



As seen from the aircraft carrier Bennington -- Tokyo Bay, October 1945



The USS LSM-371

An Officer's Story

William Carl Voigt, Jr. -- March 2000
(from an interview by his daughter)

[NOTE: Click on any of the inline photos to enlarge]

I enlisted in the Navy while I was a sophomore at Auburn, soon after the bombing of Pearl

Harbor. I had attended Birmingham Southern College my freshman year--this also allowed me to work, as time allowed, at ACIPCO in Birmingham. Before joining the Navy, I was in the ROTC field artillery unit at Auburn. I loved to ride horses and the Army horses we used were great ones. The colonel saw that I was a good rider and told me I could ride anytime and wherever I wanted. I would ride out to Chewacla Park and all over, thoroughly enjoying the privilege. During this time, I took as many engineering hours as possible--this turned out to be a smart move since I eventually graduated without having to return to college after the war.



After about two quarters, the Navy sent me to Georgia Tech for one semester in the V-12 program, and then to midshipman's engineering school at Columbia University at which time we were housed on the USS Prairie State--formerly the USS Illinois of Teddy Roosevelt's

Great White Fleet. The ship was docked on the Hudson River, near the George Washington Bridge. When the commandant welcomed our group, he said that they would be graduating only about one-third of our class since there was, at that time, a surplus of engineers. That was a big downer for all of us. Before we completed, all of the men in the bunks adjacent to me had "bilged out" of the program. I remember very well taking a flashlight under the covers and studying almost all night--but quickly turning it off when I heard the officer walk through checking quarters about once an hour. I stayed at Columbia four months, finishing in February 1944.



From Columbia, I went to Cornell University for four months of intensive training in diesel engines. The Cornell campus is on the top of a mountain high above Lake Cayuga, a lake about 40 miles

long and one of the "finger" lakes. The Navy had a nice-sized boat which we used to practice seamanship--and have fun. I had asked for duty on an LSM (Landing Ship Medium) instead of a larger ship because I wanted to have the responsibility of being the only engineering officer rather than being one of several engineers down in the engine room of some battleship or cruiser.




After completing diesel school at Cornell and a short stint at a General Motors diesel plant in Cleveland, Ohio I was sent to Little Creek, Virginia at the southern end of the Chesapeake Bay to pick up and help train our crew for the


USS LSM-371. We trained on LSMs at Little Creek and then went to Virginia Beach for gunnery training where they had a variety of cannon and machine guns; these we shot at targets towed by Navy planes. I turned 22 years old just before we left Little Creek to pick up our ship--at that time we had four officers and 52 men but we later increased to six officers and approximately 70 men. I originally was an engineering officer (an ensign with an E

rating) but I also wanted to be a deck officer which I achieved with a DE rating. Later, this served me well when I was able to command the ship.


After training at Little Creek, we went to pick up our ship in Houston, Texas where it was being built--but it was only about 50% complete at the time. They were building LSMs there in a little over a month, on essentially a production-line basis. As I got to know the people at the shipyard and as I reviewed the plans for the ship, I noticed a void that could hold a fair supply of fresh water. I got the shipyard personnel to modify the piping so we could take on fresh water and use the void for water storage. We had an evaporator that could make a limited amount of fresh water as did the other ships, but we were the only LSM that otherwise had all the fresh water we needed because of this custom modification. The extra piping and valving was designed for full security and water-tight integrity. It was also kept empty--for obvious reasons--when we got to the active war zone or experienced bad weather.

Regarding the personnel who would be under my authority, I requested that the Navy assign me a group of less-rate than authorized. For example, I asked for two First Class Motor Machinist Mates instead of one Chief and one First Class, as was called for on an LSM. In this way I was able to promote deserving individuals myself. And, rather than use a standard Navy test, I wrote my own comprehensive test for each rate. Using this method I later promoted a clearly superior First Class "Motormac" to Chief. The crew reacted favorably to this method of promotion. 



