

# Veterans Honored in Stonyford

by Roy Stewart

The Women's Ministry of the Stonyford Community Church provided a free dinner to all comers in honor of local-area veterans, on November 11, 2019. The highlight of the evening was a conversation between the church's new pastor, Daniel Reagan, and WWII veteran Joseph N. Shelton, who currently resides with his daughter in Manteca, California. Mr. Shelton was a former resident of Dunsmuir, California, and a then-member of Pastor Daniel's flock, when he was their pastor. Pastor Daniel knew his story well and asked him to tell it to the people in Stonyford. From the applause generated, it was sure that those who attended the Veteran's Day dinner were delighted to hear it.

Joseph Nathaniel Shelton was born in Arkansas, in 1925, and moved with his family to Weed, California, in 1936. He was the youngest of three other brothers to enter the U.S. Navy after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor; his two oldest brothers had joined earlier, and a sixth brother joined the U.S. Army in 1942. A total of seven Shelton brothers fought all throughout World War II, and all survived. Brothers Raymond and Alfred were in at the beginning: Alfred was at Pearl Harbor during the celebrated Japanese attack and Raymond was in Manila, P.I.. His ship, the first U.S.S. Pope, a destroyer, was sunk off the island of Java. He was rescued, captured and imprisoned by the Japanese from March 1942 until August 1945. Brother Lewis served in the army in Europe between '42 and '45, and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Brothers James, Phillip and George were all navy "Seabees" and served in the Pacific between '42 and '45.



Joseph Shelton at 94 years of age in conversation on Nov. 11, 2019

The seven Shelton Brothers who served in World War II. All survived their service.

Joseph joined at age sixteen and served on the aircraft carrier, *U.S.S. Saratoga*, and the battleship, *U.S.S. Indiana*. The *Saratoga* was in San Diego when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and returned to Pearl on December 15, 1941. It suffered battle damage in January 1942 and returned to Bremerton, Washington, for repairs. It, therefore, missed the Battle of Midway, but was ready to do battle in Guadalcanal, in June 1942, with Joseph Shelton aboard. Joseph was a coxswains mate, part of the deck crew. He served on the *Saratoga* until mid-year 1943, when he returned home on a 6-day leave following his father's death

earlier in that year. When he returned to Pearl Harbor, he joined an admiral's staff on which he served for ten days. He did not like that duty and exchanged places with another sailor. He returned to sea aboard the battlewagon *U.S.S. Indiana*. There, his battle station was a 5-inch gun mount, where he loaded powder and shell. He described the powder as being 30-inches long and 5-inches in diameter and weighing about sixteen pounds. The shells, he said, were of various lengths and weighed about 55 pounds. The *Indiana* fought in the *Battle of Tarawa* and the *Battle of Kwajalein*, where it suffered a collision with the battleship *Washington*. Joseph described that collision. He also described living through a harrowing typhoon. He talked about a cruiser being broken in half, at the bow with no loss of life. The crew had already been evacuated from their quarters located there. There were two typhoons, *Cobra* and *Connie*, which wreaked vast destruction on Admiral Bill Halsey's Third Fleet during December 1944 (*Cobra*) and June 1945 (*Connie*). The first of these typhoons was graphically depicted in the 1954 film, *The Caine Mutiny*. Joseph also described a *Kamikaze* attack and how his ship fought back. He was fortunate, he said, in that his ship was never hit. He knew others that were, however, and he said that he lost friends. These devastating *Kamikaze* attacks were the forerunners to today's guided-missile attacks.

Joseph also had an interesting life after the war. He left the navy at twenty-one and returned to Weed, where he started a temporary civilian job that led into an apprenticeship as a machinist. This job led to another with the AeroJet Company. Joseph worked on the Apollo 11 spacecraft as a foreman in charge of machinist work. As such, he says, he was acquainted with astronauts Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldren. He watched the moon landing in July '69 and was proud that he had had a hand in making this event happen. It gave him immense satisfaction. Satisfaction only surpassed by the description of his marriage to Joann, his wife of 71 years. He laughingly talked about that courtship and how he had sent her an engagement ring, which he paid for from gambling winnings, and how the postman put it on her finger, in his absence.

Joseph is sprightly at ninety-four and still has a good memory for details that happened almost eighty years ago. Pastor Daniel Reagan knew his story well and elicited its telling in a comfortable, informal interview. Joseph said being on stage and telling his story in Stonyford was a first for him. However, it won't be a last. He said that he has already been approached by friends in Manteca to tell his story to a Boy Scout troop. This may lead to a whole new career.