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A Triple Defense Man: Robert Sherwood Alford
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When I first learned some thirty years after World War II that one of my many nephews had survived the sinking of a merchant ship in the Indian Ocean, I immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had been in the same awful danger I had experienced in the early months of the big war.

Having myself been posted to the Far East in late 1940 and leaving my tearful bride of two months behind, I voyaged from San Francisco on the old liner President Pierce with ports of call Honolulu, Yokohama, Kobe, Shanghai, Hong Kong and finally Manila. Homeport of the Asiatic Fleet was Manila, the Philippines and there I was assigned to the old four-stack destroyer STEWART. For almost a year there was a sort of guarded peace during which we trained and prepared for what most of us felt was inevitable - war.

In late November 1941 with tension steadily rising in the Far East, our Admiral Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, learned that the Japanese Fleet was at sea but no one knew where. It was always assumed that, if war came, the Asiatic Fleet would be the first to be hit.

Two weeks before the war Admiral Hart ordered all ships that could move to leave Manila and the Philippines and to sail to the Netherlands East Indies. Of course no one dreamed that Pearl Harbor would be the first to be hit. But it was and we in the Asiatic Fleet wondered who would be next.

We found out soon enough and it was not long in coming. As soon as the Japanese Fleet returned from the Pearl Harbor attack, had their ships overhauled, refueled and resupplied, they turned their attention to us, the Asiatic Fleet. It was as if the enemy had saved us for mopping up at their leisure. And that is precisely what they did. They beat the hell out of us out there and in less than three months nearly all our ships were sunk or damaged beyond repair. Indeed my ship STEWART was hit by shellfire in a savage night melee and had to be drydocked for repairs. But it was a floating drydock which tilted causing our ship to turn over on its side with even more damage.

There was not enough time for repairs. We had to abandon ship to avoid capture of the crew by the enemy

who took over the port in about a week. We escaped on a small gunboat which in early March 1942 set out for West Australia. It was the last ship to leave Java in the Dutch East Indies. It was the most perilous voyage of my life. There in the middle of the Indian Ocean we were practically defenseless - our puny 3" guns no match for any warship. There were two enemy task forces, each with aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers and destroyers. They were roaming around and sinking ships right and left. An airplane pilot who flew over us reported later that enemy ships were just over the horizon, about thirty miles away. It was sort of a miracle that our little gunboat ran this gauntlet and safely arrived at Fremantle, Australia on 6 March, 1942 with fuel for just one more hour of steaming. When we anchored, I went to my cabin and fell to my knees in thanks to God for deliverance.

It was remembering this milieu of fearsome danger that caused me to jump to the conclusion that my nephew Robert Sherwood Alford, AAFA #0509, had probably experienced the same fears and impending disaster that I had faced. But I was wrong. There was a vast difference in time and place. My time of greatest peril was part of the first week of March 1942 in what could be called the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. But Seaman First Class Robert S. Alford had his ship sunk out from under his feet almost two years later in the western part of the Indian Ocean. And the Japanese Fleet had no part in the disaster which befell his ship.

Robert Sherwood Alford was born 5 October, 1924 in Lakeland, Polk County, Florida, the middle child of nine born to his parents Dewey Leorus and Mary Humphrey Alford. The family had moved to Florida in that year before he was born to seek better economic opportunity. It was tough making a living in those days in hard-scrabble South Georgia, especially Worth County. Dewey Alford had been associated with his and my father in the turpentine business but dropped out of that industry at the end of the first big war. As a result, he turned to farming cotton. The coming of the boll weevil however negated the most prodigious efforts to make a go of it. Little known is the fact that the great depression came to the South ten years before the rest of the country following the Wall Street crash of 1929. In a larger sense, the South had been in depression since the Civil War.

It was during the period from about 1920, when I was six years old, to 1924 when my half-brother Dewey moved with his family to Florida. That is when I became fully aware of what wonderful people he and his wife Mary were. They were among the kindest, nicest

couples I have ever known. For awhile they lived about a quarter mile down the country dirt road from our house and I knew when I wandered barefooted to their home I would always get a handout - cookies, stick candy or maybe a big country biscuit. Mary had come from the small settlement of Evergreen in the lower middle part of Worth County near the Colquitt County line. Mary Humphrey had been previously married to a Mr. P. L. York but I never knew what happened to that marriage.

