

Oscar Frederick Nelson (1881 – 1951)

Compiled by Kathy Huston, Lake Minnetonka DAR



BIRTH: 5 November 1881 Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota

ENTERED SERVICE: 1899 at Minnesota

BRANCH: NAVY

CONFLICT: Interim, 1901 – 1911, San Diego Harbor, San Diego, California

DEATH: 26 September 1951

Early Years

Born 5 November 1881 in Minneapolis, Minnesota to Danish immigrants, Bendt Nelson and Eliza Glemusestad¹, Oscar Frederick Nelson joined the Navy in 1899.² He married Anna Dahl, and had one daughter, Beatrice Helen Nelson (Mrs. Edward W. Verbarg), born 7 November 1912, also in Minneapolis.³ The family later lived in Duluth, Minnesota.

The War Years

Nelson was awarded a rare peacetime Congressional Medal of Honor in 1908 for his life-saving efforts as a Machinist's Mate First Class in the U.S. Navy aboard the U.S.S. Bennington. While docked off Point Loma in San Diego Bay, two boilers on the ship exploded; the sailors were killed or tossed overboard and the ship began taking on water. Nelson rescued many of his shipmates before the U.S.S. Bennington sank. The disaster killed 66 Naval personnel and maimed 49 others. Of about 30 men working below the decks of the ship, Nelson was the sole survivor.⁴

His citation, granted 5 January 1906, reads, "Serving on Board the U.S.S. Bennington, extraordinary heroism on board the U.S.S. Bennington, displayed at the time of the explosion of a boiler of that vessel at San Diego, California, 21 July 1905."^{5,6} From the magazine, *Our Navy, the Standard Publication of the U.S. Navy*:

"On July 21, 1905, a boiler of the gunboat Bennington exploded, while that vessel was lying in the harbor of San Diego, California, killing and wounding more than one-half of the crew. Shortly

after the explosion, the survivors of this dreadful accident formed a society, and elected a secretary, Mr. F. J. Schopbach, to whom all agreed to write once a year, giving their address at least. An annual directory was then to be published and mailed to each survivor.”

The editor of this magazine was one of the survivors and asked for readers knowing the whereabouts of any of the surviving crew whose names were not included to drop him a card. On the list is “Oscar Nelson, Columbia Heights, Minn.”⁷

Years later as he was due to revisit the harbor, Nelson related how, in the agonizing moments following the explosion, he had jammed a piece of waste into his mouth, breathing through it as he rescued more than half a dozen of his shipmates gulping hot steam as they screamed in pain. He made several trips to the lower decks, making sure of the men (dead or alive) were out.⁸

He was one of eleven U.S.S. Bennington crew members to be so honored for their actions that day, and Duluth, Minnesota’s first Medal of Honor winner.⁹

Post-War Years

Nelson was discharged in 1911 and later served for 24 years with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Duluth, Minnesota.¹⁰ (His WWII Draft Registration, at age 60, lists a Duluth address.¹¹) In fact, a two-room cabin originally built in 1910 by Oscar Nelson on Lake Superior, is now home to the Solglimt Bed & Breakfast located on Duluth’s Park Point Beach, the name of which means “the sun on the water”. One of its suites is named in honor of Nelson, builder of the home.¹² His medal is on display at the Canal Park Marine Museum in Duluth, as part of its Peacetime Collection (Accession Number 99.57.1).¹³

He died at the age of 70 on 26 September 1951; his wife died in 1981. Two of his three grandchildren are still living, Kathy Verbarg Jacoby of Burnsville, MN and Michael Verbarg of Charleston, SC.

Gravestone

The Nelsons are buried in Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, MN.^{14,15}



Documentation

¹ Social Security Index, #469241124, Oscar Frederick Nelson; www.ancestry.com

² Veterans Memorial Hall; online at <http://www.vets-hall.org/stories/not-available/oscar-nelson>

³ Social Security Index, #079169145, Beatrice Helen Nelson Verbarg (daughter); www.ancestry.com

⁴ Oscar F. Nelson Obituary, online at:
http://www.homeofheroes.com/photos/8_peace/nelson_oscar_article.jpg

⁵ Military Times, Hall of Valor; <http://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient.php?recipientid=2496>

⁶ U.S. Navy, *Record of Medals of Honor Issued to the Officers and Enlisted Men of the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, 1862-1917*; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917; p. 84

⁷ U.S. Navy, "Our Navy, the Standard Publication of the U.S. Navy", Vol. 4, October 10, 1910, No. 6, p. 19; published monthly at the Naval Training Station, San Francisco, CA; found online at https://books.google.com/books?id=EJEmAQAAIAAJ&pg=RA4-PA19&lpg=RA4-PA19&dq=oscar+nelson+san+diego+harbor&source=bl&ots=udR7k4MCXp&sig=o512d5ZrkjVBrXNgP_-Ly6iTek8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjEkbuQ3MXNAhUr6IMKHxzfBWOQ6AEISjAH#v=onepage&q=oscar%20nelson%20san%20diego%20harbor&f=false

⁸ Oscar F. Nelson Obituary, online at:
http://www.homeofheroes.com/photos/8_peace/nelson_oscar_article.jpg

⁹ USS Bennington; <http://www.uss-bennington.org/early.html>

¹⁰ Veterans Memorial Hall; online at <http://www.vets-hall.org/stories/not-available/oscar-nelson>

¹¹ WWII Draft Registrations, online at www.ancestry.com

¹² Solglint website, <http://solglint.com>

¹³ Photo of Medal and Story appear at <http://www.vets-hall.org/collections/peacetime/nelson-oscar-frederick-1908-medal-honor>

¹⁴ U.S. National Cemetery Interment Control Forms, 1928-1962 at ancestry.com
http://interactive.ancestry.com/2590/40479_649063_0446-03530?pid=1626165&backurl=http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%3D1%26db%3DIntermentControlForms%26h%3D1626165%26tid%3D%26pid%3D%26usePUB%3Dtrue%26_phsrc%3Dtpl1%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26rhSource%3D7316&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=tpl1&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Frederick_Nelson

Bio Photo from Veterans Memorial Hall; online at <http://www.vets-hall.org/stories/not-available/oscar-nelson>

Gravestone Photo courtesy of Findagrave Contributor Chris H. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Nelson&GSfn=Oscar+&GSmn=F.+&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=25&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=7931753&df=all&>