



**Ralph Hendrix**  
Seaman, U.S. Merchant Marines  
World War II

I was born in Dallas and was attending the University of Texas in Austin when the war started. I had the choice of joining or being drafted. Wanting to travel, I joined the Merchant Marines when I was 17 years old.

For three months, I trained in St. Petersburg, Florida. The basic training was basically the same as in the Navy. There were three sections—engineers (the men in the engine room), deckhands (mates) and radiomen.

I was sent to Houston for my first voyage. I shipped out on a T2 tanker to Aruba, an island off of South America about 40 miles north of Venezuela. At the time, the largest oil refinery in the world was located there. We carried the oil from Aruba to New York. As a supplier of gas and oil, Aruba played a major part in the war. Many ships sank off of that island.

Next I sailed through the Panama Canal to Seattle and ended up in Perth, Australia. After that, I traveled to Europe six times, carrying oil, gas and supplies to ports including Algiers, Bezirta, and Liverpool. We couldn't get through the Mediterranean, so we had to sail around the tip of Africa and come up through Madagascar. We also went to Basra and Abadan, and I made a trip with a trucker through Russia.

While in Basra and Abadan, I visited the Garden of Eden, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers come together. Not far from Baghdad, it wasn't much then. When we returned through the Red Sea, I visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I saw Mount Sinai and the Suez Canal as well.

During my fifth or sixth trip to Europe, we were sailing to Mermask, Russia, carrying oil when submarines hit us in the North Atlantic and sank our ship at eight o'clock in the morning during a watch change. Luckily, we were not carrying a full load of fuel. Some of our tanks had been filled with water to weight us down. Sadly, several of our boys were killed. The rest of us made it to lifeboats and abandoned ship.

We were in that frigid water for about four days, taking turns getting in and out of the lifeboats. But we were lucky to be alive. Of course, we were wearing our standard gear wetsuits over our uniforms along with a lifejacket. We also had whistles and lights. Of course, the convoy couldn't stop for us. Mainly, we were trying to look out for each other. I did a lot of praying.

The North Atlantic is the coldest and roughest place in the world year round. Eventually, we were rescued. When the ships came in to rescue us, they first had to circle for about a day to be sure no submarines were waiting to hit them. There had been 35 ships in our convoy at the beginning of our journey. Fourteen of them sank.

We were giving Russia a lease-lend program through which we provided materials and food to their country. Our convoy was delivering those things via the North Atlantic because Japan had cut us off from the other direction. Sometimes we sailed through the Persian Gulf, and the Russians would send trucks to meet us at the ports so they could drive the supplies back to Russia. If it had not been for us, England could not have sustained.

Before I served in the Merchant Marine, I never had heard of Scapa Flo. It was a Scottish naval base located on an island north of Scotland. When a convoy left Norfolk, Virginia, their destination usually was Scapaflo.

Our ship also participated in the invasion of Leyte. From the Panama Canal, we carried six PT boats on top of our tanker; two in the front of the bridge and four in the back plus all the gasoline we could carry and the six PT boat crews of 8-14 men each. It took 30 days at sea to get to Leyte.

In December 1944, I had written my girlfriend's father asking his permission to marry her, and he agreed. So after that last trip to Liverpool, I came to Dallas and we were married at the First Baptist Church, where I had been raised and baptized at the age of 11. Dr. George W. Truitt was my preacher. He had baptized all the members of my family. He wrote letters to me during the war that I still have. Dr. Criswell performed our wedding ceremony. So I have a good Baptist heritage.

One week later, I shipped out again and went to Leyte in the Philippines. Then we sailed through the Panama Canal to Bremerhaven, Germany. By the early part of 1945, I had been at sea for 18 months and qualified to attend officers' training school. I applied and was accepted. After three months of training in Alameda, California, I became an officer.

On a T-2 Tanker, everyone is on duty for four hours and off duty for eight hours, and we were on the move all the time. Each ship had an engineer, an oiler, a watertender, a fireman and a wiper in the engine room. About 2,200 T-2 Tankers were made to carry fuel, oil and high-octane gasoline. Our quarters onboard were fairly good-sized rooms with bunk beds. The officers had their own rooms, and they were nice rooms.

When we went to England, we would sail with a convoy of anywhere from 20 to 100 ships. The tankers were always located in the center of the convoy. If a submarine hit a tanker, the ships around it would sink if they were too close. The cargo ships always were located on the perimeter of the convoy and were escorted by destroyers that tried to take care of them. In the convoys, we only could go as fast as the slowest ship. A liberty ship could not sail any faster than 10 knots, extremely slow.

If a ship in a convoy broke down, they had to back off and stop. Then the convoy would leave it there, though submarines might be waiting there. It was very easy to hit a stopped ship. Submarine crews liked to attack at sunrise and sunset. At those times, they could see better, and we could see less. They never attacked after dark.

We often carried barrage balloons on every ship in a convoy. They were big balloons that deterred airplanes from diving at the ships. When I sailed through the Panama Canal six times, barrage balloons were used. They also were used all over London during air raids.

Whenever an air attack was about to be made on us, they would call the engine room and tell us to shut off all the air to the boilers. That made smoke pour out of the pipe. By the time the

airplanes arrived, hopefully, we would have a good smoke cover.

My Christianity sustained me during the war. On our ship, we took turns holding Sunday school lessons or devotionals every Sunday. Sometimes only one person would attend, but four might come at other times. I used to pray, "Lord, your will be done. But if it's your will, take care of us and help us out of this problem." Some of the men objected to our religious practices, but that was okay. I was lucky that only one ship was sunk while I was onboard. I sailed on so many different ships with different crews all the time.

I couldn't wait to get into the service and do my part for the war effort. All my buddies felt the same way. Americans all were patriotic then, and everybody did their part. It was great to be a part of that. Now we're losing our World War II veterans at the average rate of 1,100 per day. My military service raised my appreciation for life, for family, for God and for my country. Even during the Depression, Americans had so much more to be thankful for than people in other countries. I don't know if Americans today are thankful or not.

The Lord has been awfully good to me all my life. I've been a member of Green Acres Baptist Church for more than 40 years. We moved to Tyler in 1946.