Evergreen was a farming community of sturdy, God-fearing decent folks. As I recall, there was a Primitive Baptist Church across the road from the Humphrey home and one of my most vivid memories is of my father taking me to a "foot-washing" at the church. As I remember there was no foolishness like musical instruments - piano or foot-pumped organs. One of the solemn old gentlemen would tap out the rhythm with his foot and the congregation would join in and belt out old hymns like "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder" or "Just As I Am" and other old songs. Then the "foot-washing" was accomplished with all the solemnity and dignity of communion or a funeral. I have never seen any ritual or ceremony done with any more sincerity and feeling.

Another vivid memory is of Mary Alford relating the time her brother Quincy Humphrey, took a drink of water from a freshly drawn bucket up from a deep well without looking at it first. He quickly found a live baby catfish in his mouth. Guess I was very impressionable in those days as a young boy. But now in the mid-1920's there were rumors of boom times in Florida and no one could blame Dewey for moving down there with his family. Eventually five more of my brothers wound up in Jacksonville, which brought the total to six in Florida. After the birth of Robert Sherwood there were four more girls born to Dewey and Mary. Somewhere in there Robert acquired the nickname of "Pa" as he was affectionately known by his siblings.

When I went off to the Navy in the early 1930's I sort of lost track of Dewey and his family. It was not until I had retired thirty-five years later that I began to pick up lost threads of family ties. During the war one older brother Alton, was in the Coast Guard. Another was on a Navy cruiser and my younger brother Marvin served on a Navy destroyer. It was after the war and he had been discharged before I found out the name of his ship. Still later I found out the captain of his ship was a classmate of mine at the Naval Academy. When I told him my brother said he was a lousy skipper he didn't take that too kindly. I was lucky to run across my older brother

Jack on a cruiser in 1943 in the South Pacific near Guadalcanal when my ship was in the same port. We had a nice chat all afternoon but I never saw him again. I was still on active duty in the Mediterranean Sea when he died.

Several other nephews served with distinction in the Armed Forces during the war about which I am trying to learn more. But the story of Robert Sherwood "Pa" Alford is unique. On 10 July, 1943 at age 18 Pa enlisted in the Navy and after completion of boot camp recruit training was assigned to armed guard duty on merchant ships.



Seaman Robert Sherwood "Pa" Alford

His first ship was the SS WALTER CAMP, a Liberty ship built in Richmond, California. She was launched in May 1943. Hundreds and hundreds of these Liberty ships were turned out all over the country using methods like automobile assembly lines. One was completed in four days and 15 hours after the keel was laid. Ninety-nine of them were built in Brunswick, Georgia. The standard Liberty ship was 441 ft. 6 in. long with a beam of 57 ft., draft of 28 ft. and displaced about 14,000 tons. They could carry 9,146 tons of cargo with a full load of

fuel. Their reciprocating steam engines generated 2,500 horsepower at a speed of 11 plus knots.

After fitting out on the west coast, the SS WALTER CAMP worked her way around to the east coast and on 27 November, 1943 she departed from New York, NY bound for Charleston, SC. She was in a convoy of twelve ships escorted by three small patrol craft and upon arrival on 30 November 1943 she commenced taking on cargo of canned foodstuffs, power shovels, pontoons, trailers and trucks. Upon completion of loading, WALTER CAMP departed Charleston on 10 December 1943 with one escort and arrived at Norfolk, VA on 13 December. There she joined a convoy of seventy ships which sailed on 14 December bound for Gibraltar with fifteen escort ships including a small aircraft carrier.

