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## William & Richard L'Heureux Oral Histories

Juliana L'Heureux

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**Two oral veterans' histories recorded September 11, 2022 by Juliana L'Heureux in Topsham, Maine**



**US Navy Chiefs (L-R) Master Chief; Senior Chief; Chief**

U.S. Navy WWII veteran William Paul L'Heureux (Footnotes provide some context for this oral history.)

Richard James L'Heureux MCPO-Ret, USN

My brother in law William P. L'Heureux from Sanford Maine is a World War II veteran who was on the USS Panamint, with the fleet that participated in the invasion of Okinawa, and witnessed the Kamikaze pilots that flow over the ship while he was at his battle station.



[USS Panamint \(AGC-13: Amphibious\)](#)

Amphibious force command ship named after the Panamint Mountains in California. She was designed as an amphibious force flagship, a floating command post with advanced communications equipment and extensive combat information spaces to be used by the amphibious forces commander and landing force commander during large-scale operations. Commissioned on October 14, 1944, Captain E.E. Woods in command.

**Question: How old were you when you served on the U.S.S. Panamint AGC13?**

**William:** I was 18 years old. I did not want to go into the Army so I chose the Navy. I went to Seneca Lake<sup>1</sup>, New York in the Finger Lakes, we went there for three months. Then, we were supposed to be going to California, but at the last minute, they kept me back. They couldn't find my medical records, so they kept me back. Probably, they couldn't find "L'Heureux", because of "L'H", of the "H", so at the last minute, I was left behind. All my friends took off and I was left behind, and I had to take all my shots all over again, but it never bothered me. The whole bit! I watched them and I said, "Are you doing a proper job?" After that, I was sent to Newport, Rhode Island Naval Training School (Gunner's Maters, Naval Training Station, in Newport, R.I., at the gunnery range at [Sachuest Point, Newport](#), Rhode Island, to learn how to fire 20 millimeter cannons and whatever and to the pre-commissioning of the U.S.S. Panamint<sup>2</sup> and to the ship, was commissioned on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1944, it was on a Friday (?) and after that, the commissioning, the ship was put out to sea during a Nor'Easter. We were headed to Norfolk, Virginia to pick up ballast and the ship about 90 percent of the crew got sea sick, and I almost did, but one of the guys threw up on the table and it turned me off, so I went outside and stayed there, but I have never been sea sick in my life. Never got sea sick, then we went through the Panama Canal and sent on to California, Vallejo, California, to take on new radar and new radios that was the latest technology they had because we were a command ship. We had to have all the communications on the ship, it was a small amphibious ship, too small for the Japanese to care or worry about but at the same token, we were top secret at the time, because nobody wanted to know that the Japanese we were a command ship about the admirals and generals on board, we were planning and plotting the invasion of different islands. Anyway, we took off and we went across the International Date Line, we went to \_\_\_\_\_ and from there we headed northward towards Okinawa with a stop at [Ulithi](#), but before that, they decided to give us a little rest, one day, we were given a bottle of beer, that was it, that was the first time we got off the ship. (Mogmog Island). Then, we went to Okinawa and we got there on invasion day and they started....there was so much confusion that our own ships were firing on us...because it's so much to organize something like that, it is really hard to organize, so, anyway, we sent the signals "we are not the enemy", and the sky was red from bullets and so forth, but the Japanese were on the island and we were bombarding the island of Okinawa, we had GIs with carriers with airplanes with battleships with their 16 inch guns and all that type of thing and then for 32 days we stayed there and every night...during the day time, the Japanese reconnaissance planes were taking pictures of the fleet because there were something like 4,000 ships and every night the boats the ship got covered with smoke and then the green flies started coming in from the dad bodies in Okinawa. Of course, we were eating at our gun stations, whatever they gave us, like green eggs on green ham and whatever.

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<sup>1</sup> The American Navy urgently needed to train able bodied young me to fight during WWII. President Roosevelt selected a stretch along Seneca Lake for the Sampson Naval Training Center.

