

KINGSPORT — Virgil Peters saw World War II from a minesweeper in the Pacific.

Peters, from the Rock Springs section of Kingsport, is a 91-year-old Navy veteran who served on a minesweeper called the USS Climax, AM161, in the Japanese theater of the war.

"I was at Iwo Jima the morning the flag was raised," Peters said of Feb. 24, 1945. He served in the Navy as a seaman first class. He served from 1943 to 1946 after volunteering at age 17, although his mother didn't want him to go. Five of her seven sons served in the war; all returned home.

His life's journey started in Southwest Virginia

Peters said he began his schooling in his native Southwest Virginia at Alley Valley Elementary School, a two-room building near where he was born between Gate City and Fort Blackmore in Scott County, before moving to the Kingsport area at age 10, attending Lynn Garden and Morrison City elementary schools. He never made it to high school.

"I went to work, and from there I went to the Navy," Peters said.

Of the five Peters brothers who served in World War II, Virgil was the only one in the Navy and the only volunteer; the other four were in the Army and were drafted. Roy Peters worked at Mead Paper, Rayford Peters at Holston Ordnance, Harold Peters owned Pete's TV and Appliance, Granville Peters was a minister and Virgil Peters an office equipment businessman. Brothers Herman Peters and Malcomb Peters did not serve in the military, but Herman worked at Mead and Malcomb was a coal miner.

Witnessing history from the deck of a minesweeper

"I have a picture gallery that I've developed down through the years," Peters said. One shows a Navy ship back in a cove where a typhoon came through.

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During his service, the minesweeper went up and down the Japanese coast, trying to clear the area for battleships and aircraft carriers.

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He was there for the iconic raising of the U.S. flag on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima. From the deck of the minesweeper, he was looking at a hill that appeared to have been hit by a tornado when someone spoke to him and he turned toward them.

"I was real close to the beach," Peters said of the minesweeper's position. "I looked up on the top of the hill and didn't see anything," Peters said. "I looked again, and there was the flag."

The first flag was basically on a stick, he said. Soon a more formidable flag and pole were raised and captured in the iconic image. "I think I was there for both," Peters said, adding that he didn't realize the image would become iconic.

At the end of the war, he and shipmates wondered why they were being followed by a growing group of ships. It turns out that if the Japanese hadn't surrendered after the dropping of the two atomic bombs, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, his minesweeper was to have led the way to an invasion of Tokyo.

Pilot scooped from the water, thanks seamen with letter

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"The plane landed right in the back of our ship, really," Peters said. He said the ship's captain picked up the pilot, whose plane sank, and that the pilot wrote the seamen a four-page letter thanking the captain and crew for saving his life.

Traveling with Adm. Nimitz, actress Greer Garson

For a time, Peters was assigned to Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, who was over the Seventh Fleet and commanded Allied air, land and sea forces. He said that duty included being on a boat for a visit from actress Greer Garson, who in 1942 had appeared at the grand opening of J. Fred Johnson Stadium in Kingsport to promote war bonds.

Life after the war but still in the Navy

After the war, he and four others remained on the minesweeper and continued their job, but this time with Japanese help.

"We brought a Japanese officer aboard ship, and he was telling us where the mines were," Peters said.

In addition, he said five seamen in their early 20s decided they would volunteer for a short stint of "suicide duty" on an old tanker with oil drums tied to it. The 12-man crews would serve a short time and then be guaranteed a trip home for helping find magnetic mines, but the work was dangerous and the trip might be in caskets.

"We didn't have enough sense to be scared," Peters said, adding that the captain couldn't formally discourage them but told them they would not be serving in "suicide" duty. "That's the reason I'm talking to you today."

However, that didn't mean the group still didn't deal with magnetic and others mines, and he and his fellow seamen learned how to set depth charges for submarines and mines in the dark. Too

shallow and they'd blow themselves out of the water. Too deep and they'd miss their intended target.

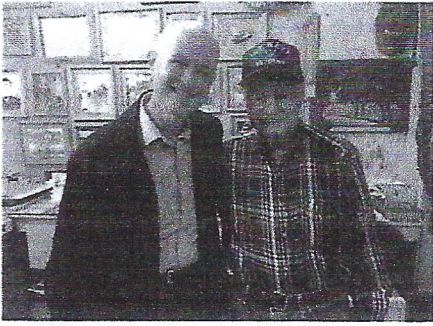
"If you made the wrong click, you'd blow the ship up," Peters said.

Marriage and career

After the war, Peters got married and had a daughter. He met his wife while cruising Broad Street in his 1936 Chevrolet. Later, he got free GI Bill training for office equipment repair and began working at Typewriter and Equipment Co. in downtown Kingsport in 1952.

He was married to Louise Peters for 70 years before she died in February. Daughter Linda Jones lives two doors down from him in Rock Springs in a barn he converted into a house, following up on his father's vocation as a carpenter. He also does woodworking, has remodeled houses and has won Tennessee Walking Horse awards.

"I used to take care of your office machines where you work," Peters said of typewriters, copiers and other equipment. He went from being an apprentice and service manager to co-owning the company when he retired in 1993. He will turn 92 April 19



"You have to do what you have to do, and you have to do it with honor," Peters said. "If it means giving your life up - hey it's what you got to do. For many in my generation, it meant they didn't get to come home."

