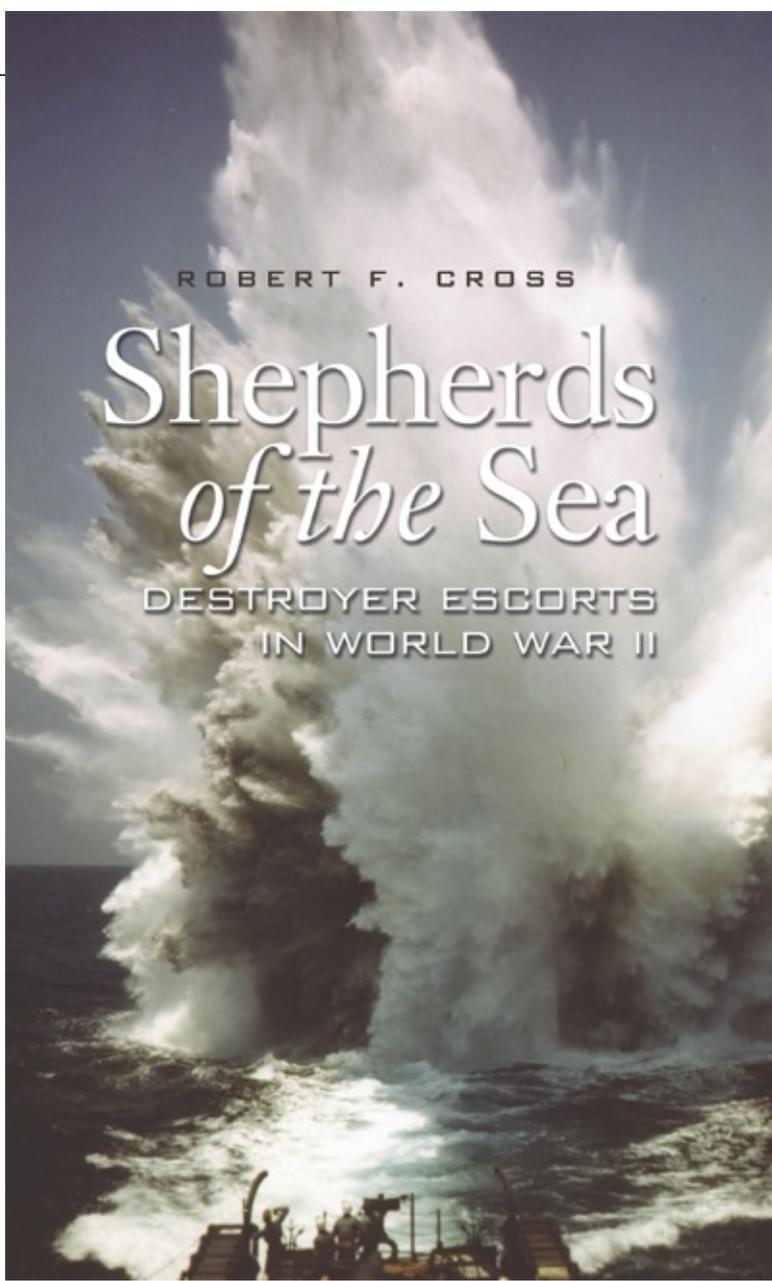


ROBERT F. CROSS

Shepherds *of the Sea*

DESTROYER ESCORTS
IN WORLD WAR II



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of the Sea

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NAVAL INSTITUTE PRESS
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

Naval Institute Press
291 Wood Road
Annapolis, MD 21402

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First Naval Institute Press paperback edition published in 2013.

ISBN: 978-1-61251-272-3

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Cross, Robert F.

Shepherds of the sea : destroyer escorts in World War II / Robert F. Cross.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Destroyer escorts—United States—History—20th century. 2. World War, 1939–1945—Naval operations, American. 3. World War, 1939–1945—Campaigns—Atlantic Ocean. 4. United States. Navy—History—World War, 1939–1945. 5. Sailors—United States—Biography. 6. United States. Navy—Biography. I. Title.

D773.C76 2010

940.54'5973—dc22

20090529

 This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Sheila, again

With love and appreciation

All I knew was that the pointed end of the boat went first.

—*William Riemer, gunner's mate, USS Frederick C. Dav*

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FOREWORD

Christopher du P. Roosevelt

I was born just fourteen days after Pearl Harbor. My father, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr., had already enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was training to become an officer. He eventually served as executive officer on board a destroyer and as the “skipper” of one of these destroyer escorts. (He loved that word “skipper” because when it was used by his crew, it was an acknowledgment of their acceptance of him as just another man and of their loyalty to him as their leader.) His father, FDR, gave the famous “Day in Infamy” speech about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. My mother drove a Red Cross ambulance during the war, transferring incoming wounded (primarily from the European front) to hospitals in the New York City and Long Island (New York) area. I still have her Red Cross driver’s license in my desk. Each of my uncles served in some capacity in World War II, and my brother served on a U.S. minesweeper in Japan in the 1960s. One would think I would have a very strong impression, indelibly imprinted on my psyche, about service and sacrifice in time of national and worldwide need. If I do, it clearly is not enough, judging from my sense of unbridled awe and respect for the individuals Robert F. Cross writes about—and through whom he tells his history of destroyer escorts in this remarkable book.

