



The Society Scroll

Newsletter of
The Ocean County Historical Society
26 Hadley Avenue
Toms River, NJ 08753
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“Telling The Stories Of Ocean County”

On-Line Scroll Article ~ October 2014

Barnegat Resident Shares History

By Barbara Reusch

He had to be convinced to tell his story to people other than his family. He didn't think of himself as a hero, even though he'd been awarded the Purple Heart. But this ninety-year-old resident in an Ocean County adult community in Barnegat kept us riveted with a life story that began on Staten Island, stretched along the Atlantic coast to Florida with the Merchant Marine, and then plunged him into battle during World War II in the Pacific Ocean off the Okinawa coast.



John Gaeta, one of eight first generation children of Italian parents, graduated from high school before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Employed as an electrician's apprentice in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, John anxiously watched as his cousins and friends were called to serve in the Armed Forces. When he wasn't called because of the work he was doing in the Navy Yard, John decided to go to an office at 42 Broadway in New York City to join the Maritime Service. After four months of training in Florida, he was qualified to work as a fireman, a water tender, and an oiler in the Merchant Marine. Because he still didn't consider himself a full-fledged serviceman, he finally volunteered for induction into the US Navy.

After only five weeks in Navy boot camp in New York, John became an electrician's mate and was sent to the Pacific, serving aboard the *USS Cassin Young* (DD-793), a destroyer that was launched in 1943. John was a member of the *Cassin Young* crew from October 1944 to July 30, 1945.

The *Cassin Young* was a radar picket ship with the mission of screening aircraft carriers, warning of enemy sightings and possible attack, as well as inshore fire support. As the war drew to a close in the spring and summer of 1945, patrolling the waters around Okinawa was a dangerous mission. Japanese pilots were desperate and volunteered as kamikaze pilots because they could die a hero's death with maximum cost to the enemy.

The battle scene was set. The US fleet was surrounded by its destroyers. The *Cassin-Young's* sister ship, the *USS Callaghan*, had been hit the night before and had sunk. The three hundred men aboard the *Cassin Young* were attacked by kamikazes and a low-flying aircraft struck the fire control room. John was at his battle station across from the bridge, next to the searchlight with a machinist's mate. His friend was later declared missing in action; no one could believe that John had survived the explosion and fire. Despite injuries to more than forty crew members and the death of twenty-one sailors and one officer, the crew managed to restart the destroyer's engine





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to escape further damage. As it turned out, the *Cassin Young* was the last ship to be hit by kamikazes during World War II.

And what happened to our twenty-two year old friend, John? He spent eleven months in hospitals with leg and arm injuries, as well as liver damage causing jaundice. His weight sank to ninety-seven pounds because he couldn't eat. He was moved from his ship to a tender, to a tent on Okinawa, to Guam for two weeks, to Hawaii for a plate in his arm, to Oakland Naval Hospital in California. He almost couldn't get on the train taking him to St. Albans Naval Hospital in New York because of his body cast!

Because of his injuries, as a civilian John was unable to do the electrical work for which he had been trained. He went back to school and eventually worked for the Internal Revenue Service. Later, he transferred to the Small Business Administration in New York, ironically at the same address where he'd enlisted in the Maritime Service, 42 Broadway! John retired in 1975.



He and his wife, Marilyn, celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary on June 6, 2014. They're the proud parents of three children, eight grandchildren, and twenty-three great-grandchildren. John and Marilyn, we're delighted that you've chosen to spend your retirement years in Ocean County, and we thank you for your sacrifice and your service to our country.

Sources of information:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Cassin_Young_\(DD-793\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Cassin_Young_(DD-793)), June 13, 2014 pp. 1-8.

Interview with John and Marilyn Gaeta in their Barnegat, NJ home on July 22, 2014.

“They Died With Honor—*USS Cassin Young*” copyright 1990, Video TV Network, 1380 Soldiers Field Rd., Boston, MA 02135.