

Naval War College, Newport, RI

Oral History Program

World War II Navy Veterans

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World War II Veterans

Interviewee: William Paynter
Interviewer: Dr. Evelyn M. Cherpak
Subject: World War II Navy Veterans
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EMC: This is an oral history with William K. Paynter of Redding, Connecticut. The interview is taking place in my office at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Today's date is July 28, 2005. Mr. Paynter, I'm so glad that you're giving us some time this afternoon to talk about your service in World War II in the Navy in PT boats. I'd like to begin the interview by asking you where and when you were born.

WP: Philadelphia, August 12, 1916.

EMC: And were you brought up there?

WP: Yes.

EMC: What did your parents do for a living? Your father?

WP: My father was an Episcopal clergyman.

EMC: And your mother?

WP: My mother was mainly my mother. She had done secretarial work after high school, but she didn't have a profession.

EMC: A homemaker. Did you have any siblings?

WP: Yes.

EMC: And who were they?

WP: An older sister and an older brother.

EMC: Did they serve in the war at all?

WP: My brother served a year in the Army in that first draft that occurred in 1940, and when his year was over he was discharged in the middle of 1941. He was an engineer, and he went to work for the Glenn L. Martin Company, the aviation manufacturers. And they wouldn't let him go back in the Army.

EMC: That's good.

WP: So he did a year of prewar, and then I was threatened with the draft. I thought I'd join the Navy instead.

EMC: Can we double back and ask you where you went to high school?

WP: Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia, Trinity College in Hartford.

EMC: Oh, in Hartford.

WP: Yes.

EMC: Connecticut, great, and when did you graduate from Trinity?

WP: '37.

EMC: My father graduated in '33.

WP: From Trinity?

EMC: Yes.

WP: Oh.

EMC: You wouldn't have known him, I don't think. What was your major?

WP: English.

EMC: English. Now what did you do after you graduated from Trinity?

WP: I was a newspaper reporter.

EMC: Where? That's very interesting.

WP: A couple of years in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, where I met Jane. And then on the Hartford Courant for a dozen years.

EMC: Oh, great. That dozen years must have been after the war then.

WP: Before and after.

EMC: Before and after, okay. So you were a newspaper reporter when the war broke out, I presume.

WP: When did the war break out?

EMC: December 7, 1941.

WP: I was in the Navy before that.

EMC: You were. When did you join the Navy?

WP: I went to the recruiting station in the summer of '41 because my draft number seemed to me to be a little threatening.

EMC: I see.

WP: And I was unable to pass the various eye tests for V-8 and all those nice programs. So I enlisted, and being a newspaper man they just

retained me for duty as the publicity man at the recruiting station. And pretty soon I went from apprentice seaman to yeomen first class and it turned out that I obviously didn't know what you had to know to be a proper yeomen first class. So I was appointed ensign which was more comfortable after that.

EMC: That's great. Where was this recruiting station?

WP: New Haven.

EMC: Oh, you went to New Haven. Very interesting then.

How long were you doing publicity for them?

WP: I was there from, if I remember right, August until March.

EMC: Of '42?

WP: '42, so I was there before, during, and after the Pearl Harbor excitement. And then I went from there to an officer training school for sixty days.

EMC: Where was that?

WP: Abbott Hall, Chicago.

EMC: You were a sixty day wonder.

WP: I was a sixty day wonder.

EMC: What did you learn? What did this training consist of?

WP: They taught us the rudiments of seamanship and navigation and gunnery, how to make your bed properly and stuff like that and march a little bit.

EMC: The basics, I guess.

WP: And then I was sent to a small seaplane tender, the USS *Coos Bay*. The *Coos Bay* was still under construction in Seattle. So I was in the pre-commissioning detail of the *Coos Bay*. We put her into commission and underwent some fleet training in San Diego. Then they cut the crew in half and sent half of us back to Seattle where the *Coos Bay* had been built to be on another similar ship. And the similar ship was the *Oyster Bay*, which became a PT boat tender rather than a seaplane tender. Then I went to the Pacific on the *Oyster Bay* as communications officer.

EMC: Now did you have any experience in communications?

WP: I was communications officer on both ships, and I took a little training in how to do that.

EMC: What did that consist of, when you say communications officer?

