



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Olean Veteran William H. Button Honored for Service in World War II

CATHARINE YOUNG October 24, 2014

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U.S. Navy Veteran Receives Awards Earned 70 Years Ago

OLEAN - In recognition of his outstanding service during World War II, United States Navy veteran William H. Button was honored and presented with long overdue medals today.

In a ceremony at the Pines in Olean, Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I-Olean) presented Pharmacist's Mate 3rd Class (PhM3c) Button with the military medals and awards he earned serving his country overseas seven decades ago.

"Petty Officer William Button answered his country's call to serve when it most needed him. We are all indebted to him for his amazing service and contributions to our nation's victory in World War II. It is wonderful to see him finally receiving these medals today - medals he earned and deserves," said Senator Young.

In March of 2014 when Senator Young was visiting the Pines, Petty Officer Button spoke with her about issues affecting veterans and his own experience in World War II. Based on his extensive service, there were a number of commendations Petty Officer Button was entitled to that he had never received. Senator Young contacted the U.S. Navy and the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs about the much deserved commendations.

The Navy responded in July with the following awards (in order of precedence): the Combat Action Ribbon, the American Campaign Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three bronze service stars, the World War II Victory Medal, the Navy Occupation Service Medal with Asia Clasp, the Honorable Service Lapel Pin, and the U.S. Navy Honorable Discharge Lapel Pin. The New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs also awarded Petty Officer Button the New York State Medal for Merit.

William Henry Button's story begins with his birth in Olean on November 8, 1925. While still attending East Smethport High School, where he also played basketball, Button got his parents' permission to join the Navy's V-6 program at just 17 years old.

He entered recruit training on October 22, 1943, at Sampson Naval Training Center on Seneca Lake, New York. After his initial training, Seaman Button completed hospital corpsman training at St. Albans Naval Hospital in Queens, New York; joined the crew of USS Landing Ship Tank (LST) 58; and departed for Europe in preparation for the invasion of France at Normandy.

While in Scotland en route to join the invading force, Seaman Button was transferred from USS LST-58 to the U.S. Navy Hospital in Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

After serving in Northern Ireland for the next year, now-Pharmacist's Mate Button returned to the United States at Brooklyn Naval Yard and was assigned to the USS Missouri (BB-63), a 45,000 ton Iowa-class battleship. USS Missouri was built by the New York Navy Yard and commissioned on June 11, 1944.

The Missouri's main battery consisted of nine 16-inch Mark 7 guns capable of firing 2,700-pound armor-piercing shells about 20 miles. It's secondary battery was made up of 20 five-inch twin turrets with a range of up to 10 miles.

After preparing for combat, Petty Officer Button and his shipmates departed for the Pacific Theater in November 1944, arriving in the warzone the following January. Petty Officer Button and the Missouri supported the Iwo Jima and Okinawa invasions, the Ryukyus campaign, and Fast Carrier Task Force 58 airstrikes and raids on Japan.

"When we bombarded Iwo Jima, I remember that the recoil from the 16-inch guns was such that it would drive the ship back six feet. You didn't hear the sound because you were at General Quarters wearing headphones, but you certainly felt it," said Petty Officer Button.

In combat, Petty Officer Button's battle station was the ship's dispensary where he helped the wounded. His greatest brush with death came during heavy fighting on April 11,

1945, when a Japanese kamikaze crashed into Missouri's starboard side, just below the main deck level. The plane's starboard wing was thrown forward, starting a gasoline fire at the five-inch Gun Mount No. 3. The ship suffered only limited damage and the fire was brought under control.

"That all occurred right above me," he remembered. "The kamikaze came at us, dropping a 500-pound bomb on the fantail and then he crashed right into the ship."

In May 1945, USS Missouri became Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet flagship and on September 2, 1945, hosted the Japanese surrender ceremony that officially ended World War II.

"The Missouri had a detachment of Marines and I was their corpsman," recalled Petty Officer Button. "Before the surrender could take place, they sent us ashore as a landing party to secure the Japanese Naval Base at Tokyo Bay. I was part of the surrender but I never saw it because I was with the Marines. I even got a card showing that I participated in the surrender but it was lost years ago."

After the war ended, Petty Officer Button and USS Missouri returned home to the United States and participated in the Navy Day Fleet Review held in the Hudson River off New York City on October 27, 1945.

After disembarking, Button returned to Sampson Naval Training Center where he was honorably discharged on December 16, 1945, having served for two years, one month, and 25 days.

Petty Officer Button returned to Olean where he and his late wife of 37 years, Onnalee Rix of Bolivar, raised daughters Pam and Debbie. For several years he worked on the kitchen table assembly line at Daystrom furniture on Franklin Street in Olean.

Later, Petty Officer Button followed his love of sports into volunteering as a sports announcer. This led to a 30-year broadcasting career until his retirement in the late 1970s. Twenty of those years were spent announcing for radio stations in Olean, Bradford, and Wellsville. Ten were spent on air at Channel 15, a Vision View Productions TV station in Olean. Button was also assistant manager of the former Coral Lanes bowling alley in Olean for 10 years.

“William Button has shown us what it means to be a man of honor and courage, committed to serving his country and helping his fellows, even at great risk to himself. For everything this inspiring American war hero has done for us, both while in the Navy and in the decades serving his country and community since, we offer our highest thanks and gratitude,” said Senator Young.

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