

Missouri State Society Daughters of the American Revolution
Proudly “Spotlights” our July 2011
Patriot of the Month



Wallace (Wally)
Burger

Sponsored by:

Westport Chapter
Kansas City,
Missouri



Wallace “Wally” Burger was born in Pilot Grove, Missouri, on May 29, 1923. He graduated from Pilot Grove High School and is a graduate of Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Wally began his naval career in December 1941, when he entered the Naval Officer Candidate School in St. Louis, Missouri. He was a twenty-one year-old Assistant Supply Officer.

Wally related the following, “I was put up in a hotel in San Francisco until I headed to Pearl Harbor on the *USS Wisconsin* where the only open space to bunk was the Admiral’s Quarters. At Pearl Harbor, I boarded a tanker traveling at 11 knots across the Pacific, where I was supposed to join the crew of the *USS Birmingham* in Ulithi, the fleet rendezvous point. However, the *Birmingham* had already left and I was in Leyte Gulf. I was then made a Shore Patrol Officer.

“One night the enemy sneaked in and a Kamikaze hit the *USS Princeton*. The *USS Birmingham* pulled aside to fight the fire, but an explosion ensued and killed 300-400 people on the *Birmingham*. I was supposed to have been on board then, but being slow saved my life. The

Birmingham went back to Pearl Harbor for repairs and I was finally able to board the ship at Mare Island, Vallejo, California, on January 1, 1945. After a shake-down cruise we were ordered to head for the Pacific War Zone once again. We joined the main fleet in Ulithi. Our new assignment was to support the Army and Marines at Iwo Jima. Our mission was shore bombardment with star shells each night, with continued bombardment with five and six inch shells into the enemy lines ahead of the Army and Marine advancement.

“Our next mission was the invasion of Okinawa on April 1, 1945. The first few weeks were filled with Kamikaze planes; they sunk or damaged our ships, and even struck our hospital ships. They came at us in droves. Under battle conditions, as a Supply Officer, my assignment was to plot the locations of the biggest enemy planes in the Combat Information Center. We had been at battle many weeks, shelling the Japanese ahead of the Marines and the Army, softening them up as they were dug in at Sugar Loaf Hill, a city under the mountains. During the day we lobbed shells, and at night we shot flares in to ignite the area so the American troops could see the enemy’s movement. We had been under battle conditions for many weeks. We worked shifts of four hours on duty and four hours off. Eventually we were ordered off to rest for a couple of days, and we were supposedly in a secure position.

“On May 4, 1945, we’d been at Okinawa for a month. I heard our ship’s 20 mm machine guns firing which was unusual and indicated that the enemy was very close. Out of nowhere, a Kamikaze swept low across the water and targeted the *USS St. Louis*. It missed and hit the starboard side of the *Birmingham*’s main deck instead, penetrating three levels before the 500 pound bomb it was carrying exploded. It went through the bunkroom killing my roommate instantly. I had left seconds before to go to my office. I was knocked around, but I wasn’t hurt. I remember a huge hole by the magazine and the feeling of the ship as it shuddered from the hit. The entire sickbay was destroyed, along with fifty-two deaths and eighty-two injuries. Standard Naval policy is to seal off the compartments after a strike to save the ship. When they did that, twenty men were drowned in their quarters.

“We left Okinawa for Guam, where we were picked up for our return to Mars Island Naval Shipyard for major repairs. Upon our return to the Pacific War Zone, the war had ended.”

Wally was discharged on July 1, 1946, in Great Lakes, Illinois. He received two stars for Iwo Jima and Okinawa and was sent a medal for a Kamikaze strike.

Wally had a distinguished career in the field of paper distribution. He was a Division Manager associated with three paper manufacturers and was a Director of the Kansas City Printing Industry. Wally is a member of the Second Presbyterian Church. He is a member of the Kamikaze Survivors Association, Association of American Heroes, American Legion, Chamber of Commerce, Phi Delta Theta, and Director of Starlight Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri. He and Betty Reeves have been married for fifty-five years. They have three daughters and six grandchildren.