

100 years of Elks in Hawaii: World War II - Battle of Tassafaronga

As the Allies fought their way across the Pacific toward Japan, Americans became familiar with the geography of the Pacific. Headlines in newspapers introduced unknown places. Maps attempted to show mothers and fathers where their sons were fighting. Even in Hawaii, the Pacific was a mystery to many. Citizens relied on *Captain Bryan's Pacific War Atlas* for direction and so did the US military. E. H. Bryan, Jr., Bishop Museum Curator of Collections, was 'activated' from the Army reserves 6 months before the Pearl Harbor attack¹. The son of a CA Elk who traveled to Hawaii to help initiate Lodge 616 in 1901, Bryan spent the war explaining Pacific geography, biology, and cultures to Generals and Admirals. What's a coral reef? How close to the beach can we get our landing craft? How much drinking water can we expect on this island? Bryan over saw the building of table top model islands to allow planning of invasion strategies. He helped those trying to 'read' aerial photos of Japanese occupied islands soon to be invaded. When headlines shouted "Battle of Tassafaronga," 616 Elks likely reached for their copy of *Captain Bryan's War Atlas*.

Battle of Tassafaronga

Future Elk and Water Tender, First Class **Linton Stevens Lester**, was born Sept 11, 1910, in Hiram, Georgia, to parents John H., a farmer, and wife Georgia. Lester left very little of his life in the public record. We only know he had migrated west to San Francisco, before he joined the Navy.

His ship, USS *Minneapolis* CA-36, arrived at Pearl Harbor in 1940, but we don't know if Lester was on it. The ship was at sea for gunnery practice when Japan attacked Dec 7, 1941, and saw no action, although the *Minneapolis* later patrolled nearby waters looking for the enemy. Things had settled down in Honolulu when Lester was proposed for 616 membership by Elk J. N. Sowers, Jul 12, 1942, while the *Minneapolis* was in port after the Battle of Midway. Elected Aug 9, Lester and the *Minneapolis* left again to cover the landings on Guadalcanal. On return, he was initiated October 25, 1942.

Following a similar path was Pharmacist's Mate First Class **Charles Strauther Smith, Jr.** Born Mar 5, 1919, in Georgetown, KY, his family life was disrupted. In 1930, age 11, he was listed by the census as a lodger with the Stewart family in Heidrick, KY. Perhaps his parents died, or Depression finances caused family dissolution. The term 'lodger' did not always mean a paying relationship. The 1910 census listed my grandfather as a "boarder" with the family which had generously taken him into their home as what Hawaii would recognize as a hanai. In the early 1900s, many generous families took children into their homes and formed lasting relationships. Hopefully this was Charles Smith's fate.

Later in life Smith found another family when he joined the Navy. He came to Hawaii on the USS *New Orleans*. Adding the Elks to his family, Smith was proposed for membership Oct 11, 1942, while in port after battles at Guadalcanal. Initiated Nov 8, 1942, Smith and the *New Orleans* left port almost immediately for a new battle. Elk relationships continued at sea as both the *Minneapolis* and the *New Orleans* had aboard fellow 616 Elks.

Nov 30, 1942, the Battle of Tassafaronga, near the Solomon Islands: the *Minneapolis* and *New Orleans* took part in U.S. efforts to prevent reprovisioning of Japanese Guadalcanal troops. Both sides knew how crucial the struggle was. Torpedoes take out the *Minneapolis* from the bow back to the chain pipes, her port side ruptured, and two firerooms open to the sea. As a Water Tender, Linton Lester would have been in these areas.

Sailing behind the crippled, burning *Minneapolis*, the USS *New Orleans*, Elk Charles Smith aboard, avoided a collision. But in escaping that collision, the ship turned into the path of a torpedo that ripped off her bow which then bumped down her port side punching holes in the hull. A fifth of her length was gone, and fires blazed in the forward parts of the ship. Magnificent crew work kept both vessels moving until safely moored, camouflaged with palm fronds to foil air attack. Quick repairs, including a temporary coconut log bow on the *New Orleans*, fit them to sail for repair.

The Battle of Tassafaronga cost the lives of 395 crew including Elks Lester and Smith, both are considered Killed in Action. Lodge 616, unaware of their deaths, dropped both men from the membership rolls in 1945.

Anita Manning, 616 Lodge Historian

References:

616 Membership records and Minutes

Bryan, Jr, E.H. 1941. *Captain Bryan's Pacific War Atlas*

www.familysearch.org & ancestry.com

National Archives World War II Archival Databases

USS *Minneapolis*: <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/m11/minneapolis-ii.htm> ; see damaged ship at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Minneapolis_after_Tassafaronga.jpg

¹ In Jan 1941, Bryan warned the Museum that in 1940 he had turned down two requests to activate with the Army and expected next to be an ordered.