

Joel "Jack" Mills

A Short Story About a Long Life

Jack was born on October 18, 1922 in Rush Springs, Oklahoma to William Thomas "Tom" Mills from Tennessee and Minnie Lee Crow from Oklahoma who were married on January 31, 1911 when Tom was 18 and Minnie was just shy of 15. They had six children in 13 years, three boys and three girls. Jack and his siblings were orphaned when Tom and Minnie died within two years of each other in 1936 and 1938. Jack survived typhoid fever in 1938, but sadly, his mother, who cared for him during his illness, did not.

Jack, Age 16, and his two younger sisters, June and Jean, were looked after by different families from their church. Jack stayed a while with the Bernard family who owned a general store in town. He was unhappy there without his family, and he left school to join his brother, Olen, his sister, Opal, and her husband, Ira, as they worked their way to the West Coast. They stopped in Eloy, Arizona taking several jobs to get by. Among other things, Jack worked in a grocery store, and he drove a small caterpillar digging water storage ditches.

Jack spent most of 1940 working for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) back in Rush Springs, Oklahoma doing soil conservation work. He enlisted in the Army, but then saw a film about PT boats and submarines. Excited about the prospect of working on ships, he joined the Navy instead in Norman, Oklahoma. Accepted, he waited for his assignment on Treasure Island. Numbers were drawn for three enlistees: "1" for a PT boat, "2" for a submarine, and "3" for a destroyer. Jack was last to be assigned to the remaining choice -- destroyer.

Jack boarded the USS Fletcher DD445 and he was a "Tin Can Sailor" who served as a torpedoman during WWII in the Pacific. The Fletcher saw action in the Solomons and was 13th in line with Task Force 67 at the Friday the 13th of November Battle of Guadalcanal from which she emerged without damage and from which her crew derived the nickname "Lucky 13." After that, the Fletcher also saw action at Gilbert Island, the Marshall Islands, and in the Philippines. On February 14th, the Fletcher was drawing fire from concealed enemy positions on Corregidor when she was hit by fire from shore

batteries. Eight crewmen were killed and three more wounded, and one of the dead, Water Tender First Class Elmer Charles Bigelow, was later awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. The Fletcher continued to fire as she controlled damage and rescued survivors of a minesweeper that was also hit by Japanese fire.

After the war ended in 1945, Jack arrived in San Francisco with his future wife's cousin, Donald Dahlke, who had served on the Fletcher, too. Don was to be married in one month and wanted Jack to stay for the wedding. When he protested that he could not afford to remain in San Francisco that long, Don assured him that he could stay with his cousin, Katherine Smith. Jack had read letters written to Don during the war by Katherine's daughter, Lillian. While staying with Katherine, he became acquainted with Lillian and her son, Glenn. Lillian busily introduced Jack to her friends, but Jack preferred Lillian, and they were married in San Francisco on December 10, 1946. Their daughter, Jewel, was born in January of 1948 to complete the family of Katherine, Jack, Lillian, Glenn, and Jewel.

From a farming family, Jack held jobs at McClellan Orchids in South San Francisco, before he worked at Hallowell's Seed Company at 519 Market Street in San Francisco and then at their nursery on 19th Avenue and Sloat Boulevard. Pat Casey, the owner of American Seed & Nursery Company nearby on 26th Avenue and Taraval Street, had an opening for a nurseryman. Jack was hired and worked first as an employee and later as the owner until 1985 when he retired.

As retirees, Jack and Lillian moved to Sonoma. They enjoyed traveling with friends, taking many cruises and road trips. They often planned their trips around the annual Fletcher Reunions. Jack served many years as their historian and amassed a large collection of photos, models and books, which they transported from reunion to reunion.

Lillian passed away in 2004, but Jack continued to live in their home until 2016. At Age 93, he moved to Elk Grove near Jewel, her husband, Phil, and his grand-daughters, Jennifer and Kathleen, and their families. He enjoyed their visits until his recent passing on November 19, 2017 at the Age of 95.

Oh, what a journey!

May you rest in peace, Dad.