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World War II

I was a high school student in Daisetta, Texas, when Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941. A good friend of mine was killed there. He died on the USS Arizona, and it remains his tomb today. That was a strong incentive for me to join the service. On September 4, 1942, I met a friend downtown who already had joined the Navy and asked him, "Say, how do you get into this outfit?" I was 16 years old at the time. He said he would take me to the recruiting officer in Beaumont.

After we hitchhiked to Beaumont, the recruiter told me, "Now, Gene, you're going to have to get your daddy's signature." So I took the papers to my father in Houston, though I had met him for the first time just that summer. My grandmother had raised me after my parents divorced when I was a baby. When I gave him the papers, he told me there was no need for me to return to Beaumont since he knew the recruiting officer in Houston. By eight o'clock the next morning, September 5, 1942, we were at the recruiting office downtown. My father signed the papers giving his permission for me to join the service and told them that I was 17, not 16. By nine o'clock, I had completed my physical and was sworn in at 10:30 a.m. along with about 500 other men. Then we were told to return at four o'clock that afternoon to leave for boot camp. I couldn't believe how quickly things happened.

That evening, we were loaded onto buses headed for Corpus Christi, Texas. When we arrived near midnight, we were sent to the chow halls for dinner. Being used to cornbread and beans at home, I was amazed. I had never seen so much food in all my life and figured the Navy was going to lose money on me. After dinner, we were sent to our barracks.

At 5:30 a.m. the next morning, they roused us out of bed and told us to go to chow. For the next three or four days, it seems like all we did was eat. We did get our shots and uniforms during that time. After about two weeks, I was sent to a base in Kingsville, Texas, for basic

training. For the next month, we had to clean the airplanes as part of our duties. One morning, they asked if any of us had ever ridden in an airplane. I threw my hand up, though I had never been close to an airplane. About five or six of us had to board planes that day along with the pilots who were training. Our job was to throw a life raft out if the plane was about to crash. Then we were supposed to parachute away from the aircraft.

The pilot was practicing strafing a bombing range over the water. When he finished that, he started raising sand with the plane. By the time we landed and got off the plane, he saw that I was white as a ghost. He knew then that was my first time in a plane.

Next I was assigned to ordinance and loaded the planes with bombs, guns and ammunition. So I became quite familiar with airplanes over the two years I spent in Kingsville as part of an aircraft service unit, though I really wanted to leave and see some action. The chief and I became good friends during that time, and he didn't want me to go. He told me, "Hayes, I'm not going to let you go." When I asked why not, he said, "Let me tell you something. They're killing people out there. You don't want to get into that. You have a good job and can stay here for the duration."

But I told him, "I don't want that. I want to go and try to do my part."

He said, "You're doing your part. You're helping to train pilots."

Finally, after two years, the chief called me in one day and said, "We've got your orders again, but I'm not going to let you go."

I said, "Chief, please let me go." I really didn't understand the importance of the role I was playing at the time. Now I realize that people on the sidelines, just like men on the bench at a ball game, play just as important a role as the men on the field.

"Okay," he said, "I'll tell you what. Do you have a mattress?"

"No, I don't have a mattress. But I'll buy one when I get to Corpus if you'll let me out of here."

Of course, I didn't even think about a mattress by the time I got to Corpus. About 300 of us rode a troop train for five days to Providence, Rhode Island. We were filthy by the time we arrived since there had been no bathing facilities along the way. I stayed at Quonset Point, a naval base, for about two weeks before we were lined up one morning and told they were looking for six volunteers. Though I didn't know what I was volunteering for, I volunteered. I thought I was about to ship out.

The six of us were sent to a strafing bombing range on an island about 30 miles off the coast of New Bedford. We stayed there for the next six months other than periodic liberties. Then I was sent to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, for a while. From there, I went to Chincoteague, Virginia, for training with an air group. Our aircraft carrier, the FDR, later was named the Coral Sea. We finished training the pilots for touch-and-go landings on the aircraft carrier and were about to ship out when the armistice was signed in September 1945.

On December 23, 1945, I was discharged from the Navy. Though I never served overseas, I had been able to train a lot of people who did.

Before I went into the Navy, I was a Christian. Not every serviceman backslid, but some of us did. Still, I never forgot my faith. In boot camp, we were required to go to church. I continued to go in Kingsville since I was dating the daughter of a Methodist preacher there, though I was a Baptist. In New Bedford, I dated a Catholic girl and went to church with her, although I knew I could never become a Catholic. My faith was well grounded because my grandmother was a good Christian, and she always saw to it that we kids went to church. I thank her for that. We learned to be God-fearing people and learned to love the Lord. God has a hand in everything that

happens. We didn't win the war by ourselves. Everything happens for a reason. I thank God for that.

My wife is a very devout Christian. We've been married 29 years and have had a good life. My first wife and her first husband passed away. We've been active in church and helped build one in Alto, Texas, and other places.

Of course, I was only 16 when I joined the Navy, but young people have no fear. That's why the military wants them. I was ready to go. Our country had been knocked down to its knees when Pearl Harbor was attacked. If the Japanese had known how unprepared we really were, they might have hit the West Coast. As it was, they did a lot of damage, and all Americans (men and women) had to work very hard to pull everything together to prepare themselves as a powerful fighting force. The people who stayed home during World War II suffered a lot. They had to do without so many things. The women in America really did their part to help. They worked in the shipyards and other places. In Kingsville, the WAVES packed our parachutes and helped clean our guns.

I became even more patriotic after I enlisted. But I also began to realize that maybe some of the things we did in this country were not always right; for instance, placing Japanese people who were American citizens in camps. That didn't set well with me, but there was nothing I could do. A friend of mine was in the service, though his parents had been put in one of those camps.

I love America and think it's the greatest country in the world, but we have a lot of healing to do. Anyone who lives here should love it enough to help defend it whenever they're called upon to do so. Today we're fighting from all angles, and it's going to be a tough fight. Of course, the protestors are out again, like they were with the Vietnam War. But with God's help, we'll come out of this turmoil all right.