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World War II

While working for a company that manufactured bomb parts under government contracts, I actually wanted to serve with the Seabees in the U.S. Navy. I was a machinist. As a result of my experience and my desire to join the service, my boss gave me a letter qualifying me as a second class machinist's mate for the Seabees. When I enlisted, however, I flunked the physical because of poor vision. The Coast Guard turned me down, also.

I believe God had a role in what happened next. A draft notice arrived after my birthday, and I never was slowed down by that vision problem again. In November 1943, I was assigned to the first group of people who were drafted for the Seabees. Before that, the Seabees had been a totally volunteer organization. Instead of becoming a second class machinist's mate, I was made a seaman second class.

I was assigned to the 33rd Special Battalion. Normally Seabees constructed buildings, airstrips, roads, etc., but we worked as stevedores loading and unloading supplies and operating a supply depot. I went into the service in November after turning 18 in August. The average age of the approximately 1,000 men in my outfit was under 19. Probably no more than 15 or 20 people were over the age of 19. We didn't worry about our youth or not knowing what to do. If somebody showed us what to do, we did it. I was very proud of my outfit. One of our lieutenants had been with the Navy for 30 years and had served as a chief gunner's mate before the war. He was a fine man and a good leader. To an 18-year-old boy, he looked old as Methuselah but probably was only 45 or 50 years old.

My first overseas assignment was on Milne Bay, New Guinea. For ten days, we unloaded supplies and loaded new ones. Next we went to Hollandia, New Guinea, and sat in the bay for about ten weeks while they put together a convoy. Then our convoy became part of the second-day wave of the reinvansion of Leyte. General MacArthur had left, promising to return. The Army spearheaded an invasion to retake Leyte, the last stronghold given up to the Japanese at the

outset of the war.

Our ship was a Norwegian freighter, confiscated and refitted as a troop ship carrying 2,000 troops — our battalion and another. It was a good ship, and the Norwegian crew was outstanding. As we approached the Philippines, a constant watch was begun. So I volunteered to man a 20mm aircraft gun. I was on the back of the ship or the fantail. Across from me was a 4-inch gun manned by the Norski Marines. They were really good people and knew what they were doing. They used to practice shooting that cannon every day and jar the whole ship. The day before we arrived in Leyte, we came under a light air attack. The Marine crew on the fantail shot a Zero down while it was flying between our ship and the ship next to us on a Kamikaze approach. They blew him out of the sky. That was probably the hairiest thing that happened to me in the service, but I didn't even think about it. I can't say I was afraid, but it was quite an experience.

By the time we arrived at Leyte on the second day, things were not secure but a lot of progress had been made. My unit unloaded LST supplies for a couple of days before setting up a supply depot in a community called Guiian Samar, about 12 hours away. There we continued to unload ships. We used barges to transport the supplies (foodstuffs, clothes, fuel, aircraft parts, and various other equipment) from the ships to the beach. Many other units were there as well, including the 5th Air Force.

Though the area was pretty beat up from the prior day's invasion, there was not a lot of action going on there by the time we arrived. All we did for the first two or three days was continue to unload supplies. By the third day, our forces had reclaimed the airstrip through fierce fighting nearby. I remained at that depot until the war ended.

After the war was over, I was transferred to Guam and remained there about five months working as a heavy equipment operator. My claim to fame, I guess, is that I set transformers on every diesel/electric power plant on Guam. That was a lot of fun. Finally, I built up enough points to return to the States and be discharged in Norman, Oklahoma.

I became a Christian when I was seven years old. There are times in life when you're closer to God than at other times, but I always felt comfortable with the Lord. Every unit I served in had a chaplain. Sometimes it was kind of a joke. When we first went overseas, our chaplain was a Catholic. He would hold mass one time, Protestant services at another time and Jewish services at yet another time. Before we left the States, we were at Fort Huememe in California. The nearest town was Ventura. A church there called the Four Square Gospel Church had a woman as their pastor, and they went all out for military people. Whatever our needs were, they were going to meet them one way or another. We would go to services there when we had liberty. Afterward, they would feed us and offered special programs. They really inspired me, though I was a Southern Baptist. There were no Southern Baptist churches in California that I could find, or in Virginia either.

I was born in 1925. So when the war came along in 1941, I had to wait a couple of years before I could enlist. But I was ready to go. I would have gone the day Pearl Harbor was attacked if I could have. I had a great time in the service and loved it the whole time. Certainly I had no doubts that we were doing the right thing. I served until April 1946 — two years, five months and four days!

At boot camp, we were just hanging around the stockade at Camp Perry, Virginia, for the first two or three days. We had met our drill instructor, but nothing was going on. Some servicemen came up in a dump truck and needed 20 people. They pointed at us and told us to get in the truck. We did as ordered. The base was mainly swampland, and the men were carrying

muck from the swamp that we had to smooth out alongside a road. Of course, we got filthy and stunk like a swamp. At the end of the day, they brought us back and dumped us out. While we were trying to clean up, our drill instructor came by. He wanted to know where we had been. When we told him, he said, "Those guys didn't have any authority over you. You're mine! You don't do anything except what I tell you to do." The point was that we were ready, willing and determined to do whatever we had to do. That was the attitude of everyone in the military at the time. Today probably not that many people would have that same attitude. A lot of people are not as proud of our country as we were then and still are.

Now we hear so many bad things about people in the military. I read an article recently about men's wives being murdered at Camp Lejeune in South Carolina. There is a lot of difference in the attitude and upbringing of an 18-year-old person today and an 18-year-old person 60 years ago. My opinion is that we have not instilled in our children the kind of responsibility and patriotism that was instilled in us. I would advise young people today to do some research about this country's history and the battles that have been fought in its defense. Recently I watched part of a movie about Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier in World War II. He played himself in the movie, and it was pretty authentic and inspiring.

Probably there were bad people in the service when I was, but I never knew them. Everyone I knew was a decent person trying to do his part. Some of us were funnier than others, and some of us may have worked harder than others. Nobody was running around waving flags at the time though. When we went to town on liberty, there would be fights and other things going on. But when it came to our jobs, we did them.