



FocusFAA

All for Audie...and His Brothers in Arms

November 7, 2012 – *With the approach of the Veterans Day weekend, Focus FAA asked Debbie Christianson, a labor relations specialist in the Collective Bargaining Service Division of Human Resources, to share her experiences escorting her father, Audie, to Washington, D.C. to visit the WWII Memorial, among other activities. The organization, based in Wausau, Wis., was formed to fly veterans (in the Wisconsin region) who served during World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War to Washington, D.C. to visit the memorials erected in their honor. It is affiliated with the national group, Honor Flight Network (CFC #67307).*

I flew home to Wisconsin to meet Dad for the Honor Flight. Veterans and their families were astounded when they found out I actually lived in Washington, D.C., and flew home to accompany Dad back out to D.C. as his guardian, but I wanted to experience the entire event with my Dad, from beginning to end.

The Never Forgotten Honor Flight began on Oct. 21 with a dinner hosted in honor of the WWII veterans, and included some vets from the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well. The event had all the pomp and circumstance of a military event as it honored these veterans. We headed to the airport at 4:30 a.m. on Oct. 22 to begin our journey.

At 87 years old, my Dad's mind is sharp, but his body has failed him. After two open-heart surgeries (1989 and 2005), both hips replaced, both knees replaced, three carpal tunnel surgeries, back surgery, and neck surgery, my Dad's body is simply in failure mode, and he's so disabled that they placed him in first-class front row to make it easier to get him in and out of the plane.

When we arrived at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, we were greeted with crowds of well-wishers, some that came specifically to greet the veterans, and many more in the airport that joined in the celebration when they realized what it was.

Our day was a whirlwind trip, beginning at the World War II Memorial, where pictures were taken. Then the veterans solemnly saluted a "missing man formation" in which a family member slowly walked in front of the veterans with a wheelchair holding a photo of a WWII veteran as a young Navy man and the flag from his coffin. His funeral had been the day of the last Never Forgotten Honor Flight in September. He got to finally make the trip.

Throughout the day, we visited the Vietnam Memorial, Korean Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Air Force Memorial, and the Iwo Jima Memorial. We also drove by the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial, the White House, U.S. Capitol, and several other sites in downtown D.C. With many of the



Debbie Christianson with her father, Audie, at the WWII Memorial.

cards and packages, and each veteran on the flight received a large yellow envelope filled with well wishes and thanks for their service to our country. Each received a package of cookies, as well.

When we arrived back at the airport in Wausau, we found the day was not over yet! The entire concourse was filled with people — civilians, military, news media — flags waving, music playing, people stretching over the ropes to shake their hands. A toddler about 2 years old darted under the rope and extended his tiny hand to Dad.

As I wheeled Dad down through this crowd of well-wishers, I was crying as I watched this unfold. Dad was crying, too. When he got to the end, he told me, "It felt like that was all for me!" I told his I felt the same way, that this was all for him.

We lost my Mom in April of this year, so it was difficult not having her there to share this with Dad. Dad survived the depth charges in the war; he survived multiple heart attacks and surgeries; and he survived losing the love of his life after nearly 65 years of marriage. He deserved to have this special honor bestowed upon him. He told me once that he made his peace with the Lord when they were in the submarine being depth charged. He realized then that life was short and so precious.

veterans (like Dad) being wheelchair-bound, each stop was a flurry of activity by the Honor Flight staff and the guardians as we got our veterans on and off the buses.

At day's end, the veterans were full of adrenaline and so hyped up. The guardians were exhausted, but happy. On the flight home, there was a "mail call" like my Dad had experienced on the submarine. Friends, relatives, strangers, school kids wrote letters and sent



Debbie Christianson

Below is a recent interview with Audie Christianson about his WWII experiences. It appeared in the *Ladysmith News in Wisconsin*:

Next week, Audie Christianson will take to the skies, flying east on the Honor Flight that will take him to his place of formal recognition, the World War II Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. Christianson will join veterans from the country's Midwest in the Honor Flight Network's goal to provide honorary visits for all of our nation's service veterans to the nation's capitol, giving as many as possible the opportunity to feel the respect they deserve in the setting designated specially for that purpose.

For Christianson, his honor began back on his 18th birthday, January 3, 1943, when he traveled from his family's farm in Weyerhauser to get in line to join the service. Two of his five brothers, Archie and John, were already overseas, and Audie felt it was his responsibility to join the fight. Ultimately, all the family's boys, including a foster brother, would call themselves servicemen.

