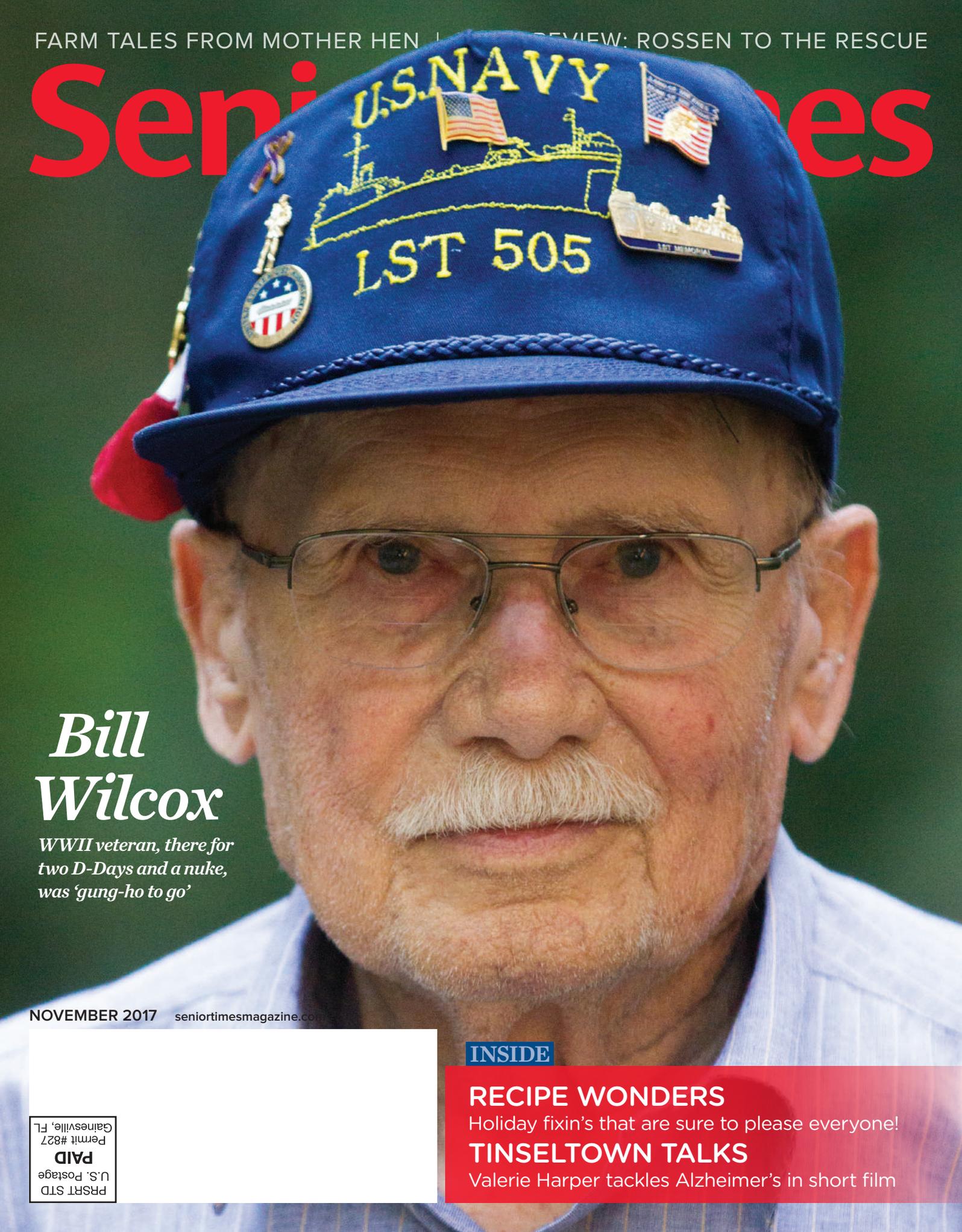


Senior Times



Bill Wilcox

WWII veteran, there for two D-Days and a nuke, was 'gung-ho to go'

NOVEMBER 2017 seniortimesmagazine.com

INSIDE

RECIPE WONDERS

Holiday fixin's that are sure to please everyone!

TINSELTOWN TALKS

Valerie Harper tackles Alzheimer's in short film

PRSRST STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #827
Gainesville, FL

William “Bill” Wilcox

There for Two D-Days and a Nuke,
Sailor was ‘Gung-Ho to Go’

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

William “Bill” Wilcox doesn’t dump his storied history on you all at once, nor does he stray from meek when telling it.

