

Edward J. Bulger

Narrator:

Donation Interview

Bryce Draper(sp?) and I spent a lot of time together and a lot of happy hours in the Navy. I will attempt to recapture his navel career which is really my navel career. He has always been an important part of my life and the most wonderful part was that Bryce and his wife Lucy were able to come east in 1968 and brought their family and they stayed with us. At that time we lived about four or five blocks away from here at 21 South Lake Ave., Troy, NY. Bryce and Lucy saw the land that we had here and shortly after that we built this house. With five children we were quickly running out of bedroom space.

The first thing to remember was that, back in WW-II, Bryce and I were in high school and graduated in June of 1944. In order to get into the Navy we were already signed up while we were in high school. You were enlisted but they were interested in you finishing school and getting your diploma.

Our story really begins when we went to two different Navy boot camps. In my case I went to Sampson Naval Training Base in central New York State. Admiral Sampson was an admiral in the Spanish-American War. It was like any big Army or Navy camp, with lots of barracks. They were divided into units as they were called. At any given time they were training about 20,000 recruits. They kept you there for a twelve-week period. They toughened you up and gave you all of the medical shots that you needed, plus all the training and drilling and stuff like that. So there we were, seventeen year old guys just out of high school so it was pretty impressive to us. It wasn't a bad way to spend the summer. Sampson is located on the east side of Seneca Lake south of Geneva. We only got up there once during our twelve weeks. We got to go on an outing after we had done particularly good on an inspection of our barracks. Bryce's experience was probably identical to mine. I believe he was up in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

During boot camp they tested recruits to see what their aptitude was. For instance, if you picked up Morris code easily you were obviously going to be in the radio shack part of a ship. If you had no aptitudes you were probably going to end up in the deck gang chipping paint all day. Luckily that didn't happen to Bryce or myself. We were lucky. We both tested well for fire control. I said that I was no fireman and didn't really like to fight fires. They explained that it involved the aiming and firing of the guns on a ship. All we knew was that in September, 1944, after we had completed boot camp, we were going to Fire-control School in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. That appealed to us because the winter was coming on. It was Bryce's first trip across the country and my first trip down to Florida. So that sounded pretty "Jimdandy" to us. So we first met in Ft. Lauderdale in September, 1944.

A Fire Controlman had to have excellent eyesight. Both of us had it, which allowed us to use an optical range finder, which was basically a super-duper set of binoculars with little diamonds etched onto it, with which you could determine the range to a target. You had to have what they called stereoscopic vision in order to qualify. That meant that you could tell which of two objects was closer. When you dialed the diamond in on an object you could tell how far away it was via a readout on a meter on the optical range finder. And that's what you had to do if you were going to fire at an enemy ship or whatever the case may be, you had to know how far away things were. We went to Primary Fire Control School at Ft. Lauderdale.

Back at that time Ft. Lauderdale was just a sleepy little village, nowhere nearly as developed as it is today. I would guess that there are twenty or thirty times the people there now as there were then. They had a little white frame railroad station and we got off there. From there they took us on buses down Las Olas Blvd. right to the ocean. And lo and behold, there was our barracks, the Lauderdale Beach Hotel. At that time the Lauderdale Hotel was quite new, having been built no earlier than maybe 1938. It was Very modernistic looking by the standards of the time. So that was our barracks and it was right on the beach. You go there today and there is all of the fabulous beach front development, but there was very little of that except for that hotel. So we stayed there and because we were in school (believe it or not) they had retained their cleaning staff so we didn't even have to clean our rooms. So it was pretty good duty.

Right on the beach were our classrooms and they had optical range finders. While we were there we also had to learn how to use mechanical computers. They were the forerunners of today's computers and they would solve firing problems for the guns. I don't think we ever knew anything other than how to operate them and get the answers. They were mechanical computers that would take into consideration the wind, the distance and if the target was moving, etc. It was an excellent school and I could say that about all of the Navy training.

While we were there we heard a new magic word and that was radar. To that point we had heard nothing about it and knew nothing about it. Radar was known as "radio detection and ranging". With radar you could determine how far away a target was electronically within 5 yards even if it was twenty miles away. It gave you exactly what you needed to load into your fire control computer to solve the problem. So we spent a lot of time training on that. They had ships going up and down the coast. They would know exactly how far away they were and we would have to make sure that we could solve the problems and come up with the right answers. We were young and eager to learn.

There wasn't much to do in Ft. Lauderdale and we didn't have much time off. I only remember one time taking the bus down to Miami. A bunch of us went down to Miami and looked around. One thing that irritated me was that it was during the war and on Miami Beach were all these vacationers. The cars had license plates from New York and Illinois. At that time New York City and Chicago were the main sources of tourists in southern Florida. It was a bit disconcerting to see those cars down there when gasoline was so heavily rationed. I guess that is when you grow up a little bit and realize that money buys a few privileges.

