

From County Galway, Ireland, U.S. Navy man Bill Niland served his newly adopted country in the Second World War

Written by Jean Bartlett, 2016

(for the family of Bill Niland and Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, California)



NILAND, WILLIAM "BILL" (1911-1961)

(Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, California.
Section 5, Row 9, Grave 77)

A native of Chessy, Ardrahan, County Galway, Ireland, William Niland was born on December 5, 1911, to Patrick and Margaret (Burke) Niland. His father Patrick was born August 15, 1856, in Chessy, Ardrahan, and died in 1931. His mother Margaret was born on December 29, 1874 in Clarinbridge, County Galway, and died in 1963.

William was one of nine siblings: Mary Keary, 1902-1969; Katie Fahy, 1903-1998; Tommie, 1904-1922, taken early by meningitis; Bridie, 1905-2000; Paddy 1906-1995; Rita Corbett, 1908-1964; Martin, 1909 - 1978; William 1911-1961; and Elsie O'Toole, 1918-1983.

In September of 1930, William boarded the passenger ship Laconia in Liverpool and arrived in New York City on the 15th of September. He didn't know it then but he wouldn't see Ireland again for 28 years. He traveled by train from New York to San Francisco where he was met by his aunt and uncle, Katherine and Jack Burke. Jack, William's uncle on his mother's side, was a San Francisco police officer and he and his wife

lived in San Francisco. The couple did not have children and were happy to have one of the Niland children come live with them. Originally they had wanted to bring the youngest Niland, Elsie, to San Francisco, but Elsie's mom thought she was too young to emigrate and so Willie, as he was called then, emigrated instead.

The 18-year-old landed a job with a meat packing house not long after his arrival. In 1933, "Bill" as he was now called, was hired by Southern Pacific. Over the next 28 years, excluding his time in the military, he worked as a special agent/investigator for the railroad company.

"He was the equivalent of a police officer," his daughter Peggy noted. "He had a gun, a badge and handcuffs. Mostly he was a plain-clothes investigator, going to work in a suit, hat and tie. But in his earlier years with the railroad, he wore a police uniform."

Six feet tall "with beautiful blue eyes," Bill was always a fiddle player. He played the fiddle when he lived in Ireland and he brought the fiddle with him to America and played it every chance he got.

"He could read music but he played by ear," his daughter said, "and there wasn't a song he couldn't play. Music was a big part of our lives and to my knowledge he was the only one in his family that could play an instrument. He played in an Irish band, and with friends, and at all the Irish benefits, dances and picnics. He could play and name every Irish tune, jig, reel or hornpipe and he could play pop. I remember in the 1950s hearing him play 'How Much Is That Doggie In The Window' and 'This Old House,' among many other pop tunes. He was really good."

Bill met his future wife Mary, born the same month and year as he, at a Catholic social event in the early 1930s. A native of San Francisco, Mary was the daughter of Thomas and Nora Joyce, originally of County Galway. The couple dated for several years and married in San Francisco on November 14, 1936, at St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church. They made San Francisco's Mission District their home before the family – which would go on to include daughters Peggy and Pat – moved to the Parkside District in 1948 to the Burke home which Bill inherited when his aunt died. (His uncle died in 1946.)

Along with marrying in 1936, that was the year that Bill also became a U.S. citizen, a life event he was very proud of. He loved this country as much as his homeland.

On May 8, 1944, Bill entered active service with the Armed Guard (Pacific Fleet), a service branch of the United States Navy that was responsible for defending U.S. and Allied merchant ships from attack by enemy aircraft, submarines and surface ships. He trained as a gunner's mate on San Francisco's Treasure Island. Although Bill was married and the father of a toddler, WWII was still in full swing and men in their thirties were being drafted. Rather than enter through the regular Army draft, Bill chose to enlist with the Navy.

One hundred and fifty thousand Americans, assigned to 6,000 merchant ships, served in WWII's Naval Armed Guard as gunners, radio operators and signal men on cargo ships, tankers, troop ships and other merchant vessels. Gunner's Mate William Niland, Gun Crew 6, American Area, Asiatic Pacific Theater, served on the cargo/ammunition ship SS Nira Luckenbach and the Liberty ship SS Charles Goodnight. Of those 6,000 merchant ships on which the Armed Guard served, more than 700 were sunk and many more were damaged.

Liberty ships were the result of the extraordinary shipbuilding efforts to meet the needs of the Second World War and the United States produced 2,700 of these ships from 1941 to 1945. Well educated on naval vessels, President Franklin D. Roosevelt applauded the design of the Liberty ship which made it a real lifesaver with its ability to carry a good load. But the President did tell Maritime Commission Administrator Admiral Emory S. Land that while he knew each Liberty ship would serve the country well: "*She isn't much to look at, though, is she? A real ugly duckling.*" Naturally "ugly duckling" became their preferred name.

On December 10, 1945, Bill was honorably discharged. His daughter said he never really spoke about the War other than to say that he had met a great friend, his gunnery mate partner, Ed Miller. Ed, his wife Theora and their daughter Anita would come to visit the Niland family when they could in San Francisco and the Niland family in turn would visit the Miller family on their farm in Oregon. The families loved these visits. But the most prized vacation was yet to come.

In 1958, Bill took his wife and daughters to Ireland to meet his family. They traveled by train across the U.S. and then sailed to Cobh in County Cork, Ireland, and from there made their way to Galway. Bill would only travel by car, train or ship, never by plane. That came from an experience on a plane during the War which he never elaborated on. The trip was lovely. The family met Bill's siblings. They met all of the cousins. (There are about 40 first cousins in Galway.) While Bill's father had died a year after Bill had moved to San Francisco, his mom was still hale and hearty and thrilled to see her son and finally meet in person her San Francisco family. They stayed for three months and had the time of their lives.

Peggy described her father. "He loved his family and he loved his friends. We were very close. He couldn't wait for me to get my driver's license because my mother didn't drive. He loved his Irish food, meat and potatoes. He did, however, come to love Italian food. But that was it. We were raised Irish. We traveled mostly in Irish circles as my mom was also very Irish. My father was a member of the Connaught Athletic Association. He believed in an honest day's work. On his last day, he had a railroad case to attend to in Stanford. He said he didn't feel well and then he was gone."

Bill Niland died on November 15, 1961. It was the day after he and Mary had celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary at their favorite Italian restaurant in San Francisco. It was also after he and Mary had arranged the guest list, 400 people, for Peggy's upcoming wedding to Mike Cooney (of County Westmeath, Ireland), held just two weeks later.

"We had originally wanted a small wedding, which we ended up having, but my father and mother just knew so many people," Peggy recalled. "On November 18, he had one of the biggest funerals you ever did see. Mass took place at St. Cecilia's Church and then he was buried at Holy Cross."

He never had a chance to know his grandchildren: Ann, Kathy and Terri (Peggy and Mike's children), and Angela and Brendan (Pat and Alan Boreni's children).

"I think he would agree he was taken too soon at the age of 49."

His beloved wife Mary, who proudly learned to drive in 1963, was laid to rest beside him in July of 2005. His aunt and uncle, Katherine (Riddell) and Jack Burke, are also buried at Holy Cross.



This particular biography can be found in Jean Bartlett's 2016-released book, "Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: Roll Call ~ Reveille," which offers 55 biographies on individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War and on through the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II. The book is available through [Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma](#). Jean Bartlett can be contacted through her website: [Bartlett's Biographies](#).