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THE SILENT DEFENDERS





"Just a young punk," he said, looking at the picture taken the year he joined the war, not too long before he was assigned to work on a minesweeper called the USS Climax.

"The motto of a minesweeper is 'where the big ships go we've already been,'" Peters said, smiling with pride. "When I was sweeping mines I've looked at the mines right down by the side of the ship. All they'd have to do is hit the side of the ship and boom."

When conflicts flared in the South Pacific, his ship went in first to clear the way for the transport and battle ships.

"I wasn't old enough to be scared really," Peters said.

While American soldiers fought on land in Okinawa, Guam, and Iwo Jima, Peters and his crew on the U.S.S. Climax were removing mines from the waters off-shore.

At Iwo Jima, he caught of a glimpse of history.

"At first, I didn't see anything. Turned my head and there was a Flag. I said, 'Hey guys... they're raising the flag!'"



Peters and his four brothers made it home after the war. After spending two years in a veterans' hospital recovering from a serious lung infection contracted while in service, Peters ran a business in Kingsport, got married, and had a family.

"For an old country boy out of Scott County, I've led an exciting life really."

Since finding the letter from President Truman, he's been on a pursuit to rediscover his own story of service in World War 2.

Local

World War 2 veteran recalls seeing American Flag raised at Iwo Jima

By: Josh Smith ✉ (mailto:jsmith@wjhl.com)

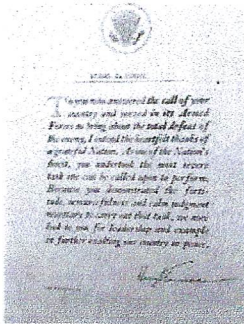
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(Interactive Media Not Supported by Print)

For Virgil Peters, memories of World War 2 are vibrantly alive - not only in his mind, but also on the walls of his workshop.

Photographs hang side by side, a big change from just a few years ago. "I had them in a box really," Peters said.

But then he found a forgotten treasure.



"When I came up here this past winter putting all this together I came across this," he said, pointing to a letter addressed to him. The letter was signed by President Harry S. Truman. "I thought Hey - I forgot I had this."

It was a thank you letter, a one-page acknowledgement of what Virgil Peters did at the age of 17.

“Virgil C Peters - to you who answered the call of your country and served in its armed forces to bring about the total defeat of the enemy I extend the heartfelt thanks of a grateful nation.”

Peters said the discovery of the letter sparked something in his mind - a hunger to remember and to become re-aquainted with the boy who left a farm in Scott County, Virginia and followed his four brothers into war.

Witnessing history

Kingsport's Virgil Peters saw Iwo Jima flag-raising from a minesweeper in the Pacific

BY RICK WAGNER
rwagner@lineasnews.net

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His life's journey started in Southwest Virginia. Peters said he began his schooling in his native South-west Virginia at Alley Valley



Rick Wagner — rwagner@lineasnews.net

Kingsport's Virgil Peters, 91, shows part of the photo gallery he has put together over the years. The collection includes photos of early Kingsport, old photos from Scott County and military images. The World War II veteran was just 17 when he volunteered for the Navy in 1943, inset.



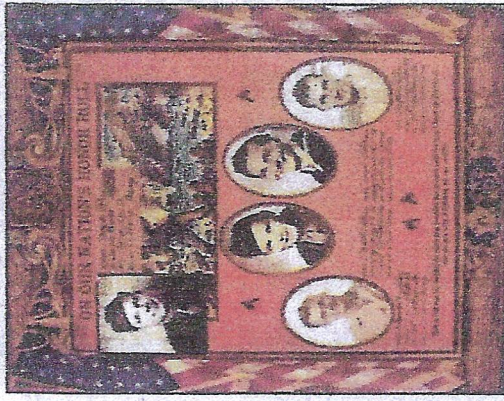
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See VETERAN, 2A



Contributed by Virgil Peters

During World War II, Kingsport's Virgil Peters served in the Navy and had four brothers who served in the Army. All of them except Virgil were drafted. He volunteered — against his mother's wishes. All five of the brothers returned home.



THE SILENT DEFENDERS



VETERAN

Continued from 1A
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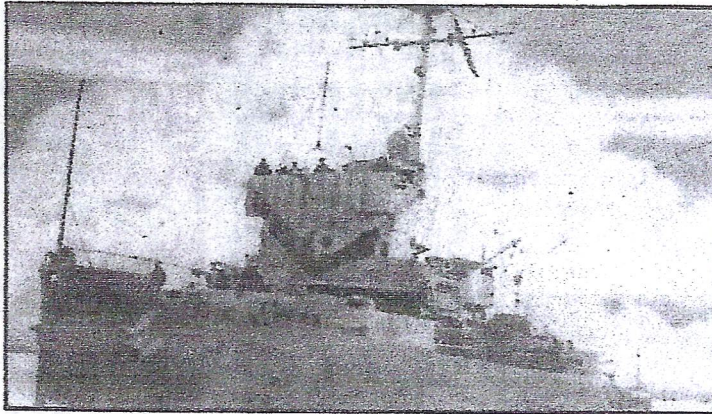
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Contributed by Virgil Peters

Virgil Peters served on this minesweeper, the USS Climax, during most of his time in the Navy in World War II. He was in the Pacific theater and saw the U.S. flag raised at Iwo Jima in February of 1945.

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