

Herbert Eugene "Gene" Hohl interviewed August 30, 2007
Seaman First Class, US Navy, June 1944- July 1946

Gene remembers hearing the news about Pearl Harbor on the radio on Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941. One of his brothers said to him that the war would be over before Gene would be able to fight. Gene did become involved as an air spotter while in High School. The spotting tower was located near the old North Coventry High School/Elementary School.

Gene enlisted in the U.S Navy as a 17 year-old straight out of high school in June 1944. With three brothers already in the service, Gene's parents agreed to his enlistment (Being only 17, Gene needed his parents consent to enlist).

Boot camp was at Camp Perry, VA. Gene's brother, Alan, was also going through boot camp at the same camp although he was finishing up as Gene was starting. After getting a hair cut and being issued a uniform, the men went for a swimming test. They climbed a 20 foot ladder, which Gene did willingly even though he didn't know how to swim. Gene jumped as he was instructed and ended up floundering in the water and had to be pulled out.

The next day, the men were told they had a second chance to do the test since it was felt some of the men may have been "nervous" the day before and probably really did know how to swim. This time, Gene was worried and made sure he was last in line and as soon as he jumped he started yelling "help!" Gene did learn how to swim and passed his test in the last week of boot camp. In a way, the "remedial swimming" lessons were a blessing since they took place while the rest of the company was doing Physical Training.



One day, Gene was summoned to the headquarters area. There, he met Willis Marquette (Uncle of Joan Colledge) who had enlisted as a chaplain. Willis was covered in "scrambled eggs" and Gene didn't know whether to salute or shake hands. He ended up doing a little of each, much to Willis' amusement.

After boot camp graduation and 14 days of leave, Gene reported to Quanset Point Naval Air Station, RI. There, Gene's duties were working in the mess and delivering messages on a moped. After three months there, transfer orders came for the US Naval Station at Shoemaker, CA. The five-day trip to California was most enjoyable as Gene and his three travelling companions had a stateroom on the train next to some SPARS and WAVES (women members of the Coast Guard and Navy, respectively).

Upon arrival at Shoemaker, Gene was again given moped messenger duty. This only lasted for five days before he was assigned to an AKA (Attack Cargo Ship). But before getting on board, his orders were changed to the USS Gilmore (DE-18). The Gilmore was a Destroyer Escort, a small (289'), maneuverable ship whose job was to protect convoys. The Gilmore had returned from duty in the Aleutian Islands so most of the crew had already served on the ship. Gene was part of a replacement group of sailors coming on board. Because the ship had just returned from being at sea, the sailors all had a lot of

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money from back pay. They proceeded to shoot craps. One sailor named Benfield came down to the quarters where Gene was resting unseen. Benfield threw a torn \$20 bill in the trash and left. Gene jumped down and fished out the \$20. The next day, Benfield was looking for it, but Gene didn't say a word. Gene went right up to the ship store and bought a watch with the money, a watch he wore for many years.

Soon, it was off to sea. As soon as the ship cleared the Golden Gate Bridge on its five-day trip to Hawaii, Gene got sea sick until the ship docked again. During this voyage, Gene was assigned to chip paint on the rear deck. While laying down and working on the paint, Gene looked out the back and saw something floating. He asked the watchman what it was and was told it was a mine! The mine had worked its way through the convoy without being hit. The Gilmore got permission to blow up the mine by shooting at it with a rifle. This took awhile, but eventually was successful.

After a few days at Pearl Harbor, the Gilmore left on escort duty heading for Guam and then Saipan. On Saipan, the crew was given leave and was permitted to walk around. On paths around the island were signs "beware of Japs" as there were still some Japanese soldiers who hadn't yet surrendered. Another memory of Saipan was watching the American planes returning from their bombing missions each evening, some in bad shape.

Family Reunion

It was while in Saipan that Gene's brother, Alan, arrived on his ship, a sea going tug. They were able to spend some time visiting. By this time, the invasion of Iwo Jima was taking place and Gene's ship escorted a convoy that arrived two days after the initial landing.

When the Gilmore arrived off of Iwo Jima, the sounds of the fighting could be heard on the island and Navy ships were firing onto the island. One of the common duties for a ship was to perform picket duty to protect the fleet in closer to the land from Japanese submarines. This was hazardous duty and Gene's ship was fortunately assigned to escort a convoy of empty ships back to Saipan rather than perform picket duty. While on the way back to Saipan, the Gilmore picked up sonar readings indicating a Japanese sub. The sonar also would routinely pick up whales on the sonar, but this time, it was a sub. The Gilmore used depth charges to sink the sub. Oil and debris on the surface confirmed the sinking. Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, Jr. later came on board to give the ship a star for sinking the sub.

Gene's job during General Quarters was to help man a 20mm gun toward the front of the ship, just below the bridge. His job title was Gunner's Mate Striker (apprentice). At first, he helped to pass the ammunition up to the gun, but later moved up to firing the gun when needed. Gene's Regular Station was on the fantail of the ship serving as a lookout with ears and eyes. Shifts would be four hours on duty and then eight hours off.

