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World War II

After growing up in Shreveport, Louisiana, I joined the U.S. Navy and left home on my eighteenth birthday in 1944. I chose the Navy so I would have a clean bed to sleep in. They sent me to a naval training station in San Diego, California, for six weeks of boot camp. The club car on the train was filled with recruits, but that was the end of our first-class treatment.

In the Navy, I grew up real fast. I had led a fairly sheltered life before. But in the service I saw things, heard things and found out about things that I didn't know existed. We arrived at boot camp in time for breakfast that first morning. When I saw nothing but Boston baked beans and cornbread, I was ready to go back home.

Next I went to gunnery school for four weeks. After that, I was a trained fighting man. They immediately put me on a liberty ship with a Navy gun crew. Our first stop was Honolulu. Then we sailed to Guam and back to San Francisco. The ship could cruise at about 10 or 11 knots. If the ship were empty, the fantail would rise out of the water.

On our way back to the States, our ship ran aground just outside San Francisco. The ship broke up and the master lost his license as a result. I managed to get off the ship but lost everything. So I went home on a survivor's leave. I had to ride a train to Louisiana. At the time, the trains burned coal, and the soot would come into the railcars. After I got home, my mother had to bleach my T-shirts to get them clean.

When I came back to California, I boarded a larger ship called the SS Exeria and sailed all over the South Pacific, including Honolulu, New Guinea twice, the Philippines twice, and the Marshall Islands. That ship would cruise at about 20 knots and was operated by the Matson Fleet Line. We ate Merchant Marine chow. In those days, the Merchant Marines had a very strong union. So they had to be offered a choice of two entrees at every meal. Being an 18-year-old boy, I ate both. They also provided refrigerated cold cuts 24 hours a day. I would eat a big meal at six

o'clock in the evening and then have a sandwich when I got up to go on a midnight watch. One boy from Tennessee gained 100 pounds. I don't imagine that guy had ever had a square meal before.

I was assigned to a gun turret on the fantail of the ship. We had to man our battle stations all the time. The only time I recall being real nervous was when a submarine had been spotted in the middle of the night, and our ship was zigzagging through the water. At one time, I was assigned to a 20mm machine gun. Then I was switched to loading a 4-inch 50. The shells were in a case with the settings marked. Each shell weighed about 80 pounds. I had to pick it up, slap it in the gun and close the breach. Another gunner actually fired it.

Of course, I went through the equator initiation and still have my certificate. It was a tradition similar to fraternity initiations that included shaving the sailors' heads or running them through a belt line and smearing paint on them. The certificate saves a sailor from having to go through it more than once. We were carrying 800 servicemen at the time. In New Guinea, the Navy had asked for 800 aviation crewmen. Instead, they were sent 800 aviation ordinance men. They didn't want to participate in the equator initiation

Occasionally when we were close to shore, they would fly a plane over the ship with something hanging behind it that served as a target for us to shoot as practice. In gunnery school, we had practiced firing some on a gun range.

Carrying troops and supplies, we were supposed to participate in the invasion of the Philippines, but our evaporators broke. They are used to convert saltwater to fresh water. So we had to stay in the Marshall Islands to have them repaired.

In New Guinea, we hitched a ride inland on an Army truck and saw Jack Benny perform in a USO show. I went to Manila in the Philippines and saw that the city had been practically blown away. In the harbor, we tied up to sunken ships. We had to be back aboard our ship by six o'clock that evening. There wasn't much to do but walk around. I walked by what had been a car dealership and saw a line of 1941 Buicks torn to pieces. I believe that happened during the Japanese invasion.

I never knew what happened to my crew on the liberty ship. But I was with the crew on my second ship for quite a while. I really didn't want to get close to most of the guys onboard. As a Christian, I saw things I didn't want to see. For instance, one night in San Francisco a Merchant Marine deckhand approached me with a sea bag on his shoulder. He said, "I'm Louise." To this day, I don't know what his real name was. Later someone told me what kind of a person that guy was and advised me to stay away from him. The Merchant Marines did not discriminate against homosexuals.

When we returned to the States from my last trip overseas, I got off my ship in Seattle and rode a train for four days and four nights to get home. It was a day or two before I even found a seat. But the seats were hard, and there was no air conditioning. I still was at home on leave when the Japanese surrendered in August. It was an exciting time. I drove my father's car downtown and blew the horn until I ran the battery down. When I returned to San Francisco, they didn't need gun crews anymore. I saw a sign posted about a typing job, so I applied and was given a position with the dispersing office. I did that for seven or eight months and enjoyed it. Basically, we prepared payroll. The perks included working with a bunch of Waves. If we wanted to go to the movie on Treasure Island, we always found a Wave to go with us so we didn't have to stand in line. The girls were allowed to go right in and sit with the officers. That was a good thing. We saw a lot of good live shows and movies there.

After the war, everything had to be wound down. Some men had to go overseas again to

bring troops and supplies back to the States. Since they didn't need gunners anymore, I stayed in San Francisco. In May 1946, I was discharged from the Navy. Then Uncle Sam paid for my education through the GI Bill.

During World War II, there was no such thing as draft card burners. Everybody wanted to serve in some way. Before that, very few women had worked outside the home. After the war started, women did jobs previously performed only by men in this country. They worked in shipyards and aircraft factories. Of course, the women in the service didn't have frontline responsibilities then. Only male nurses were allowed to work on the Navy ships.

Now I'm glad that we're not speaking Japanese or German instead of English. Most people don't think about it, but I wonder what this country would be like if we had lost the war. Our freedom would be gone, and the rest of the world would be different, too. I think President Roosevelt was in the position that President Bush is in today. We probably should have gone to war sooner. Hitler should have been stopped earlier.

I had joined the Baptist church when I was 12 years old, and my mother insisted I always go to church. So in the Navy, I carried my Bible and went to church services when they were available. A chaplain was onboard our ship whenever troops were onboard. I read my Bible every night, prayed a lot and leaned on the Lord quite a bit during my time in the service. My faith kept me from just following the crowd and doing the wrong things. It's not always easy to be a Christian and be popular, too. But I knew what was right.