His voice staying soft, his hearing working against him, Wilcox steps about it slowly, but he eventually steers into his magnum opus — at least in terms of historical name recognition. D-Day.

The great amphibious and air assault of June 6, 1944, which sent about 156,000 American, British, and Canadian ground soldiers and paratroopers into the gauntlet that was northern France to begin the slow process of Nazi expulsion from Europe.

As a sailor, Wilcox doesn’t have a gritty tale like those of the infantrymen who charged courageously out of their Higgins boats.

“I give these guys a lot of credit,” the 91-year-old said from inside his Gainesville home. “The Army and the Marines [in the Pacific], they’re really cannon fodder any way you look at it. I mean, there’s just no doubt about it.

“You can imagine: You’ve got 36 guys on a small boat, you drop that ramp, and there’s a machine gun sitting out there. Come on, man.”

(Indeed, by the end of June 6, at least 4,413 Allied soldiers, including 2,499 Americans, lay dead.)

But him simply being there that day — his ship (LST 505) floating offshore as it deployed two Army platoons in two Higgins boats and waited to beach itself to unload equipment —

becomes more and more meaningful as the number of remaining World War II veterans marches inevitably downward.

From the roughly 16 million Americans who served in history’s greatest armed conflict, an estimated 624,000 are still living, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Almost all are in their 90s, and the department predicts the last one will pass away in either 2044 or 2045.

These remaining men and women are a direct connection to a bygone, pre-Vietnam era, one in which the country’s need for soldiers was met with enlistees and not protesters, volunteerism and not draft-dodging.

“I was bugging her so much that I was gonna go one way or the other. I couldn’t wait to get in the service.”

“I couldn’t wait to go. I mean, I wanted to get in the fight,” Wilcox recalled, attributing the fervent mindset of his youth to being “full of piss and vinegar.”

“A lot of us were just gung-ho to go.”

Wilcox was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1926. But with his young father passing away with pneumonia before he was born, a grandmother and aunt in nearby Sykesville began caring for him before his first birthday.

There, he grew up amid the Great Depression and eventually attended Sykesville High School. One pleasant Sunday,

William "Bill" Wilcox holds a photo of himself from his time in the Navy, which led him to a few critical moments during and just after World War II.





Wilcox (right) sits with an APB-45 shipmate who he remembers as "Ruda from Mississippi" in 1945 at New Orleans' Pat O'Brien's, a famous bar that was converted from a speakeasy upon prohibition's end in 1933. Wilcox's first ship from his time in the Navy, LST 505, is at right.

while resting on a bank with friends after a game of touch football, 15-year-old Wilcox heard someone yelling from the gas station across the street about a place called Pearl Harbor.

"Everybody said, 'Where's Pearl Harbor? What's Pearl Harbor?'" he remembered.

But the gravity of the attack on the U.S.'s military installations in Hawaii soon made itself clear, and two years later, at 17, Wilcox convinced his mom to give the parental consent necessary for those under 18 to enlist.

"I was bugging her so much that I was gonna go one way or the other," he said. "I couldn't wait to get in the service."

After signing up in August 1943 and then attending boot camp, Wilcox trained at Solomons, Maryland's Naval Amphibious Training Base.



Safeguarded by the Chesapeake Bay from the coastal U-boat threat, service members trained at the base for the D-Day beach landings as well as for others throughout the European and Pacific fronts.

Upon completing training, the seaman joined the crew of a new LST (Landing Ship, Tank). LSTs were used as port-to-shore transports, beaching themselves to offload tanks, other vehicles, armaments, and troops.

The ship was being finished when Wilcox arrived in Jeffersonville, Indiana, where 123 LSTs were completed by the Jefferson Boat and Machine Company in its Ohio River shipyards during the war.

“We lost a boat, but we also lost Bob. He didn’t get killed. He ended up in the water. He got picked up by another ship, and he never came back to our ship.”

He and other sailors awaited LST 505’s completion at a local YMCA and, when finished, boarded it on Dec. 17, 1943. They headed down the Ohio and then the Mississippi toward New Orleans and the Gulf for their shakedown cruise, which took them to Texas and Florida.

Wilcox was assigned to the deck force, which had him handling topside tasks like loading and unloading, painting, managing lines, standing watch, and being prepared to load a 20mm deck gun if attacked.

As was true of many warships built during this period, the complement of probably between 100 and 150 sailors was relatively green, Wilcox remembered.

“We were too naïve at the time” to worry about our own and others’ inexperience, he said.

