

WWII's Underage Sailors • Marines Take Back Alcatraz

# NAVAL HISTORY

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## The U.S. NAVY in VIETNAM

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# ‘Too Young to Be Scared’

BY BRUCE M. PETTY

Although they were underage, boys who volunteered for combat in World War II were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.



**B**etween the two World Wars, and especially once the Great Depression hit, getting into one of the armed services was almost as big of an accomplishment as getting accepted into an Ivy League college. For the lucky few, being in the U.S. Navy meant having three meals a day, a place to sleep, and the opportunity to learn a trade that could continue to benefit them professionally later on as civilians. Many Depression-era Americans worried that another economic downturn could occur. As a result, many servicemen—even former prisoners of war—elected to serve until retirement.

After Pearl Harbor was attacked in December 1941 and the United States entered World War II, joining the U.S. Navy became easier. With new ships under construction and the nation in a struggle for its very survival, all branches of the service sought new recruits. In addition to having regular meals

PHOTOS COURTESY OF B. L. PETTIT AND RICHARD H. JOHNSON

Teenagers B. L. Pettit (upper left) and Richard H. Johnson were among an estimated 200,000 youths who fabricated their ages to enlist in the services during World War II. Pettit was kicked out of the Navy at the ripe old age of 16 after serving for three years; Johnson, a 14-year-old when the United States entered the conflict, served throughout the war.

and a place to lay one's head, revenge for the attack on Pearl Harbor was a motivating factor to join. For others, enlisting in the Navy was an alternative to being drafted into the Army.

Individuals who in peacetime may not have qualified due to age or medical issues would be given waivers. Many Seabees—members of the Navy's construction battalions—were in their 40s and older, and some even had physical infirmities. They were not only allowed to serve, but were actively recruited due to their much-needed skills. Likewise, around 200,000 teenagers (including some young women) who would be considered too young to serve in any country's military lied about their age to join

the services during World War II. Many of them would die before they were old enough to vote.<sup>1</sup>

Some of these individuals, including Calvin Graham, were as young as 12. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy along with some older teenagers from Texas (older meaning 16 and 17). He was 13 by the time he graduated from boot camp and headed for the Solomon Islands on board the battleship USS *South Dakota* (BB-57) as a gunner's mate. During one of the many battles fought around Guadalcanal, the boy was wounded. However, after the *South Dakota* returned to the United States for battle-damage repairs, his age was discovered. Despite being decorated for bravery, he was sent to the stockade for lying. He was finally released but was not allowed an honorable discharge, which meant he had no benefits. It would be many years later before they were finally granted.<sup>2</sup>

**A**nother young sailor, B. L. Pettit, was born in 1928 in Houston, Texas. His father died when he was only ten months old, and after the onset of the Great Depression, Pettit spent much of his youth supporting his family by

doing odd jobs after school and on weekends. A year after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Pettit falsified his age to enlist in the Navy; as far as the service was concerned, he was born in 1924. At the age of 13, Pettit started off as a seaman's apprentice, but by the time he left the service at the end of the war at the ripe old age of 16, he was an electrician's mate first class.

Pettit was not the only teenager in his boot camp, and he remembered the first night in the barracks hearing other young men sniffing, probably thinking they had made a mistake. For many, going off to war was their first time away from home, and some would never see their families again. Pettit graduated from boot camp in January 1943, but with only an eighth-grade education, he didn't qualify for any of the Navy's schools. Instead he was sent immediately to the fleet oiler USS *Tallulah* (AO-50). Once on board, Pettit studied hard to become an electrician's mate, but he was unhappy serving on a noncombat ship that only made routine trips back and forth across the Pacific.

In March 1944, as an electrician's mate third class, Pettit was transferred to a newly constructed vessel. *LCI(L) 750* wasn't exactly a destroyer, but the landing craft, infantry (large) did see combat. By war's end, she had earned two battle stars and participated in landings on western New Guinea, Moritai Island, and the Philippines. Pettit stayed on board *LCI(L) 750* until the war ended. Once the Navy learned that he had falsified his age, he was dismissed—not discharged—from the service.