The ship was 203 feet long and had two 1,800 hp Fairbanks-Morse opposed piston diesel engines as our main drives. The LSM had an advanced engine room with more main engine power than the larger LST. Our purpose was to be a landing ship that could get on the beach fast, quickly unload and then get off fast. We normally used one generator at a time, but had both of them running during general quarters or during storms when a loss of power would be disastrous. 



After our "shakedown cruise," we were commissioned in January 1945 at Gulfport, Mississippi and then went through the Panama Canal and on to San Diego. While there, I took some time off and visited Tijuana, Mexico with a couple of buddies. We stayed in San Diego a week or so and then headed on to the Hawaiian Islands, anchoring at Pearl Harbor. While there, I had dinner with the parents of a midshipman friend from Prairie State. They had a real nice home high up on Diamond Head with a fabulous view of the Waikiki Beach area. From Hawaii, we headed toward Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands. It was on this leg of the journey (or perhaps a later one to Tulagi/Florida Island) where I had a fascinating experience: A group of several hundred dolphins was following in our wake; 



then, over time, thousands more joined in. This continued until eventually, we were completely surrounded by dolphins who wanted to accompany us; they were visible as far as the eye could see. I never imagined that many dolphins even existed!

After anchoring for several days at Eniwetok, we proceeded to Guam and Saipan in the Marianas. From the Marianas, we subsequently delivered pontoons to Okinawa, anchoring in Nakagusuku Bay (renamed Buckner Bay). One night around midnight, while enroute to Okinawa, I looked to starboard and saw the sparkling phosphorescent outline of what I am sure was a torpedo. Fortunately, due to our shallow draft, it passed under us just aft of the conning tower and on into the open sea beyond.


Enroute to Okinawa, we were in a typhoon in the area of the "Marianas Trench," one of the deepest known spots in the ocean. The task force tried its best to avoid the storm ever since it had first spawned in the general area of the Solomon Islands, but it seemed to thwart all our attempts at outmaneuvering, and we were finally caught right in the middle of it. The wave height in a storm is proportional not only to the velocity of the wind but also, to a lesser extent, the depth of the sea--and we were in waters 30,000 feet deep or more.

To say the least, that was an exciting experience. The winds reportedly reached 157 MPH, but I didn't have time to think about being afraid because I had to concentrate on the safety of the ship; if we had lost power we would have been swamped. We were on incredibly huge waves that felt just like an unending roller coaster ride. At one point we were on the top of a great swell, and I could see down the smokestack of the large command ship that was at the bottom of the trough and angled about 30 degrees towards us.

As the typhoon was developing, one ship had to declare a medical emergency, so the command ship signalled us to pick up the sick sailor and transfer him to a larger ship for medical assistance. I was the officer of the day and had to come alongside the ship in heavy seas--but all went well. Another medical emergency was coincidentally called when the winds had become even stronger, but I had been relieved from duty by that time. The Captain had taken the helm and, as he tried to come alongside the big ship, he slammed the 371 right into the much larger vessel. Unfortunately, the Admiral was watching from the deck above and an embarrassed Captain asked if I would take over. I was able to successfully bring the ship alongside and we transferred that second sailor. Incidentally, I still have the ship's flag all knotted-up from the typhoon.

Okinawa was a real hot area for "kamikazes" and they attacked almost daily, targeting mainly the larger ships. One day I saw a group of three flying out of Okinawa at about 5,000 feet when suddenly, one veered off and dove straight towards us. We shot at him with our .50

caliber machine guns, 20mm cannons and our twin 40mm guns up on the bow. About 100 yards from the ship he raised up slightly and skimmed over, barely missing us. I emptied my .45 into the underside of the fuselage as he went over the ship. As it turned out, one of the big guns must have connected because he started weaving and then eventually went down. I guess he picked on us because we were easier to get at--before he took a dive at us, he had been tied up in the midst of exploding 5-inch shells with proximity fuses fired from the bigger ships.

While we were at Okinawa, a rumor was going around that officers on several of the LSMs had been murdered by Japanese swimmers who climbed up the anchor lines at night. That put everyone on guard because we weren't that far from shore. Fighting on the shoreline to the South was clearly visible; its violence was evident from the flashing of gunfire and flamethrowers. I really felt for the Marines and Army guys having to go through all that. At one point we witnessed a battleship firing point-blank close to shore at the southern end of Okinawa--an awesome sight! Incidentally, it was at Buckner Bay that I received word that I would be awarded my degree in Mechanical Engineering from Auburn University in two weeks; that date had already passed by the time I received the notification. 