Near my home town in southeastern Connecticut, there recently was a small air show featuring Boeing B-17 and B-24 bombers and a North American P-51 Mustang. At the show a former pilot who fought in World War II was quoted in the local paper as saying, “In my squadron, out of 160 men only 18 guys survived. The losses over Europe were terrible.” That’s a survival rate of 11 percent. Devastating odds. And to a parent, a family, and a community, just devastating, period. The same could be said for the survival rate during the war in the North Atlantic (and, later, the Pacific), where literally tens of thousands of American sailors lost their lives and American warships and merchant marine ships were lost to torpedoes, bombing, strafing, and kamikaze attacks. Some 2,800 merchant marine ships were sunk by German U-boats in just the six months between December 7, 1941 (Pearl Harbor), and June 1, 1942.

That was before a new and very effective weapon could be developed, one that was sought by Churchill and my grandfather as early as 1940, was initially opposed by the U.S. Navy’s top brass, and finally made it to sea in January 1943. That weapon was the “mighty little ship that could”—the new class of destroyer escort designed and developed to help save shipping on the high seas. These agile, indomitable, and dangerous (to the enemy) little ships were almost anthropomorphized, the human characteristics of courage, durability, steadfastness, and survivability attributed to them. While the destroyer escorts were smaller and slower than World War II destroyers, they had almost the same firepower, they possessed greater maneuverability, and, above all, they cost significantly less and could be mass-produced quickly. Overall, some 563 destroyer escorts were produced for the war effort. And more than 1,300 men lost their lives serving on board these ships. Thousands more returned home with serious injuries, both physical and psychological, that they would carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Cross tells us they are “heroes.” That is certainly true (and an understatement). But as is the case with most real heroes, they do not strut and boast; they are modest, and they speak in terms of teamwork and being part of crews that accomplished incredible feats. Their human stories, as told and superbly related by Cross, are vivid and challenging—and sometimes excruciatingly bloody and violent. But their stories are really about human beings, Americans, rising to challenges never before faced by Americans, with ramifications far beyond our own shores at a time when isolationism was a significant political force in the United States. Their human stories still challenge us today in the sense that we are more than a generation away from their experiences and that distance has never felt greater.

Cross’s *Shepherds of the Sea* comes at a critical time in U.S. history: We need to be reminded of the commitment, valor, personal sacrifice, and patriotism of our recent forebears. And Cross does so with a grace and sensitivity to the personal lives of countless young men and their families in a time of great national and world need. He has told their stories with eloquence and, sometimes, in graphic detail, portraying the pain, the injury, and, yes, the blood and gore that are a necessary part of war.

While this may appear to be a story of limited scope—the destroyer escorts of the U.S. Navy—reality it is a story of the heart and soul of our country and we as its people. And it is critical for our time if only because so little has been passed along—from just the last generation—of the impact of the war on countless individuals and families, and of the personal sacrifice, courage, and determination that made Americans some of the toughest soldiers in the world, fighting for a just cause.

Much has been written about the slaughter in the trenches of World War I, the devastating loss of lives, the impossible, inhumane conditions on the various war fronts, and the first real documentation of what was then called “shell shock” (now called posttraumatic stress disorder). Much has been written of the world politics that led up to World War II and the manipulations, machinations, and strategies that brought the Axis powers together and their opponents, the Allies, together. But little has been written, especially from a naval warfare perspective, about the human beings who contributed so greatly to winning World War II in the Atlantic and Pacific—about the decision that a new class of warship was needed, the designing and building of that new class, and those who manned the instruments of war so critical to ultimate victory.

Despite what one might expect—the “dryness” of the history of a very specialized class of warship—Cross has brought about nothing less than a moving and thrilling story consistently focused on the people involved and almost miraculously evoking the special character of the destroyer escorts—the ships that proved their usefulness in a wide variety of demands placed upon them by a nation struggling to rebound from both an economic crisis and a potentially unstoppable enemy. This history is told through the lives and experiences of individuals, most of whom actually served on board the ships. They are ordinary Americans, and as we discover, these ordinary Americans became heroes large and small, whose personal sacrifices and complete commitment became the backbone of the American war effort.

Possibly because of the “excesses” we all have read about and lived through over the past few decades, of greed beyond belief, of serving self-interest beyond normalcy, of putting the interests of others, especially “community,” out of mind, I fear that we have become a self-focused and so society incapable of rising courageously to serve and sacrifice for needs great than our own. But then as I think about our service men and women on constant vigil around the world and fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, I know I am wrong.

Clearly the seeds of this country’s greatness are still here, the courage and values still present and strong in the hearts and minds of our service men and women (and their families). Yet I still worry

that there is too much detachment and distance between most of us here at home and those who serve. There is too much “insulation” between the hardships and sacrifice many experience and the relatively cushy lives we live, not threatened with a loss of freedom, with economic hardship, or even with inadequate food on our table.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, President John F. Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” He was one of the last presidents of “that generation,” the generation who lived through World War II and experienced the saving grace of values, commitment, and sacrifice. It has been almost a desert in between, with admired presidents espousing both self-interest and self-service, encouraging greed and ignoring those less fortunate, and perhaps most important, not leading the country to a greater sense of (and respect for) our fellow human beings. I hope that today we are beginning a new and different era, both with our national leadership and with a book that tells of the lives of the leaders, ship designers, builders, and ordinary sailors who had the gift of understanding what was needed of them in service to their world, their country, and their communities.

PREFACE

This is a story about American heroes. They came from farms, small towns, and large cities across this nation. Many still too young to shave, they brought along their own brand of unbridled energy and a strong sense of duty and love of country as they courageously went to sea to help fight the greatest war this world had ever seen.

