Navy Pacific War Vet Attends Navy’s 250th Birthday Celebrations in Philadelphia



Edward Desmond, center, gets a VIP tour of the battleship USS New Jersey. *Photos courtesy of the Desmond family*

Soon to be 100-year-old Petty Officer 2nd Class Edward D. Desmond from Boston was invited by the Navy to attend the

Navy’s 250th Birthday Celebrations in Philadelphia in early October.

He spent four days in Philadelphia and enjoyed everything from attending the Navy’s Gala Birthday dinner wearing his tuxedo to enjoying a visit to the Battleship USS New Jersey and the Cruiser USS Olympia wearing his newly issued Navy pea coat to keep him warm in the unusually cold weather.

At the Navy 250 Gala birthday dinner held in the Great Hall of the National Constitution Center at Independence National Historical Park, within sight of the Liberty Bell, Desmond received recognition from Navy leaders as he was the oldest Navy Sailor in attendance.

He received a standing ovation from the more than 750 guests in attendance and was able to participate in the ceremonial cutting of the birthday cake alongside Admiral Daryl Caudle, 34th chief of naval operations.

As the oldest Sailor in attendance, 99-year-old Desmond was then presented the first slice, with the second slice presented to the youngest Sailor, just 22 years old. The moment captured the Navy’s enduring legacy honoring those who have served before while also celebrating the newest generation of Navy Sailors who will continue to carry its proud traditions forward.



Desmond swapped challenge coins with Admiral Daryl Caudle, the chief of naval operations.

Challenge Coins

On the following day, Desmon was given a VIP tour of the historic Battleship New Jersey where he again met CNO Caudle to share sea stories and where the admiral presented Desmond with a commemorative Navy 250 challenge coin.

Desmond had a surprise for the admiral as he countered by offering Caudle his own challenge coin, a unique coin representing and honoring the service of 10,000 landing craft support Sailors who served on LCS ships during the Pacific

war. The U.S. built 130 of those heavily armed gunboats in a hurry in 1944 and 1945 and sent them to the Pacific. They were designed to provide close-in gunfire support for the landing boats carrying Marines and Army troops ashore at such places as Iwo Jima, the Philippines and Okinawa.

Desmond was also the guest of the crew of a smaller, 21st century Navy LCS rafted alongside the battleship New Jersey: the USS Billings (LCS 15) a Freedom-class littoral combat ship.

Desmond noted with delight he had the privilege of being aboard the Billings two years earlier when the ship was at its homeport at Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville, Florida. Desmond got a tour of the ship and had a front-row seat on the bow for observing Navy small boat forces performing a mock assault on a small ship on the Delaware River.

As Desmond was departing the Billings, the senior gunners mate presented him with a shell casing from the bow gun, a 57mm Mk 110 naval gun capable of a high rate of fire against air, surface, and shore-based threats.

Desmond told the gunners mate that his battle station assignment aboard LCS 128 eight decades ago was at a 20mm anti-aircraft gun and, with a twinkle in his eye, let the gunners mate know that “my 20mm gun had a firing rate of 300 rounds per minute” compared to the 220 rounds per minute firing rate of the MK 110.

That same evening, Desmond rallied and attended a 2.5 hour “Victory at Sea” concert which included performances by the U.S. Navy Band, the Marine Corps Drum and Bugle Corps and a special performance from Patti LaBelle.

On the last day of Desmond’s trip, he was the guest of a different kind of Navy, the famous Schuylkill Navy, sponsor of all of the rowing clubs in Philadelphia. Desmond took a tour

of Boathouse Row, including the Saint Joseph's University Boathouse, and took a few minutes to try out one of the rowing machines.

He had worked up an appetite, so he asked if there was any place close by where he could get a Philly cheesesteak. His wish was granted and he gave the iconic Philly sandwich a big thumbs up.

The indefatigable 99-year-old then headed to his hotel to get ready for a second Navy birthday dinner hosted by the Navy Museum Development Foundation at the prestigious Union League Club.

Coming Up on 100

Desmond's daughter was his accomplice on his visit to Philadelphia and reported her father said the Navy's 250th birthday celebration weekend was a once-in-a-lifetime event and he would send a big thank you to the Navy for hosting him at such a prestigious event.

Desmond and his family are now looking to celebrate his 100th birthday on Nov. 10, which just happens to be the Marine Corps' 250th birthday.

Desmond again, with a twinkle in his eye, said maybe he should send one of his challenge coins to the commandant of the Marine Corps and see if he might get invited to come back to Philadelphia for the Marine's 250th birthday.