WP: The radiomen and the signalmen and the quartermasters all--it was my division. I was the division officer of that group. And I had to know the rudiments of those various skills, and I also had to know how to do the coding because that was one of my primary responsibilities running a coding machine and all that stuff.

EMC: How large was this ship, the *Oyster Bay*? How many men? How many crew?

WP: I would guess three hundred. I'm not sure.

EMC: So it was pretty big.

WP: It was about destroyer size.

EMC: I see.

WP: It was equipped, of course, to maintain PT boats, fuel them and repair them and all that.

EMC: I see.

WP: But it also had the two five inch thirty-eight guns and various other weapons. The *Oyster Bay*, later after I had left it, was heavily involved in the Kamikaze activity in the Philippines and shot down a couple of planes and survived.

EMC: That's quite something.

WP: I wasn't on her then. I was on the *Oyster Bay* from San Diego to Samoa and to Brisbane, Australia, and then Milne Bay in New Guinea. As MacArthur hopped up the coast of New Guinea we went along and took care of the PT boats.

EMC: What years were you on the *Oyster Bay*?

WP: 1943 and part of 1944.

EMC: So you were in the Pacific then and following MacArthur at that point?

WP: That's right. We were under General MacArthur's overall command. The Seventh Fleet was part of that command, the Southwest Pacific. He was our supreme boss. Admiral Kincaid was the Navy boss for whom we worked.

EMC: Uh-huh.

WP: And then the PT-boat force had a captain; (we called him Commodore) who was in charge of the PT boats task group within the Seventh Fleet, he was Selman Bowling-known as Biff. He later made admiral.

EMC: Uh-huh.

WP: He came on board the *Oyster Bay* as his flagship, and I was his communication officer, too. And then one day he said they needed officers in a couple of the squadrons and would I care to transfer, and I was happy to do that. That's how I got into the Squadron 18.

EMC: That's how you got into it. Why did you decide to leave? What was attractive about going to a squadron versus being in the *Oyster Bay*?

WP: Well, it's charming to have your own boat and all that.

EMC: Oh, you'd be a CO.

WP: Sure.

EMC: Okay.

WP: After a little--

EMC: --training.

WP: I think I made two patrols on other guy's boats. They needed officers then. They had lost a couple.

EMC: Wasn't being on a PT boat very dangerous at that point?

WP: I don't--

EMC: Was it considered dangerous?

WP: I think the people who were involved didn't consider it especially dangerous. I think it had that reputation.

EMC: How large was the crew of your PT boat?

WP: Seventeen.

EMC: Seventeen, and how many were officers? How many enlisted?

WP: Two, sometimes three--

EMC: Officers?

WP: --officers, yes.

EMC: Uh-huh, and the rest enlisted.

WP: Yes.

EMC: It was a close-knit group.

WP: The crew of a PT boat was somewhat like an airplane crew or a big bomber crew. The distinctions of rank were not quite as noticeable as they were on other ships.

EMC: I would think so.

WP: And there was sort of a mutual dependence mood about the whole thing. Guys who knew how to run the engines were pretty important, and so were the people who had to run the guns

EMC: I bet. So you said you went on two runs with other individuals' boats before you took command of your own.

WP: Right.

EMC: And what was the number of your boat?

WP: 362.

EMC: 362, and where did you assume command of it? Was that in the Pacific or here?

WP: Oh no, it was all out there. By that time we were at --let's see. We were working off a tender named the *Mobjack*. And there were three

squadrons involved in the landing on an island in the then Dutch East Indies called Morotai.

EMC: Oh, so you were out in the Dutch East Indies.

WP: Yes.

EMC: Oh, okay.

WP: --having gone up there in little hops and jumps on the *Oyster Bay*. Morotai was a relatively small island that the Army wanted for an airfield between Papua, New Guinea, and the Philippines so they could give cover to the bombers flying over, and so the PT's helped with the landing on Morotai and then stayed there for most of a year, I guess, because there was another much bigger island nearby with some thirty-thousand Japanese troops on it.

EMC: Now, did you get much resistance because--

WP: Some.

EMC: Morotai must have been occupied by the Japanese.

WP: Yes, it was.

EMC: And so--

WP: So our mission was to prevent the Japanese from sending reinforcements over from Halmahera Island to Morotai.