While we were there at the school we went out on our first sea voyage. It was only a day trip. It was on the USS Hapsiton (SP?) which was a seaplane tender. On there they had a catapult and they would shoot a seaplane off the catapult. They would fly around and come back and land and by means of a hook they would hoist it back aboard the ship. That ship was also used as a target ship for training Navy torpedo plane pilots. The way it would work is we would cruise up and down the coast off Ft. Lauderdale, back and forth over a span of twenty miles or so. These torpedo planes would take off from their Florida bases and go out to sea. Then they would come back in toward us as we were going parallel to the shore. They would drop their dummy torpedoes and they had a group of people who were recording the hits on the ship. The torpedoes would not actually hit the ship. They would run a little deeper and pass under the ship. That would tell them that the torpedo would have hit the ship if not set so deep. They had some kind of device that made them pop up to the surface after they ran under us and they could be retrieved and used over and over again. Former President George Bush was a torpedo pilot. I recall that he mentioned once that he was down there at that time. Who knows, I may have been torpedoed by President Bush. Anyway, it was our first taste of the sea and we thought we were pretty good sea dogs. Here we were, in November and December of 1944, and it was fairly cool in that part of Florida. I guess I had expected it to be warmer.

This is where Bryce and I first met. We were together until our discharge in June, 1946 after we had put our ship in mothballs at Astoria, Oregon. Astoria is right at the mouth of the Columbia River. Anyway, it was the first time I had ever met a Mormon. I was impressed and so was everybody else from the East because his language wasn't "salty" and they didn't drink coffee or tea. They drank milk. I didn't know how to take him at first, but after a week or two I began to realize that these guys were for real and stand for something. I think it was interesting for youngsters like myself to meet youngsters from other parts of the country. I'm sure Bryce had the same feelings about that.

In late January of 1945 we finished our training at Ft. Lauderdale. They sent us down to Miami and put us in the Everglades Hotel. We were there for a few days and were able to see a bit of Miami. Then they put us on a troop train that took up to Little Creek, Virginia, near Norfolk where they have the gigantic Naval base. Little Creek was an amphibious base and that is where we got our first inkling of the type of ship we were going to be on. We knew we were going to be on one of the landing ships. I didn't know if it was going to be an LST, an LSM or an LCI. It was a dump. Little creek was a temporary looking place from the word go. The barracks were old and drafty and just thrown together. I know that my recollection, and probably Bryce's, is that all that summer we had been in Idaho or New York when it was warm and then Florida during the winter, and when we got to Little Creek we nearly perished with the cold. We would go around with two pairs of pants on and our long johns under that and our Navy coat with our sweater under that and we would be shivering. There wasn't really anything for us to do when we first got there. They just put into barracks and we were free to walk around the place. We really didn't have any duties. We just knew that at some point we were going to be assigned to an amphibious ship of some sort. We were like that for about a week and then they posted us to Washington, DC. We thought that was manna from Heaven to get out of Little Creek. We were going to Advanced Fire Control School in DC.

We were there until late May, 1945. It was not only a school where we learned to operate the equipment much better than we knew. We also learned how to repair it. There were electro-hydraulic drives on the gun platforms and they showed how to make what repairs we could at sea. There were a lot of smart guys there. The teachers and guys that had been overseas who were taking the course while being re-assigned. At that time they would bring experienced guys back to form the nucleus of new crews so that new ships wouldn't be going out with crews of raw recruits. It was an excellent school and quite a few things happened while we were there. In May, 1945 Germany surrendered. Just before that, on April 12th, President Roosevelt died in Warm springs, GA. They brought his body up on a special funeral train to Union Station on April 14th. His death came as a tremendous shock to the nation. There had been much secrecy about his health and people didn't realize that he was that sick.

Because we were there in the Washington area, we were grabbed up along with thousands of other Navy, Marine, and Army people stationed around there and we lined the streets all the way from Union Station to the White House where his body lay in state that day. It was a cold, but sunny, April day. The streets were mobbed. They had the caisson with horses pulling it all the way to the White House. The people behind us were crying their heads off and we had tears in our own eyes as well. Roosevelt's death, in the minds of the people, was just totally, totally unexpected. Following the caisson in an open car were new President Harry Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt. In the second car were members of the Roosevelt family. I remember one car had General Marshall and General Hap Arnold. I seem to remember that another car carried Admiral Nimitz and Fleet Admiral King. Anyway, it was pretty heavy stuff for Bryce and myself, being only 18 years old.