Wilcox didn’t know for sure what LST 505’s mission would be following the shakedown cruise, but he assumed it’d take place in Europe and not the Pacific because it started heading up the East Coast instead of toward the Panama Canal.

Along the coast, it picked up equipment, including at Cape Cod on Maryland’s coast. There, the ship got its first real test: rough seas during the early-morning hours of March 2, 1944, so forceful that two cracks opened on the port side and allowed water into lower compartments.

“We thought, ‘Well, it looks like we’re not going to be going anywhere

with this ship,’” Wilcox remembered. “We were all a bit shaken up. ‘Well, what’s gonna happen with this damn thing now?’”

But no one was killed or injured, and a few days in a shipyard had her ready to go.

Later, on March 14, as part of a 69-ship convoy, LST 505 headed from Halifax, Canada, to England to be part of the buildup of troops and supplies taking place there for the invasion of mainland Europe.

“It was good news to all hands that we were to sail to England,” Wilcox wrote long ago. “To most of us it meant, probably, our one opportunity to visit Europe to participate in the greatest invasion of all time.”

By then, the Battle of the Atlantic had been largely won — meaning encounters with U-boats and other Axis vessels and planes weren’t anywhere near as likely as they had been earlier in the war.

The convoy did get one warning from a scout plane of a possible U-boat, but it arrived safely at Milford Haven, Wales, on March 29.

Between then and D-Day, LST 505 sailed to and from port cities in Wales and southern England, training along the way.

Though the ship would indeed end up taking over supplies and some troops, the training’s emphasis was on transporting prisoners and American wounded on the lower, open “tank” deck.

Two things stick out in Wilcox’s mind from his time in Britain: following the English to the safety of tunnels amid air-raid sirens, and hitting the bars.

“A bunch of young sailors, the first thing you want to do is go to the pub,”

Why should you join our planned maintenance program?

TO SAVE MONEY AND LIVE IN WORRY-FREE COMFORT.

CT CARES
PLANNED MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

Joining our CT Cares Planned Maintenance Program ensures that your air conditioning and heating system is properly maintained, keeping it efficient which reduces energy use and helps to eliminate system failures.

Our CT Cares Plan members enjoy call priority status and are never charged overtime fees. Membership allows discounts on all parts and supplies with consistent filter replacements for a healthier home overall.

Join now to receive \$20 off an annual maintenance plan that is right for you and start getting the most out of your comfort system today.

\$20 OFF

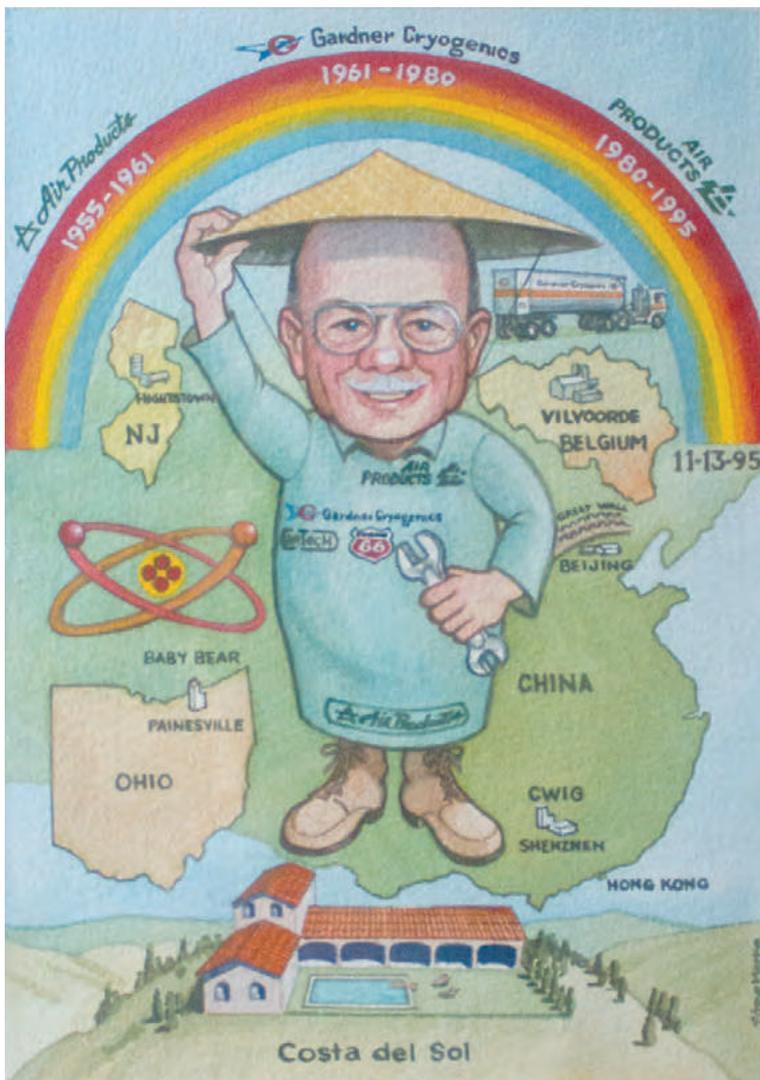
Your Planned Maintenance Program
MUST MENTION OR PRESENT THIS COUPON AT THE TIME OF PURCHASE. NOT VALID WITH ANY OTHER DISCOUNTS. EXPIRES 10/31/17