We went from Okinawa to the Solomon Islands, specifically Tulagi and Florida Island just across the strait from Guadalcanal. It was on Florida Island I came across a cove with literally thousands of wild orchids--the most beautiful I had ever seen. We had crossed the equator July 13, 1945; I believe we were picking up a load of Seabees. By the way, there was an interesting initiation ritual we all had to go through when crossing the equator for the first time. The Chief Motormac was crowned "King of Neptune" (and dressed accordingly) because he was the most senior of the entire crew who had also previously done an equator crossing.

From Florida Island, we went back to Saipan and Guam in the Marianas where I got to know some Army B-29 pilots who took me on a few of their training flights. They offered to fly me on a mission over Tokyo to the Vladivostok weather front, but at the last minute an Air Force General wanted to go so naturally I got "bumped" from the flight. We also went to Iwo Jima where I found it very difficult to stare at the pumice-covered beach and stark landscape, even though the action was long over. It really brought home what the Marines must have been through when they landed right at the base of Mount Surabachi where the Japanese were heavily entrenched in pillboxes and caves. It also reminded me of all the other brave guys--pilots, crews and sailors--killed or wounded in battles across the Pacific, all because of the savage attack on Pearl Harbor.

We understood we would eventually invade the mainland of Japan so we accordingly came

alongside a destroyer and received secret papers showing our proposed landing site. I don't recall exactly where it was...I think it was the south end of Kyushu. But after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki we learned, of course, that the Japanese had agreed to surrender. About a week before the surrender was signed, we landed at Yokosuka Naval Base in Tokyo Bay; we were in fact one of the first ships to arrive. It was apparently deserted of Japanese by that time, but as I walked through the base and city I had the distinct feeling the Japanese were close by and watching my every move. I took possession of a Japanese Flag I found there which had been torn by high winds in the recent severe weather. Another building had a room full of swords which were evidently those of Japanese officers who had gone to sea. I also went into a tower on the assembly grounds and found the base bugle. I still have the bugle and flag.

After Yokosuka Naval Base had been turned over to the American Navy the city was cordoned off--but I got around that and went up into the hills alone just to see what I could see. I was admiring a very attractive Japanese home with a garden and goldfish pond out in the front when, to my complete surprise, the door opened and the owner asked me in. I entered, leaving my shoes outside, and found that he could speak English quite well. His wife was also there; they were both well-dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, and she brought out several courses of Sake as we talked. He had a noticeable scar on his face; he indicated he had been grazed by a stray bullet, and that his son had been killed in the war. He was a lawyer by profession and a very cordial one at that. It was about this time that the surrender was signed on the battleship Missouri, some 3,000 yards from our ship.



At an air base between Yokosuka and Yokohama, I went up an overlooking hill and found an interesting board nailed to a wooden post at an anti-aircraft battery: This board had accurate freehand drawings of the different American planes, each marked with the optimal "lead" distance (in meters) to bring it down. Then I went down to the air base proper and met the base commander--he was still in uniform. He was the only "militant/defiant" Japanese officer I had encountered after the surrender and, needless to say, his attitude embittered me. He insisted his country should never have surrendered; moreover he went on to claim that the Japanese Air Force had about 2,000 planes hidden on airstrips around Honshu, and that their plan had been to sink every allied ship as it came in and anchored at Tokyo Bay.

We made frequent trips out of Yokosuka into Tokyo, usually picking up personnel from aircraft carriers. We performed this service almost daily because the LSM could easily



traverse shallow water, unlike most of the larger ships. I would also go into town for sightseeing and souvenirs: For example, I saw the Emperor's Palace Grounds (a landmark that had been deliberately spared by the B-29s) and the earthquake-proof Imperial Hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. At the Imperial, I bought some pearls at Mikimoto's main showroom. I also purchased Japanese

pictures (with captions in Japanese) of the bombing of Pearl Harbor--these were the first I had ever seen.

