

Everlasting spirit

By Vanesa Brashier

Even a war cannot dampen the spirit of Lloyd Brymer of Onalaska; three wars actually.

Brymer's ability to find humor in nearly every situation, even something as serious as war, is legendary in Polk County, particularly in his hometown of Onalaska where he is affectionately referred to as "The Ol' Sailor."

Born and reared in Comanche, Brymer joined the Navy during the latter part of World War II and was still enlisted during the subsequent wars in Vietnam and Korea.

He chose the Navy, Brymer said, because his favorite uncle was a Navy man and he wanted to follow in his footsteps.

But it might have been more accurate to assume it had something to do with his inability to march. "I can't keep in step; never could keep in step, even in boot camp," Brymer said with a laugh.

"I guess I wasn't taking long enough steps or something, or it may be because I have no rhythm." He went to boot camp at San Diego, Calif. where new sailors lived in wooden barracks with tarpaper walls. For heat, the sailors used a pot-bellied stove in the center of the room.

Four weeks later, he was on a ship; destination unknown. "The Navy would put you on a ship and the next morning you were heading somewhere. About three days out, they would finally tell you where you were going," Brymer said. "In my case, it was the Philippines."

When he reached the Philippine capital city of Manila, Brymer was sent to a base where he trained to be a dive. In October 1944 the harbor of Manila had become the grave yard for many sailors, ships and submarines during repeated strikes from both the Japanese and the United States.

"What we did mostly was to go out every day and find ships that had been sunk. We cut up the ships into chunks, picked them up with a crane



Lloyd Brymer's

and towed them offshore to a ship graveyard," he said.

"The dive teams used torches, dynamite and C-3 explosives to dismantle the sunken vessels. Most of the ships and submarines were completely submerged but a few had masts sticking up as ghostly reminders of what had taken place."

Brymer describes the diving gear they used as nothing more than a modified gas mask with an air hose attached. Often he and the other divers would play pranks on each other by putting a kink in the air hose of a submerged diver.

"You wouldn't want to do that too much because the guy might be tending your air hose the next time," he said.

Sometimes the divers would wear a diving suit that would collapse if the air was cut off or would shoot up to the top of the water like a rocket if it was given too much air.

"Just like you would see in a cartoon," he said. "You couldn't do anything when you got to the top. You couldn't move your arms, legs or anything."

In the Philippines, he occasionally guarded Japanese prisoners who were not much trouble at that stage in the war Brymer said. They bummed a few cigarettes but mostly kept to themselves. "I think they were glad to be captured knowing they were going to survive the war," he said.

He recalls hearing about one sailor who was assigned to guard two prisoners he had captured while on patrol. After he brought them back they wanted him to guard them on his watch. The sailor was pretty well beaten up so he just

shot both of the Japanese prisoners.

Brymer said, "I guess he didn't want to take a chance on them killing him if he fell asleep. He was just saving his own neck. He had had enough of it and wasn't going to risk his own life to protect theirs."

After the war ended, Brymer along with other Navy divers helped salvage millions of Philippine peso that were dumped in the ocean by the Philippine government. Retrieved from the ocean off Corregidor, this was a successful effort to prevent the pesos from falling into the hands of the Japanese.

Later, he went to Guam where he worked at a submarine base. They put him in the fire department because he couldn't drive a truck. His family never had a car he said, so he never learned to drive.

However, his lack of experience behind the wheel did not stop him from volunteering as a driver at the shore patrol headquarters in San Francisco. "I was told they needed a driver so I said I would do it. The commander got in the Jeep and said to take him to Chinatown. I took the wrong way and ended up going down a one-way street in the wrong direction," he said.

When they returned, he was relieved of duty and given a nightstick for shore patrols.

After the war, Brymer left the Navy for a short while but civilian life did not agree with him so he re-enlisted.

His timing was unfortunate though. "I got in about two weeks before the Korean War began," he said. Luckily for him, he avoided combat in that war and instead went to Mayport, Fla. to run a crash boat.

Brymer's boat went out each time bombing drills were conducted.

A career sailor with more than 20 years of service, Brymer was in the Navy until his retirement in 1966.

This story submitted by Lori May of Crockett about her father Lloyd G. Brymer (Sept. 26, 1927-June 28-2006) and his experiences during his 20-plus years in the Navy was published in the Polk County Enterprise three years ago.