This created a multitude of problems for Pettit. He had no benefits and had trouble finding work because he lacked discharge papers. But thanks to Texas Congressman Albert Thomas and newspapers taking up his cause, he was eventually given an honorable discharge, which allowed him to go back to school on the G.I. Bill. But first he had to graduate from high school, and he hadn't completed junior high before enlisting in the Navy. He graduated from high school in 1948 and Texas A&M in 1952 with a degree in electrical engineering. For years afterward Pettit stayed connected with the Navy through his work as an electrical engineer, and he spent six months with the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean as a Western Electric field engineer on radar gunfire control systems.<sup>3</sup>

**R**ichard Johnson was 14 when he joined the Navy, and looks even younger in photographs from that time. Like Pettit, Johnson served on board a Navy oiler; however, he chose to do so. His time aboard the *Taluga* (AO-62) was anything but routine. He was assigned to the 1st Division—the deck force—and eventually became the coxswain of the division's motor launch and the gun captain of one of the twin 40-mm antiaircraft guns. The *Taluga* may not

have been a combat ship, but she saw plenty of action, often being attacked while refueling other ships. She was also at Ulithi Atoll when another oiler, the *Mississinewa* (AO-59), was struck and set afire by a manned suicide torpedo—a *kaitan*.

Later, again anchored in Ulithi, the *Taluga* witnessed an attack on the fleet by several kamikazes, one of which hit the aircraft carrier *Randolph* (CV-15). In December 1944, off the coast of the Philippines, the *Taluga* was caught in what later became known as Halsey's typhoon, one of the worst of the war. Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey's 3rd Fleet was right in the middle of it: Three destroyers rolled over and sank with the loss of most of their men, while other ships were severely damaged and planes were swept off flight decks of aircraft carriers. The *Taluga* survived, but Johnson and his shipmates remembered that event as being just as frightening as combat, even more so because it lasted so long.

For the *Taluga*, like the rest of the Navy in the Pacific, the last months of the war were probably the most eventful. Okinawa was the last major battle of World War II and the bloodiest of the Pacific campaigns. The Japanese threw everything they had at the United States and its allies to stave off the invasion of their Home Islands. Kamikazes did the most damage to Allied ships, resulting in 10,000 U.S. Navy casualties. On the morning of 16 April 1945, the *Taluga* was attacked by ten of them. Most were shot down, but one made it through to strike the oiler. Johnson remembers seeing machine-gun bullets striking the deck around him. The plane then hit the mainmast just 20 feet above his head before crashing forward of the well deck, close to where 300,000 gallons of aviation fuel was stored. Several men were killed or wounded as a result, but the *Taluga* survived.

Years later at a ship's reunion, Johnson asked one of his old officers why they put a juvenile like him in charge of a boat and gun crew made up of older men. The response: "At your age, we felt you were too young to be scared and would act without giving too much thought to it." Johnson stayed in the Navy for 11 years, but with a wife and four children to support, he left the service and became a police officer. He eventually rose to chief of police in Hampton, Maine, retiring 35 years later.<sup>4</sup> ⚓

1. Tony Welch, "Don't Count Him Out Yet!" American Veterans Center, [www.americaveteranscenter.org/2012/02/veterans-of-underage-military-service](http://www.americaveteranscenter.org/2012/02/veterans-of-underage-military-service).

2. Gilbert King, "The Boy Who Became a World War II Veteran at 13 Years Old," *Smithsonian.com*, 19 December 2012, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-boy-who-became-a-world-war-ii-veteran-at-13-years-old-168104583/?no-ist](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-boy-who-became-a-world-war-ii-veteran-at-13-years-old-168104583/?no-ist).

3. Based on July 2001 oral history interview the author conducted for his book, *Voices From The Pacific War: Bluejackets Remember* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004).

4. *Ibid.*