COMFORT TEMP

24 HR SERVICE
AIR CONDITIONING & HEATING
COMMERCIAL • RESIDENTIAL • INDUSTRIAL

CALL NOW! 352-332-COOL

352-332-2665 | 4301 NW 6TH STREET, GAINESVILLE, FL 32609
WWW.COMFORTTEMP.COM | LI NO CFC1428364 | LI NO CMC039605



Wilcox received this drawing (left) depicting his 40-year career in the industrial-gas business upon his 1995 retirement. He holds a magazine (top) showing a ship similar to his first, the LST 505, and he goes through his military documents (bottom) in his Gainesville home.

Wilcox shows a card (right) he received after participating in Operation Crossroads, the test detonations of two atomic bombs in July 1946 at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.



he said. “And then the problem is over there,” the war brought about beer shortages, so the English didn’t like the Americans drinking what little they had.

On June 2, Wilcox could tell training had ended by the way tanks, jeeps, artillery, and soldiers were being loaded onto the 505 in Plymouth, England.

And on June 6 — after bad weather nixed the original date of June 5 — the ship, about 6,000 others, and at least 11,500 aircraft headed to battle.

For Wilcox, memories from D-Day itself aren’t the clearest. He does recall being topside at general quarters and hearing Allied ship cannons fire at Omaha Beach, by far the bloodiest of the five Allied landing sites.

On that first day, the 505 didn’t get to beach itself to unload its materiel because of the disarray on the shore.

But the ship’s two Higgins boats did land, with one being destroyed after unloading its troops. It had hit a landmine as pilot Bob Tweed backed it off the beach.

“We lost a boat, but we also lost Bob,” Wilcox recalled. “He

didn’t get killed. He ended up in the water. He got picked up by another ship, and he never came back to our ship.”

That first night, Wilcox spotted the only active enemy he’d see during the war: German reconnaissance planes dropping flares over the invading forces.

“We thought, ‘Well, what’s going to happen now?’” he remembered. “But nothing happened. ... We thought something else was going to following behind there lighting us up.”

By D-Day, Wilcox had received his shipfitter rating, which tasked him with working on and repairing the ship’s metal parts. (He considers himself fortunate for having to only ever repair minor leaks.)

His shop was on the tank deck, so after the 505 eventually got to drop off its supplies on June 7, he saw the loaded-up German prisoners and American injured, wrapped and bloodied.

One specific encounter with a German army captain hasn’t escaped him: “I said something, and he answered me in perfect English. I started talking to him. ‘Where’d you learn your English?’ He said, ‘I worked for Ford Motor Company in

JOINT TASK FORCE ONE
ATOMIC BOMB TEST

WILCOX, William H, SF2 258 61 37, USN

has participated in OPERATION CROSSROADS
ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to test the effect
of the Atomic Bomb on naval vessels and conducted
at Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands.

USS HENRICO (APA 45)
(Unit or ship)

JACK B. WILLIAMS
Commanding

Vice Admiral, U. S. Navy
Commander Joint Task Force ONE

LOTS OF TREASURES
FROM THE PAST!
Open Friday, Saturday
& Sunday 8-4pm



Chiefland FARMER'S FLEA MARKET

We have something for
everyone! Young & Old.

- GENUINE LEATHER SHOP
- JEWELRY
- CHRISTIAN BOOK STORE
- GROCERIES
- COMPUTER REPAIR
- TOOLS
- CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
- ANTIQUES COLLECTABLES
- R.V. PARK
- WEATHER KING® SHEDS
- GUN SALES
- SO MUCH MORE!!

