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Pennsylvania Sailor an Eyewitness to Operation Crossroads

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Francis Michael Bedner of Erie, PA served in the Navy from 1943 until 1948 as an Opticalman (OM). A highly specialized rating, the OM was responsible for maintaining and repairing the sensitive optical equipment used in the US naval fleet. This equipment included periscopes, telescopes, range finders, and binoculars. From March 1943 until the middle of 1946, Bedner was stationed at the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

In the summer of 1946 Bedner sailed aboard the USS Ajax, a Vulcan-class repair ship, from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii to Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands where he participated in Operation Crossroads. Operation Crossroads was a series of nuclear tests conducted to explore the effect of nuclear weapons on navy warships. The operation included two nuclear detonations: "Able" and "Baker". The "Able" test shot occurred on July 1, 1946 when a B-29 Superfortress dropped an implosion-type atomic bomb with a 23-kiloton yield on a target fleet of 90 naval vessels including the USS Pennsylvania (BB-38), which had been damaged during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945.

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30 June, 1946:

0900: today is the day that we, on the Ajax, leave Bikini atab to clear area for Atom Bomb test. The Ajax is scheduled to leave Bikini at 1400 according to the plan of the day. Preparations will not be made to go to sea until that time because of Chances of Cancellations. The crew at this time do not seem to be nervous or have an idea what they are making history, in fact to everybody aboard it just another day.

1400: Called out on Special sea Detail, along with R.C. Tucker (Range find Operator) & C.B. Higgins (Voice tube talker), & myself and the (Range find Operator).

At this time the Captain is on the Bridge top, instead of on the Bridge, piloting the ship out of the harbor. The Captain is in a pretty good mood, bidding the boats on watch and the O.O.D.

Hevined anchor at 1420 and it took us 20 minutes to get out of our berth, which was due to the fact that our port engine is completely dead. Speaking of the engine & the fact that it's burned out we are to sail for the 15th Aug. but the Captain is trying to get us orders to sail 10 July. I would hope that we get them and for a daughter I've never seen. That of course if anything goes along fine. I personally don't think that anything will happen as I will be approximately 25 nautical miles away.

2200: Just finished seeing the mines out on the beach which was "London May Post," a picture I've seen quite a while back. Well it looks like the boat will be

On the day of the "Able" test, Bedner carefully recorded an hour-by-hour account of the event, seen here. He also composed letters describing what he saw that day to his wife, Marie, and to his infant daughter Marifrances, whom he had not yet met. These letters as well as his daily correspondence with his wife and other family members from 1942 until 1951 are now a part of the Pennsylvania Military Museum's permanent collection. The collection also includes an assortment of 35 various lenses Bedner used in his optical work as well as uniforms and photographs documenting his service.