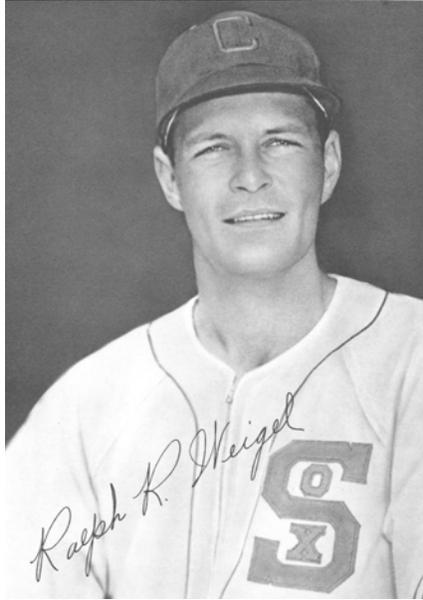


LTJG Ralph Weigel, USCGR



Ralph Weigel, born in 1921 in Coldwater, Ohio, played semi-professional baseball prior to World War II. He joined the Coast Guard in 1943 and went through OCS at the Coast Guard Academy and was commissioned as an ensign. He was assigned to the USS FS-169.

His son, Dr. John R. Weigel, recounted his father's war-time experiences that were published in a biography written by Gary Bedingfield for the website "Baseball in Wartime"

[www.baseballinwartime.com/player/biographies/weigel_ralph.html]:

"Dad spent 18 months in the Pacific Theatre as the Exec Officer/Navigator on a relatively shallow draft [but ocean-going] Coast Guard supply ship," explained his son, Dr. John R. Weigel, recently. "After the Marines and Army troops established beach-heads in the Solomons, the Marianas, and at Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, the Corp of Engineers would erect make-shift piers. The deep draft Liberty ships would off-load their cargo onto smaller ships like my father's to take into shore. As a consequence, these smaller ships were within range of Japanese artillery and any strafing runs by Zero groups.

"My Dad did tell me that he led the gun crew on his ship [they only had one gun -- perhaps a 5-inch] and that he believed that they shot down a kamikaze during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. His Captain was Malcolm Bell who wrote a letter to my Mom, my sister, and me in the the late 1980's to let us know how thankful he and his crew were to have had the "Big Backstop" as the Executive Officer and Navigator, especially during one horrible storm in the Pacific after the convoy had been scattered to avoid submarines. Captain Bell said that he never doubted that Dad would get them back to the convoy rendezvous point in spite of the storm.

"When I asked Dad about that storm, he told me the following story. He had sited a very tall group of palm trees on an island near the horizon just before the storm hit. He plotted the rendezvous course, reviewed it with Captain Bell, and went to his bunk for some much needed sleep. About 4 hours later, Captain Bell sent someone to get Dad back up to the Bridge to try to find out where they were -- since he figured that they should be very near the rendezvous point, but nothing looked right. They had been moving along the plotted course at near their maximum speed of around 12-15 knots. After checking all his prior calculations, Dad said that he felt just as confused as Captain Bell. Then he took the binoculars up to the lookouts level for a look, and he could not believe his eyes! Exactly where he had sighted it over 4 hours ago was the group of tall palm trees. He went back and explained to Captain Bell that the storm essentially had held the ship in place for the 4 hours of darkness!"

Weigel's war-time commanding officer, noted civil rights activist, banker, photographer, researcher and author of African-American history and a noted member of the Georgia Historical Society , wrote to Weigel's family regarding their experiences on the FS-169 (he refers to Weigel as "the old backstop" in reference to his baseball career as a catcher):

2 May 1990

Dear Mary and Ralph,

Thanks for the note. I am so glad that both of you came to Savannah and called us. For a long time I have wanted both of you to know my feelings about Ralph's role on the FS 169 throughout our tour of duty in the Pacific during the war.

So, Mary this is for you - and for Judy, John and David.

I, the Commanding Officer, had never been to sea except as a passenger. C. E. Johnson, the Executive Officer, had limited sea duty on a smaller vessel. Ralph, the youngest, had the greatest responsibility of all of us. He was the Navigational

Officer, and on top of that was the Gunnery Officer. He handled both as though he were a veteran.

From the moment we lost our convoy (due to a submarine scare) in the Gulf of Mexico enroute from New Orleans to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and Ralph plotted our course to a safe arrival, I knew that we were blessed with a capable navigator. Again and again, when crossing the Pacific, in New Guinea and Philippine waters Ralph saw to it that we stayed on course and found our destination. In Leyte Gulf, during a huge air raid, his gunnery crew shot down a Japanese plane. So, more than anyone aboard, he got us through.

I am sure the role of the FS 169 was not one of the war's great stories. Sure, we carried Hawaiian pineapple and Sweetheart soap, but we also carried bombs, aviation gasoline in drums, we transported wounded and battle-weary soldiers, and were very much a part of the war effort.

We had a good crew who knew and respected Ralph. They knew full well that we all depended on him.

Mary, take care of the old backstop and he will take care of you just as he did the crew of the FS 169.

Best from Muriel and Mac

Weigel was discharged from service in November 1945 as a lieutenant (junior grade). He went on to play in the major leagues for a number of years before an injury forced him to retire.

Weigel crossed the bar on 15 April 1992.

Photo and information courtesy of his son, Dr. John R. Weigel. For more information see:

www.baseballinwartime.com/player/biographies/weigel_ralph.html