"At that time, there was a draft, but for me, this was what I wanted, not what someone said I had to do," Christianson explained matter-of-factly. "The woman at the office said, 'You really wanna go?' 'Yeah, I really wanna go,' I told her, and when the '43 draft list came out, I was on it."

"It was the thing to do at the time," he continues. "I don't know what I was really thinking back then except that I wanted to join the Navy." Christianson smiles. "I knew I didn't want to dig fox holes."

Christianson was sent to Farragut, Idaho, for Basic Training in the spring of 1943, and honestly found the expectations to be less than rigorous. Even today, at age 87, he carries the broad shoulders and thick neck of the strapping young man he once was. Blond and swarthy, Christianson had the physique that made the workouts look easy and the enthusiasm to volunteer for what he wanted at that juncture of his life. "For a young man who was used to sawing with a cross-cut in three feet of snow, what they put us through was kind of a joke for me. When it was time to do sit-ups, they had to tell me to quit. I coulda done them all day long — 'til I'd a had a sore on my tailbone."

From Basic Training, Christianson moved on to Fleet Service School in Norfolk, Va. With choices to be made, his hand shot up for submarine torpedo: "I didn't even know what a submarine looked like, but I thought it'd be good duty." Perhaps it was romantic immaturity, visions of shapely Hawaiians greeting the underwater monster as she came into port. Perhaps he did it without much forethought of what potentially lay ahead in the expectant waters of the Pacific, but Audie Christianson set his sight on the sea and never looked elsewhere.

From Norfolk, Christianson "... went directly to a brand new submarine, the U.S.S. Tilefish." The 311-foot diesel beauty was launched from Mare Island Navy Yard in California, crafted with her sister ship, the U.S.S. Tang. There, the young seaman spent his first few months living on a barge alongside the Tilefish at port and boarding the ship daily to learn about her inside and



Audie Christianson (right) with his buddy, Bob Armbrust, on board the submarine, USS Tilefish. They are photographed by the torpedoes, where they slept.

out, recognizing that, along with about 80 other sailors, he would serve as her caretaker in the months, and years, ahead.

Seaman Christianson's regular duty was the bow planes, and he stepped in at the helm and on lookout. Christianson maintained his humor: "I was real lucky to go topside every day. Some of those guys got to looking pretty white down there." He explained his responsibility:

"Along with the stern planes, I kept the sub level, from rolling from side to side." Christianson could only have guessed in his first weeks on board, how difficult that responsibility would become.

As the Tilefish skimmed into its first patrol, to the main island of Japan, the Wisconsin sailor was alongside the sailor manning the periscope. "He said, 'Christianson, you wanna see a sight?' He gave me the scope. He had it trained on Mt. Fujiama. I'll never forget that sight. The sun was behind us, shining on the mountain. I could see the snow on its peak. It was beautiful. And to think, my first sight of Japan was from the periscope. We'd end up getting so close to land we could see cars and trains."

The Tilefish swam in and out of the waters off Japan, stealthily making its way close enough to enemy ships to do them harm before she got discovered. "It was our job to sink enemy ships," the seaman explained. "Merchant, military, any of them except hospital ships. And the [enemy] was using that to their advantage, too. They'd load those hospital ships with other stuff — oil, munitions, I'm speculating — knowing that they were off-limits." The sub would stay at sea — anywhere from the Hawaiian Islands and Midway to the coast of Japan — until they'd run out of torpedoes or fuel.

Tears of remembrance come quickly to Christianson's eyes as he recalls his most memorable war patrol, which was also his first. The Tilefish had received word that a troop transport was coming out of port and headed its way. "We laid and waited for it. We were at battle stations in seconds, me on the bow planes, and we fired five torpedoes. We damaged the ship real bad, but we didn't sink it. He survived our hits."

Then came the enemy destroyers — two of them — and they knew just about where to seek their target. Christianson’s face reddens as he tries to stifle his emotions and maintain composure. “Nobody in the world can imagine what it’s like to be depth-charged. But we got depth-charged.”

