

Fall 12-8-2015

Oral History Report / World War II

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Recommended Citation

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Joana Claros

Student Interviewer's Name: Joana Claros

Interviewee Name: William Paysonutt

Time and Location of Interview:

The Interviewee was conducted in one session on October 26, 2015 and lasted about an hour and a half. It was conducted in the home of William Paysonutt in Collegedale, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About William Paysonutt:

William Paysonutt was born in Freedom, Maine in the 1920s. He fought in World War II with the U.S. Naval Amphibious Forces. The interview covered topics ranging from his home life to the end of the war. It was conducted on October 26, 2015 at his home in Collegedale, TN.

Interviewer: Joana Claros (JC)

Interviewee: William Paysonutt (WP)

JC: Mr. Paysonutt, what were you doing before you joined the Navy?

WP: I was working in a shipyard, my dad drove a bus to pick up farmers and take them to work in the morning and bring them back in the afternoon. So for some reason I happened to be free for something, anyway, I went down and got a job. And so anyway, it was cold in the wintertime, I told the boss that I was going to quit, he says: "you can't quit". I laughed at him and uh, I went down and got my dad's permission, I was seventeen and he okay-ed me for joining the Navy. As a matter a fact, he was in the navy during World War I.

JC: Where were you living at that time?

WP: In the town of Freedom, the little town I was born in.

JC: Were you attending school?

WP: I attended grade school up there, and because I was an early bird, they gave me a job in the winter for building fires.

JC: Did you enlist in the war, or were you drafted?

WP: Oh no! I told the guy that when I quit, that my dad gave me approval to join the Navy, and I'm glad that the recruiting officer steered me into the right direction. He said why don't you take the duration and if you like it, you can sign over. Hey, I can hug and kiss that guy (chuckles). He steered me right because after three invasions, I was ready to get out.

JC: Who motivated you to join the Navy?

WP: My dad suggested that I join the Navy, because he was in the Navy and he told me about the good food and the warm bed.

JC: Did any of your friends join the Navy with you?

WP: No, but I made friends.

JC: So, where did you go to join?

WP: Where did I go? Let's see. I remember getting on the bus, I think it was Newport where I enlisted. And uh they sent me through boot camp, and I forget where it was. I think it was in Rhode Island, also. I went through some primary training exercises. And then they sent me to Boston to the fargo barracks, where they sent all green recruits, and uh, one morning they marched a bunch of us down to the dock. There was this big aircraft carrier, sitting in there. And they were going to add about a hundred people, including me. But they didn't get to me, as my buddies name was Brown, I saw him going up, he was the first one. And before my time came, my gear was up there, but uh, someone came running up and said "I need twenty volunteers, you, you, you" So I was a volunteer, so I went back to the fargo barracks, where all the servicemen stayed while they were waiting deployment for different places. So the next day or two, they put us on a plane, headed for Florida. And uh, so we were sort of drafted into the Amphibious Force, we were working with the army down there, and what horrible food. I'm glad I took the Navy, they had good food most of the time. I can remember Christmas day, '44 and '45, I had gone through the Panama Canal on Christmas day in '44 and then in 1945 the High Seas ship was going up a mountainous wave and down another. Oh man, it was terrible. Everyone was sick except for half a dozen of us.

JC: What year did you join the navy?

WP: I was in it during 1943-1946.

JC: What do remember about your first days in the navy?

WP: I will never forget it, we were in Normandy and I went to relieve my counterpart. I was a petty officer, he was a petty officer, and he would stand and watch at the deck. I wasn't there too long, he says will you carry this message down to the war room, oh I had no idea. They came at night when we were sleeping, the Army did. They had the two generals, Hudgens and Brenbi were standing at the foot of this map, and uh, I took it all in when they opened the door, I knocked on the door and they opened it. And then the two generals had earphones on and they were getting messages from the beach, they were moving little wooden objects around the map. And so they, uh, then at night time they would go back to for safety, but they were right back the next morning, and, uh, starting the war up again. There was a ship stranded on the beach, and so the entire time we couldn't get close enough because it drew a lot of water, so they asked me to carry the cable

in and put it on this stranded ship. And as we did that, well uh, my help, did that. We heard this roar and we looked up and saw a black man, coming in with a Duck. A mine had gone up to the beach, one of those ship sinking mines. Everything went up and nothing came down, it just simply evaporated.

JC: Do you remember anything from boot camp?

WP: *laughs* well let's see, that was a long time back. The rats were running through, I would take a cooking pot and swing at them as they were passing by. (laughs). Well it was just a lot physical exercise. But being a farm boy, well I was tough.

JC: Where did you go during the war?

WP: Well we were at Normandy for six days, and then we went on a convoy to southern France. There were three ships ahead of us, and they got torpedoed at the center, and they tipped over. I don't know if they sank or I don't know we didn't watch that. But we got hit with a fourth torpedo, dead center, which was a dud. It didn't go off, so it put a dent on the side of the ship. The Lord spared us that one.

JC: What were you doing the war?

WP: Well I was doing what I was told to do. Well on the ship, I was on the wheels, steering.

JC: Did you have any close friends? Did you keep in touch after the war?

WP: Oh yeah, I'm glad you asked that! I did have. We were known as the odd couple. He smoked, didn't drink, I drank and didn't smoke. We went fishing off the end of the ship, at North Africa. This is a story I tell the kids. I don't know what he used for bait or where he got the pole, but anyways, we got a bite. He pulled it up. This black head came over the railing, and we could see its arms underneath it moving around. Well anyway, this octopus looked at us, he had big bright eyes, he looked at us and we looked at it. So the guy that was holding the pole he just threw it up and we took off because we thought he might het one of those hands on the railing. But uh, he didn't. We heard a splash and went back, and the defense mechanism is ink, it was all black under there. I used to fly up to see my folks in the fall year, up in Maine. And the plane flew low and the colors were beautiful, I flew in a plane where I saw all these people getting off this little plane that I was going to get on. Years later, this friend of mine, I thought I'd drive by instead of flying to stop by and see him. So I drove and I had a station wagon and uh, I stopped by and I see the furniture moved out of his house, so I went right across the street to the city hall and they said that he had been dead for three years. Smoking got him. When I see people at Wal-Mart smoking, I go up to them and tell them the story about my friend and they all know it's bad for them.

JC: What was your everyday life like on the ship?

WP: Well it was a lifetime of duties, you know, I steered the ship.

JC: Where there times when you felt homesick?

WP: No it was just an excursion for me.

JC: What was it like after the war?

WP: What happened was, there was nothing for me to do at home. My wife, well girlfriend, wasn't ready to get married so my cousin and I went down to the docks and signed on to the African trip. We took a load of grain to the South Africans. We spent two three months down and back.

JC: Were you glad you joined the navy?

WP: Yeah! I had a good record. I did my job.