

Human Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard

JOSEPH TEZANOS



No one individual could claim a more unique and interesting pursuit of the fabled American Dream than Joseph Tezanos. Born in 1920, in Santander, Spain, Tezanos' parents moved in the 1920s to Upstate New York, where he completed high school and began working at Bethlehem Steel Corporation's Lackawanna plant as a crane operator.

Tezanos enlisted in the Coast Guard in spring 1942 at the age of twenty-two. As a gunner's mate on board LST 20, he saw action in some of the most highly-contested amphibious landings of World War II. These included Kiska, Alaska; Tarawa and the Gilbert Islands; and Kwajalein and the Marshall Islands.

By April of 1944, LST 20 returned to Pearl Harbor and moored near an armada of transports and LSTs loading and preparing for the top secret Operation Forager. Forager would support the invasion of Saipan, which resulted in one of the bloodiest invasions of the Pacific Theater's island-hopping campaign. On 21 May 1944, however, an explosion on board LST 353 set off a chain reaction among the transport vessels and resulting in the largest accidental explosion of World War II in terms of lives lost. At great personal risk of being burned or blown up, Tezanos joined the crew of a rescue boat and assisted in saving over forty survivors from the water and off of burning ships.

Tezanos received the Navy & Marine Corps Medal, a citation signed personally by Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and a commendation letter from Commandant Russell Waesche. By the end of the summer, Tezanos received orders to begin Reserve Officer Training and, by October, he found himself in New London, Connecticut, at the Coast Guard Academy receiving that training. In early spring 1945, he graduated as an ensign in the Reserve and, in May 1945, he found himself back on the West Coast serving as a boat officer on board Attack Transport Joseph T. Dickman.

Tezanos served the remainder of his tour on board the Joseph Dickman. Most of that time saw his ship transporting troops to the front and, after the conclusion of hostilities in August, transporting them back home to the United States. In January 1946, Tezanos arrived in San Francisco on board the Dickman and witnessed the ship's formal decommissioning. That spring he returned to New York, having lived a lifetime's worth of unique and vivid experiences, but he was ready to return to civilian life and enrolled full-time at Syracuse University.

By 1950, John Tezanos had nearly completed his bachelor's degree at Syracuse University and had allowed his reserve status to expire. He was ready to start the next chapter of his life. Born in Spain and growing up in Upstate New York, Tezanos' future

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had seemed assured as a steelworker with Bethlehem Steel. World War II had changed all that as he witnessed some of the conflict's bloodiest fighting and survived arguably the worst accidental disaster in the war. But Tezanos' early life proved an American success story as he bettered himself in the service and returned home to a promising future.

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