He crosses his arms: “Picture a 50-gallon oil drum full of TNT. As it sinks, the pressure increases until its pressure gauge causes it to blow.” To escape the enemy charges, the Tilefish dove deeper and deeper, reaching an ultimate, incredibly risky depth of 580 feet. “We were never supposed to go below 400 feet,” Christianson explains, shaking his head and wondering still today how he can be here to tell about it. The hazard of the depth crushing the sub’s hull was great, and the sailors knew that at any time, the sonar would detect their exact position, a charge would find its mark, or they’d be crushed.

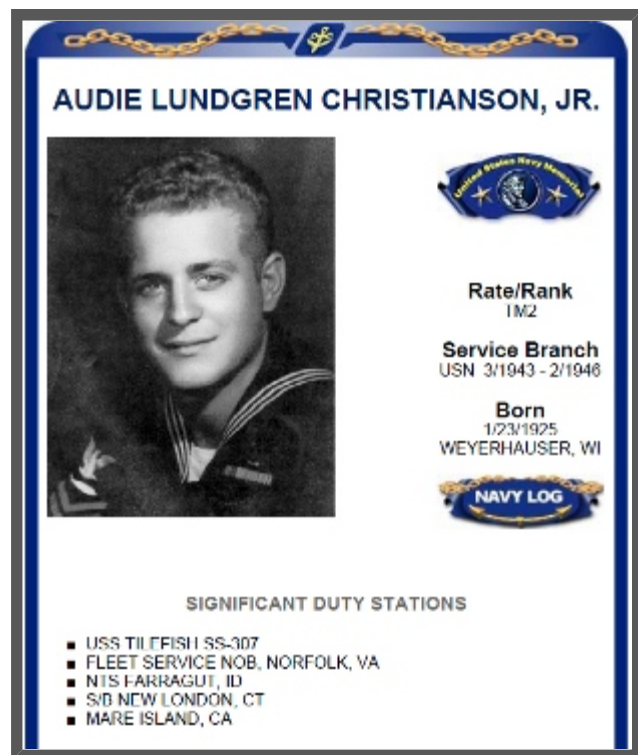
“To hear it all happening just on the other side of the hull,” Christianson says incredulously, “you

feel like you’re going to explode.” Wiping away tears with a sleeve, he adds, “If it hits, you got nothing to worry about. You’re done.”

The first destroyer dropped seven charges. “It went off so close above us that it actually drove the stern down. We regained our balance, but I don’t know how we did it.” His attempt at a smile is now grim. “I guess by then you pray a little.” He goes on: “Some can’t take it. They have nervous breakdowns right in front of you. You gotta have a strong constitution.”

This memory causes Christianson to reflect on his interview early on with a psychiatrist: “You go through lots of tests, I guess to see if you got what it takes. ‘When you gonna quit chewing those nails, Christianson?’ he asked me on my way out his door. I thought I was through, and I told him I would. ‘I said, when you gonna quit chewing those fingernails?’ ‘Right now, sir!’ I knew was the answer, and I did, right then and there. But that day, of those depth charges, I probably had blood running from ‘em.” He goes on, now calmed and with some pride, “Skipper got the Silver Star when we damaged that ship. I and who was on the stern planes both got the Bronze Star.”

It’s a memory that remains vivid, and will never get easier for him to relive. “I can’t name the number of times we went through [depth charges.] You kinda get used to it. But none ever got



Audie Christianson's Navy Log.

so close. I do remember thinking then, 'Why didn't I listen to my dad and stay home on the farm?'"

Christianson and the Tilefish survived a total of six war patrols. They moved in and out of Pearl Harbor and from port to port, a time he was glad he wasn't tied to a sweetheart at home. As the war waged on and the girls back home tired of being alone and not knowing if their soldier would make it to the end, Christianson commiserated with soldiers receiving their "Dear John" letters. "It'd be, 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' and then, 'Oh, by the way, I got married last week.' They'd be heartbroken. It happened a lot." At times, Christianson was relieved when mail wouldn't come in, so he wouldn't have to witness the sorrow his fellow sailors would feel.

The Tilefish was off the coast of Formosa, her men listening to the radio, when word of the war's end came over the waves. "When that second atomic bomb hit, that was it," Christianson reflects. The sub was immediately given orders to return home. Christianson recalls the relief he felt, "I thought we were going to have the worst duty in the world. Sitting on the surface on lifeguard duty picking up downed pilots. That's what we'd have been doing if we'd invaded Japan."

