

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at ron.nakamoto@yahoo.com.

KEN NIX— Former Greeter



When you meet him, you are immediately put at ease by his sincere smile and strong handshake. His glasses frame his face but his captivating bright brown eyes and smile are all that you see. The grooves of age etched on his face like the rings around a great redwood tree capture the experienced life he has lived, on land and on the high seas. He is Ken Nix, former Life Scout, Navy Air Navigator during World War II, Merchant Mariner, Elementary School Teacher, Ocean Shipping Manger, Tax Preparer, U.S. Dept. of Census Taker, husband of some sixty years and SIR member.

Ken was born and raised on a farm in Northern Colorado. He was the second youngest of eight. His father was a farmer with some 160 acres growing pinto beans, corn, potatoes and alfalfa. As part of the family workforce he was up before dawn and in bed soon after sunset. The

home provided shelter but the water had to be carried in and fueled lamps were used at night when needed. Ken attended local schools in the area and graduated from Eaton High School with a graduating class of thirty-five. It is amazing that he still has his graduating class photo and that he has kept in touch with all his classmates over a lifetime of changes. His loyalty is clearly a point of pride with him although when he reminisces about his class he pauses to note that there are only a few still around. Ken was an avid Boy Scout and achieved Life Scout status. He also played on the high school football team at the center position. The Eaton Reds made it to the National Championship in his senior year but unfortunately did not win.

After graduation in 1941 Ken decided to move on and hitch hiked to Lincoln, NE. There he got a part time job at Bob's Coffee Shop, rented a basement room in a private home with another student and enrolled at the University of Nebraska. World War II disrupted all lives including Ken's. In the summer of 1942 Ken travelled to San Francisco to work with Railway Express, a railroad business where his older brother worked. Here he climbed the stairs to the second floor of Pier 14 (SF Ferry Building) to enlist in the U.S. Navy. At the time there was an urgent need for pilots and navigators. As a V5 Aviation Cadet, he trained at Weber College in Utah and then at Navy Pre-Flight School, Del Monte, CA. Ken was accepted into the Lighter Than Air (LTA) program and was assigned to Moffett Field for flight training. He recalls dozens of airships (blimps) tethered around the field and stored in Hanger One. It was exciting to pilot the blimps

but landing was always a challenge with the numerous plum and apricot trees around the airfield. (Editor's note: Blimps were primarily used for anti- submarine operations.) Ken completed his training at Lakehurst, NJ with the larger K-Airships and was commissioned as Ensign in the U.S. Navy.

Ken's next assignment required filling an urgent Navy need for Navigators, so he was assigned to the Navy Air Navigation School in Shawnee, Oklahoma, then to New York Naval Air Station at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, NY. Some of his training included night navigation at the Hayden Planetarium, NY. Star gazing now meant more than just a romantic evening under the stars. After completion of that training Ken was assigned to the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) the Navy's worldwide transportation command. He first went to Dinner Key, Florida where he served as first or second navigator for transport planes moving cargo between Miami, Puerto Rico and Panama. He then received orders to report to Squadron VR-11, home based in Honolulu, HI. This squadron consisted of R5D Douglas four- engine aircraft with a charter to serve the entire Pacific Theater of Operations. After months with VR-11, Ken received orders during the Okinawa campaign to report to an evacuation squadron VR-1, home based in Guam. From that location he made many trips to Yon Tan Airstrip, Okinawa to ferry the wounded back to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Guam. The wounded reminded one of the true horrors of war.

After the war ended in August 1945, Ken continued to navigate many flights into Japan and China until he was discharged in 1946. Ken complains of serving four years with the U.S. Navy but never on a ship. He returned to the University of Nebraska to complete his education and received his B.A. in 1948. From there he pursued and received a California Teachers Certificate from U.C. Berkeley and taught in elementary schools with the Mt. Diablo School District for two years.

Still single, with the love of the ocean calling and three of his brothers in the Merchant Marine, Ken jumped at the opportunity to work on a ship at the start of the Korean War (1950). He shipped out on a Liberty freighter as a wiper for several voyages in the Pacific and then on a C-4 freighter as a purser in the Atlantic. (Editors note: A wiper is the most junior crew member in the engine room of a ship. The role of a wiper consists of cleaning the engine spaces and machinery, and assisting the engineers as directed. Pursers do the complicated paperwork that is necessary each time ships enter port. They keep their ship's accounts and prepare and keep records of payroll.) The crews on these long voyages were between 35-50 so Ken thrived in these close quarters with his easy-going personality. Post Korean War, Ken states; "...My entire business career has been in the maritime industry or ocean transportation with Pacific Far East Line and Hapag Lloyd. I'd had various positions in documentation, rates, booking, sales, contacting importers, exporters, Japanese trading companies, custom house brokers, and freight forwarders."

While he was in San Francisco, Ken attended a friend's wedding and first met his wife, Jan. She worked as a food editor for Sunset Magazine and would routinely bring home samples of food she worked with. Ken was lucky enough to secure an invite along with her roommate's friend. The meal was fabulous and the rest is history. There must be some truth to the wives' tale that "...the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

Jan and Ken have been married for over 60 years and have two boys and three grandkids. Their sons live in San Diego and McKinleyville in Humboldt County.

In 1969 Ken's boss called him into his office and asked that he take the Manager position in Osaka, Japan. Within a week he was in Japan and two weeks later, his wife and three young sons were at the airport. He commuted to his office in Osaka and made monthly trips to Okinawa and Korea. They lived in Japan for three years and then returned to the corporate office in San Francisco. Ken officially retired in 1962 but when you talk to him, he rattles off jobs that he has held way beyond his retirement. He talks about his work with H&R Block doing tax returns for clients and later working with the U.S. Census Bureau for ten years travelling, training or taking surveys involving everything from drug addicts and prison inmates with violent crimes to household surveys to assess the total cost of owning a pet. He has worked for the Tech Museum as one of the Special Events coordinators working various logistic needs for the events. He was also a member of the San Francisco Japanese Society and was part of the greeting party when Emperor Hirohito visited the Bay Area. In 1992, as a World War II Veteran of the Pacific War along with 300 other veterans, he participated in a three weeks tour of the 50th anniversary of the invasion of Guadalcanal. The tour took them through Manila, Corregidor, Palau, Wewak, Rabaul and finally attendance at the formal memorial ceremony at Guadalcanal hosted by the U.S. Navy. Ken flipped through some great pictures of the various WW II sites including a picture of Admiral Yamamoto's Supreme Command bunker on Rabaul, New Guinea.

Catching Ken and Jan for the interview was a bit tough as this couple was on the move, this time going up to Ashland, OR to take in the Shakespeare Festival. One of my fondest memories of Ken was when he signed up to play in the golf club's Match Play Tournament at Shoreline Golf Course in Mountain View. Here was a 90+ year-old golfer competing against someone 30 years younger. It was all smiles and banter as he proceeded to beat me on the first few holes. It is indicative of Ken that he would sign up, show up and compete for the trophy. His love of life is infectious as you can see through the sparkle in his eyes and his vice grip of a handshake.

Ken Nix -- hitchhiker, World War II veteran, teacher, ocean mariner, adventurer, census taker, tax preparer and long-time SIR -- we salute you!