 **2 RESTAURANTS WITH
HOME COOKED MEALS**

PHONE &
DIRECTIONS **352-493-2022**

1206 N YOUNG BLVD. (US 19) CHEIFLAND, FL 32626

From Gainesville/Jonesville:
Take SR 26 to Trenton,
then 129 South to US 19 N.
(Flea Market on the left)

From High Springs/Alachua:
Take SR 41 to SR 26 to Trenton,
then 129 S. to U.S. 19 N.
(Flea Market on the left)

www.ChieflandFleaMarket.com

Detroit!' I say, 'What?!'"

The 505 would make eight total round trips across the English Channel, hauling supplies and troops and taking back injured and prisoners.

Then, on July 18, it headed from Fal-mouth, England, to Tunisia, to Naples, Italy (which had already been captured from the Italians), and then finally to a beach at Frejus in southeastern France.

The ship hit the beach in the early morning of Aug. 15, 1944, for the first wave of Operation Dragoon. The invasion — often overlooked by the larger, earlier, and bloodier one to the north — is also known as "France's second D-Day."

This time, the 505 unloaded six Hig-gins boats and 13 DUKWs, essentially

boats with wheels for land travel, all filled with troops from the Army's 45th Infantry Division.

"It was pretty quiet," Wilcox recalled of the calmness of the landing. "We didn't see any action down there at all."

As the coastal situation in Europe swung more and more in the Allies' favor, the 505 headed back to the U.S., and after some leave time, Wilcox received additional training at Solomons and then was reassigned to the USS Blackford (APB-45).

Emerging late in the war and near the time of Japan's surrender, the APBs were converted LSTs that served as floating barracks for troops during the occupation of the Japanese mainland.

APB-45 stayed in Japan from August

Advertise Here

for as little as
\$219 per month!

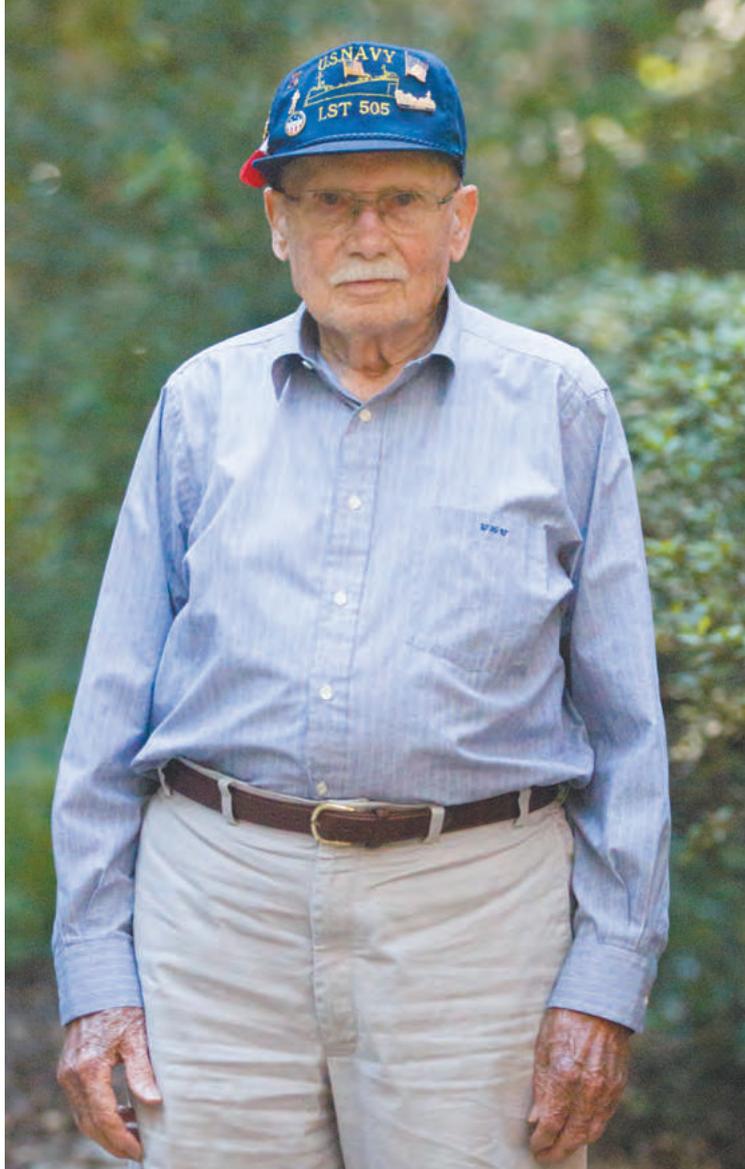


To request
more
information
and a copy
of the rate
card, please
contact us
through our

website or call 352-372-5468.