The Tilefish did happen to rescue a fighter pilot once, as he ditched his plane in the water right off the sub's bow. "He got in his little six-foot boat and came aboard. We dropped him at Midway, or maybe Pearl Harbor, and he stayed connected. He was a little short, red-headed guy. I remember he was with us when we shot at a Japanese submarine." The pilot even showed up at reunions. War connections run deep.

*Although Christianson's skipper urged him to head to Annapolis to naval officers school, the offer was turned down by the Wisconsin farmer. "He talked to me for half an hour, wanting me to do this. I don't regret my decision. I said I was going home to shovel s*** and milk my Holsteins."*

No, Audie Christianson never regretted his choices. His sweetheart came after his return, and no "Dear John" letters were ever necessary. "I had a good wife, a very good wife, and we raised a good family. I've led a good life all 'round."

Although Christianson has been to D.C., he's never been to the Veterans Memorial. He's glad he's going, he does feel honored, as he felt honored to do what he considered his duty back in '43. "It made me feel good that I did my little part for the world. Three years in a submarine. To keep us free."

In addition to the Bronze Star, Audie Lundgren Christianson, Jr. earned the American Campaign Medal, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal with two stars, and the World War II Victory Medal. He ended the war having earned the rank of TM2 (Torpedo Man 2nd Class).

(Ladysmith News Editor's note: The following was written and submitted by Nancy Anderson, Social Worker, Ladysmith Care Community, with Ben Anderson, Ladysmith High School.)

Share your story in Focus FAA with Direct From You.



Audie Christianson at the WWII Memorial.

Annie Glenn Thank you for a touching story of courage, faith and service!
ATO Beautiful!
1 month ago

William J Hughes
AVS Hell of a job!!!
1 month ago Semper Fi
SGT. USMC
RVN

Brett Faulkner Thanks for sharing this moving patriotic story about your Dad with us Debbie!
ATO
1 month ago

Wow, what a great story brought tears to my eyes. Debbie thank you for sharing and THANK YOU to your dad for his service.

**Tony
Manziona**
ATO
USNR AME1 Anthony Manziona
1 month ago

**Marilyn
Rowell**
ASH
Very touching. Thanks for sharing Debbie, and thanks to your Dad for all he has done.
1 month ago

Jon Croft
ATO
I didn't know your Dad was a submariner, Debbie. Tell him thanks, and thanks to you for sharing his story!
1 month ago

Billy Chain
ATO
1 month ago
Thanks Debbie for sharing the honoring of your Dad. I am very proud for him. I was drafted during the Vietnam era & served in South Korea. Although I served, I still do not believe our country should have been in Vietnam. I think 95 % of the vets from this era were really not appreciated as was WWI & WWII vets have been. My Dad tried to enlist for WWII but was denied because he had just under-went a double hernia surgery. He too was a dairy farm boy, but from MS though. I've got to go to Wash. also to see these memorials, maybe when I retire. Thanks again.

**Doug
Johnson**
ARP
1 month ago

Mike Mills
AFN
I can only imagine where we would be today without the service and sacrifice of our WW vets. We are forever in their debt.
1 month ago

Tony Taylor
AVS
Thank you for the story, thank your Dad for his service and God bless all our Military Men and Women for keeping us free.
1 month ago

**Deborah
Green**
AOC
Great piece Debbie - Thanks for sharing, and thank you for your Dad's service.
1 month ago

Joan Pollitt Hey Debbie, Great Story! Thanks You for this! I'm so Glad you got
AVS to bring your dad here for him to enjoy te sights! Thank You and
1 month ago Thank your Dad!

Jim Shaddock Thank you and your father for service to the country. Well done.
ATO
1 month ago

Priscilla Carr Thank you for sharing such a touching story. And please thank your
ATO father for helping to keep us "free" and safe.
1 month ago

Tony Pablo What a nice story of your father's wartime experience on board,
ATO "The Tilefish", he is a true hero!! This is a good reminder that,
1 month ago "Freedom is not free."

USN CPO (Ret)

Susan E Wilson Debbie, I loved reading your father's WWII story. My father was
ATO also in the Navy and served in the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign during
17 days ago WWII, beginning at Pearl Harbor. They are our heroes.

Gwendolyn Coley Great story, Debbie. In case you haven't already done so, consider
ATO capturing your father's story on video for the Library of Congress'
14 days ago Veterans History Project. You can get more information at this site:
<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>

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