

REAR ADMIRAL LEO WILLIAM NILON
UNITED STATES NAVY, RETIRED

NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION

Rear Admiral Nilon, born December 13, 1905 in New York, New York, attended Regis High School in his native city before entering the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, in July, 1923 by appointment from the 22nd Congressional District of New York. He was a class member of the football and lacrosse teams while a midshipman, and a member of the Reception Committee. He was graduated and commissioned Ensign June 2, 1927, and has advanced in grade as follows: Lieutenant (junior grade) June, 1930; Lieutenant, June, 1936; Lieutenant Commander, December, 1941; Commander, July, 1943; Captain, March, 1945. He was transferred to the Retired List of the Navy April 1, 1949 in the rank of Rear Admiral on the basis of combat citations.

When graduated, Rear Admiral Nilon remained at the Naval Academy for the summer course in aviation instruction, and when detached in August, 1927, he reported for duty at sea, serving successively in the USS DOBBIN, USS FLORIDA, and USS GILMER until July, 1931, at that time reporting to the Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island. He completed the course in torpedo instruction there in December, 1931, returned to the USS GILMER, and served in that destroyer until June 15, 1932.

Rear Admiral Nilon reported in July, 1932 to Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation, Fore River Plant, at Quincy, Massachusetts, where the USS PORTLAND was fitting out, and when that cruiser was commissioned on February 23, 1933, he served as Aircraft Gunnery Observer aboard, and as Squadron Radio and Communication Officer, attached to Scouting Squadron 11 from November, 1934 until transferred June 10, 1935 to duty under instruction at the Postgraduate School, Annapolis. Completing the course there in Applied Communications and general line duties on June 4, 1937, he reported then to the Submarine Base, New London, Connecticut, for further duty under instruction, and when detached in July, 1937, he had duty in connection with fitting out the USS PHILADELPHIA, building at the Navy Yard, Philadelphia, and on board upon her commissioning, September 23, 1937, as Communication Officer. The PHILADELPHIA operated under the Chief of Naval Operations, and was selected for the Presidential cruise in 1938.

Detached from duty in the PHILADELPHIA on June 23, 1939, Rear Admiral Nilon served the next tour of duty in the Asiatic Fleet, from July, 1939 to September, 1941, as Aide and Flag Lieutenant on the staff of the Commander in Chief, USS AUGUSTA, flagship, with additional duty as Fleet Aviation Gunnery Observer. Upon returning from the Far East, he returned to the Naval Academy in November, 1941 for duty on the staff of the Postgraduate School as Instructor, continuous until June, 1943. After temporary duty under instruction at the Navy Yard, Washington, D. C., in August, 1943 he assumed command of the USS JEFFERS, of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe; was transferred in May, 1944 to command of Destroyer Division 20, which participated in invasions of Normandy and southern France. He was awarded the Silver Star Medal, Gold Star in lieu of a second Silver Star Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Medal, and the Croix de Guerre from France for exceptional services rendered in combat. The citations follow:

SILVER STAR MEDAL

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity as Commander Destroyer Division TWENTY, in action against enemy forces during the amphibious assault on Normandy, France, and the bombardment of enemy shore batteries at Cherbourg, France in June, 1944. Courageous in the face of heavy enemy fire from numerous powerful coastal batteries, Captain (then Commander) Nilon maneuvered the ships under his command to their assigned stations and efficiently directed their operations in carrying out their mission. Charged with the task of screening the battleships during the bombardment of Cherbourg, he led his ships through an intense hostile barrage to lay protecting smoke screens between the battleships and the enemy batteries, probably saving the battleships from serious damage. Captain Nilon's aggressive leadership and tactical knowledge served as an inspiration to his entire command and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

GOLD STAR in lieu of second SILVER STAR MEDAL

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity as Commander Destroyer Division TWENTY, in action against enemy forces during the amphibious invasion of Southern France in August 1944. Demonstrating exceptional skill, Captain (then Commander) Nilon directed the ships of his division during the conduct of shore bombardments, screening operations and close-in spotting missions in the initial phase of the assault. Coolly and judiciously stationing his units in the invasion area, he enabled them to provide valuable spotting information to Allied capital ships and cruisers and to open fire at a moment's notice on targets of opportunity. Braving the constant danger from enemy gunfire and densely laid minefields, he took up a position close to the hostile shore at one extremity of the left flank and, supplying accurate and complete reports on the progress of landing operations, assisted the Task Force Commander in directing extensive fire support operations without endangering friendly troops. By his leadership and devotion to duty, Captain Nilon contributed materially to the early collapse of enemy defenses in the area and to the rapid and secure establishments of the Allied beachhead, thereby upholding the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

NAVY AND MARINE CORPS MEDAL

"For heroic and meritorious performance of duty as Commander, Destroyer Division TWENTY, in the face of great danger during the rescue and towing operations of the mined SS JOHNS HOPKINS off Marseilles, France on October 2, 1944. . . . It was soon established that the liberty ship SS JOHNS HOPKINS, with six hundred troops embarked, was in grave danger, having struck an enemy mine. . . . Throughout the whole rescue operation, Captain Nilon's great resourcefulness, courage and leadership was evidenced by the fact that the stricken vessel was returned

Navy & Marine Corps Medal, cont'd

- to port where all of her troops were removed without loss, after covering thirteen and one-half miles of unswept water. Captain Nilon's seamanship, consummate skill and outstanding devotion to duty reflect great credit upon himself and were in keeping with the best traditions of the United States Naval Service."

In November, 1944, Rear Admiral Nilon assumed command of Mine Division 59, and two weeks later transferred to Mine Division 58, in which he served until January 22, 1945. Returning to Washington, D. C. in April, 1945, he reported for duty in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Communications Division, where he served until July, 1947. Ordered to sea duty at that time, he assumed command of the USS CALOOSAHATCHIE, oiler, and was so serving when relieved of active duty pending his retirement, April 1, 1949, for physical disability.

In addition to the Silver Star Medal, Gold Star in lieu of the second Silver Star Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Medal, Rear Admiral Nilon has the China Service Medal, American Defense Service Medal with Fleet Clasp, American Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with two engagement stars, and World War II Victory Medal.

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23 August 1949