

Local author relives WW II memories

BY PETE SLAVIN
pslavin@nsb-observer.com

NEW SMYRNA BEACH — A World War II veteran has written a book detailing his own war experiences in the South Pacific.

Edgewater resident John R. Kilsheimer recounts his own experiences in the book, “How the Navy and I Survived Each Other During World War II,” published by AuthorHouse in September 2005.

After returning from the war, Kilsheimer kept quiet about his war experiences. “I think that most people that got out did this. We were just so glad to get out and get our lives started,” he said. Kilsheimer was impressed by a speech that President Ronald Reagan gave while visiting Normandy, a site of some of the war’s most ferocious battles. “Tom Brokaw also wrote a book on the ‘greatest generation’,” which followed the lives of some of the soldiers, and what they did when they got out of the service,” he said.

In 2004, Kilsheimer and some of his Edgewater neighbors began discussing what they did in the service. “I guess I had more stories to tell than they did. They said why don’t you write it down, your kids would love to see it and learn about it,” he said.

He began writing his war experiences down on paper. After several false starts, he searched for some information on how the top writers did it. “I saw an article on Ernest Hemingway. His method was that he would get up every morning and write 500 words,” Kilsheimer said. “Once he had written 500 words, he felt he deserved the day off. He went to Sloppy Joes on Duval Street in Key West and drank the rest of the day.”

Kilsheimer then did exactly what Hemingway did, he wrote 500 words a day. He did not, however, indulge in drinking the rest of the day when he finished writing. Instead of drinking, he took his faithful dog, Chase, for a walk. “After doing this every day for four and a half months, he had the work mostly completed. He wrote the entire book with a pen and paper; he did not own a computer. He then focused on how to get his work published.

To get his book published, Kilsheimer knew he had to have his work typed out. His daughter helped him by typing it on her computer. “I wanted to write a book that was easy to read. I wanted it to be short enough so that when people started to read it, they would read it cover to cover,” he said. “When the work was typed out, it was 50 short chapters. I first copyrighted it myself in 2004.”

Kilsheimer then sent copies to prospective publishers. For almost a year he had no luck. “I finally got a phone call from AuthorHouse. You have to pay some money to get it published. It was much less than the other companies,” he said. “The mainline companies were not interested. They only deal with people who are well established. It is a good relationship with AuthorHouse.”

AuthorHouse not only published his book, but also provided publicity for the book. Barnesandnoble.com and Amazon.com started to sell it. “I was invited by Barnes and Noble to do a book signing,” he said. “Until then all of my book signings were mostly private, at churches and community associations.”

The book offers incredible tales of the fierce battles Kilsheimer fought in the South Pacific during World War II. He worked as a small boat officer aboard an LST ship. “Our ship was 325 feet long and 50 feet wide; our job was to bring an anti-aircraft battery ashore on D-Day,” he said. “We could not get close enough because of the sandbars.”

Kilsheimer’s main job was to rig up the pontoons to get the anti-aircraft battery ashore. The crew was unable to get the rest of the ship unloaded, which contained ammunition and 55-gallon barrels of high-octane gasoline.

His accounts of the next few days are both heroic and terrifying. “At D-Day plus 2 (the second day after D-Day), the Japanese still held their position. From Catmon Hill, they opened up on us with mortars,” he said. For the next six weeks, the crew of LST 734 was bombarded with nightly air raids from the Japanese.

Kilsheimer graduated from the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. with a bachelor’s degree in Chemistry. He later received a master’s degree in Organic Chemistry from Fordham University. He also earned a Ph.D in Organic Chemistry from Syracuse University.

He began working at Union Carbide. He later led the Sevin Insecticide program. Some of the products from this era are still sold locally. “I went on a speaking tour across the United States to promote it,” he said.

In 1961, he went to work for Mobil Chemical. He was one of six people that led the development of a research department at the company. Kilsheimer also worked for Esso. After a lengthy career, he retired as senior vice president of the Scotts Company, in charge of research, manufacturing and distribution.



PHOTO BY PETE SLAVIN

Edgewater resident John R. Kilsheimer recounts his own experiences in the book, “How the Navy and I Survived Each Other During World War II.”