Teenagers with little or no experience on the water, these boys were determined to fight for their country. They dropped out of school, ran away from home, and lied about their age so they could put on the uniform and defend their homeland. As Nazi U-boats were sinking Allied ships at a rate faster than they could be replaced, Winston Churchill warned that the sea soon would become America's cage. Churchill argued that something had to be done, and done quickly, to stop Adolph Hitler before he ruled the Atlantic Ocean, cutting off all commerce between the United States, England, and Europe. Fortunately, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was listening.

To carry out this mission, America turned to an unseasoned crop of teenagers, sending them out to fight the Nazis in a new type of warship—the destroyer escort (DE)—a novel and untested vessel that some U.S. Navy officials viewed as a waste of money. But Roosevelt and Churchill believed it offered the Allies the best hope to turn the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic.

The United States was pinning its very future on these newly minted bluejackets and their officers—Ivy League college boys more accustomed to being on board yachts than warships. Out at sea they went in the new vessels, designed by a man who had no formal training in ship design and who used whatever available parts he could find to build the new ships. Before long they became the most valuable and successful antisubmarine vessels in the U.S. fleet.

With their teenage crews and young skippers, destroyer escorts plowed through the stormy and dangerous North Atlantic, shepherding merchant ships and Allied convoys carrying needed supplies, equipment, and troops for the war. Using the most sophisticated sonar and radar equipment available, they searched for enemy submarines along the way and used the latest antisubmarine weapons to sink them. Finally it appeared the U-boats had met their match.

President Roosevelt, one of the earliest proponents for the construction of destroyer escorts, believed they would be best equipped to battle Hitler's skillful U-boat commanders because they were smaller and more maneuverable than larger ships. He first ordered them built in 1940, but the Navy brass did not agree with their president and convinced him to use the nation's limited resources to build more American destroyers instead. That mistake would carry a heavy price.

U-boats slaughtered Allied vessels and their sailors on the Atlantic Ocean with great effectiveness—some twenty-eight hundred ships were sunk in only the first six months following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. As Germany increased its stranglehold on the Atlantic and the outlook for the United States and England appeared grim, the Navy decided to take another look at FDR's idea to build the smaller vessels. And not a moment too soon. Hitler's men were courageous and brazen, using the lights from America's cities to target and sink Allied ships with American

watching in horror from shore as ships burned in the distance. There was little time left to end the carnage and turn the tide of the war.

The new ships were built by untrained men and women at a fevered pitch in seventeen shipyards all around the country, 563 DEs in all, 17 rolling off the production lines in a single month. Shipyards stayed open around the clock turning out the new vessels, which, although tardy in their arrival, would quickly be taking their place along the front lines on the dangerous seas.

Navy officials accelerated the mass production of these new ships, with large sections fabricated in factories many miles from the shipyards and welded, rather than riveted, to save additional time. The first DE, outfitted with the latest sonar, radar, and antisubmarine weapons, went to sea in January 1943. The sturdy little ships waged war against German submarines and torpedo bombers in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and then went on to fight in every major battle in the Pacific, where they went toe-to-toe against the largest battleship in the world.

But this is not a story about ships. Ships did not win the war against Germany and Japan—courageous young American sailors, soldiers, and airmen did that job. Away from home for the first time in their young lives, many—more than 1,300 DE sailors, in fact—would never see their families again. Others would return with serious injuries, physical and psychological, they would carry with them for the rest of their lives. Today they speak, many for the first time, about their harrowing days at sea.

This chapter in American history has been largely overlooked in the annals of World War II. Since 2003, when I first considered writing a book about the men who sailed on these trim but deadly little ships, I have interviewed scores of DE veterans, most in their eighties and nineties, humble and reserved, and every one with a story to tell. Finally, in their twilight years, these aging heroes have decided to speak, and I am honored to be the one to hear their tales and write them down for the ages.

I conducted ninety-one personal interviews with World War II naval officers and enlisted men who served on board fifty-six different destroyer escorts; reviewed dozens of oral histories and letters and poured over secretly kept war diaries, ship logs, and countless other documents and photographs that help to illuminate the remarkable contributions made by these men. Until today many of the diaries and other documents rested in dusty attics, basements, and storage closets far removed from our view. Now a new window has been opened, allowing all Americans to see in crystal clarity the sacrifices made by these young sailors and their families so many years ago—sacrifices, in fact, that allow us to live today as a free nation rather than, as President Roosevelt once said, at the point of a gun.

But the story about destroyer escort sailors is not just a story about battles. It is a story about growing up in the Great Depression, American genius and ingenuity, hard work, honor, and fear, and includes a small but historic first step toward ending racial discrimination in the United States' armed forces. All of this and more are part of the remarkable tale these men have told about themselves and their service to the nation. These are their words, these are their stories—I am simply the messenger privileged to share them with my readers.

All too frequently authors will tag their books as “the untold story of . . .” I have resisted doing that here. But it should be very clear that this, indeed, is a story about World War II that has remained virtually hidden in the minds and hearts of the destroyer escort veterans. Although they are aging and unfortunately, we are losing them too rapidly, their recollections are clear, the memories are focused, and their stories offer a vital lesson for the United States today. It is a lesson of service, honor, responsibility, and tolerance. These men came forward to serve their country during one of the most dangerous and fearful periods in American history. Today their numbers may be diminishing, but their contributions to this nation will forever live in our collective memories. Heroes, you know, never

really die.