<sup>2</sup> U.S.S. Panamint, part of the Northern Attack Force, served as the flagship of Rear Admiral Lawrence F. Reifsnider, Commander Amphibious Group 4, going in under plane attacks, on April 1, 1944. By April 22, all resistance in the northern two-thirds of the island of Okinawa had ceased.

**Question: In other words, you were literally at your battle stations for 24 hours straight?**

**Answer:** Yes, we were sleeping with our helmets on the gun tops. That was it, we took it for granted. But, on the six days after the invasion, the invasion happened on Easter morning, after six days, the Japanese sent a whole group of Kamikaze, and they had to go through the destroyers to get to the main fleet, a lot of them were shot down. But, then they would come along and they would come in dives, but in the evening, the ships would all move and change positions so the Japanese could not get a reading of where the carriers were at, the battleships were and all the rest, type of thing. So, that was it, and day by day, we were attacked, the Japanese came in at us and especially with the Kamikaze and one that dropped a torpedo and on both sides of my ship torpedoes, but they are going by us, then, meanwhile, I am thinking about the poor guys in the engineer room, who don't know what's going on and "Prepare for torpedoes!" ??... And, but anyway, almost every day the Japanese would come along and attack us. And, so being stupid, I said to myself, there is always a Kamikaze, boy, what if I hit about 15 feet above the water, I was bound to hit something. What they would do, at nighttime, they would come along, one came as close – you see that railing over there. ? Right behind the ship. "Prepare for torpedoes?"- right behind the ship and exploded. And the USS Franklin<sup>3</sup>, the aircraft carrier was very damaged. Had to be towed back to port. So, after (..) days, the Japanese finally surrendered Okinawa and we were preparing to invade Japan. We were heading toward Vladivostok, Russia, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and six days later it was on Nagasaki and the Japanese called it quits at that point. So, we went to North of Japan, and Hokkaido, to Japan, to Northern Japan and there was the surrender of Northern Japan. Japanese admirals and generals on board our ship, meanwhile the Japanese had already surrendered on the U.S.S. Missouri, but they were already broadcasting the surrender of Japan.



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<sup>3</sup> U.S.S. Franklin (CV/CVA/CVS-13, AVT-8) nicknamed "Big Ben" was one of 24 class aircraft carriers built during WWII.

*Three Japanese emissaries surrender to Admiral Fletcher's North Pacific Force off Hokkaido and northern Honshu aboard one of USS **Panamint** (AGC-13) boats, September 1945.*



But the broadcasting to the world was about the surrender of Japan, but then Japan is made up of different islands, so we were in the northern part, Hokkaido.

One day when I was on the gun, a Japanese plane came down, and I said to myself, “Ohhhh, I’m dead, ...I said to myself, ‘I never knew it was so easy to die’. But, when the shells hit the plane, and the plane hovered and went over our ship and hit the merchant ship next to us and killed 20 people on that. So, anyway, I was fire and rescue so I went over there and the pilot was in the hold, dead, and so, I finally got my good breakfast, eggs! You remember things like that. “Finally, I got my good breakfast”. (Laughter)

**Question: Ernie Pyle?**

Answer: Yes, [Ernie Pyle](#), a famous war correspondent was on our ship. He left the ship and went on to “ie Shima”<sup>4</sup>...Japanese words are pronounced like they are in French. “i-e- shima”. I was talking to a Japanese professor on the train in Yokohama, Japan, and I was talking a little bit of Japanese with him. “I-e” is pronounced a little like it is in French. He said, “It’s easy for you because you because you understand French. (*“ie Shima” is now known as “lejima”*)