The convoy arrived at Gibraltar on 2 January 1944 and thereafter the British Navy took over escort duties for passage to Alexandria, Egypt. About half of the convoy ships broke off south of Italy for support of our forces there while the remainder proceeded to Alexandria. South of the island of Crete on the night of 8 January 1944 the convoy came under attack by enemy aircraft for about an hour. The 28 Navy men of the Armed Guard of WALTER CAMP were at their stations and four of her eight 20mm guns opened fire on a plane reported overhead with undetermined results. Thus did Pa Alford get his first baptism of fire. The 5", 50 cal. aft and the 3", 50 cal. gun at the bow did not fire. It was later reported one enemy plane was shot down but there was no damage to the convoy. On the night of 9 January there was another air alert but no action.

On 12 January, 1944 the convoy arrived at Suez and then WALTER CAMP proceeded independently the next day for Aden, Saudi Arabia arriving on January 18th. On the 19th and again sailing alone, the ship departed Aden and set a zigzag course for Colombo, Ceylon. At about 300 miles west of Cochin, India at 0430 on the early morning of 26 January, 1944 the ship was hit by a torpedo on the starboard (right) side forward of the bridge. Both the No. 2 and 3 holds were flooded immediately and the ship quickly took on a thirty degree list to starboard. The rudder was jammed to starboard, the main engine room flooded and all power lost. In imminent danger of sinking the order to abandon ship was made at 0440. It was accomplished about 0443 without a single man lost albeit with some difficulty in launching lifeboats and rafts because of the list. With the rudder jammed the forward motion of the ship took her in a slow turn to starboard and at 0450 a

second torpedo was observed as it hit on the port side amidship. WALTER CAMP then took an extreme list to starboard and at about 0455 sank, going down by the stern.

Distress signals were sent out by radio before the ship sank but it was more than three days later at about noon on the 29th before a plane was sighted. The aircraft reported the location of the lifeboats and rafts and signaled that they would be picked up the next day. Early morning on 30 January the British Navy royal warship HMS DANAE picked up all hands and set course for Aden. Thus did Seaman First Class Robert Sherwood "Pa" Alford get his first taste of "war is hell." I don't know whether he actually had to swim for his life but it is probably a sure thing that he was scared as hell by the experience. Of particular interest to me was that the men were picked up by HMS DANAE on which I had been aboard on a courtesy call back in 1935 in the port of Gibraltar. After the start of the big war, I saw the ship again in early 1942 in the port of Batavia, Java, Dutch East Indies. She was an older ship of the Royal Navy and was sometimes described as a very light cruiser or a large destroyer. Fortunately she was away from Java on convoy duties when the Japanese beat the hell out of all of us - American, Australian, British and Dutch Navies. The submarine which sank WALTER CAMP was later identified as German U-532 which surrendered at Liverpool on 10 May 1945.

The crew and men of the Armed Guard of WALTER CAMP were landed by HMS DANAE at Aden on 3 February 1944. The US sailors then made their way to the Armed Guard Replacement Pool at Port Said, Egypt. Subsequently Seaman Pa Alford served in the Armed Guard of the merchant ships SS CAPE HORN and SS PORT PLEASANT. After the war, he was discharged by the Navy on 4 April 1946. Later he enlisted in the US Army, rising to the rank of sergeant and served during the Korean War. Later still, he served twenty years in the US Air Force covering the Vietnam War. Not many US citizens can boast of honorable and distinguished service in three major branches of the Armed Forces - the Navy, the Army and the Air Force. Pa Alford never married and upon his well-earned retirement he returned to Lakeland, Florida and looked after his aged father and mother until their deaths in the late 1970's. Pa Alford died 24 October 1995 in Lakeland and is buried near his parents in Fitzgerald

Cemetery. Truly he was a magnificent Alford and an illustrious triple defense nephew. We are all so very proud of him.



**USAF Staff Sergeant
Robert Sherwood "Pa" Alford**

Recently, in late 2001, I had occasion to revisit the Evergreen community for the first time in about eighty-one years. When I saw the lush green cotton and cornfields, the modest but well kept homes and churches, I was reassured of the future of our county. I know these are the sons and daughters of the sturdy, God-fearing folks I remember as a small boy. I could not find or identify the Primitive Baptist Church of my dimmed memory. But I know our God lives on in the hearts, minds and souls of the good people of Evergreen and Worth County, Georgia. "O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain-----Thank God."