A sailor spends a quiet moment alone on the deck of the USS *Liddle* as the sun sets over a calm North Atlantic. Life on board these ships could be very lonely as the ships “mothered” slow-moving convoys across the vast, U-boat-infested waters of the North Atlantic. DEs started rolling out of shipyards in record numbers beginning in 1943 and quickly became the most important antisubmarine vessel in both the U.S. and British fleets, credited with sinking nearly seventy U-boats. *Photo taken by Harold S. Deal, courtesy Jeff Deal*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Back in 2003, while my wife Sheila and I were enjoying a pleasant dinner one evening as guests at Albany, New York's venerable old Fort Orange Club, Frank Lasch, president of the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum, asked if I might consider writing a book about the stories of those sailors who served on board destroyer escorts in World War II. He knew my first book, *Sailor in the White House: The Seafaring Life of FDR*, was finished and I was looking for a new project.

Although the idea sounded interesting, I first wanted to do a little research to see if there really was a story to tell. Well, it did not take long for me to determine that not only was there a remarkable story to tell, but it was one that was little more than a footnote in American history—except, of course, among destroyer escort veterans. While they knew what they had done for their country, most Americans had never heard of this remarkable group of teenage sailors.

So I set out to tell their stories and ensure that their contributions to our nation were recorded in the historical record. First, I want to offer my deep appreciation to the ninety-one DE veterans who took the time to speak with me at great length about their days at sea, along with the scores of others who shared their diaries, letters, photographs, and personal memories of their days—and nights—battling Hitler's U-boats and Japan's kamikazes. Without their help, this book simply would have relied upon dry archival records detailing various battles. Instead, using their own words, the stories of these brave and daring young Americans come alive in these pages.

Many others generously gave of their time and efforts so I could better convey the story of the American heroes. Tim Rizzuto, executive director of the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum, provided invaluable assistance by putting me in touch with sailors all around the country and offering expert advice and counsel throughout the course of this project. Tim is assisted by individuals, both in Albany and beyond, who provide him with essential advice in restoring and operating Albany's world-class museum ship, the *USS Slater*. Several of those individuals provided gracious assistance to me, including Sam Saylor, Marty Davis, Pat Perrella, Anne McCarthy, Pat Stephens, Victor Buck, Don Montrym, Rosehn Gipe, Eric Rivet, Katie Kuhl, and my friend and cousin, Diane Lobb Boyce. I also appreciate the strong support of Frank Lasch and the rest of the museum's board of trustees, who do a spectacular job overseeing the *Slater's* miraculous restoration.

A number of others have been very helpful in locating various documents so I could better tell this story, including Robert Clark, supervisory archivist at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York; Robert B. Hitchings and William Troy Valos of the Kirn Library in Norfolk, Virginia; Lester Weber of the Mariner's Museum in Norfolk, Virginia; Therese Gonzalez of the Great Lakes Naval Museum in Illinois; and Donald Cavanaugh, formerly of Gibbs and Cox. I am certain someone has been left off this list, and I hope you will forgive me, knowing that I appreciate all you have done to help me along the way.

While I conducted ninety-one interviews and reviewed dozens of documents, letters, war diaries, and photographs, I could not include every story from every sailor in this book. Because of space

limitations many fine stories and eyewitness accounts had to be left out. Although your specific stories may not show up in these pages, rest assured they were essential to my understanding destroyer escorts and the courageous contributions you made to this nation's security.

Now for a note on photographs. As I have said previously, this is not a story about ships. It is a story about an unseasoned crop of teenagers and their young skippers who went to sea to defend the homeland. Unfortunately most archives are filled with photographs of ships and hold very few lifestyle photographs showing the sailors on board these tiny warships, sometimes at sea for months at a time. Thankfully I stumbled upon a collection of remarkable photographs taken by a small-town pharmacist from New Berlin, New York, who, at the age of thirty-one, left his family and one-year-old child to join the Navy. He went on board the USS *Liddle* as a pharmacist's mate. Although cameramen were generally not allowed on board ships during wartime, the pharmacist's mate was asked by his captain to photographically document life on board their ship.

Harold S. Deal, the small-town pharmacist from upstate New York, was happy to oblige because photography was his hobby. He quickly sent a letter to his wife asking her to mail his camera equipment to the ship. His superb work has provided us with a rare behind-the-scenes look inside the little warship. It was not until after his death in 1991 that Deal's family discovered the photographs. Although he never spoke about the war years, today his photos give us a glimpse into everyday life on board a destroyer escort. I am indebted to his grandson, Jeffrey Deal, and his family for allowing me to use these wonderful photographs.

The hardest part of being an author, I have found, is balancing the personal responsibilities of everyday life and work with the all-consuming effort needed to research and write a history book. Fortunately I am blessed with supportive friends and family who, although they may not like to understand that my absences from family and other functions are part of the all-engrossing job of writing a book. I could not ask for more caring and loving sisters than Janet Dobbs of Port Jervis, New York, and Linda DiPanni of New Canaan, Connecticut. My parents, Francis and Rita Cross, gave me the opportunity to study and learn, for which I always will be grateful.

Over the course of this project, my dear wife, Sheila, has taken on many responsibilities, freeing up my time to conduct interviews, pore over war diaries and ship logs, and try to put it all down on paper in what I hope is a coherent and compelling narrative. But Sheila has given me more than just the gift of time. She is my most important critic, and her careful and precise editing of the manuscript made *Shepherds of the Sea* a much better and more readable book. That is why, once again, I have dedicated this work to her.

