

# Rex Neil Larson

as interviewed by Judy Hansen

Rex Neil Larson was born in American Fork, Utah February 18, 1925 to Neil and Erma Fox Larson. His dad and two of his brothers bought their grandfather's farm that sits north of the Training School (Utah State Developmental Center) in American Fork where Lone Peak High School is. They ended up losing the property during the depression due to the way his grandfather had managed things. His uncle got his dad to go up to Wyoming to Jenny's lake and they worked for the forest service for one summer. Then they moved back to Lehi when Rex was six years old where he has lived ever since. Rex started school in Lehi in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. He went on through Lehi High School and when he became a senior he was able to go to vocational school in Provo. He went there in the afternoon to take machinist classes while he



continued to take classes at Lehi High in the mornings. While he was learning this trade, Tom Pierpoint, who owned a foundry on the corner of Center Street and 500 West in Provo hired Rex and he would go over there at nights and on the weekends to work for him. He also worked at Geneva Steel while they were building that plant. He would go down to Geneva at nights and 'keep the salamanders rolling'<sup>1</sup> so the cement would stay warm. After he became a machinist and Geneva Steel opened for production he work there until he went into the Navy.

There were only one or two young men that was Rex's age who had not been drafted left in Lehi so they went to the draft board and asked if they could take them. Rex was turned down the first time because he had a hernia. The second time he went up they took him. He was drafted along with his friend Boyd Calton. All the draftee's had to check in at Provo and from there they caught the old urban train into Salt Lake. Once in Salt Lake they put Rex on a bus and took him up to Fort Douglas. Rex went into one room to talk to an officer while his friend went into another room to talk to different officer. They both came out at the same time. Rex asked him what he took and his friend told him he took the Navy. Rex also said they let him have the Navy too. He enlisted 16 Sept 1944.

---

<sup>1</sup> A salamander was a 50 gallon barrel full of fire from coal. It had holes in it so it could keep a draft.

He went home and then a week later he had to go to Farragut Naval Training Station in Bayview, Idaho for his basic training. He was in 884<sup>th</sup> Battalion. After basic training he was sent to San Diego. They lost his gear. He was down at Camp Pendleton and several others had their gear lost too. He had a pretty good time there until they found everything. He never drank but he would go out bowling. He was a little disappointed that his stuff was found. He decided he would go down to the station one day to see if his gear was there and he found it.

He was assigned to the ship *USS Breton*, an aircraft carrier. They went to Hawaii and he stayed there for three or four days. During that time he wrote a letter to his folks telling them where he was. His mother wrote a letter back and told him his letter was all cut up. He had written about a lot of things that was in hiatus, things that were going on in the military. His mail had been read and censored.

His grandmother lived across the corner from his parent's house. They had the old fashion phone that would hang on a hook. Rex would call his grandmother and tell her he would call back in 10 or 15 minutes and she would have to walk over to get his mother who would come over to talk to him.

After leaving Hawaii he went to Guam. It was the assignment of the *USS Breton* to sail throughout the Pacific taking men, supplies, and aircraft to various units of the fleet that was striking the enemy, it was an escort carrier. They would dump their airplanes off then go back to Hawaii to get more airplanes. Sometimes they would bring soldiers back to Hawaii that were hurt.

Rex traveled all over on the *USS Breton* to New Guinea, the Marshall Islands (Eniwetok), Guam, Western New Guinea, The Caroline's (Ulthi), the Philippines, Marianas, Iwo Jima, and during the assault and occupation of Okinawa in April 1945.

There is a port and starboard side of each ship. Port side would take their leave and when they came back starboard side would take theirs. Whenever Rex would get four or five days leave he would fly home and back on a commercial flight.

Rex received three medals, the Asiatic-Pacific for two campaigns, the American Campaign, and the WWII Victory medal. When Rex was in Eniwetok the Captain said there would be no prank initiations when they crossed the International Date Line because they were going on a secret mission. That kind-of got everyone worried. They headed out for Okinawa. Before they hit Okinawa they saw a little light that was only about as big as a city block. Rex went out on the sponson<sup>2</sup> and counted over a hundred ships every direction as far as his eyes could see. The *USS Breton* had to leave sooner than the battlewagons (battleships) and cruisers because it was a much slower ship. There were two groups of two aircraft carriers and two cruisers together. The *USS Breton* took one side of the island while these two groups took the other. They launched

---

<sup>2</sup> platform jutting from ship's deck for gun or wheel

their planes; some came back and unfortunately some didn't. The two aircraft carriers and the battlewagons were shooting over the top of them.