**Question: Can you say more about Ernie Pyle (b. 1900 in Indiana d. 1945 in Okinawa)?**

**Answer:** Ernie Pyle was a famous World War II correspondent. But, the Panamint was [the last ship](#)<sup>5</sup>, I had a picture of him but it was stolen on me, because I came down with colitis ulcerates (*ulcerative colitis*). (In) Aiea Naval Hospital in Hawaii and I was there for two months. And, meanwhile, they had taken all the souvenirs I had. And my pictures I had a picture of Ernie Pyle, he was hit on the temple and nobody has got the picture. But, anyway, that’s the U.S.S. Panamint. After that I went on to different places. But, after that, I was on the ship, I got colitis, and I almost died, you know, I was down to 118 pounds, I was passing blood about 30 times a day, Of course, it was inflammation, which, maybe, known as Crohn’s Disease<sup>6</sup> today, or something? So, that’s it. But, I survived; in fact, I was so weak I could not even write to my

<sup>4</sup> Ie Shima lies about three and one-half miles off the western tip of Motobu Peninsula and twenty miles north of the Hagushi beaches on Okinawa.

<sup>5</sup> Ref: The Last Assignment: Ernie Pyle in Okinawa, Indiana Historical Society

<sup>6</sup> Crohn's disease can sometimes cause life-threatening complications.

Crohn's disease can cause abdominal pain, diarrhea, weight loss, anemia, and fatigue

mother. In fact, the nurses were writing my notes for me. I was sick. I got more mail from every uncle, and aunt and cousin in Sanford. But anyway, that was my experience on the U.S.S. Panamint. Of course, I left the ship. Meanwhile, the crew on the ship left me behind in the hospital, and so forth. And then, I went home. And then, I said, “Well, there’s nothing to do in Sanford”, so I reenlisted. Got on the U.S.S. Philippine Sea<sup>7</sup>. Dickie was on the ship but not at the same time.

Then, I went to the South Pole. The Philippine Sea was going to the South Pole with Admiral Byrd.

### **Question: The South Pole?**

**Answer:** Yes. South Pole. Antarctica. Oh yes, (*Rear*) Admiral Byrd! I traveled quite a bit. I was not a sailor who stayed at home. (*Byrd Antarctic Expedition: [YouTube video here](#)*). I had a friend of mine went to Boot Camp at Great Lakes and when he went to Norfolk, and that’s all he ever saw. I was on sub-tender, two aircraft carriers, CINCLANT Headquarters (Norfolk), Fleet Intelligence Center in Morocco. (Bill served on the [USS Philippine Sea CV47](#) and the [USS Bennington CV 20](#) during his Navy career.)

Okay, on the Philippine Sea, departed to Antarctica, and Admiral Byrd to deliver a plane over there, and establish a base, it was called “Operation HIGHJUMP” 1946-47<sup>8</sup>, and one of the things, or course, I never had heard about Antarctica, it was summertime over there, in January-February, the sun never sets, of course, staying on the ship, I mean you never know, sun was always on the horizon,, every day we had a little bit of snow, a very little bit, and I understand that Antarctica is basically a dessert because very little snow falls on the island but nonetheless, it’s true, but on the outer edge, that’s where the icebergs were, that’s where the icebergs, we had some huge icebergs....then I got transferred to CINCLANTFLT headquarters, that’s where all the admirals and generals, ...intelligence and marines and headquarters and all that, (chuckle here) and about the Fleet admiral, I was at the gate when the Fleet admiral was coming in and I was the office of the day, (chuckle) and I said, “Well, I better greet him”, well I got up to open the door and I knocked him flat on his back! I looked at, said, “Ohhhh, I can’t believe this!” I helped him, (either Marc Mitscher or William H.P Blandy- list of [United States Navy Four Star Admirals](#)) he kinda’ laughed about the thing. That’s the way to greet a Fleet admiral. I had so many admirals. I always wanted to go to the South Pole for some reason and I was in charge of the print shop, so, that’s when I met Johnny Dauplaise, he was not a printer, he was on the flight deck, chocking<sup>9</sup> at the planes, before they take the chock from underneath them and so forth, and

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<sup>7</sup> USS Philippine Sea (CV/CVA/CVS-47, AVT-11) was one of 24 Essex-class **aircraft carriers** of the United States Navy

<sup>8</sup> **Operation HIGHJUMP**, officially titled **The United States Navy Antarctic Developments Program, 1946–1947**, (also called **Task Force 68**), ended in late February 1947.