Like Lambs to the Slaughter

Sixteen-year-old James Graham and a handful of his tenth-grade classmates decided it was time to fight for their country. Six months had passed since the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the teenagers were determined to do something about it. Climbing into a bus in Lake City, South Carolina, passengers cast wary glances at the kids, and although there were plenty of unoccupied seats up front, the driver waited until they walked to the back of the bus to be seated before continuing on his route. It was 1942, after all, and the African American students knew where they had to sit if they ever hoped to get to the Army recruiter in Charleston.

A rude surprise was waiting for these patriotic boys—all of whom wanted to be pilots—once they arrived. “We don’t take colored boys in the Army Air Corps,” the recruiter told Graham and his classmates. Heads bowed in despair, the dejected students started to leave but were stopped by a Navy recruiter, who called them over and invited them to join up. Graham was hesitant because he knew that the Navy only allowed African Americans to work as mess attendants or shore laborers loading and unloading ships. “I won’t cook or clean up behind anyone,” Graham told the recruiter. “My sister does that for me.” But things had changed in the Navy, the recruiter said, and now they were accepting African Americans in the seaman branch, “same as the white guys.” With that assurance Graham lied about his age and signed the papers on the spot enlisting in the U.S. Navy, where he and his fellow African Americans would be destined to make history in spite of the antiblack sentiment among many of their fellow sailors and officers, a sentiment that reached all the way to Washington, D.C. Eventually Graham would join a complement of other African American sailors to step on board the USS *Mason*, a destroyer escort and the first warship in American history to be manned by a black crew.

During World War II, James Graham’s story was repeated in cities, towns, and villages all across America. Young men of all races—many of whom had not even started to shave—heeded the call to serve their country, running away from home, fibbing about their ages, and devising all sorts of schemes to enlist in the military. These young men were determined to fight for their country and would do whatever it took to put on a uniform. Many would never return home.

Walter Roberge, a spindly sixteen year old, boarded a bus leaving his small hometown of Lansing, Illinois, bound for the big city. He was slight for his age and height—129 pounds full clothed on a skinny five-foot, eleven-inch frame. As the bus slowly inched away from the curb on this spring day in 1943, Roberge’s eyes widened with excitement as he anticipated his big plans once he arrived in Chicago. But those plans were quickly dashed when the government recruiter got a look at him.

“You could count my ribs at five yards,” Roberge said. The recruiter told him, “Come back in six months when you put on some weight.” Roberge had hoped to join the Navy. “I wanted to enlist when I was fourteen,” he said, but that was a little young in the eyes of his parents, especially his mother who wanted him to finish high school. Now that he was sixteen years old, he considered himself a man and was determined to go to war.

Not about to wait six months, he started formulating plans for his next visit as he rode the bus back home. Young Roberge had heard that if you ate a lot of bananas and drank plenty of water, you

could put on weight very quickly. And that's just what he did for the next six weeks. He then headed back to Chicago for a second try. As extra insurance he took along his birth certificate, which had been "doctored" to show that he was born in 1926, making his age seventeen, old enough to enlist without parental consent. "My mother marked up the birth certificate," he said. In those days birth certificates were filled out in ink, and Roberge's mother didn't have the right color ink to match the original ink on the document. "It was a miserable job, the ink didn't even come close to matching," he recalled.

At the Chicago recruiting office, Roberge handed the document to an official, who peered suspiciously at it through a heavy paperweight-type magnifier. After studying it for what seemed an eternity to the teenager, the recruiter barked, "I don't like this birth certificate. Get a new one." But Roberge knew that if he asked for a new document it might be typed, making it impossible for his mother to alter it since the family did not own a typewriter. So he asked the recruiter if it would suffice for his father to testify that he really was seventeen years old. The recruiter said it would.

So on 5 July he and his father, a veteran of World War I, stood before a notary public and swore that the teenager was seventeen. Even though the banana and water diet had not resulted in much, if any, weight gain, that no longer seemed to matter to the recruiter, and the sixteen year old was sworn into the U.S. Navy. By this time the government was in desperate need of troops and "they would take you as long as you were upright and warm," Roberge said.

"I just felt it was the right thing to do," he recalled. "I could have avoided the war completely if I had just stayed in school. But I wanted to go. I was the adventuresome type. I started fighting for my independence when I was three years old."

When the war broke out his father, who was an ironworker, wanted to join, but a couple of his false teeth were missing. "They told him he would have to get a new set, but he couldn't afford it," Roberge said. "So I went instead." Even though his mother had forged his birth certificate to allow entry into the military, Roberge recalled, she really would have preferred that he stay in school. "But she threatened to run away from home if she didn't do it," he said.

After nine weeks in boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center along the banks of Lake Michigan in Illinois and five weeks of specialized training in Key West, Florida, Roberge was assigned to the destroyer escort USS *Swearer*, a new type of warship designed to protect convoys from the U-boat menace in the North Atlantic. So in November 1943, a little more than four months after that July day back in Chicago when he and his father swore he was old enough to enlist, the skinny teenager from Lansing was earning seventy-eight dollars a month as Petty Officer Third Class Roberge—and he was at sea.¹

Like so many others, Roberge was too young to enlist in the armed forces. But during the height of World War II, many young men—fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen years old, caught up in the patriotic wave sweeping the nation—volunteered for service in the Navy in spite of their age and complete lack of experience with anything to do with the sea. In fact, the majority of crew members on board destroyer escorts in World War II were teenagers or just barely out of their teens, most of whose experience on the water, if any, consisted of little more than fishing in a rowboat or paddling a canoe.