After Germany surrendered we finished up school in May 1945. The war with Japan was still going and we believed that we were going to have to invade the Japanese home islands. We were sent down to the Navy base at Charleston, SC. Charleston was a big Naval base and shipyard. That is where we joined our ship, which was known as LSMR-503. LSMR stood for Landing Ship, Medium Rocket. We were a floating rocket platform with a lot of fire power. The ship was built earlier that year in Houston, TX by the Brown Shipbuilding Co. It was at Charleston that the more secret equipment was added, such as radar and fire-control equipment. That is where we got our first glimpse of what war was all about. We were at a pier there and into another pier came this destroyer. It was the USS Rodman and it had a hole in its bow that you could have driven a Greyhound bus through. They had been hit by a Kamikaze out in the Pacific. At that time so many ships were being damaged by the Kamikaze's that the Navy was patching them up and those that could make it through the Panama Canal were being sent to East Coast facilities.

We were there until around June 1st when we left and sailed up the East Coast to Little Creek, VA. Here we finished crew training. For a month or so we would go out on Monday and back on Friday. They had a bombardment island in Chesapeake Bay called Bluntworth Island. It was where we would go to fire our rockets and guns, and we even had mortars on the ship. One time we sailed up the James River from Norfolk and anchored off Jamestown, which was the first permanent English settlement in America.

Around the end of July we were loaded up with ammunition, etc. and ready to leave for the Pacific. There were six LSMR's and a small command ship making up our flotilla. We were underway a day or so and off the coast of Cape Hatteras when we heard of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. The thought that occurred to us at the time was that was a weapon that could be used against us as well. We proceeded southward and through the Windward Passage between Cuba and Puerto Rico. On August 15th we were near Panama and that is when the war ended. We were on the Atlantic side waiting for our chance to go through the canal. We were there a couple days due to the heavy traffic in the canal. While we waited we saw these ships coming through that were just devastated from kamikaze attacks. They were being sent to the east coast for repair. We then went through the canal in daylight. It took about eight hours. We were small ships so they tied six of us together and moved us through the canal that way. Our ship was only about 120 feet long and about 40 feet wide. We had a crew of about 120 men, including officers. That seems a lot of men for that size ship but you needed a lot of men if you were firing the rockets. The rockets had to be loaded by hand into the racks for firing so it required a lot of manpower.

So we went through the canal and proceeded up the coast of Central America. We were within sight of the coast and used our range finder as a huge set of binoculars to observe Acapulco, which was a famous posh resort at the time.

Next we arrived at San Diego around September 1st, 1945. San Diego at that time was much smaller than it is today. The area was beautiful. We sailed into the bay past North Island Naval Air Station. That NAS had been there since the time of Lindberg's flight across the Atlantic. Lindberg actually took off from there when he flew across the country prior to his transatlantic flight.

The Navy had a big shipyard there. We were there for a few months. While we were there all these ships were coming back from the Pacific as the war was over. They came steaming in with their "Homeward Bound" banners flying from their highest mast. We must have seen 100 destroyers, 100 destroyer escorts, battleships, aircraft carriers, etc. The carriers tied up at the Naval Air Station docks. By Christmas there were probably more ships there than exist in the entire U.S. Navy today. It was wall-to-wall ships, tied together in the middle of the bay and all different spots. It was very stirring, especially the aircraft carriers. As they came from the Pacific, about 25 to 50 miles off San Diego, they would fly their planes off. From each carrier there would be maybe 100 planes all flying in formation. You could hear the drone of sound building from a long way off and it was quite a sight to see them all. They would all peel off one by one and land right behind each other. We could see the air station from our ship and it was row upon row upon row of aircraft, easily 1000 planes, all lined up.

We enjoyed liberty in San Diego. It was a real Navy town, with tattoo parlors, etc. Bryce and I successfully resisted the tattoos.

We went out about once a week, usually to the Channel Islands. One of them was San Clemente Island which was a Navy firing range. I think we nailed every goat on the island with our rockets, etc. We had all that ammunition and needed to shoot it off I guess, so that is what happened. In

October we did go up the coast a little to Santa Barbara for Navy Day. We were able to go ashore there and the people were very nice. That is where I saw my first old Spanish mission.

We were in San Diego until about March, 1946. Then we received orders to take our ship up the coast to Astoria, Oregon, near the mouth of the Columbia River. Astoria was a fishing town. They had a Navy base there for mothballing ships and that is what we had to do. Once we arrived there we never went to sea again. It was our job to clean and paint equipment, etc. Then they had these white cocoons that they would place over each gun and so on to protect it from the elements. We did that until we got out in June, 1946. Bryce and I left and returned to our respective home towns and civilian life.