Rex didn't think the guys that ran those 40mm machine guns could hit anything. He thought if we really got in a fight with someone they would be goners. The Japs were using suicide machines (Kamikaze aircraft) and the pilots would take their own life. The *USS Breton* didn't have bombs they only had machine guns. When they did get to where they had to use the machine guns to prevent from being hit by a Kamikaze attack the guys were pretty good with them and knocked a couple of Japanese planes down.

After Okinawa they headed back to Hawaii for repairs and more planes. The *USS Breton* only traveled about 16 knots<sup>3</sup> so it took time to travel back and forth to Hawaii.

Rex's job was in the engine room. He would run the throttle that turned the prop. He was in the Corp of Engineers. They kept that ship afloat.

The flight deck had two elevators; one fore and one aft. They would bring the planes up the back elevator and then they would go up front. They had 100 feet to get off the ship. They called it the catapult. There were two great big air compressors in the engine room and they could tell every time one of the planes went off because the air pressure would drop. They would have just enough air pressure in one air compressor for one plane to get off. The other air compressor would be building up pressure for the next plane.

They have several cables across the deck that is about 5-6 inches high. There would be a signalman on the back of the ship with his flags signaling the planes where to go. One day they were taking a plane down the front elevator and another plane came in. The hook on the back bounced over every cable and the incoming plane's propeller hit the airplane that had just started going down the elevator. It cut the plane right behind the pilot. The pilot was still in the plane and it hurt him. There was enough damage they brought the plane back up and just pushed it over the side into the ocean.

They were very fortunate when it came to people not getting hurt. If anyone got hurt it was their own fault. The enemy never hurt anyone on his ship. No one ever lost their life.

When the war ended Rex was just coming into Pearl Harbor. There were a lot of fireworks going on. The men on the *USS Breton* didn't know what was going on but Hawaii sure had the sky lit up. It was after they got docked they heard over the PA system that the war was over. It was a joy to see all of it and know that the war had come to an end. Some of those poor islands he had been too were just flooded with destruction. The trees had no leaves on them and half or more of them were just gone where the bombers had hit them.

---

<sup>3</sup> A nautical mile is 1,852 meters, or 1.852 kilometers. In the English measurement system, a nautical mile is 1.1508 miles, or 6,076 feet.

A lot of the army guys went back to San Diego. There were more than 300 army guys on ship. The ship was pretty big and a person could easily get lost on it. After they unloaded the army soldiers in San Diego they went up to Tacoma Washington. He had to stay on the ship a couple of weeks before he was discharged. That is where the *USS Breton* was taken out of commission. Rex was discharged 6 June 1946, he got on a bus and came home. He never told his parents he was coming home. He wanted to surprise them and he did when he walked in the door about 3:00 in the afternoon.

Two weeks after he returned from the service, Rex went back to work at Geneva Steel as a machinist. All the servicemen that had worked there were able to get their jobs back after they returned. He eventually quit that job and went to work at the Murray Refractories where he worked for about a year or a year and a half. He really didn't like it so he quit and again went back to Geneva where he was working in the rolling mills as an inspector.

Just a little over a year from his return from the service, on April 2, 1947 Rex married Evelyn Smith from Pleasant Grove. They lived in Lehi after they married.

Before Rex went into the service he had a few mink. His father also had some and his father told him he would take care of his while he was away. When he came home he started to increase his mink. He had both the mink he was taking care of and working at Geneva. It became too much so he told his wife it was either Geneva or the mink. They decided to go with the mink and they increased it as fast as they could to hold quality. The mink farm was on 400 East and 100 North in Lehi. At that time they were in the county. There were dirt roads and the water truck would come and wet down the roads. The School Board had come to Rex and wanted to buy ground where he had the mink farm and he told them he wouldn't sell it. They came back a second time so Rex and Evelyn talked about what they should do. People had built around the mink farm so in 1957 they finally gave into the School District, sold to them, and went out west of Lehi found ten acres of ground and built their home there. Rex and Evelyn were in the mink business full time.

The first phone they had in the new house was a party line. There were three other parties on the line. Rex would screw the mouthpiece out and listen to their conversations. He would listen to Bertha Fenn and Ruth Keetch have conversations that he said would just blow your mind. Shame on Rex !

Running a mink ranch was a heck of a lot of work, but it was fun. He really enjoyed it. They would have to kill the mink, skin them, and then there was a tapered pole they were put on. When he first started doing it he used a case knife out of the kitchen to get all the fat off the hide. All the fat had to be off the hide before they were shipped. Later on it got easier because Rex was able to buy a semi-automatic machine they made in Holland. It cost him \$30,000.00 to get it to Lehi and set up. His son could do a male mink on that every 70 seconds it was so fast. There were two poles so you could get one mink done on one pole while another mink was getting

ready on the other pole. Then when the first mink was done you just had to flip it over and the next one was ready to go.