EMC: Okay.

WP: There was a perimeter on Morotai behind which were some Japanese, and they needed reinforcements. There were plenty of Japanese troops on Halmahera. The PT's were there to keep them from getting across about twelve miles of water.

EMC: So you were patrolling, basically.

WP: Right.

EMC: And did you see any action?

WP: Yes.

EMC: And what kind of action was that when you were patrolling?

WP: The patrols were almost always at night. And the Japanese would attempt to send supplies and reinforcements across in various kinds of boats. And our role was to prevent them from getting over there which we did rather successfully.

EMC: Did you ever receive any gunfire from the Japanese?

WP: Yes.

EMC: Was anybody ever injured?

WP: Yes, I wasn't.

EMC: Yes, but--

WP: But several of my crew were.

EMC: And I guess you wouldn't have sunk a ship, or would you have?

WP: Sure. We used to dispose of the barges rather harshly. And sometimes the Japanese had armored escorts that fought back pretty hard. I think I made about fifty patrols, and about a third of them involved some use of weapons.

EMC: Now did you go in a group, or did you go singly in your boat?

WP: We went in pairs usually.

EMC: Oh, okay, two accompanying.

WP: Uh-huh.

EMC: So you would need more firepower I suppose for protection. So how long did this go on, this patrolling around Morotai?

WP: It went on for, I guess, eight or ten months. I'd have to look it up in the book. I don't remember exactly how long.

EMC: How many patrols did you make in the evening? Was it one per day?

WP: They were mostly in darkness. One per night.

EMC: One per day usually?

WP: No, usually not day after day. There was usually at least a day between unless there was some extraordinary circumstance in which case they might send boats out on shorter notice. But the routine would have been every other night or maybe every third night.

EMC: Now during this time did you ever have a chance for R&R or to go ashore?

WP: At Morotai we had a small base, and the base was on a tiny island that was off the shore of Morotai which in turn was near Halmahera. And

the little island where the base was was--we had an officer's club and crews mess and all that kind of good stuff and also the maintenance of the boats. The tenders left after the base had been created. So the base did the repair work, the feeding, the fueling and the rearming.

EMC: Very good, so you got to step on land once in a while.

WP: One night in November my own boat got banged up pretty badly, so it was laid up for quite a while for maintenance. And I moved ashore then, and the Japanese would still send a bomber over at night just to disturb people. They really didn't have substantial air power there. They ran these--what did we call them? Washing Machine Charlie--they'd come buzzing over in the middle of the night, and there would be an air raid alarm, and you'd have to get out of your bunk and get in the foxhole and those centipedes were in the foxhole and all that. That was life on Morotai.

EMC: Yes, and hot, too, I bet.

WP: It wasn't as bad as it was here last week.

EMC: Oh, really? I think of that part of the world as being very steamy.

WP: Yeah, it was steamy.

EMC: --Dutch East Indies and no air conditioning.

WP: We were right on the equator. The patrols at night--we'd go back and forth across the equator routinely.

EMC: Did you ever feel any sense of fear when you were on this boat?

WP: Yes, sure, you'd be crazy if you didn't.

EMC: Right, and how did your crew get along?

WP: Beautiful, wonderful people. They really were. The best part of the PT duty was the crews. They were good guys, and they knew how to do what they were supposed to do.

EMC: That's great.

WP: My own crew--I don't know what happened to all of them. But one of them retired from the Air Force

as a colonel and others were in various kinds of business and professional success.

EMC: Uh-huh.

WP: They were a well chosen group, and they were adequately trained to do what they had to do, and they did it. It was wonderful.

EMC: A lot of young men from Ivy League schools seemed to go into the PT area. I've noticed that when—well, I've interviewed Stanley Barnes. I don't know if you knew him.

WP: I knew him very well. We lived in New Canaan for a long time.

EMC: Yes, he was nice.

WP: In fact, I was here with him one time at the museum. We had a PT reunion.

EMC: Yes, I remember.

WP: And Stanley and Tony and I had a long conversation about the boats.

EMC: Yes, I have his interview. He was here for a couple of days, I think.

WP: Stanley was the top PT officer in the Mediterranean.

EMC: Oh, yes, very definitely.