The majority of DE sailors were teenagers or just barely out of their teens. The United States pinned its very future on this unseasoned crop of kids who, along with their young skippers, fought Nazi U-boats in the North Atlantic and then fought in every major battle in the Pacific. Radioman William Bryant Graddy of St. Olaf, Iowa, who enlisted in the Navy on his seventeenth birthday, is pictured here after receiving orders to board the USS *Liddle*. Graddy was killed a year later when a kamikaze crashed into the ship during the Leyte Gulf operation. *Photo provided to Jeff Deal by Inda Hoover, Graddy's sister*

Sixteen-year-old Terry Thomas and his family had just walked the two miles home from St. Brigid's Church after mass on a cold and blustery Sunday, 7 December 1941. Terry and his father were reading the Sunday newspapers while his mother and sisters, Vera and Rita, were listening to music on the radio in the living room of their tiny house in Detroit, Michigan. "All of a sudden the music stopped," Thomas said. "Special bulletin—our naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii has been attacked by Japanese aircraft." Thomas' father, a tool and die maker who had immigrated from Wales, said, "This means war." The next day Thomas and his classmates started talking about joining the military, although they all were too young to enlist.

Two years later, Thomas decided to join the U.S. Coast Guard after listening to the uncle of a friend who said he should ask for beach patrol on the Great Lakes. That sounded appealing to him and his buddy, so they decided to quit school and sign up. But Thomas will always remember the day he climbed on board an old steam train at the Michigan Railroad Station on his way to boot camp. "As I left with the other enlistees, I heard my mother crying and saying, 'They're so young, like lambs being led to the slaughter,'" Thomas, who stood only five feet, four inches tall, said. "I'll never forget that moment." The old train chugged out of the station carrying Thomas and a motley collection of teenage recruits on their way to Manhattan Beach, the Coast Guard boot camp in Brooklyn, New York. Loneliness and homesickness soon would overtake these kids, most away from their homes and

families for the first time in their young lives. But there was no turning back.²

Offers to join the military poured into Washington from patriotic citizens in every part of the nation, observed President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he signed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. Finally approved after one of the most tumultuous and bitterly divided sessions in the history of Congress, the law required all male citizens between twenty-one and thirty-six years old to visit one of the nearly 6,500 new registration boards set up throughout the nation. But America's first peacetime military conscription did not come about without a great deal of angry debate by antidraft activists, who declared that "American conscription is American fascism."³

Women wearing widows' veils took up vigil in the U.S. Senate gallery. Florida senator Claude Pepper, who supported the Selective Service legislation, was hanged in effigy on the Capitol grounds and fistfights among members of Congress developed before the legislation, commonly referred to as "the draft," could be approved and sent to President Roosevelt, who signed the measure without delay.⁴

William Riemer, who grew up in the small town of Janesville, Wisconsin, was just starting his senior year in high school when the seventeen year old dropped out to join the Navy. He had wanted to join the Marine Corps as soon as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor but was only sixteen years old. His uncle, a World War I veteran, assured him that the war would last long enough so he could enlist once he was of age. Several of his friends in the close-knit community of eight hundred were joining the Navy, so when the time came to enlist, Riemer chose the Navy instead of the Marines.⁵



Pharmacist's Mate Harold S. Deal, who at age thirty-one was older than most DE sailors. After Pearl Harbor, Deal, who was working as a pharmacist, enlisted in the Navy, leaving behind his wife and one-year-old child. He survived action in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters and returned home to his family. *Courtesy Jeff Deal*

"All I knew was that the pointed end of the boat went first," Riemer recalled, noting that, like s

many Navy recruits, his experience with boats and the sea was limited to what he read in books. Although he knew how to swim, that was just about his only experience with water. Like Walter Roberge, he went to the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. Later he was assigned to the USS *Frederick C. Davis*, one of only a handful of the 563 destroyer escorts sunk by enemy action and the last American combat ship torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat during World War II. By the time the war was over, Riemer had learned a lot more than simply which end of a boat went first.

Another novice to the sea who wanted to do his part for the nation, John “Bo” Keally, enlisted in the Navy in 1944 after quitting high school. “It seemed like the patriotic thing to do at the time,” Keally said. After his father died, he and his mother moved around the Pittsburgh area frequently, with young Bo attending four different grade schools and four different high schools before finally finding stability in the Navy. Because he was underage, his mother had to sign so he could join.⁶ Following a brief stint at boot camp at Great Lakes and specialized training for a gunner’s mate, he was assigned to the USS *Johnnie Huchins*.

Keally, like many of the DE recruits, had no experience on the water but felt that joining the Navy would be a good way to see the world. Excited at the prospect of the adventures that lay ahead, he never could have imagined that, within a short time, he would be struggling to survive a major hurricane, which sunk an American destroyer off North Carolina, clinging to a life raft after being thrown overboard off the coast of New Guinea, or engaging in a fierce fight with Japanese suicide midget submarines near the Philippines in what would be the last major surface battle of World War II.

A year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy continued to recruit rather than draw inductees from the Selective Service system. Trying to lure the “cream of the crop” with slogans such as “Choose while you can,” the Navy was able to induct 35,000 men who already had received their Army draft notices. As the war progressed Army officers became alarmed that their service seemed to be getting those the Navy did not want.⁷

To skim off the best potential inductees, the Navy would sign them up early, before they legally could join. Some 120,000 young men were signed up in the Navy’s V-12 program, and many of them were sent to college, rendering them “draft proof” under the rules of the Selective Service system. They already were in the service, although not officially on the sea or in the air. Trained at government expense, they would be ready when the Navy called.⁸

Navy service was more attractive to many young men who felt life on board a warship would be superior to fighting the enemy in muddy trenches. The “Choose while you can” campaign resonated with many potential recruits, such as Donald Kruse, who signed up within a few months of graduation from LaSalle School in Troy, New York. His quick action deprived the Army of a GI—the very day he was packing to leave for the naval training facility in Sampson, New York, Kruse received his draft notice. Standing at the door with his bags packed, Kruse told the mailman to return the draft notice and marked the envelope “U.S. Navy.”

