

## Raymond McLewin

Raymond McLewin was living in Portland, Maine working in a bank when World War II started in 1939. The United States was not involved at that time but, as a matter of precaution, began register all young men for the draft. Like many other young men McLewin went to register and was told that he was 4-F or physically unfit for service because he had crooked teeth. McLewin had grown up during the Depression and his family never had money for dental work.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor McLewin knew that crooked teeth would not keep him out of the service so he decided to join up rather than wait to be drafted. He had grown up in Portland, a coastal town, and had a seafaring background so he decided the Navy would be the best fit for him. Most recruits were given the rating of Seaman or Seaman Apprentice but since he was a graduate of business school and had valuable office skills he was made a Petty Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class.

McLewin was quite excited about his first assignment aboard the troop transport USS *West Point*, he referred to her as a “beautiful, big ship”. The *West Point* was the former ocean liner SS *America* that had been taken up by the US Navy for use transporting troops overseas. The promise of voyages around the world intrigued McLewin and he couldn’t wait to get started. Unfortunately, as the ship was preparing to transport troops to India, his globe travels were cut short when it turned out that there was one too many crewman on board the *West Point*. Being familiar with seafaring customs McLewin knew that in cases like this it was “last man on, first man off” and he had been the last man on. He dejectedly left the ship at Norfolk Naval Base where he was assigned to the staff of the Commander, Service Force, Atlantic Fleet.

This headquarters was located on a repair ship at the naval base. The ship wasn’t expected to sail often and had actually been modified to accommodate more office space for the headquarters staff. Initially this did not look very appealing the McLewin, he had to trade in the opportunity for world travels for an office on a repair ship that never left port. He would later be quite grateful for this turn of events.

Service Force, Atlantic Fleet handled much of the logistic needs of the US Naval forces in the Atlantic theatre. They planned operations, received requests for supplies and ensured that those supplies reached the forces that needed them. In late 1942 they planned and executed the logistics for Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa, this was the largest operation they handled during the war.

As a member of the staff McLewin was assigned to handle office work, later when his superiors discovered he knew shorthand he was given duty as a court reporter. His first assignment as a court reporter was taking notes during an autopsy of a sailor who died. He “nearly fainted” when he saw the sailor’s body laid out on the examining table. His success as a court reporter and knowledge of shorthand later led to a job as the secretary for the Vice Admiral in charge of the Service Force, Atlantic Fleet.

This was a prestigious job that brought both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage was that he was able to cut to the front of the chow lines during meal times. As the admiral's secretary he was expected to eat and be back at work on time, other sailors grumbled but understood his reasons for cutting in front of them. On the negative side, while non-staff sailors could wear the blue dungaree working uniforms, the staff personnel had to wear white dress uniforms to work in. All things he considered he liked the job and knew he had it better than others. McLewin specifically mentioned the chauffeurs as having a thankless job. They had to be ready to take the admiral anywhere at a moment's notice and then wait till he was done and drive him home. McLewin much preferred the regular hours of his office job to that.

Because the admiral in charge of the Service Force wanted to get additional sea pay he established his headquarters on the repair ship. Despite the additional pay the ship did not go to sea! However McLewin and his fellow sailors were forced to live on the ship despite the fact that it was tied up to a pier. He shared a compartment with 150 other sailors, they slept on bunks stacked five high. McLewin's schedule had him working every other night till 9:00pm so many times he just slept on top of his desk. Because of a lack of space in the crew compartment he also dried his clothes in his office. He would just hang them around the office and turn on a fan. The office itself was small enough with four men working in a space measuring about twenty feet on each side. Not all was bad though, McLewin's immediate superior was a regular lieutenant named Kent. McLewin was quite happy to work for Lt. Kent who was very understanding of his mistakes. Lt. Kent seemed to understand that most of the men on the ship were not regular sailors and were only in the navy because of the war, he therefore had a great deal of patience with their ignorance of navy ways.

Norfolk Naval base was located about ten miles from the town of Norfolk. McLewin remembered that it was easy to take the trolley into town but was quite difficult to take it back to the base. You had to be sure to leave town in plenty of time to get back to the base. McLewin describes Norfolk as "totally a sailors town" that really didn't offer him much in the way of entertainment. He didn't drink so had no interest in going to bars, fortunately there was "a lovely YMCA" in town where that he visited often. The Y featured meetings for Christians of both sexes. It was at one of these meetings that he met his future wife. They began dating and were married on May 8, 1944 at the Norfolk YMCA where they met.

Both McLewin and his wife wanted to get a theological education so in September 1944 she left for Philadelphia College of the Bible to start her education. He would go up to visit her one weekend a month. The trip up began with an all-night ferry ride to Cape Charles followed by and all day train ride to Philadelphia. He would have a short time with her and then would have to start heading back to Norfolk. McLewin remembers that there were limited seats on the train and sailors would make a dash from the ferry to the train station to make sure they got a seat. If not they had a long wait for the next train.

His wife would also come down to visit him periodically and she just happened to visiting on their year anniversary, which happened to coincide with the German surrender. McLewin and his wife were downtown in Norfolk when the news began spreading. There were soon 20,000 sailors celebrating the end of the war in Europe, McLewin could tell the situation was starting to get out

of hand. He told his wife “if we don’t get out here now, we’ll never get out of here!” and they beat a hasty retreat from the wild revelry.

The end of the war in Europe had another less apparent benefit for McLewin also. With the Atlantic Fleet now at peace many of ships were shifted to the Pacific to prepare for the final battles against Japan. This included the repair ship that had been McLewin’s home and office for two years. The Service Force, Atlantic Fleet shifted its headquarters to a building on shore and the men moved into nearby barracks. The move ashore also meant that women could join the staff, since they could serve ashore but not aboard ships. Very soon after the move two WAVES or Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service joined the staff. The move ashore did not deter the admiral commanding the Service Force from receiving the extra pay sailors receive for serving on board ships. He arranged for Vincent Astor’s yacht, the *Nourmahal*, to be acquired by the navy and sent to Norfolk. There he moved his office on board so that he might once again be stationed “afloat” and be eligible for sea pay.

After Japan surrendered McLewin left the service to join his wife at Bible College in Philadelphia. He considered the G.I. Bill to have been a great help. This post-war legislation provided for educational assistance for former servicemen. McLewin’s service had entitled him to five and half years of education though he didn’t need all of it. When he and his wife had completed their studies they expected to go to Africa to replace missionaries who had been stranded there for the duration of the war. They ended up in South Africa working with the emigrant Indian population there. They stayed for thirty years, building seven churches and ministering to their Indian congregations. They had two children, both of whom were born in South Africa.

McLewin is grateful for his service in the navy, it wasn’t all pleasant but it opened his eyes in a way he had never experienced. He had grown up in a small town and had led a very sheltered life. Spending two years in a rough “sailor’s town” like Norfolk had shown him things that disturbed him but that also reinforced his Christian faith. He is also grateful for his naval service because getting bumped from the *West Point* in 1942 meant that he had a chance to meet his wife. Together they embarked on the much more fulfilling voyage of missionary work.