

Close encounters with kamikazes

By Lou Michel Dec 26, 2011 Updated Jul 2, 2021 0



After two years at Burgard Vocational High School, Salvatore L. Gruttadauria decided he had had enough with

formal education and ventured into the classroom of the working world.

One of seven children living in a flat at Seventh and Pennsylvania streets on the West Side, Gruttadauria felt he was moving up in life with his newfound employment.

A worker at a food warehouse on Clinton Street, he got a taste of backbreaking labor, filling pallet-sized orders for area markets.

"That was the thing back in those days, getting a job instead of going to school," Gruttadauria said.

Then Uncle Sam made him a job offer in the form of a draft notice in 1944, and he was off to the Navy.

After learning semaphore and Morse code, he was billeted with a newly assembled crew, which journeyed from Rhode Island to the naval base at Virginia Beach. There, they boarded a new aircraft carrier, the USS Ticonderoga.

"It was as big as a football field and had a crew of 3,000 men," recalled Gruttadauria. "The boat was enormous. You felt like you could get lost in it. There were so many different compartments that you needed instructions to get around." The first order of business was to take the Ticonderoga out on a "shakedown cruise" to get acquainted with how the ship handled and provide sailors a chance to get their sea legs under them.

The honeymoon lasted 10 days.

"We then went through the Panama Canal and joined the fleet in the Pacific," Gruttadauria said. Not long after that, he and his crew members were on the lookout for Japanese kamikaze pilots. And it was during one of his watches that the suicide pilots came buzzing out of the sky.

"I got on the phone and reported to the bridge, 'There's a bogie coming in at 9 o'clock.' The guns on the ship started firing, but they didn't shoot good enough, and the plane hit the flight deck and made a big hole. None of our planes could take off."



In the meantime, Gruttadauria spotted a second kamikaze and realized he needed to take cover or face the likelihood of death "I got the hell out there and went down into the ship. It was made of steel, so I had protection."

Others were not so fortunate.

The second plane struck the Ticonderoga's radar tower, killing a chief petty officer and other crewmen.

The double whammy was enough to send the Ticonderoga back to America for repairs at a State of Washington port.

The ship was then ordered back to the South Pacific. But by this time, Japanese air power was diminished.

"Thank God we didn't see any more kamikaze. It was all over by then," Gruttadauria said, the relief in his voice still easily detectable so many years later.



After the war, he was more than happy to rejoin the ranks of land lovers and took a job at the Post Office, delivering mail on Clinton Street and Jefferson Avenue for 27 years before retirement.

He and his wife, the former Rose Alabisi, raised a son and a daughter and have six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

And while the Second World War is long over, Gruttadauria is never far from those memories of when Uncle Sam called him to duty.

On the wall in the sitting room of his West Side home, he has a large photograph of the Ticonderoga and other World War II aircraft carriers prominently displayed.

Salvatore L. Gruttadauria, 86

Hometown: Robertsdale, Pa.

Residence: Buffalo

Branch: Navy

Rank: Seaman first class

War zone: World War II, Pacific Theater

Years of service: Drafted, 1944-1946

Most prominent honors: Pacific Theater Medal

Specialty: Signalman