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Boatswainmate Petty Officer, U.S. Navy  
World War II

On March 31, 1944, I enlisted in the Navy in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was 17 years old and thought I could win the war, so I persuaded my dad to sign the papers allowing me to join as a minor. After graduating from high school in June, I was assigned to the USS Twetty, a destroyer, in Miami. When I arrived in Miami, the ship was full so they sent me to Orange, Texas. There we commissioned the ATA-179, a sea-going tug that I stayed with for the next two and a half years.

Following a shakedown in the Gulf of Mexico, we sailed through the Panama Canal headed for Fitzhaven, New Guinea (about 3,000 sea miles) as part of a zigzag convoy. We passed Bora-Bora along the way, a holding of the Japanese at the time. From New Guinea, we went wherever the action was. And there was plenty of action.

A working ship, we were capable of putting two sectional dry docks together in the open sea in order to rescue a wounded ship and get her out of the way of enemy aircraft. I have a picture of a destroyer we once towed and put back into service. It had been hit in the side, resulting in a tremendous hole. At the time we loaded her, we were under tremendous fire from the Japanese. A Kamikaze pilot dove pretty close off the fantail, too. They generally would dive for the stack because the ammunition was stored a couple of decks below it. If they managed to hit the stack, they could sink the ship. But we were able to get destroyer ship out of there and back to port for repairs. Alongside an aircraft carrier, we looked like a peanut, but we could tow those huge ships. Also, if an LST or transport became moored on a beachhead, we would pull it off and put her back in service. At times, we loaded our dry dock with food to be delivered to other ships. I also occasionally ran an LCI, a small landing craft.

We were a hardworking bunch of guys, and we save a lot of servicemen. Our working

crew consisted of about 55 men, including seven officers, boatswain, electrician, welder, etc. I was a boatswain in charge of the deck and cable splicing. We had an elevated 3-inch, 50mm gun on the bow, and I was second-loader for it. At 6-foot-6, I loaded for all surface firing. A shorter guy loaded for firing at aircraft. Wearing asbestos gloves, we would throw the ejected shells over the side of the ship as the gun kicked them out. We also had 20mm guns on each side of the bridge. We were shot at quite frequently.

The worst thing that ever happened to us was once when we were towing a sectional dry dock, a storm came up and the stainless steel cable broke. As a qualified shallow diver, I was told to go underwater to assess the damage and try to jar the cable loose. That meant I could dive to depths that did not require a pressurized suit and helmet. After I found that the cable was bound tightly around our screw, I came back up and told the skipper, "If you want that thing loosed, you go down and kick it." But I went down again, placed the cable in a better position and put it on a retrieving reel to pull it out. When we turned the power on, a tremendous splash occurred in the water. I told the skipper, "That would have been me, and I would have been shark meat."

He laughed and said, "I knew that, Paul. I wouldn't let you do that."

Finally, we were able to retrieve the cable, splice it and chase down our missing half of a dry dock.

Many times, the skipper would tell me, "Paul, go over and see how bad she's hit," or "Take a dimension of the hole." I was qualified to dive deep enough to do that. That way, he could notify the ship's captain of the extent of the damage. By the time, we delivered the damaged ship to port, they knew what had to be done and were able to begin repairs immediately.

During the Leyte Gulf Invasion in the Philippines, our ship almost sank. It was a bad situation. Dead bodies were floating everywhere and the sea was red as I watched our boys hit the beach. Stepping over the countless bloody bodies and under heavy fire, they just kept going. Close to shore, we were firing our guns and rescuing some of the men on the LCI's and LST's. While pulling an LST off the shore, a Japanese Zero aircraft hit the beach less than 100 yards away from us. I was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious service and I received 2 Bronze Stars while in service.

Later, some of the women who came down from the hills in the Philippines looked terrible. The Japanese, extremely cruel people, had tortured and mutilated them. Bamboo shoots had been driven beneath their fingernails and set on fire. I came back from the Philippines with a Japanese rifle and bayonet stashed in my seabag. Surprisingly, their rifles were flimsy and unsophisticated.

At the end of my tour of duty, they offered me a chief's position if I would stay and decommission the ship. I was the last member of the original crew by the time we returned to San Francisco. But I told them I had had enough, and they discharged me. I rode a crew train back home to Charlotte, North Carolina.

Under the GI Bill, I attended North Carolina State College. I was an Episcopalian during the war but was baptized in First Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1950 after marrying a Baptist girl. Later we started a church with 8 members in Raleigh, North Carolina. It now has more than 3,000 members, and I was a charter member and I have been a deacon for 38 years. I became a deacon at Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler about 12 years ago.

It's difficult to get a veteran to talk about his experiences. My uncle was aboard the plane that dropped the atomic bomb. I knew he had medals, but the only way I could persuade him to tell me about them was by making him angry. One day I said, "I had more medals than you

have.” He said, “Let me show you something, son.” Then he showed me a cigar box full of all kinds of medals. I don’t think I’d be here today if it wasn’t for the Lord. It hurts me deeply when I think of all the friends I lost during the war and the terrible things I saw. Sometimes, I don’t believe I was really there. But I’m here, thank the Lord.

I have no regrets about my military service. Things were very different then. We were gung-ho and wanted to serve our country. Now people go to Canada to avoid the service. Somebody had to do it, and we accomplished what we set out to do with good leadership and the help of the Lord.

September 11 is my birthday. Now I think about the terrorists’ attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, every birthday. At first, everyone was displaying the American flag and patriotism was high. Now that patriotism has slacked off. Fortunately, the American people had never been invaded before and have never seen death in the quantity that the World War II boys saw. I pray that the Lord can touch our enemies in some way to bring them to reality. When a parent sends their child covered with bombs into a place and tells them they’ll be exalted in heaven for their actions, that’s wrong. I can’t visualize Christians ever doing anything like that.

During a talk I gave at Brownsboro High School, I asked the kids, “How fast would a plane go back during World War II?” They thought maybe 1,000 miles per hour and were surprised to learn that the fastest plane we had could only fly at 350 miles per hour. I asked if they knew about the steel girders that had been placed between our ships and the beaches. They had no idea that the girders were there to stop the LST’s from unloading men on the beach. That meant the troops had to disembark in the water, becoming easy targets. I would like to tell young people today, “Thank God that you are an American and have your freedom. God willing, He will look after the United States in the future as much as he has in the past. Within your own heart, your loyalty towards God and your country will be lacking if you’re not a Christian.”

I was in Pearl Harbor not long after it was attacked. It was a horrible scene with warehouses stacked full of dead bodies. If the Japanese had been smart enough to go in there with their fleet after that, they could have taken it. After that, we didn’t have as many carriers as the enemy. With guts and courage, we played a hide-and-seek game with the Japanese and won. The top officers made the right decisions despite knowing they would lose men and ships as a result. My job was to obey orders. Sometimes I didn’t agree with those orders, but I did it anyway. If a bomb fell near me while I was underwater, I would have ended up deaf or even dead. Though I thought about that many times and was scared, I still followed orders. We didn’t question our commanding officers because we knew we were there for one purpose — to win the war and save America.