<sup>9</sup> Chocks, the word meaning referred with airport and airlines is actually a **wedge-shaped sturdy rubber or wooden block or even a metal structure**. These pieces of wood or rubber or metal is usually used to stop or prevent the motion of an aeroplane on ground.

then Johnny Dauplaise, he was French and the two of us were talking French all the time and that type of thing, so we spent a lot of time in the print shop, and I knew the Commander, the second in charge of the ship, and who I knew quite well. He was a Mustang, by the way, “Mustang” means he went up through the ranks, but he was tough and so forth. Anyway, he and I got along fine, so I talked him into getting Johnny Dauplaise down to the print shop; and Johnny Dauplaise became a printer and that’s what he made a living on. He is dead now, (d. 2015 in West Springfield Mass.) so he had Alzheimer.

**Question: What were the decks made from on the Philippine Sea? They were wood, right?**

**Answer:** Teak wood

**Question:** Teak? What a waste of Teak?

**Answer:** No, because resilient, I mean, for one thing. Some Teak wood is known to be a thousand years old and still beautiful. You can always see Teak it always smells of like oil. If you have a Teak bowl, it smells like oil. Do you have a Teak bowl? Smell it. Mine is a big one. I got a nice big salad bowl made out of Teak, it is indestructible. So like Pine, or whatever. Mine is kind of flat, it’s a big one, that’s why at nighttime supper I have a big salad.

**Question:** Can you say a few things about the Philippine Sea?

**Answer:** My brother Richard, after I left the ship, by that time I was probably on the Bennington or in Africa or wherever.

**Question:** You were on the Bennington? Were you on the Bennington when it caught fire?

**Answer:** I had just left, two weeks before. A catapult explosion<sup>10</sup>. Well, it killed, it destroyed the print shop. And the officers, killed, what do you call, those not officers but....they’re what?

**Response:** Warrant Officers.

**Answer:** Yes, Warrant Officers. Okay, they killed all the Warrant Officers because of their quarters was right in front of us at the print shop. Next to the print shop was the Bridge. That’s how I got to know all the Marines (haha).

**Richard L’Heureux continues, will talk a little bit about the USS Philippine Sea MCPO-USN, Ret. Talk about what years you were stationed on the ship and talk about your discharge from the Navy when you left Guam.**

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<sup>10</sup> On May 26, 1954 the *USS BENNINGTON* suffered an explosion which claimed the lives of over 100 men and officers. This was the second worst ship disaster not involving enemy action at the time, appeared that there had been a slow leak in one of the catapults. A hydraulic fluid operated the catapults, which was supposed to be safe from fire or explosion. However the timing of the first explosion makes it appear that at some level in the ship the hydraulic fumes were in a vaporized state and had reached a concentration which caused the forward part of the flight deck to explode