“I knew they would give me a free meal and a clean sack,” Kruse said. Born in Saugerties, New York, Kruse later moved to Catskill, New York, before eventually settling in Troy. His cousins all were drafted into the Army, and wallowing in muddy trenches was not the life he wanted.⁹ Sent to the naval training facility in Sampson, along Seneca Lake in upstate New York, Kruse and more than 411,000 sailors would receive their basic training there over the course of the war. One of seven naval training centers in the nation, Sampson, along with facilities in Bainbridge, Maryland, and Farragut, Idaho, was opened within a year of the Pearl Harbor attack.

Four other Navy training facilities were operating at the start of the war, including facilities

Norfolk, Virginia; Newport, Rhode Island; San Diego, California; and the biggest of them all, the Great Lakes Naval Training Center along the shores of Lake Michigan. That is where many of the recruits who eventually would find themselves on board destroyer escorts learned how to swim, tie knots, march, and identify the parts of a ship.¹⁰

Stepping off the train and taking a bewildered look at their new home, the recruits' eyes widened as they gazed at a compound that certainly was much larger than many of the communities where they had grown up. Great Lakes, the sprawling 1,440-acre facility forty miles north of Chicago boasted a population of more than 100,000 and had all the features of a large city, including a hospital, barber shop, tailor, post office, and laundries. It was about as self-sufficient as a military facility could be and even included recreational and reception centers where recruits could relax and unwind after a week of training and classes.¹¹

Construction of what was also the largest naval training facility in World War I was first approved by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, despite some concerns about locating a naval facility one thousand miles from the nearest saltwater.¹² By Armistice Day in November 1918, the base had been substantially enlarged from the prewar days to include 775 buildings on 1,200 acres with a peak naval population of more than 47,000 men. More than 125,000 men passed through the facility by the end of the war, a mere fraction of the number that would be trained there for World War II.¹³

Fast forward to 7 December 1941. Within two hours of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, plans hurriedly were put in place to expand the Great Lakes facility in preparation for America's entry into a new war. With American ships still smoldering in ruins at Pearl Harbor, Capt. Ralph D. Spalding, public works officer at the Great Lakes facility, met with the base's commandant and described his plans to expand the compound. Neither man had the authority to authorize the expansion; however, with chaos rampant in Washington there was no time to seek proper authorization from Navy brass. Work began the very next day, even though formal approval for the project would not come for two weeks.¹⁴

A herculean effort, construction continued seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and involved some twenty-six architectural firms, fourteen general contractors, and 13,000 workers. The final cost for the two-year project exceeded \$120 million. As it had in World War I, Great Lakes would again serve as the largest naval training facility in World War II, training more than a million sailors or about a third of all Navy men fighting in the war. But Washington could not wait for the work to be finished before sending recruits, who arrived daily, to the facility, cramming barracks with young men and forcing others to sleep on cots in drill halls. There was no time to delay—the United States needed trained sailors and it needed them now.¹⁵

Moving ahead without authorization was a bold but wise move because plans for other naval training bases were still on the drawing board. "The speed of construction at Great Lakes was doubly fortunate because delays at Bainbridge, Farragut, and Sampson (new stations authorized in March 1942) made it necessary for Great Lakes to take many recruits who should have gone to the new stations in September and October 1942," observed Lt. T. A. Larson in his official history of the Great Lakes center.¹⁶

As thousands of so-called boots streamed into the naval training facilities, now commonly referred to as "boot camps," they would soon learn a new way of life—regimented, structured, and strenuous—as they were schooled in the classroom and field training necessary to become a seaman on one of America's warships.¹⁷ "The first day at boot camp was a shock," Robert Holman said. "First off, we took off all of our clothes and stood there buck naked while a corpsman painted a number

across our naked chests with methiolate, which is an orange liquid, a mild iodine.” The skin of a seventeen-year-old kid from Calhoun County, South Carolina, recalled his time at the Bainbridge, Maryland, facility as a “degrading experience,” as the naked recruits were poked, prodded, examined, and questioned by Navy doctors.

Over time Holman, who eventually would be assigned to the USS *Frost*, said the recruits became accustomed to the routine of boot camp: “We spent many hours in boot camp tying knots, reading the *Bluejackets’ Manual*, learning the Navy language, learning the semaphore, washing clothes, preparing for inspection, keeping our bunks neat. The sheets had to be so tight that a half dollar would bounce off them. We were not allowed to sit on our bunks until after supper. There were benches in the middle of the barracks for sitting.”

Young boots also had to learn an entirely new vocabulary, Holman recalled: Floors became decks, walls became bulkheads, ceilings became overheads, halls became passageways, doors became hatches, ropes became lines, ahead was forward and behind was aft, toilets were heads, canteen was the ship’s store, the deck force were called swab jockeys, the electricians were sparks, signalmen were flags, afternoon and evening ashore was liberty, and days ashore were leave.¹⁸

“The officers were a little rough,” said Manuel Maroukis, who boasted of being born “with a silver spoon in my mouth” until his father, who owned restaurants and car dealerships, lost everything in the Great Depression and had to go to work as a stripper in a leather factory. Maroukis joined the Navy after talking to both Army and Navy men and realizing that “if you want to be clean, you go to the Navy. If you want to wind up kind of muddy, you go to the Army.” Maroukis added, “I decided to stay clean. If I was going to die, I’d die clean anyway.”¹⁹

“My reason for joining the Navy was I wanted to eat three square meals a day, and I didn’t want to live in dirt. So I didn’t want to go into the Army,” said Jersey City native Leonard Bulwicz, who joined right out of high school and served as quartermaster on board the destroyer escort USS *Moore*. Bulwicz also recalled that he felt a sense of patriotism. “I had a duty,” he said, especially after Pearl Harbor.²⁰

But in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Great Lakes facility was filled to the brim with recruits who would have gone to other facilities had they been ready. As a result early recruits at the station suffered through a great many discomforts while construction was under way, including very long chow lines, no heat in their barracks, no hot water, and, sometimes, insufficient clothing to provide a full issue to each recruit.²¹

The lack of basic needs such as drinking water and waste disposal continued to plague the station well into 1944. In both cases demand overloaded available facilities, resulting in restrictions on water use in the barracks. Round-the-clock guards were posted in barracks to ensure that each recruit used no more than ten gallons of water per day. Water was pumped from Lake Michigan and in 1942 was cut off completely when the intake valve froze. A diver had to go down into the frigid waters to remove ice from the intake.²²

Following 7 December 1941 and through 19 March 1944, the number of recruits showing up at the station varied from 10,000 to 40,000 per month, requiring an adjustment in the length of time recruits would be at the base. A six-week training period was in effect at the start of the war; however, this was shortened to four weeks and then to three weeks in order to accommodate the influx of recruits. All told, a boot’s stay at Great Lakes changed twenty-eight times over the course of the war.²³ Because the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor left much of the United States’ military unprepared, early training materials at some of the service schools had not even arrived. One instructor at the electrician’s mate school was given nothing but scratch pads, pencils, a box of chalk

and two erasers and told to teach the recruits all they would need to know about being an electrician mate on board a ship—without the benefit of any written training manual.²⁴

The *Bluejackets' Manual* was one training manual in good supply. Given to each recruit upon arrival, the 1,145-page 1943 edition contained everything a recruit would need to know about the Navy and would be his “Bible” for his entire tour of duty. First produced in 1902, the manual has seen many revisions and is considered a “Navy primer” to this day. An important chapter for Navy men was titled “Learning to Swim,” which began, “If you can perform the physical training exercises used in the Navy you can learn to swim. All human beings other than the most decrepit, the crippled or the deformed possess all of the qualities needed to permit them to stay on the surface.”²⁵

In theory it seems like every sailor should be able to swim, but only about half of the recruits arriving at boot camps knew how. By 1944 there were twelve swimming pools at the Great Lakes facility, one said to be the largest indoor swimming pool in the world, holding 587,000 gallons of water and stretching 165 feet long and 75 feet wide. “We had to throw away all of the books when we started to give lessons to thousands,” said Chief M. J. Howlett, who was in charge of the Great Lakes swimming program. “We had to develop a system of mass instruction which would teach nonswimmers to swim in the shortest possible time.” Nearly a million sailors were taught to swim at the facility, with 98 percent of them graduating as competent swimmers.²⁶

For Jarvis Baillargeon of Keeseville, a tiny village in upstate New York about fifty miles from the Canadian border, being on water was second nature. Although he never had experienced the ocean, he had paddled a number of rowboats and canoes growing up in the Adirondack Mountains. Baillargeon, whose grandfather was a Civil War veteran and whose father operated a small grocery store in Keeseville, graduated from high school at sixteen and enrolled in Plattsburgh State Teachers College until he decided to join the Navy in November 1943.

“I decided to be a sailor rather than a soldier,” Baillargeon said, explaining that he would have been eligible for the draft when he turned eighteen in two months so decided he’d better sign up for the Navy before his Army “Greetings” letter arrived. “I raised my hand and swore allegiance to the United States Naval Reserve in Albany, New York, on November 17, 1943,” Baillargeon said. Within a few days he was shipped off on a steam train to the Navy’s training facility in Sampson, New York. Having experienced the snow and cold of Adirondack winters, he had hoped to be assigned to a warmer training facility in Florida. But the Navy had other ideas.

Sampson was a “flimsy operation,” obviously constructed with great haste following Pearl Harbor, Baillargeon said. “The barracks were just shells with a coal stove for heat,” he recalled. “Getting uniforms, shots and lots of lectures plus physical training filled our days, with occasional guard duty at night.” After boot camp and sonar school, Baillargeon was assigned to the USS *Rudderow*.²⁷

Arriving at Sampson at about three in the morning, Brooklyn, New York, native John Acer and his fellow recruits were given the traditional “first meal” consisting of a bologna sandwich and an apple and then told to get a little sleep before reveille at 5:30 AM. Upon awakening, the recruits again were sworn into the U.S. Navy and then they began the hurried pace of abandoning all aspects of civilian life for their new life in the military.

“The first thing they did to you is they gave you a big pillowcase, a big sheet. You had to put all your clothes in it,” nineteen-year-old John Acer said. “They kept throwing all these things at you—underwear, pants, suits, jackets, sweaters, hats. They all kept coming at you.” Acer, who had just graduated from Erasmus Hall High School, grew up in a big family in the Parkville section of Brooklyn, but as he gazed at the camp, he realized he would be living with a much larger “family.”

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