WP: He had a difficult challenge, too. He was under British command.

EMC: Right.

WP: And there were tensions there.

EMC: Right.

WP: But he did a beautiful job.

EMC: Yes. Anyway you were on your boat in Morotai, and then what happened next? Did you have another command?

WP: Oh, well, after a while there was a gradual return of people to the states after they'd been out there over a long time. I became the squadron executive officer. So I didn't have a boat anymore. But I used to go as an officer in tactical command, they called it, on patrols when there's some reason to. So that's how I finally ended up with fifty patrols. I was doing OTC as tide squadron executive.

EMC: Now were you still in Morotai?

WP: Yes.

EMC: Okay.

WP: I was in Morotai until I was sent back to the states.

EMC: So that was a promotion of sorts, wasn't it?

WP: Of sorts.

EMC: What was your rank at that point?

WP: I think I went from Jg to lieutenant.

EMC: Did you win any medals?

WP: Yes.

EMC: And what were they?

WP: I got a Navy Cross.

EMC: That's fantastic. Now why and how did you get the Navy Cross? For what action?

WP: The Navy Cross came after my boat and another boat were coming back at dawn, and we thought we saw a big barge on the beach on Halmahera. We thought it would be a good target, and the other boat was in the lead, and we went in, and we started popping away at it, and it turned out it

was probably a trap because there was an artillery unit there that came to life. The other boat was immobilized.

EMC: Oh dear, did you rescue that?

WP: My crew went in and took them off, all but one who was missing, and the skipper of the other boat was hit fatally. And I guess almost half of the people on the two boats were injured. I wasn't. I was very lucky.

EMC: Yes, you certainly were. So you brought them back to--

WP: Brought them back, actually we first went to an Army base on Morotai itself, not to our little Somoe-Somoe base because that was the best hospital facility, and we unloaded the wounded there, and my boat was leaking gasoline so much that we got it towed back to the PT base. I didn't want to start the engines again. We were afraid we would blow it up.

EMC: Oh, my Lord.

WP: And the boat had a lot of damage, so it was out of commission for weeks. I don't remember just how long. And it was during that period that I became the squadron executive.

EMC: That's great. Who was the CO of the squadron at that point?

WP: His name was Swift. And his initials were HMS, His Majesty's Ship.

EMC: Ship.

WP: Yes, he was a regular Navy officer.

EMC: Now the people you served with in your crew--were most of them regular Navy or just in the Reserves?

WP: Reserves.

EMC: Reservists.

WP: I think almost without exception.

EMC: How long were you out in the Pacific? How many years?

WP: Between *Oyster Bay* and the squadron, I guess I was out two years.

EMC: Through about '44?

WP: Yes, I came back through San Francisco when the UN formation meeting was happening. President Harry Truman was there.

EMC: '45.

WP: --April of '45.

EMC: Yes, okay.

WP: Or May. I forget.

EMC: You were out there a couple of years then. And you came back before the war was over?

WP: Just a little before.

EMC: Just before.

WP: VE Day had happened. And then Jane and I got married that June, and VJ Day happened in August.

EMC: Did you celebrate at all for VE Day?

WP: I think we did. I think we did. We shot off some flares or something.

EMC: And then you said you were married in June in Pennsylvania, right?

WP: That's right.

EMC: And where were you going to be stationed after that?

WP: Melville.

EMC: Melville, Rhode Island.

WP: Yeah.

EMC: And what were you preparing to do there?

WP: To go into another squadron.

EMC: Oh, really.

WP: Squadron forty, I think it was going to be.

EMC: Squadron forty?

WP: I'm not sure of that number, but it was in the forties.

EMC: Another squadron.

WP: Anyway, the government decided to send those new boats to the Soviet Union on a lend lease basis. So that's what happened to them, and then pretty soon came Hiroshima and all that.

EMC: Yes.

WP: And then the station here had a separation center, and I was one of the two guinea pigs who went through the first day.

EMC: Oh, really and when was that?

WP: That was in September, I think.

EMC: Yes, so you were out pretty rapidly.

WP: I was working for the Courant by Navy Day in October.

EMC: For heaven's sakes, you got out very quickly then.

WP: Yup.

EMC: --separated here in Newport, Rhode Island.