Another Reunion and Bad News

After making another trip to Iwo Jima, Gene was able to visit with Alan again back in Saipan. There, Alan said he had bad news: his ship had been ordered to leave for the invasion of Okinawa. They said good-bye and waived to each other as Alan's ship left the harbor for Okinawa. What neither of them knew was that Gene's ship was soon ordered to Okinawa too.

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This time, the Gilmore arrived with the first wave of the attack. When they arrived, they were ordered out onto picket duty. The captain protested saying they had just arrived and needed to be re-fueled so another ship was sent out to take their place on the picket line. The replacement ship ended up being sunk.



USS Gilmore (DE18)

The Navy took a beating from kamikaze attacks off of Okinawa. The Gilmore was next to another ship, possibly refueling when a kamikaze plane dove toward the ships. Gene was manning the 20mm gun at the time and remembers firing at the diving plane as it passed over the Gilmore, just missing the bridge, and crashed into the ship next to the Gilmore. It had flown close enough that Gene could see the pilot.

Longing for Saipan During a Storm

Leaving Okinawa, the Gilmore was part of a convoy of 117 ships, the largest ever assembled. The convoy was headed back to Saipan when they were struck by a typhoon. The huge waves would lift the ship up and when it hit the water again, the ship would shudder and vibrate. The typhoon lasted for about 24 hours. During one of Gene's watches on the fantail, his replacement failed to show up. Gene was given permission to go look for him and found him in the head throwing up and crying like a baby saying "I'll never see my wife and I'll never see Saipan again." Gene found the longing for Saipan humorous and told the sailor he had to pull it together and go stand his watch.

During the typhoon, Gene saved a friend, Dick Major, from falling overboard. As the ship pitched in the waves, Dick started to go overboard, but Gene grabbed the wire to his headset and managed to keep him from falling off the ship which would have meant certain death in the heavy sea. Despite Gene's early experience with sea sickness, he never got sea sick again, even during the Typhoon.

One of the Gilmore's sister ships had the experience of their ship rolling 90 degrees and having their antennae go under water, but still was able to right itself. Only seven ships of the convoy made it in to Saipan together. The rest straggled in over a period of days.

Gene likes to tell people that he was never more than three miles from land during his Navy career. Sometimes, however, the land was straight down! Another interesting piece of information is that the men all slept with their socks on while on ship. The Navy had them do this in case they ended up in the water their feet wouldn't look like fish to the sharks.

After one more trip to Okinawa, the war came to an end. They still had to operate under war conditions with black-outs and one of their duties was to head to the Marcus islands where there were still Japanese troops who hadn't heard about the surrender. The Gilmore eventually headed for home via Pearl Harbor and Gene got a chance to walk and swim on Waikiki beach, which he was surprised to find out was full of sharp coral. He does remember the sailors being jealous that the Army had taken over the luxurious Royal Hawaiian Hotel for rehabbing soldiers.

The Gilmore returned to the US at San Pedro Island outside of LA. Because Gene hadn't been in the Navy as long as some of the veterans, he was not immediately discharged. Gene was re-assigned to another ship. When Christmas came, leave was being granted in order of how far the sailors had to travel to get home. Gene's name was not on the first list. He approached the executive officer and asked why he wasn't on the list. The Exec said "You're right" and bumped someone else off of the leave list so Gene could take his place. The sailor he bumped turned out to be Benfield, the man who had thrown away the \$20! Gene didn't feel too bad about these things happening to Benfield since Benfield wasn't a very nice guy.

While stationed at Shoemaker, CA, Gene was laying in the sack with a 107 degree temperature when his brother Alan came in to see him. Gene thought he was hallucinating, but Alan was really there and took Gene to the dispensary. Alan was so concerned that he had written on Gene's chart to notify him in case of death.

While in Los Angeles on leave one day, Gene and his friend were standing on the street when a woman's dog relieved himself on the friend's leg. They looked up and saw Red Skelton walking by and he waived at them with his fingers and kept on going. One famous person he didn't get to see was Betty Hutton. Hutton was scheduled to perform a USO show at Saipan, but the show was cancelled and the men were told she was sick. The men later learned that she had put on a show for the officers instead. She lost at least one fan over that (Gene).

When it was time to be discharged, Gene was sent across country on a train. This time, it was a troop train, packed with troops and very limited facilities. As soon as Gene arrived in Philadelphia, he was given a five day pass and Gene headed straight home and showed up unwashed and unshaven, but glad to be home. Gene still had to head to Bainbridge, MD for his discharge in July 1946. All four brothers had survived the war and Gene looked forward most to seeing his brother Ray who he hadn't seen since late 1941 when Ray had left for the war.

Gene is proud of his service and says he "Wouldn't pay a nickel to do it again, but wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience."