

## Weatherman's Career Defies History

By Jimmy Brown, Jax Air News, March 12, 1981



Ask him his age and a sly smile covers the face of former Master Chief aerographers mate William Heagley of NavOceanComFac. Before he manages to tell you that he's a former Navy man with 30 years active duty under his belt, you'll feel so at ease with him, you'll be inclined to pull up a chair for a bit of light socializing.

The fact that he was there mess cooking when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor makes him a genuine legend in his own time. But that's not the most fascinating thing about Heagley. As he unravels details about a career that spanned each of the seven seas, it's not hard to tell that here is a man who enjoyed his naval career.

In 1939, a Navy man's pay was \$21 a month. There were no I.D. cards, or social security numbers. In those days, thousands of enlisted Navy persons rolled out of hammocks at reveille and simultaneously tied seven marlin hitches to secure their hammocks before the leading seaman conducted the first of a series of early morning inspections.

The 'good ole days' as Heagley refers to them, started at Great Lakes Naval Training Station in 1940. It was a long ride from the Omaha, Nebraska AFEES station but the worst was yet to come. Winter had come to Illinois and the 17 weeks of basic training were no laughing matter. But Heagley survived to experience his first tour of sea duty.

Afterwards, he was sent ashore but found it "boring and extremely dull", he says with emphasis. But he hung in there until he couldn't take it anymore and finally requested to terminate his shore duty for assignment to the USS Albany.

If adventure lures young people to today's Navy, then let the store of Pearl Harbor be told by one who experienced it that morning of Dec. 7, 1941.

Heagley was up at 5 a.m. performing his usual duties as mess cook on the USS Utah.

"I was lucky. I remember grabbing a handful of coffee cups with no handles. The Utah was a target ship for pilots to practice bombing. They would drop bags and little steel bombs onto the 12 X 12's target areas used on deck. The Utah ship looked more like an aircraft carrier than a target ship, and evidently the Japanese pilots thought so too, because after they hit the destroyers in the area, they started on us."

"I remember it was 7 a.m. when they hit and no one knew what was going on. We all thought the entire country was being attacked and for that day and the three days that followed havoc reigned."

"It wasn't just one series of attacks, they lasted for hours. I saw several planes shot down, but the unfortunate thing was, that since our ship was a target ship, we had no guns. We were totally helpless, and had no other choice but to abandon ship. Lucky thing we were tied up close to the pier, or else many of us probably never would have made it."

Although he's traveled the seven seas, Heagley says some of his happiest moments were spent in the states. San Francisco's Market Street on VJ Day, for example.

His eyes and voice both register the long-ago excitement. "There were girls out there kissing everybody, and you never saw such happiness."

So happy was Heagley, that he climbed a lamp post and screamed for joy. One of the best 'good olde days' an old Navy hand could ask for.

Had he known that others who'd reached the rate of Master Chief were allowed to stay in the Navy past the 30 year mark, Heagley says he never would have left.

Ask him the big question and that boyish grin completely covers his face before the dedication sets into his eyes. The mood changes.

If you had to do it all over again, what would you change?

Heagley smiles before silence captures the room. A few muscles in his cheek give way to a moment of hidden sentimentality. He manages to fight it off. Once more, a smile relaxes the atmosphere and things are back to normal.

“Not a single solitary moment. I wouldn’t change a minute of my life in any way, form or fashion.”

“I really would have liked to stay in.”

Photo Caption

FORMER MASTER CHIEF aerographers mate Bill Heagley still carries on in the tradition of weather men around the world on the job at NavOceanComFac. (Photo by Jimmy Brown)