WP: Then on Navy day--the Navy had a huge fleet in New York. You're probably too young to remember that, but--

EMC: Yes, they used to--

WP: But they had everything in New York, and there were a thousand aircraft parading up the Hudson River, and I was in one of them.

EMC: Oh, really?

WP: For the Courant, not for the Navy.

EMC: Oh yes, obviously, reporting on it.

WP: Yeah.

EMC: You know, they used to have these big Navy Day celebrations in New York.

WP: Yes, that's right. This was the end of the war celebration.

EMC: Did you celebrate at all on VJ Day? You were here in Newport.

WP: Oh, sure, in Newport, sure.

EMC: Do you remember what it was like in Newport?

WP: You'll have to ask Jane. She remembers better than I would.

Jane: What it was like?

EMC: Yes, what the celebrations were like?

WP: VJ Day.

Jane: People were out in the street.

WP: Where your parents here that day? Weren't Chris and Harold here by chance when that happened? They came to see us?

Jane: I don't know.

EMC: Uh-huh.

WP: But anyway, Newport was wild, sure.

EMC: Oh, I bet.

WP: And of course half of Newport was Navy in those days.

EMC: Yes. The Navy presence here was great.

WP: And Newport was very good to the Navy. You got guest memberships to Bailey's Beach and all the good stuff, Reading Room and everything.

EMC: Oh, that's great.

WP: Yes, the casino.

EMC: So they treated--

WP: We could just walk into any of those.

EMC: Officers clubs and--

WP: All that.

EMC: That was here, and that's great because somebody else was telling me that there were signs on the grass---- Navy men and dogs keep off or something.

WP: Not in Newport. That's not true.

EMC: No? No.

WP: Newport was very welcoming. That was Norfolk where that was a legend. I never saw those signs, but I heard that was true in Norfolk.

EMC: Okay.

WP: I don't think Newport ever treated the Navy badly.

EMC: Great.

WP: And I don't think the Navy did Newport any harm either.

EMC: No. Where did you live here in Newport?

WP: Mount Vernon Street, in an attic apartment.

EMC: How did you feel about the end of the war? What was your reaction to it?

WP: I was delighted, of course.

EMC: How did you feel about the dropping of the bomb? Did you have any qualms about that?

WP: Not then, no. I may have had some since, but I had none at all then. Everybody was expecting mayhem as we moved into Japan. And it was a great relief that we didn't have to do that. That was a bold move then. I still don't think Mr. Truman did the wrong thing, although I know that's debatable.

EMC: Well, anyway, can you comment at all on the patriotism in this country during the war?

WP: I think it was just a very practical attitude on everybody's part, whether you want to call it patriotism I don't know. But people knew we had to do it. And they took whatever burden there was to take. I know after we got to Newport and got our apartment, which took a little doing, we went to the commissary with our ration tickets, and the only meat we could get in the commissary was tripe. Now if you're from Philadelphia you know what tripe is. It's not very appealing. Isn't that what we found, tripe?

Jane: That's what we found.

WP: Yeah.

Jane: Mostly.

WP: And we couldn't buy sheets. We needed sheets, so the maid at the Viking where we had stayed for a week while we looked for an apartment said to Jane, "Look dear, you just take a couple of sheets, and when you're through with them bring them back."

EMC: What a riot.

Jane: So they loaned us some sheets.

EMC: Oh, that's good.

Jane: We returned them slightly used, more used. But that's what people did.

WP: That was the way the world was. We had no car. We had to improvise transportation.

EMC: Oh, you didn't, so you had to get yourself to the base by the buses, I guess.

WP: Whatever I forget the details now.

EMC: Yes.

WP: But we survived.

EMC: You survived, yes, somehow. We can do without a lot of things. After the war, you said you went back to your job at the Hartford Courant.

WP: --at the Hartford Courant.

EMC: --as a newspaper man.

WP: Yup.

EMC: But you did decided to stay in the Navy in the Reserves. Didn't you?

WP: Not right away. No, I was separated, and I had no particular connection with the Navy for a

couple of years. And then--do you really want to hear this story?

EMC: Oh, yes, I want to. How you got back in because that's part of your career.