Senior Times

www.seniortimesmagazine.com



1945 to April 1946, mostly in Tokyo, and was the quarters for the Naval Technical Team Japan, which confiscated and studied Japanese military equipment and manufacturing.

The things that stand out in Wilcox's mind from his time in Japan are: the charcoal-burning cars, used because of gas shortages; citizens bowing outside Emperor Hirohito's palace; and, amid all the bombing destruction, the Dai-Ichi Seimei insurance company's intact building, which U.S. General Douglas MacArthur used as his headquarters while overseeing the occupation.

There for both European D-Days and the occupation of Japan, Wilcox does have another noteworthy item on his war-time checklist — and it started with a bar fight at Pearl Harbor on his return trip from Japan.

"I got back to the ship with a big hangover" after being caught by the Navy shore patrol and spending the night in the brig, he recalled.

"The next morning, I was standing on deck, and Captain Williams said, 'Well Wilcox, sounds like you had a pretty good

"We've lost a few, but I know most of their stories, at least the ones I've [visited] with long enough, and they're fantastic guys. And I look forward every month to being with them."

night. I said, 'Yessir.' He said, 'Well, you like it out here. I'm just going to leave your ass out here.'"

The dismissal from the ship turned into a transfer.

He ended up on the USS Henrico, which participated in Operation Crossroads, code for the test detonations of two atomic bombs — on July 1 and 25, 1946 — at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

While much was studied from the explosions, the Henrico's job was to help set up for tests on how an A-bomb affects a naval fleet. It did this by helping anchor older, surplus, and captured German and Japanese ships near the explosion site,



Wilcox shows some of his military-related clothing. He left the service in June 1947, and the pin (below) indicates his final rank, petty officer first class. Soon after his discharge, Wilcox got involved in the industrial-gas business, which carried him to the secret effort in the 1960s to develop liquid hydrogen as rocket fuel.



and installing measuring equipment on them.

Wilcox was one of 42,000 sailors, political leaders, scientists, and others to see the July 1 test. They watched from what was considered a safe distance, but he isn't fully sure.

"We were so damn naïve," said Wilcox, who saw the explosion's flare from behind the welding mask he wore for eye protection.

"Nobody knew anything — about atomic radiation poisoning or anything else — and we had no real protection, none whatsoever."

In January 1947, Wilcox received one last transfer — to the USS George Clymer transport ship, on which he participated in some mock landings at San Diego — before being discharged that June with the rank of petty officer first class.

After the service, Wilcox returned home to Maryland and got his start in the industrial-gas business. He did so without a formal education, instead learning the trade from the ground up — first by working with oxygen in the making of steel at a plant in Sparrow's Point outside Baltimore.

Starting with Air Products and Chemicals in 1955, he moved up the company and became plant manager in the 1960s at the company's "Baby Bear" plant in Painesville, Ohio. There, the company worked secretly to develop liquid hydrogen, used as rocket fuel, for the Air Force. (The two other plants involved in the project were "Mama Bear" and "Papa Bear.")

Wilcox worked for Air Products for a total of 21 years between 1955 and his retirement in 1995, with 19 years in the middle devoted to a startup venture that was bought by Air Products, which brought Wilcox back in.

He concluded his working years in China, where he met his wife, Jenny. They ended up moving to and around Florida until settling in Gainesville a few years ago to be near her daughter, a University of Florida student, and the city's hospitals.

Meanwhile, Wilcox has two biological children, four grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Among his retirement activities is attending the monthly D-Day Normandy Veterans of North Central Florida luncheons at Conestogas Restaurant in Alachua. (The group is now open to all World War II veterans and has about 15 who still go regularly.)

"I look at them today, and I thought, 'Wow, these are living history,'" said Gainesville resident Diane Fischler, 70, who is involved with area efforts on war history and has attended the luncheons since 2008.

"We've lost a few, but I know most of their stories, at least the ones I've [visited] with long enough, and they're fantastic guys. And I look forward every month to being with them."

As for his reflections on being present for such momentous points in recent world history, Wilcox takes a muted approach.

"You know, sometimes it's hard to reflect on" D-Day and other events, he said. "You kind of get numb to certain situations, and it's just part of the job, you know?"

"And that's the way it is."§