



Robert E. “Bob” Layton Jr.
S1/C-AMM, U.S. Navy
World War II

A freshman at Texas A&M University, I had just returned to the campus from a movie in town when I found everybody outside talking. They told me that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. I asked, “Where’s Pearl Harbor?” When they said it was in Hawaii, I said, “Oh, that’s halfway around the world. We won’t get involved in that.” Little did I know. By the end of the war, I was at Pearl Harbor.

At A&M I was in ROTC and studying engineering, so I was deferred from military service for a while. During my junior year, I signed a contract to accept a two-year commission in the Army upon graduation. A year later, I went on an accelerated basis year round. I had enrolled at A&M when I was 16 years old, so I still wasn’t 18 by the time I was a junior.

In 1943, toward the end of the war, the military decided they needed more troops. They pulled my class and the senior class out of school at the end of my junior year for active duty. Unfortunately, I wasn’t 18 yet, so I couldn’t receive a commission at the time. After I turned 18 in the spring of 1944, I volunteered. I wanted to fly, but I couldn’t pass the eye exam for the Air Corps or the Navy. However, I had been flying solo since the age of sixteen. I decided to enlist in the Navy even though I had received Army training.

Boot camp, of course, was a less pleasant environment than A&M had been, but I was prepared for it from a physical and disciplinary standpoint. I felt sorry for some of the guys who came right out of the more plush colleges or civilian jobs, especially the married ones. We used to joke about double-timing to get to the mess hall and then standing in line for 30 minutes or an hour to get our food. I tried to help counsel a few of those men and was successful in some cases.

From boot camp, I was sent to air technical schools in Chicago. Then I went through the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Norman, Oklahoma. My major in college had been aeronautical engineering.

I was assigned to the Naval Air Station at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, when the Germans surrendered. After that, they sent all of us to the West Coast to be shipped out to the Pacific. While I was on board a ship headed for Okinawa to participate in the invasion of Japan, I fell on a gangplank and broke my ankle. They put me off the ship at Pearl Harbor. The atomic bomb was dropped while I was in the hospital there, so the war with Japan ended.

Many wounded soldiers and evacuees from prison camps were in the hospital at Pearl Harbor while I was there. Though my ankle was in a cast, I was probably better off than anyone else. Many men had lost limbs or were burned all over their bodies. I was able to get around well enough to help feed those men.

After my ankle mended, I was sent to Houma, Louisiana, to a Lighter-Than-Air Base where six blimps were kept in a big hangar. We had to store 50 or more later model aircraft in that hangar. By then, I had earned enough points to get out of the service. I was discharged at the Naval Air Station in New Orleans.

I received good training and had several good assignments while I was in the service and can't complain about anything. I met my wife while I was based in Providence, Rhode Island. After the war, I returned there and asked her to marry me. She did, and we've been married 55 years now.

Had the atomic bomb not been dropped, I probably wouldn't be here today. It was estimated that we would have lost more than a million American soldiers and over two million Japanese if we had invaded Japan as originally planned. Those people probably would have fought to the bitter end, down to the last woman and child. Though many people may think it was barbaric to use the atomic bomb, it ultimately saved many lives. A Japanese doctor once made an announcement at a medical convention in Chicago saying that the United States saved Japan by dropping the atomic bomb.

I saw the leaflets that the Americans dropped over Japan warning the people about upcoming bombing raids. The tactic was to wipe out major industrial centers by sending 500 B-29's to bomb each city. They were doing as much damage as one atomic bomb could do, but it was very costly to us in the loss of airplanes and men. The leaflets warned the Japanese citizens to evacuate the industrial centers listed because the towns were going to be systematically destroyed. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were on that list. I am president of the aviation museum at the airport in Tyler, and it has been one of my pet projects. We have samples of the circulars that were dropped over Japan that have been translated into English.

America never has gone to battle with the intent to injure non-combatant citizens of a nation. With the help of the United States, Japan is a major power today and an American ally. General MacArthur served as the military governor of Japan, and he helped them become a dynamic society.

There's nothing good about war. Unfortunately, it is a necessary evil.

As a Christian, I had no trouble maintaining my faith during the war. It probably was the

only way I got through it. A Baptist preacher in Houma came out to the base every Sunday morning to hold church services. I was the only person on the base to attend. Finally, I told him, "You're having to give up your time away from your congregation. Why don't you just let me come into town?" He agreed that would be wonderful, so I began attending services at his church. Wherever I was during my military service, I would go to church if I could possibly get to one. Chaplains were available on the bases, but they were only there for crises and comfort.

When I joined the service, like most of the young people I knew, I was anxious to serve my country and do my part to help end the war. Though no one was anxious to go into combat, not one person I knew resisted it. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, I've seen things happening in this country that are similar to what happened here immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Probably more people express opposition to war today than did during World War II, but they are a great minority. I think today's young people are just as patriotic and just as willing to serve their country as young people were in the 1940s.

I'm not a proponent of women serving in combat roles in the military, though I'm not opposed to them being in the service. I don't think they're suited for it mentally or physically, and I was brought up to respect women as the weaker sex. In general, I believe they're better suited for other roles. I think it would be a handicap for men to fight side by side with women because they would want to favor and protect them. Many women served during World War II in non-combat roles. They served in clerical jobs and even ferried airplanes.

My experience at Texas A&M trained me for leadership and helped me to mature more than any other single thing did. In the Navy, I had a warm bed and a warm meal every day. If I had been on a ship, I still would have had that. It could have gotten bad if the ship sank, of course. With that exception, the living conditions for men in the Navy were very tolerable. I really respect the Army foot soldiers that had to fight the war from foxholes in deplorable conditions.

My faith has given me the tools I needed to work with in leadership positions. It encouraged me to be of service to others and strengthened me. Basically, it has influenced everything I've done. If I had it to do over again, I would do the same thing. While I was in the service, I think God used me to help men who were having a hard time. He gave me the courage and the faith not to have the same problems.

At the hospital in Pearl Harbor, a 19-year-old Marine who had earned a bronze star was there. He had broken his back during maneuvers at Pearl Harbor when he fell off a cliff. Just a country boy, he had to wear a body cast and needed a lot of guidance. After he received a medical discharge, he got in trouble one night when he had been drinking and broken a window. From jail, he called me in Houma and asked if I could help him. He said, "I need someone to help me get out of jail and make restitution. I don't have anybody to do that." I did help him, and he never forgot it. He also never forgot the things I had done to help him while he was disabled in the hospital.

Prayer always has been my resource for strength. I have relied on it. If not for that, I would not have been able to accomplish the things I accomplished. Today, I rely on it even more so. It has been the foundation and strength of my life, and I'm very grateful for it.