



**THE BATTLESHIP USS MISSISSIPPI** as it looked during World War II. Members of its crew witnessed the signing of the surrender papers from their ship, just 100 yards from the USS Missouri, where the official end of the war was declared on Sept. 2, 1945.

—Gene Leitner photos

# Oberlin man was there when Japan surrendered

## Sailor remembers historic end to World War II

By MARY LOU OLSON

Military personnel at home and abroad 60 years ago, along with those on the home front, rejoiced when the official end of World War II was declared on Sept. 2, 1945, aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

Gene Leitner, an Oberlin man who was serving with the U.S. Navy aboard the USS Mississippi, remembers the day well, since his ship was docked alongside the Missouri for the historic event.

He said he witnessed the signing, which brought peace to the world after nearly half a decade, from just 100 yards away.

The USS Mississippi was chosen to be in Tokyo Bay for the surrender mainly because the original USS Mississippi had anchored there in 1853 in the same location, he said.

The headline above a picture of the ship in the Aug. 30, 1945, edition of *The Oberlin Herald*, said, "USS Missouri to be scene of historic Jap surrender. Below, the caption declared: "The United States Navy's mighty 45,000-ton battleship, the USS Missouri, will end her World War II career in a blaze of glory Sept. 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay, when she serves as the scene of the historic unconditional surrender of Japan to the United Nations. Proudly bearing the name of the home state of President Harry S. Truman, the fighting USS Missouri has been named by the General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander, as the locale of the formal ending of the war in the Pacific."

A farm boy from Traer, Mr. Leitner said he enlisted in the Navy just after he turned 17. He attended grade school at Traer and completed the two years of high school there. Russell Anderson was principal and a teacher at Traer and his wife, Melba, also taught there. Mr. Leitner was one of four sons of Paul and Theresia (Wendelin) Leitner. The others were Robert, Marvin and Jerald.

"I enlisted at the courthouse in Oberlin, then boarded the "pollywog" train at Traer, which took me to Kansas City," he said. "I was sent to Farragut Idaho, where I completed two months of boot training. After a short leave, we went to Bremerton, Wash., for six weeks of training, then were assigned to the



**'WAR'S END KISS'** was a popular photo in 1945 after a U.S. Navy sailor grabbed a stranger in New York. The Leitners' daughters found a purse for their mother with the above picture on it.

USS Mississippi, where I served as a gunner's mate third class."

The Mississippi crew assisted with the invasion of the Marshall Islands, using 14-inch big guns to destroy a sea wall at the western end of the island. They also fought in battles at Kavieng Diversion, at New Ireland; Palau Islands, the Philippines, in preparation for the invasion of Leyte and Luzon; a sea battle at Surgo Strait; and Okinawa.

After Okinawa was secured, Mr. Leitner said that the "Missy" joined the main body of the Third Fleet.

Mr. Leitner said he lost many shipmates during those battles, and he often helped prepare the bodies before they were buried at sea.

"We always said 'The Lord's Prayer' at the close of each service," he recalled.

"After the war ended on Aug. 14, our ship arrived near Tokyo Bay on Aug. 27 and as it stood by the en-

trance of Tokyo Bay," he said, "we had our guns pointed at Tokyo, ready for any unforeseen action. As far as the eye could see, and to the horizon, was every type of ship, the most I had ever seen assembled at one time."

In a story, a shipmate, E M 2/C John Yakushik, wrote, he said, "On Aug. 31, 1945, the formal surrender drew near. The Mississippi was ordered to enter Tokyo Bay and anchor in the approximate area where Commodore Perry had anchored the first Mississippi in 1853. When the surrendering was completed, we were homeward bound, to the city of New Orleans, U.S.A., by way of the Panama Canal. From New Orleans, the ship was ordered to Norfolk, Va."

"The USS Mississippi BB41 holds the sole distinction of all capital ships of the line during World War II in the U.S. Navy for knocking out

a castle. Shuri Castle on Okinawa, which was the headquarters of the Japanese forces, was touted as being impossible to destroy. The Mighty Missy completely destroyed it and also fired more millions of tons of steel at the enemy than any other U.S. Navy ship during the War."

"When the war was officially over, we had a two-day celebration after serving those 20 months overseas in the South Pacific, then we got a 30-day leave before receiving our discharge at Dodge City," Mr. Leitner said. "When we arrived in the States, I was so happy that I bent down and kissed the U.S. soil."

"I got into McCook at 4 a.m., so I checked into a hotel, took a shower and spent the night before calling my parents. My mother checked me over thoroughly to be sure I was not injured."

He received an honorable discharge on May 25, 1946, from the Naval Personnel Separation Center in Norman, Okla., signed by the commander, Capt. Carlson.

Mr. Leitner married Marcella Riepl, daughter of Bill and Anna (Hutfler) Riepl of Herndon, on May 25, 1949, and they farmed in the Traer area until retiring and moving to Oberlin in 1990.

They have three daughters, Patricia Tongish, who assists her husband in his auto body business at Newton; Barbara Leitner, a teacher at Kirtland Elementary School at Farmington, N.M.; and Donna Wilson, a registered nurse practitioner at Via Christi Hospital in Wichita. They have five grandchildren.

Since the war, Mr. Leitner said, he and his wife have attended some of his Navy reunions and several buddies have visited at their farm home.

"We took them to a lamb fry at the Herndon Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, which they really enjoyed," he said.

Mr. Leitner is a member of the Herndon VFW and Oberlin American Legion.

After the war ended, Mr. Leitner said that the USS Missouri was retired to the harbor at Honolulu, but the Mississippi was later sold as scrap iron to Japan.

"Although the Navy did its share in winning World War II, we never could have done it without all the help of the other branches of the military," he said.



**DECKED OUT** in his Navy uniform, Gene Leitner of Oberlin (above) as he looked during World War II. He and his wife, Marcella, are shown on their farm near Traer following the war.