When I went ashore in Tokyo, I took Hershey Bars, Ivory Soap, cigarettes, etc. to the Japanese for selling/trading as they regarded such items as valuable commodities. Of course in those days right after the war, we had to do a lot of bartering for Japanese currency because we had only American dollars and there was not yet an established rate of conversion to yen. I recall there was one storage area in the rear of the ship that had been contaminated by a few gallons of diesel fuel from a cracked weld. Since this compartment got very hot, extra provisions stored there would pick up a distinct "flavor" from the partially vaporized diesel fuel--in particular, a hoard of chocolate bars I had taken into town and sold to the Japanese was so affected. Later I returned to town with more chocolate, but one of the Japanese buyers seemed quite upset: "No, No! Choklot no gud--got gazzoleene!" I mustered my most deadpan expression and corrected him: "No, not gasoline: diesel fuel." At this he brightened up, replying: "Ooooh, deezel fuoll--OK!" and bought the whole lot.

I took a short train trip from Yokosuka down the coast of Honshu to Kamakura, where I photographed the Great Buddha. A little later on, I also went by train to visit Yokohama. I could just take off and visit all these places, as duty permitted, since I only had to answer to the Captain and Exec. That was one of the great things about being an officer on a small ship like an LSM, and it allowed me to see so much. I'm sure such freedom of movement would be impossible in today's Navy. Around October/November 1945, we were ordered to take gasoline and other provisions to different bases around the Japanese main islands, so we left Tokyo Bay for Nagoya on Honshu Island. It was there that I took a private tour of the Noritake factory escorted by the manager, and bought several pieces of china. From Nagoya, we went on to Wakayama and then to Nagasaki, where I went ashore to view the damage. The city was not as devastated as Hiroshima because clouds had interfered with the bomb run and prevented a direct hit. We also visited a base in Sasebo, north of Nagasaki.



Around the first of December 1945, we were sent to Oshima Island which is situated about 30 miles from the entrance to Tokyo Bay. We were apparently the first American ship to land there and, from what I understand, we were the first Americans the Japanese people there had ever seen. After they saw that we

weren't going to hurt them, the Mayor of the town of Habu invited the officers to come up to have dinner with their local authorities and we accepted. They served Japanese specialties like squid and other assorted delicacies which we ate with chopsticks--with some difficulty. I wasn't too enthusiastic about the squid but the Sake sure was good. For our part, we gave them chocolate bars and a few bars of Ivory Soap. We casually mentioned that our crew would be painting the hull of the ship the following day, but when they heard that, they offered to do it for us! So the local people came over the next morning and completed the whole job in two days, hanging over the ship on slings. We fed them chocolate ice cream produced by a machine we had rigged-up on the ship, and they had a complete fit over that. While they were in the midst of painting, I decided to tour part of the island on foot. I walked a couple miles and came across a school, but when the children saw me they all ran inside.



After our return to Tokyo Bay, Captain Ruebeck left the 371 along with one other officer.



Tony Castagnoli became the new Captain, and I became the Exec as well as Engineering Officer. Ensign John White and Wayne Fisk, the Gunnery/Stores Officer, stayed with the ship until we got back home. We spent Christmas 1945 in Tokyo Bay.

Our last assignment was to lead a three-ship group back to the United States carrying large-bore Japanese cannon. The LSM-371 was to carry back the world's largest (18.1-inch) naval cannon; it was to be picked up from Kure, a naval base about 10 miles from Hiroshima. This certainly was a great final mission for us; besides, it meant a trip back to the USA! We went through the Bungo Straits (which had been heavily mined) to the Inland Sea, and then northeasterly to Kure where the cannon was waiting to be loaded. On arrival, I made a tour of the shipyard and noted that one of the drydocks held about a hundred two-man midget submarines.



The cannon was 90 feet long and weighed 180 tons. It was transferred by an enormous floating crane, then to the shipyard's overhead crane and finally loaded on to our ship. The Japanese told us that the cannon was originally intended for the world's largest battleship, a proposed sister ship to the Yamato which had been sunk back in April 1945. Seeing that they were losing the war, they decided instead to place the cannon at the entrance to the Inland Sea; of course the war ended before this could be achieved.