**Richard L'Heureux:** First of all, I cannot hold a candle to my brother William.

But, I too, served in the Navy. I was in the Navy for 23 years. I can say that I accomplished, that I made Master Chief Petty Officer which is the highest enlisted rank in the Navy which is held by less than one percent of all sailors. So, I'm very proud of that. Going back to when I was a kid, yes, at 18 years of age, I reported aboard the U.S.S. Philippine Sea, in San Diego, California, my first duty station after Boot Camp (in Bainbridge, Maryland). It was a fun cruise. We went to Hawaii, and we went to the Philippines. And, from there we went to San Francisco, so I was in San Francisco for six months in dry dock. And then we changed home port from San Diego to Long Beach, California, so I've been in almost all the major ports in California. Shortly after arriving in Long Beach, I was transferred to the Naval Station in Long Beach for shore duty. In 23 years, I had 20 duty stations, which is unheard of. Most people, if they have, like my brother said, if they have one or two or three, that's a lot. But it seemed like, every time I was turning around, I was going someplace new. My wife Juliana knows that very well. We are now living in Topsham, Maine and this is our 16<sup>th</sup> house. So, we've moved a few times. But, one of the stories I want to encounter, some of the highlights, like I said, they are not like my brother, but in 1960, my enlistment was coming up and I was stationed on Guam with VW1, which is squadron, that we tracked moving typhoons, so that the ships would not be damaged. We were supposed to be leaving on a Tuesday, to go back to San Francisco, there was 20 of us because our enlistments were up. I worked in personnel, and the personnel people are the ones that write all the orders for the people moving from one duty station to the other. While we were in the barracks, waiting for our departure the next morning, I had heard of an early flight going to San Francisco, and so I decided, I'm going to fool all the other 19 sailors, I'm going to get on that flight, because, remember, I controlled that manifest. So I got on that flight, figuring I'll meet them when they get to San Francisco, and they'll all be laughing because he missed his flight, he's probably with some Guamanian girl or some other thing, so anyhow, I got on the plane and I flew to San Francisco. So the next morning, at 7:30 the plane took off from Guam, and the pilot could not control the plane and it crashed into the mountains and everyone on board was killed. Yeah, I must have a guardian angel. Even saying this after over 60 years, it's very hard to believe that when I went to the airport to meet my 19 buddies, I was told they were all dead. Ahhh, like I said, like my brother, I went back to Sanford, there was no work, and so I went back into the Navy and that's when I started moving from one place to the other. I was very lucky, my next duty station was the U.S.S. Lake Champlain, and I was involved with the picking up of Alan Shephard the first American astronaut<sup>11</sup>, it was funny, because we had so many civilians and press on board, that we had established a shore patrol group, and so I was assigned to the flight deck area. Don't ask me why? So, I was on the flight deck just a matter of feet of the helicopter that landed on the Lake Champlain, and who was the first one to walk off? Alan Shephard. (Chuckle) So, before I turn this back over to my brother, like I say, I've had some phenomenal

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<sup>11</sup> 5th May 1961: Astronaut Alan Shepard becomes the first American to travel in space on Freedom 7, Project Mercury.



assignments, most of them, believe it or not, were after I was married. I was assigned to a SeaBee (MCB71)<sup>12</sup> battalion, and I was in Chu-Lai in Vietnam, Chu-Lai was one of the most heaviest bombed areas in Viet Nam during in 1967, our base was hit by mortars and gun fire, on an average of 6-7 days a week and that was for six months. Today, when I hear gunshots, or a helicopter flying by, or a boom, I immediately find myself back in Vietnam. But, I made it! I did not get wounded. And here I am in Topsham, Maine, having been out of the now Navy for almost 45 years.

**Juliana:** Thank you Dick, that's great. Thank you . He never told me those stories until he got home, believe me. So, William, tell us about any more experiences you had after you left the Panamint.

**William:** Well, after the U.S.S. Philippine Sea, I was transferred to the USS Orion<sup>13</sup>, a sub tender, and every six months the ship would take off ....to the....we'd go down to Guantanamo Bay, and come back and so forth, to get the ship moving and so forth. And we were servicing the submarines. Then I got transferred, I wanted to go back to a carrier so I got on the U.S.S. Bennington, which was an unlucky ....assisting the planes the twin engine planes to land on the carrier, and invariably they were crashing, they were crashing, on the edge. It was unlucky, it was not a ship that I particularly cared for. The print shop and the brig were side by side for one thing. But anyway, after that, I said okay, so after that I was flattered to Fleet Intelligence Center in Morocco, there I was a French interpreter, assigning, I helped children for officers and enlisted men, and in their public school and parochial school, I go to their nuns and say "Don't you think the kids should speak nothing but French?"