Rex would breed and raise all his mink by hand. To choose the breeders they would run their hand up the mink's back to feel how soft they were and how deep the fur was. Evelyn could always stand back and pick the best black mink to breed with her eye. They would mate the mink in March and the babies would be born the last part of April or the first part of May. Their gestation period was very short. They were generally ready for pelting in November but that would depend on their color. They would start the blue mink before Thanksgiving and the black mink they would have to wait longer until after the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. He would kill close to 20,000 mink a year. There was no vacation raising mink. It was work all day and ½ the night a lot of the time. The mink would need to be bedded, fed, and areas cleaned. Evelyn was the work horse on the farm. No one ever saw anyone work as hard as Evelyn. She would go out and shovel manure. She could work circles around any one.

One time, Rex made a machine to feed all the mink with so he wouldn't have to feed them by hand. He told his wife Evelyn to try it but she got her leg caught under it and she was lucky her leg didn't break. After that she told Rex she was not going to use his machine any more.

Rex was always the first one to try all the new machines that came out. Someone had a feeding machine they wanted the co-op to sell but the co-op wouldn't so Rex went to Oregon where it was made and he bought one. The ranchers would come to Rex to see the machines and pretty soon they started buying them.

They had another feed machine that came out that had a 300 pound tank you would put behind you and it would pump the food out onto the pen. The mink ate meat, mostly fish but sometimes horsemeat if they could find it. It had to be fresh because if the meat was spoiled it would kill them. They had to be pretty fussy on what they fed them. They had fisherman on the coast that would go out and catch the fish and then bring them into their plant they had on the coast. The fish would be put on a conveyor line where they were ground and then frozen. Afterwards they were put on a semi and brought to Murray, Utah where their co-op plant was in Utah. They also added Kellogg Cereal products and antibiotics to the mink feed.

Rex was on the Board of Directors for the Fur Breeders Co-op for 20 years. They use to have little mixers that would take all day to mix the feed for the next day. The manager of the Co-op didn't like Rex and Rex didn't like him but Rex was OK with that. Rex went to the Pribolof Islands west of Alaska and the Aleuts would kill and skin seal up there. The Co-op also had a plant there and they would take the seal carcasses to that plant, grind them up, and ship them to Seattle, then to Salt Lake.

At the same time Rex was on the Board of Directors for the Co-op he was also on the Board of Directors for the EMBA Mink Association (The Breeders Association) and served there for eight years. While he served on that board he was able to see the rest of the world that he hadn't seen

while in the Navy. They really liked mink in Europe. Russia and Japan would come to the United States to purchase a lot of the mink pelts. EMBA would put on new style shows of the new garments that were made with mink. The EMBA held these shows in England, Germany, and Sweden. Evelyn would travel with Rex to these shows.

Rex would sell his mink pelts in New York or Seattle. Professionals would bundle the pelts up according to size, color, and quality. Rex was known worldwide and always topped the market for his blue mink. Rex became good friends with a man at the Seattle Fur Exchange. He told Rex to give the buyer who buys his top bundle in each color face a plaque. So he did. He was still on the EMBA board at that time and one of the Managers, Don McCormick of EMBA went to Japan and toured the fur market. He went around a corner and seen all of Rex's plaques in a store window that said, "Sold by Rex Larson at the Seattle Fur Exchange." Mr. McCormick came back and really cussed Rex out and said no wonder he was getting good prices for his furs. After that everyone started giving out plaques. The black fur always sold for the most. There were five or six mink farms around the Larson farm at that time.

Once Rex got a letter from some animal rights group that said if he didn't quit his business they would burn him down. Four others got the letter as well as the Fur Breeders Association. Rex went to the Lehi City police who told him to take it to the County Sheriff (because Rex was in the county) so he gave it to the county Sherriff who gave it to the Utah Attorney General. Rex was never bothered but there was a fire set at the fur breeders' co-op in 1997 and explosives in 2012 where they kept the feed. They caught the guy in the 2012 explosion and he was sent to prison.

Around 1980 Rex had a heart attack and open heart surgery. His wife wanted him to give up the mink farm but he didn't want to. He ran the mink ranch until about 1990. Then again in 1995 he had another open heart surgery. Evelyn passed away right after that and he shortly remarried until his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife also passed away.

Rex and Eveyln are the parents of four children; Lynn Larson (husband of Diane Bair) of Lehi, Neila Peterson (wife of Steven Peterson) of Lehi, Lloyd Larson of Lehi (never married), and Janet Kay (wife of Fred Kay) of Provo.