

JOHN L. ROSS

Branch of Service:

U.S. Navy

Years of Service:

1944 - 1946 WWII

1950 - 1952 (Air Navy Division)

Outfit:

U.S.S. Saratoga CV3

Areas Stationed:

Bremerton, Washington; South Pacific; Hunters
Point, California

Ships:

U.S.S. Saratoga, U.S.S. Princeton, U.S.S. Hornet,
U.S.S. Iowa

Specialty:

Catapult

When Mr. Ross was 12-years old, he visited his uncle in Port Orchard, Washington. They made the short trip to Bremerton to see the Navy ships docked in the yard. He was able to go aboard the U.S.S. West Virginia, U.S.S. Tennessee and the U.S.S. Saratoga. He was so impressed with what he saw, that he decided that he was going to join the Navy someday. Little did he know, in just a few years he would be a crewmember on the U.S.S. Saratoga and the world would be at war.

After finishing high school, in 1944, Mr. Ross enlisted in the Navy, went through boot camp at Farragut, Idaho and was sent to Bremerton to be assigned to the Saratoga.

The U.S.S. Saratoga had just returned to Bremerton after being heavily damaged in the Iwo Jima Invasion. It

sustained three hours of aerial attack, five Kamikaze hits, and seven bomb hits. It had a forty-foot hole on the starboard quarter, which flooded out one of the boiler rooms. After all the repairs were finished, a shakedown cruise out of Bremerton was made. They were firing test rounds from the guns into the Puget Sound, when a projectile went off in one of the barrels and killed six men in the turret and blinded and badly burned six more men in the handling room. A speed run was made back to Bremerton for repairs and then it was off to Pearl Harbor.

"The greatest hazard aboard the ship was dodging our own aircraft. Two fellows who went to high school together and lived on the same block back in their hometown, went home on Survivor Leave to marry their high school sweethearts in a double wedding. Back aboard the ship, they both became tail-hook men to earn their flight skins, which meant a twenty percent raise in pay. This was a very dangerous job. The tail-hook men had to run on deck after an airplane caught the wire, let the plane coast backward and then free the landing wire from the tail-hook. One day a F6F came in for a landing with 120-gallons of 120-octane fuel still in the belly tank. (For some reason the pilot did not or could not use the fuel up before landing). It was a normal landing until about mid ship, the plane caught the third wire and the belly tank tore loose and went through the prop. Everything aft turned into a giant fireball. In the middle of this were the two tail-hook men. One was killed instantly and the other only made it through the night. The pilot made it out with only facial and hand burns. That was probably one of the worst accidents we had.

We occasionally had some comic relief. One night we were landing TBF's, when one came in low on fuel. We could

hear the engine sputtering on the final approach. The pilot had to try to make the flight deck because if the engine quit, he would crash into the stern of the ship. When he made it to the deck, the aircraft was in a stalled out attitude, the engine quit just before the signalman gave him the cut. He stretched his glide and hit belly first on the ramp. The airplane broke in two just behind the ball turret and went down the deck on it's nose with it's tail in the air. The gunner in the ball turret had his feet sticking out and was looking at the stars, the tail went into the ocean. We, the crash crew, went up on a pallet on a fork lift to extract him. I grabbed hold of his hand and said, "You're OK! You're OK!" There was just no way he was going to let go. We had to cut his harness and pry his fingers loose before we could lift him onto the fork truck. I imagine anyone who just experienced something like that would be real shook up.

Up at the catapult end, the planes were being brought up on deck to be launched. As the Directors spotted the planes to the catapult, they would always make sure they were able to see the pilots face, this way they knew the pilot could see them. One time as a plane was being spotted, the pilot must have looked down to adjust something in the cockpit, because he missed the last Director and went past the place where we spot the plane into the catapult track. At that point, the pilot's only salvation was to give it throttle and try to fly it off. The track was only 76-feet long and we had a wind of about 25-knots coming over the bow. Because of this, his wheels were very light and there was no way he could stop. He would need about 90-mph speed to make it off the deck. Therefore, he gave it throttle and at the last 50 to 60-feet, he built up enough speed, flew off the bow of the ship and disappeared. We immediately saw a spray of water come back up over the bow of the ship. My buddy next to

me said, "He's running underwater!" Well, you knew that was not true because all you had to do is just touch the water with the prop and it would wind it into a pretzel. Then, all of a sudden, the plane came struggling up into the air. The fellows by the catapult controls could see the whole thing over the side. They said, the plane came down and the pilot folded gear as soon as he left the deck (probably all in one motion). A wave hit the belly of the plane with the propeller ahead of the wave and threw up spray and put him into the air.

One of my best friends by the name of Duffy was working the barrier area while we were landing planes. This was a critical area because it kept the landing aircraft away from the fueling and bomb loading areas and could save a plane if the barrier was folded at just the right moment. About once a week, Duffy, would save an airplane by folding his barrier down. If we were not in a critical landing position, the Signal Officer would wave the landing planes around for another pass. Duffy would take off his helmet, goggles and gloves and stand up on the waterway with his hands clasped together over his head and everyone on the flight deck would give a great big cheer for Duffy. Then he would put his helmet, goggles and gloves back on, and wave back up to the Air Officer. The green flag went up, the red flag out and we were landing planes again.

The pilots were always real anxious to get back into the air. They all wanted to go home Aces. If their planes were damaged, the pilots would pace the deck. A pilot from one of the planes Duffy saved came into the catapult shack one day while we were sitting around telling stories and wanted to thank Duffy for saving his plane. He began asking us where we were all from, he was from the Midwest somewhere, and I told him I was from the State of