Yes, but surprising, but within a week they will learn. Because, what we do, in the first week, we put them with another American child so they can translate, and within a week, a little girl daughter of an officer she was six years old, she was

Every day in Morocco, we would take off, I would go to Greece, I'd go to Turkey, I'd go to London, but then what did it, I said, "I've had it". And, the Commanding Officer had it. He said, they sent us to Patuxent River Maryland, But I had to stop at the Azores, and before I left, and before I left, it was 11 o'clock at nighttime, they woke me up, they said, "Chief L'Heureux, You're going to Bay of .....and Patuxent River, Maryland<sup>14</sup>, and then you are going to Pittsburgh and then Chicago. Here is \$200, we took for you. They gave me \$200 out of my paycheck, meanwhile, my paycheck was back in Morocco. So, I had to live with \$200, we were walking the streets, me and this other guy. We were walking the streets, eating Chop Suey, having oatmeal for breakfast, we couldn't go anywhere, hot dogs were \$0.35 (thirty five cents), that were horrendous! Because, that was in Pittsburg, some people took pity on us, at the theater, some people said, "Would you like to go the theater?". And we were walking; we could not

<sup>12</sup> Mobile Construction Battalion known as "Seabees".

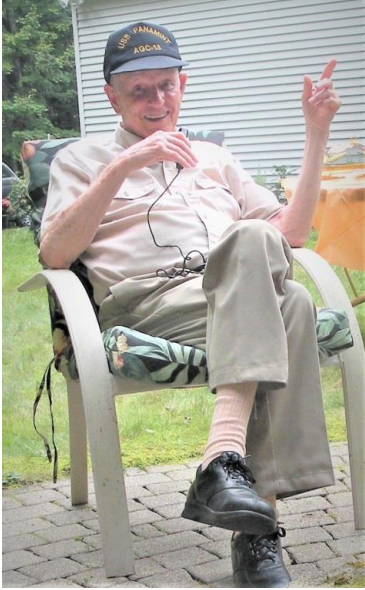
<sup>13</sup> **USS Orion (AS-18)** was a [Fulton-class submarine tender](#) of the [United States Navy](#)

<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval\\_Air\\_Station\\_Patuxent\\_River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval_Air_Station_Patuxent_River) Naval Air Station Patuxent River

afford...we had to go on the other side of the Ohio River, in Pittsburg. Then they sent us to Chicago, and when we got to Chicago, they said, "We got a nice place for you. It's only \$60 a day" But, I said, "Forget it we're staying in the YMCA. We couldn't afford it." And, finally one of the guys said, "Well I have an aunt that lives in Indiana. And on the weekend, maybe she can give us some money and so we can get a decent meal."

After that, I said, we're back to Morocco, and we have to learn how make up a lot of expenses, because I had to learn how to run new cameras, and all that time of thing, and went back to Morocco, and my time was up and the Captain said, "Mine too". So, I left. I never meant to make a career in the Navy, anyway. What happened, is when the Korean War broke out you had no choice, you accepted for one year or two years, as long as the Korean War was going on. So, I said, well, in that case, I might as well re-enlist; so that's why it's kind of odd, because of the extra number of years I had, I intended to leave. When I left, I had a of friend of mine, that lived in Springfield (Mass) Johnny Dauplaise, he was the one on the carrier, on the Philippine Sea, but he got me the job at the print job, in Springfield. And, that's it. It's history. I met Doris, my wife, there, we got married. For 59 years, we had 59 good years and she died (in January) on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the day before her birthday, six hour before, at 6 o'clock. If she had lived until midnight, she would've been 92 years old. And that's it. Meanwhile, I met my friend Ken. He has been a God send. He helps to keep me young.

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William P. L'Heureux, veteran US Navy 2022



Cruise book portrait Chief Richard L'Heureux in Seabees MCB71

**Richard L'Heureux, USN MCPO-Ret. About 1968**