While the ship was at Kure, I drove by jeep to Hiroshima with another officer. As we approached the city, I could easily see the progressive force of the bomb: Initially the houses were flattened only on one side but, as we got closer in, everything was totally flattened and

the destruction was absolute. About the only thing standing at the center was a twisted dome of steel; I was told that this was the frame of a building which had been very near ground-zero. I entered this twisted frame to examine it more closely and, as I walked out to the street on the other side, I saw what appeared to be an x-ray outline of a man etched right on the street's surface.



After loading the cannon, we went back through the Inland Sea and spent the night at a small island that had an Army detachment. The colonel in charge asked if we had any Coca-Cola® on board since they hadn't had any since their arrival on the island. We obliged by loading 25 cases on their LCVP; he returned the favor by giving us an almost new jeep! He said he was required to "survey" a certain number of jeeps from time to time. From there, we returned to Hawaii and then to Long Beach, California where we went into drydock for repairs.

I remember a Chief Petty Officer who needed a ride from Pearl Harbor to California, so we picked him up from his destroyer on the way back. The sea was pretty rough and one of our guys warned him he'd better be careful because he might get seasick. He took great offense at the warning, recounting the many years he'd been in the Navy, and said he did NOT get seasick. Well, 30 minutes later he was real seasick! The LSM rolls more than just about any other vessel on the sea because of its flat bottom; moreover, its low center of gravity makes it "snap-roll" and this can challenge even the strongest stomachs.



While at Long Beach, I learned that my old friend Jack Hans was stationed nearby. Other Navy pilots told me he was one of the very best, and the only landing officer qualified for every plane the Navy had on its carriers. When I got together with Jack, he took me up in an SNJ and we went way out over the ocean. After taking the plane through a series of acrobatics, we suddenly caught sight of a large sailing ship. We flew down to get a better look and, all at once, all these women in bathing suits came running out waving to us. Jack told me to hurry up and get the name of that boat, but its name was painted on the inward slanted fantail making this very difficult--I kept telling him to get lower and lower. With the propwash coming over the wings, I was finally able to read the name and we headed back for the base, dressed up, and went out to meet that sailboat when it came in. We were enthusiastically greeted by all the young ladies aboard who had apparently been most impressed by our airshow.



Since we were going to be at Long Beach several weeks, I caught a ride on an Air Force plane to Columbus, Mississippi where I then hitch-hiked home to Birmingham for a short visit, and then returned by commercial flight. Once I got back, I was ordered to come to the

Commandant's office where I met with an Admiral and other ranking officers. They asked if I would take command of and deliver the LSM-60, modified to hold a suspended atomic bomb, to the Bikini Atoll for an underwater test. They said I could watch the explosion and then they would get me back home and promote me to Lieutenant Senior Grade. But I turned them down; I told them I was very flattered but that I needed to get back home to Alabama and get a job.

When the LSM-371 got underway, I took the ship down through Panama where we saw hundreds of turtles, many manta rays and even a few whales. We went through the Canal and headed north, passing at night along the western tip of Cuba. There I saw a ship off in the distance, several miles to our stern which, as it closed in, proved to be a giant tanker going full speed right towards us. I estimated she was approaching at maybe 25 knots and we were making about half that speed. Her bearing was not changing in the slightest; she continued to come straight at us until it was way too close for safety--we were clearly on a collision course. "What in the world do they think they're doing?" I thought as I focused my glasses and discovered they had no one on the bridge! That tanker would have cut us in two if I hadn't quickly veered off. They never even saw us.



We eventually got to Chesapeake Bay by using dead reckoning to get to the outer banks of North Carolina and using the Cape Hatteras lighthouse as an arrival marker. Between the rough weather and the ship's rolling, it had been difficult to get a good sighting for navigation. As we approached the outer banks of North Carolina on a windy night, I had calculated when we should first spot the lighthouse and, almost to the minute, there it was! Initially we went to Little Creek to notify the Navy that we were ready to deliver the cannon and other guns to Dalgren Naval Proving Grounds. After the guns were unloaded, we left Dalgren to return to Little Creek, and then to drydock at the Norfolk Shipyard. After drydock, the 371 was destined to go to Green Cove Springs, Florida (near Jacksonville) for mothballing.

