

An Interview with Oliver Champion
WWII Navy Veteran By Michele
Starkey

Oliver Champion shared with us, "My father was a Cooper and made wood barrels used for housing wine or spirits. I grew up on 26th Street in New York City, also known as 'Hell's Kitchen.' I became one of Macy's first black salespeople on the selling floor in the 1940's." In the early 1940s, the retail business was booming. On December 7, three years to the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked, Macy's department store in NYC had its largest sales day ever.

Champion was the only surviving son in the family having lost two younger brothers to childhood illnesses. He was 20 years old when he was drafted in the Navy June of 1943 at a time when African Americans held limited positions in the US Navy. In the end, one million African Americans would serve in the military during WWII. Champion's ship, the USS Anthony DD 515, would have some of the War's first black American officers in the Navy.

Where did you go for basic training? "I went to the Great Lakes and it was my first time away from home. At the time, I was directing a Gospel Group of about twenty-six teens ranging in ages from 14-19. The pianist's brother was also inducted and he introduced me to his brother. The two of us stayed together almost the entire time that we served and we remained friends for roughly 66 years."

What destination was next? "We served as logistical support on Mare Island, California for 1-1/2 years. I was on administrative duty and was responsible for recreational activities, mainly the bowling alley and the billiards."

Were you the only black sailor on board the ship? "No and in fact, the USS Anthony DD 515 had some of the first black officers in the Navy at the time. Our Junior Grade Lieutenant and Chief were black and I became one of the first black Yeoman on the ship. Our ship had about 100 men total."

When did you head overseas? "It was very emotional leaving the United States in 1945 as we headed for the South Pacific. The ship was never told of our destination until we were underway. We stopped en route at Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands about 3000 miles west of Hawaii."

What was the big announcement during your crossing to the Marshall Island? "While we were crossing the Pacific, the announcement was made that the War was ending. There was a huge celebration of sorts and the officers broke out some beer and we all had one drink. It was a long trip to the Marshall Islands and we zig-zagged the entire way."

What did you do when you got to the Marshall Islands?
"The island was basically uninhabited when we arrived. There was one company of Marines still stationed there. We lived in Quonset huts and cleaned up the grounds. The Island was about the size of Coney Island. We had an outdoor theater and the supply ships would bring us movies from time to time and the ship's crew would go to the outdoor theater to watch the movies. It was one of our few pastimes, except for poker. I learned how to play poker during the War. We were not supposed to gamble but we did anyway to pass the time."

Did the officers know that you were gambling? "Remember, we lived on one end of the Island in Quonset huts and the officers lived on the other end of the Island. I doubt they knew what we did in our spare time."

Tell us a little about life on the Island. "There were no showers and we bathed in the ocean, often collecting rainwater in our helmets or boots to rinse off the salt. Every single night between 4:30-5:00, it would downpour for about an hour or longer. The outdoor movie show started at 7:00 and sometimes we would walk to the movies and be soaking wet."

Did you receive mail on the Island? "Yes, letters and birthday cakes arrived intact and we shared the bounty with the rest of the crew."

How long did you serve? "I served from June of 1943 until March of 1946. I was discharged in Lido Beach, Long Island and would receive the American Theater Medal, the Victory Medal and the Asiatic Pacific Medal."

When did you return to NYC? "After being discharged, I took a train from California to NYC. We shared a compartment with other sailors. There were four of us in that compartment for the 4-5 day trip back East. After about a one-month holiday, I began working at Macy's Department Store again but they started me out on the bottom of the scale in the Shipping Department. It would take about 4-5 months to work my way into retail sales again. I left for a position with Abraham & Straus and stayed with them for one year working my way up from Clerk to Shipping Clerk and eventually returning to the sales floor."

Where did you go from there? "I saw an alert from City Hospital that they needed field personnel for the automation that IBM was doing for the hospital. I took a course and became the instructor for hospital employees. I worked through the ranks and eventually became a Buyer. I worked at Kings County Hospital (part of the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation) for twenty years. It was during this time that I met my wife, Val."

How did you meet your wife? "Val was a nurse who had a very active social life. One day, she needed an escort to a function and we ended up dating for two years. On June 30, 1974, she became my wife. I waited a long time to get married and so did she. We moved from Queens to Yonkers and met a couple who were moving to Newburgh. Eventually we moved to Meadow Hill where we lived for 32 years and enjoyed a wonderful marriage until Val passed in 2006."

Oliver Champion remains active in singing and performing with the Golden Chorus -a group of sixteen members who range in age from 65-97-years-old. He remains active with VFW Post 1161 and is a member of the WW Breakfast Club which meets from 8-9:00 am every Friday at the Neptune Diner.

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg, The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details.