

OPERATION RETURN WWII DOG TAG

By Vishi Garig, Archives Specialist



Veterans Committee Chairwoman Darlene Costos with honoree William R. Ledwell, WWII Navy veteran, both of Chelmsford.

William Rainier Ledwell is ninety-two years old. He has received his share of mail over the decades but likely few deliveries more impactful than the package he received on October 20, 2017. Ledwell received a seven decade old vestige of his past that now serves as a reminder of his service to our nation and his travels across our great country and around the world.

Several months ago, another military veteran, Frank Haggard of Green Cove Springs, was metal detecting in the mud of the St. Johns River. It was low tide and the mud near the former Mothball Fleet piers was exposed. His machine beeped and Frank started digging. He pulled out a small metal object encrusted in mud and grime. By its shape and its

location, Frank surmised it was a US Navy World War II dog tag.



Fast forward a few weeks. Frank cleaned up the dog tag and brought it into the Clay County Archives, a division of the Clay County Clerk of Court in Green Cove Springs. Frank asked County Archivist Vishi Garig to help find Ledwell or some of his family, so the military identification could be returned.

Using her skills as a historical researcher along with the resources available at the Clay County Archives, it took Garig a mere thirty minutes to find William Ledwell, alive and well, living in New England. After notifying Frank Haggard of the good news, Garig sent a letter to Ledwell. In it she briefly described the finding of his military identification and that she'd like an opportunity to interview him about his time in Green Cove Springs during World War II.

A few days later the phone rang at the Clay County Archives. On the other end of the line was William Ledwell.

"Well, I got your letter here and you said for me to call," said a gravelly voice with a Boston accent. Ledwell is a man of few words, not accustomed to long phone conversations. But, after the formalities were done, Garig got down to asking him about his experiences when he lived in Green Cove Springs after WWII and the weathered veteran began to open up. He was stationed in Green Cove Springs for one year: 1947.

"I mothballed many ships. I mothballed the galleys on the ships. I had two African American Navy Chiefs who out-ranked me working under me. This was due to segregation in the Navy. The Chiefs weren't thrilled, but we made it work." As a team, he said they got the job done.

The mothballing process involved spraying a gray oily protectant all over and inside the ships. Anything they didn't want to deal with got thrown in the river.

He said he also was part of the shore patrol. "There were almost 2,500 sailors here," he said.



Frank Haggard with the rescued dog tag.

“The town of Green Cove had a police chief who made it a point to arrest sailors at every opportunity. So, the Navy put two shore patrol guys on every street to keep the sailors out of trouble,” he said. Ledwell explained there were many bars that popped up overnight once folks heard that the mothball fleet was coming to Green Cove Springs. “They were there to take the sailors’ money,” he said.

Before his assignment here in Clay County, Florida, however, were several missions that rival scenes from any classic wartime movie. Ledwell served first on the USS Monterey (CVL-26), an aircraft carrier serving in the western Pacific. Her sailors and pilots participated in securing Makin in the Gilbert Islands, supported strikes on Kavieng, New Ireland, and supported the landings on Kwajalein and Eniwetok. She operated offshore during the raids on the Carolina, Marian Islands, New Guinea and Bonin Islands. Monterey was in the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944. After a short visit to Pearl Harbor, she was back at it again, this time at Wake Island in September. The USS Monterey then supported the Leyte and Mindoro, Philippines landings. While Ledwell’s ship escaped battle damage she could not escape the wrath of Mother Nature. In December 1944 she sailed into Typhoon Cobra, a vicious storm with winds of over 120 mph. Planes were torn loose from their moorings and there were a few fires on the hangar deck. Ledwell’s shipmate, the future President Gerald R Ford, was almost washed overboard. In August of 1945 the USS Monterey participated in the final strike against Japan, at Honshu and Hokkaido.

After the war was over, the USS Monterey was transferred to Philadelphia and there, in 1946, Ledwell joined the crew of the USS Battan-CVL29. He was there from 1946 to 1947 and came aboard the USS Moore (DE 240), a destroyer escort. That’s how Ledwell got to Florida and the Mothball Fleet. The Fleet once housed more than three hundred escorts and other smaller ships, all being preserved for future use or sale. The USS Moore returned to the United States and went to Green Cove Springs in late 1946 to be decommissioned and, in the 1970’s, was used as a target for training missions. By 1948, Ledwell was a sailor on the Battleship Missouri (BB-36).

Many years after his naval career ended, Ledwell recalls returning to Florida to visit family. He drove by the old Navy base and was struck by the fact that there were just a few ships remaining there on piers he knew cost millions of dollars to build in his day, and many ships sold to foreign countries.



Archives Specialist Garig and Haggard take dog tag to the post office.

Fast forward to 2017. Following her fact-filled phone call with Ledwell, Archivist Garig carefully prepared a padded shipping envelope, wrapping the dog tag neatly in tissue paper. She included a thank you card from Clerk of Court Tara Green, a personal note thanking him for his service and adorned with an American flag. Garig put in a note, too. Frank, the finder of the dog tag, added something special as well - a lengthy handwritten letter about the Mothball Fleet and his own Navy experiences, plus a CD of photos and other information on the Mothball Fleet.

On October 19, 2017 Haggard and Garig took the package to the post office and mailed it. The next day Frank’s phone rang and it was that same weathered voice on the line. “I’ve got that dog tag around my neck, where it belongs,” said Ledwell. The two Navy vets reminisced about their service.

Frank Haggard, being the local expert on the Mothball Fleet, was “over the moon” excited to talk to Ledwell about his experiences on the Green Cove Springs piers. Ledwell said he doesn’t remember losing the dog tag while stationed in Green Cove Springs in 1947, but is grateful he has it back regardless. It lay in the mud for seventy years until Frank Haggard found it. And now, it’s back with its sailor where it belongs. Operation Return Dog Tag was a success.