I was supposed to turn the ship over to one of the two Ensigns that got on board at Long Beach, but both were really green; neither one was an engineer and they seemed to know next to nothing about ship handling. I recall showing them the engine room and being asked about the "steam turbine" even though we had diesel engines! After a question like that, I remember thinking: "What did I do to deserve these guys?" I didn't feel comfortable giving them any real responsibility so they basically had themselves a pleasure cruise to the East Coast. When we got to Little Creek, I spent quite some time with them trying to train them to handle the 371 correctly. Each morning we'd go out together and, after getting underway, I'd try to show them how an LSM was docked--but it was very frustrating, to say the least.

Finally I made up my mind: "I'm just gonna make them dock this ship until they get it right!" We went alongside the dock maybe 20 or 30 times and kept on and on because they just couldn't do it. Our main drive diesel engines were started up using compressed air but unfortunately, after so much starting and stopping, we suddenly found ourselves out of air! We were in REAL trouble then...there we were, adrift in Little Creek Harbor, no starting air, and a fairly brisk wind was blowing us right toward some high voltage lines 1,000 plus yards away at the end of the harbor! "Well, we're either going to get electrocuted or I'm going to get court-martialed," I thought to myself. But then, I called down through the voice tube to the engine room and ordered them to store up all possible starting air and, when I give the word, start ONLY the port engine. I waited as long as I could for the compressed air to build up; finally, when the power lines loomed only about 100 yards ahead, I signalled to start. After a few chugs and skipped heart beats, the port engine DID start! We pulled away, I docked the ship, and we didn't try any more docking practice that day.

When we were finally ordered to drydock, I decided to see whether the Ensigns could navigate from Little Creek to the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. I got the more promising of the two and showed him all the charts and went over every buoy step-by-step, essentially spelling out the entire route for him even though the shipyard was only a few miles away. Once underway, I went down to the ward room and just sweated it out, wondering if he were making out OK. After a few minutes, I couldn't stand the suspense another second and just had to go up and see how things were going. I got on deck and could not believe my eyes: "My Lord," I shouted in complete disbelief, "where ARE we?" But when I looked ahead, I knew in a flash: We were approaching downtown Norfolk in a shallow ferry channel--a channel which was only about 200 feet wide and not much over 10 feet deep. I immediately ordered the starboard engine "all ahead flank" and the port engine "all back full" which basically spun the ship around with mud flying up all over the place. I got out of there fast hoping no one was watching. That green incompetent almost had us grounded in downtown Norfolk! I wouldn't let him touch the ship again and took it into drydock myself. I ended up advising the Navy that those two Ensigns were not competent to deliver the ship to Green Cove Springs--at the very most, they might be able to coastal navigate to Jacksonville.



I took the "surveyed" jeep for one last sightseeing trip to Williamsburg, Virginia and Washington, DC. I then drove back and made my final farewells to my faithful companion, the USS LSM-371, leaving the jeep with the ship. Since I hadn't taken much leave up to then, I took a train to Birmingham to visit with the folks before the Navy sent me to New Orleans to be discharged. I was in New Orleans being processed for the better part of a week, but I was still on terminal leave for several months before finally leaving the

Navy. My lifelong buddy and Navy Fighter Pilot, Jim Strange, was also there; we went up in an SNJ and I got in a little "back seat time." I loved the Navy--I had a great duty, a great ship and a great crew!

You are visitor **002528** since September 10, 2000.

If you would like to contact me, my e-mail address is:

LSM371BILL@mindspring.com

I'd especially love to hear from you if you're an old shipmate or were on another LSM, you recognize yourself or your ship in any of the pictures, or you were a Midshipman in the Sixteenth Class at Columbia/Prairie State, February 1944.

Thanks for stopping by and hope you'll visit again real soon!

Anchors Aweigh & War Eagle!!

Bill Voigt