WP: For a couple of years I was the City Hall reporter for the Courant. And I knew the mayor very well. And I knew some people in the Navy, and the Navy wanted to open a Naval Reserve Center in Hartford. There's one on the base, so you probably know what they are.

EMC: Uh-huh.

WP: They're situated them all over the place. And somehow or other I got to be the guy who negotiated with the mayor about this. And the city was willing to make some real estate available but it would take a long while to get the structure. So they decided to bring an LST up the Connecticut River, the biggest ship that ever plied the Connecticut River. So I was one of the people that was on that ship coming up the

river, and we had a Naval Reserve Unit on the LST, and so I signed into the Naval Reserve Unit.

EMC: Oh, really.

WP: And we had weekly drills and all that stuff. And then come 1950 I got recalled.

EMC: Oh, the Korean War?

WP: Yes, but I had nice duty. The Navy didn't make me go to sea again.

EMC: Where was your duty, and what was it?

WP: Philadelphia, recruiting again.

EMC: I see. That's not bad. So how long did you do that?

WP: Two years. And by then I had six or seven years of active duty, a couple of years of Reserve duty. So I just stayed in the Reserve and took courses and a couple of cruises and other kinds of--two weeks of active duty and all that. I made my satisfactory years until I was old enough to retire.

EMC: And what rank did you retire as?

WP: Commander.

EMC: So you went up the ranks.

WP: Uh-huh.

EMC: Did you stay in at least twenty years? Did you have twenty years of service?

WP: Satisfactory years. I had twenty-four or five. But I stayed on the ready reserve list until I was 60. I didn't feel like getting off the list during the Vietnam War, but, of course, they didn't pay any attention to me then. But I knew what my mobilization billet would have been if they had a major mobilization, which they never did.

EMC: What would that have been?

WP: I would have been the public affairs officer of the Eastern Sea Frontier.

EMC: Yes.

WP: Governor's Island.

EMC: That's very nice. Well, that wouldn't be a hardship duty.

WP: No, that would be nice.

EMC: That would be nice. That's quite an interesting Tare. Are you a member of Peter Tare?

WP: Yes.

EMC: And have you attended the reunions that they've had?

WP: Yes, most of them.

EMC: Most of them. Right, because we have their records here. Some of the records of the--

WP: From Ned Garvey.

EMC: From Garvey, from Ned Garvey, right here in Manuscript Collection 100.

WP: And Garvey's successor is a guy named Ed Jepsen from California. Are you in communication with him?

EMC: No, I should be. I'll have to get his address.

WP: Do you have the Peter Tare directory?

EMC: I think I do in there.

WP: Of course, if you wanted to communicate with Jepsen--he's thinking of quitting. He's been the Garvey since Garvey died. And last time I talked to him he was feeling that he was not driven to

maintain that anymore and they may dissolve.

Some people want to keep it going and some think it's time to quit.

EMC: Oh, I see.

WP: --unlike P.T. Boats, Inc.

EMC: Right.

WP: PT Boats has the next generation and hobbyists and whomever, whereas Peter Tare is just officers and spouses, widows.

EMC: Right, exactly. So he may have records.

WP: He has whatever records that I'm aware of except the ones that are here.

EMC: Right, I will have to contact him. J-e-p-s-o-n?

WP: Yup.

EMC: Okay, great.

WP: Or is it e-n?

Jane: J-e-p-s-o-n.

WP: s-o-n, okay.

EMC: Well, did we leave anything out about your World War II experiences?

WP: No, we got it all.

EMC: Okay, great, I just want to ask you one last question. What was the significance of your World War II service for you and your life? How would you sum it up?

WP: Well, I think everybody's life has some kind of intersections in it. And what happens after you come to that turn--I'm sure that my life wouldn't have been anything like what it has been if I hadn't been in World War II. I get some satisfaction out of my Navy time. I think very highly of the Navy. I think the Navy has been good to me, and I don't think I've done the Navy any harm. We're on good terms.

EMC: Yeah, that's great. That's great. Thank you very much. We're going to have this transcribed.

WP: Oh, my.

EMC: Oh yes. We need a written record, and then we'll have it edited. You can do some editing, and I can do some editing.

WP: Was that the kind of stuff you wanted?

EMC: Oh, yes, definitely, definitely.

WP: Oh, good.