

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



Lt. Cmdr. Frank Bogert (top row second from left) with the Navy brass at Alameda. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Palm Springs history: Bogert's Navy service, from pilot to photographer

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Armed with his camera equipment, Palm Springs cowboy Frank Bogert went to war on the Sangamon aircraft carrier headed to the Pacific in 1942. Bogert was more than a decade past the age of conscription, married with a family. He needn't have gone at all, but his father served in the Spanish American War and again in World War I and Bogert thought, like his father, he should serve his country.

Bogert asked Colonel Herr of the Army's 11th Cavalry to help him get in the war. As it would turn out, Bogert got orders from both the Cavalry and the Navy. Colonel Herr told Bogert to join the Navy, as the Cavalry was headed to a certain bloodbath in North Africa fighting Rommel. (Half of Herr's regiment was lost in that faraway desert.)

Bogert had done a stint in Army ROTC when he was at UCLA. But it was his expertise with a camera that made him an officer, a lieutenant commander, in the Navy. He had orders to report to Pensacola to the naval photographic school, but while on the train, he received a telegram telling him to report on the double to the Naval Aviation Cadet Board in San Francisco. He got off the train and headed west. An old naval captain and member of the Menlo Circus Club, where Bogert had been manager, got him transferred back.

Assigned to set up War Training Service centers for pilots all over the West, he traveled to Utah, Nevada, and Colorado. Bogert would set up the sites, finding housing, a place for a dining hall, an airport and space to teach "the kids" to drill.

Bogert was ordered to go to Grand Junction, Colorado, the small town where he'd grown up. He was only naval officer there and was prevailed upon to give speeches to Lion's and Rotary Clubs. He'd read the newspaper to keep up on the war as he didn't know much about the Navy yet.

While at the camps, he took flying lessons. At Grand Junction, his teacher let him take up a Piper Cub by himself against all regulations. Bogert flew up over the Grand Mesa to look at his family's old ranch. After the jaunt, he headed back but couldn't find the airport. It had seemingly vanished. He knew about the concept of cribbing but wasn't sure how to do it, and he was running out of gas. He had no choice but to put the plane down. Glad to have survived the landing, he never flew as a pilot again.

Back at the Ferry Building in San Francisco, Commander Bud McPherson enlisted Bogert for help throwing a party requested by Admiral Van Huhbert Ragsdale. Bogert blended Tony Curtis' character in "Operation Petticoat" with the integrity of Henry Fonda's in "Mr. Roberts" and proved extremely resourceful.

Bogert brought caterers and waiters and all kinds of liquor up from the Menlo Circus Club for the party. Admirals King and Kincaid attended, as did members of the Quiet Birdmen, and what seemed like every officer in the Navy. The Quiet Birdmen were a secret fraternity of elite Navy flyers started in WWI that included talented aviators Charles Lindbergh, Eddie Rickenbacker, Jimmy Doolittle, Wiley Post and Roscoe Turner. Humorously, the Quiet Birdmen were actually quite noisy and boisterous. Hence the Admiral's party



Bogert on board the USS Sangamon aircraft carrier.



Bogert on a Pacific atoll after a battle.

was exceedingly memorable.

In gratitude for an evening the Navy brass would not soon forget, Ragsdale asked Bogert if he'd like to go to sea. Two days later, Bogert was ordered to report to Cardiff 22 at Alameda to serve as aide and first lieutenant to the admiral.

At Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Bogert had a huge freezer installed on the Sangamon. Working for the admiral, it was easy to buy meat and he stuffed the freezer with New York strips, bacon, apple pies and other treats. He recruited a chef from one of New Orleans top hotels. They would eat well at war.

Newly on board, Bogert confessed to Red Gardner, the ship's chief, that he was a complete landlubber. Gardner was impressed, saying that Bogert was the first "90-day wonder" to have ever admitted he didn't know something.

Almost immediately, eight planes were lost in the drink due to lack of a catapult and not enough wind to properly launch. The carrier could make 16 knots but the Grumman TBF Avenger was underpowered, requiring 18 to 20 knots to get aloft. Each plane had three sailors and they died unable to escape the plane in the water. It was a shocking and solemn start to the war.

Finally across the Pacific at Tarawa atoll, the fleet had 15 destroyers, one cruiser and four carriers, including the flagship Sangamon. They strafed Betio Island for two days with 50-caliber guns and 5-pound bombs. It seemed nothing was left alive on the island. Bogert had been appointed photographer of the fleet by the admiral and mounted cameras on the fighter planes to take overlapping images of the islands that seemed to confirm the destruction.

But when the Marines attempted to land, the battle came. There were 5,000 Japanese dug in. They'd misjudged the tides and the landing was a disaster, with Marines being blown off the AmTrac landers into the air. After Betio was finally secured, the admiral allowed Bogert to go ashore.

The island was littered with Japanese bodies. The decaying flesh, mixed with the stench of dead fish was sickening. Bogert watched the surviving Marines digging in for the hard-won occupation. They had only K

rations to eat.

The Sangamon went from Tarawa to Makin, the Marshalls, the Gilberts, Enewetak, Palau, Hollandia, New Guinea and the Mariana islands. Bogert photographed each invasion and went ashore on every island with admiral's barge. On Kwajalein he took unforgettable pictures.

There was dark room on the ship but mostly they didn't use it. Bogert took 16mm moving pictures of every landing, sending it back to be developed. He had a Bell and Howell camera and color film. His footage was used in the movie "The Fighting Lady," produced by the Navy. (Watching it on YouTube is profoundly humbling.)

Bogert filmed a plane missing the hook and hitting the tower, knocking the wing off but the pilot walked out of the plane. He documented wounded planes and pilots limping back to the carrier. One PBF missed all the hooks and hit the barrier exploding its fifty-gallon tank of gas and killing six of the flight crew as it rolled across the deck. The ship's dog "Sangy" howled as the dead crewmen were buried at sea.

Admiral Ragsdale went home after 18 months, replaced by Admiral Tommy Sprague. As if in a scene from "Mr. Roberts," every night, the catholic priest, the ship's doctor, Bogert and the Admiral would hang out during the long hours before the Battle of the Philippine Sea where they survived the first kamikazes of the war.

Bogert was present for the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, documenting the battles with photographs and movies. Bogert was awarded a Bronze Star and the Sangamon had three Presidential Commendations during his tenure. After four years of service, he got out of the Navy in 1946. Years later when asked, Bogert demurred about what earned him a Bronze Star saying he never thought much about it. Like many in the greatest generation, he rarely spoke about the war.

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