

Union-Bulletin

Ernie Baumgardner's war



With the backdrop of a framed copy of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin announcing the Aug. 15, 1945, surrender of Japan, 91-year-old World War II Navy veteran Ernie Baumgardner poses for a photograph as the V-J Day anniversary draws near. Photo by [Jeff Horner](#).

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Higgins boat a WWII invasion workhorse

#Anyone who has seen a World War II movie featuring troops going ashore has seen a Higgins boat (or at least a Hollywood replica of one).

#Designated as “LCVP” for “Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel” the flat-bottomed boat was designed by Andrew Higgins of Louisiana in the 1930s for oil prospecting and trappers.

#As World War II approached, the U.S. Marine Corps began to express interest in Higgins’ boat. An early model of it, the “Eureka boat,”

was tested in 1938 by the Navy and Marine Corps. It surpassed the performance of a Navy-designed boat and further tests were conducted by the services during fleet landing exercises in February 1939.

#Higgins modified the design in 1941 to incorporate a ramped bow that allowed men and vehicles to rapidly exit after running up on a beach.

#Each Higgins boat was 36 feet 3 inches in length and had a beam of 10 feet 10 inches. Its displacement when unloaded was 18,000 pounds, and it could maintain a speed of 9 knots. The craft had a four-man crew, the coxswain who steered the boat, an engineer and two sailors who acted as semaphore signalmen and carried out other duties.

#Each craft could carry 36 combat-equipped infantrymen or 8,000 pounds of cargo. According to sources, a total of 23,398 LCVPs were produced during World War II and the craft remained in service until 1950.

#WALLA WALLA — In wartime, there are many viewpoints. For Ernie Baumgardner, his was at sea level.

#A U.S. Navy veteran, Baumgardner went through seven invasions during World War II, getting a front-row seat to each one aboard a Higgins boat, one of the ubiquitous landing craft that ferried men, vehicles and supplies from ship to shore.

#With the exception of his first landing, Baumgardner served as the coxswain, the man responsible for steering the boat. "I'm the only guy, when we hit the beach, who was displaying his whole person," he joked, referring to the fact that he had to remain standing up while at the helm.

#Baumgardner, now 91, and a friend, Ron Wilham, enlisted in the Navy in 1942, "six months to the day after Pearl Harbor." The recruitment office was "right on Main Street between the Book Nook and the Beehive (store)," he said. "I tried to get another friend, Karl (Eichele) to enlist with us, but he said 'No, no. I can't swim that ocean!'"

#After basic and advanced training, Baumgardner was assigned to the USS Calvert, an attack transport ship that carried about 18 landing craft. Both crew and soldiers shared cramped quarters. "We were stacked in our racks," he said about the tight-spaced arrangement of bunks and during mealtimes "we stood up to eat, we didn't sit down."

#Baumgardner's first invasion was "Operation Husky," the Allied landings on Sicily on July 9-10, 1943. At that time he was a signalman, "talking" to the other landing craft via semaphore flag signals as they prepared to head ashore.

#"I have real memories of the fear of gas," he wrote later. The evening before the landing he and the other sailors washed themselves with a protective chemical and dipped their coveralls in the substance as well. They were also issued gas masks.

#Those preparations were, literally, washed away. As they approached the beach in a "very heavy sea" the landing barge broached, going sideways and turning on its side, spilling everyone into the water.

#“All of our gas masks were soaked beyond use. Crawling up a sandy bank, we found a hole to keep out of sight. All of this during daybreak,” Baumgardner wrote. As they were cleaning their .45 pistols “which were also soaked like we were, full of seawater and sand,” they heard the scream of an airplane coming out of the sun on a dive bombing run.

#As they watched, a bomb landed between two landing craft. “It was a dud,” Baumgardner said. “Another bomb landed closer to us (and) someone yelled, ‘It’s gas!’ If it would have been gas I would not be here today.”

#Although he can laugh about it now, Baumgardner said “I was so scared if I had Jesus’ shoes I would have run out on the Mediterranean.”

#After Sicily, the Calvert steamed back across the Atlantic and through the Panama Canal. After a stop in Seattle, it went on to Pearl Harbor. It was there that Baumgardner learned how to steer a Higgins boat, eventually earning the rank of Boatswain’s mate, second class.

#“I remember one of our officers giving me hell. He said ‘You will learn to drive this boat if it kills me!’” he said. Becoming a coxswain also meant that he and his engineer had to make sure the boat they were assigned to was ready when it came to deploy. “You had more responsibility for that old barge than you would believe,” he said.

#It was in the Pacific theater that Baumgardner went through his next six invasions. Makin atoll in the Gilbert Islands and then Kwajalein, Saipan and Tinian in the Marshall Islands. His final two landings were in the Philippines.

#“We were in harm’s way all of the way. We were always in the first or second wave” of landing craft coming ashore, Baumgardner said. But he never knew the soldiers who were in his boat or their fates.

#“Once they went off the barge we never saw them again,” he said.

#Baumgardner was not the only one in his family fighting in the war. One of his brothers, Frank, had joined the Navy before Baumgardner enlisted and it was during his third invasion at Kwajalein atoll that he learned that his brother was in the same neighborhood, so to speak.

#“(He) was aboard a destroyer (the USS Sterett) shelling the beach while I was in the lagoon landing the Marines. I met him just after this at Pearl (Harbor),” Baumgardner recalled.

#The invasion of Saipan came next and, after that, the landing on Tinian, a neighboring island. Baumgardner’s role there was to take part in a decoy operation to draw fire away from the Marine force coming in on the other side of the island.

#“We had shells (and) shrapnel coming in all around us,” Baumgardner recalled. “I heard one (shell) coming in and I ducked behind my steering wheel and the shrapnel hit it. It was the closest I came to a Purple Heart.”

#After Tinian came the Philippines. The the first landing was on Leyte, where Gen. Douglas MacArthur made good his promise to reclaim the islands.

#“Our ship was anchored up the beach from where MacArthur marched from the landing barge and made the famous statement, ‘I have returned,’” Baumgardner wrote later. While at that location, he also saw a kamikaze pilot fly directly into a gun crew on a small aircraft carrier. “My thought was, I’m glad it’s there and not here,” he said.

#Then came Lingayen Gulf, where troops landed on the northern coast of Luzon island.

#“That was my last landing,” Baumgardner said. From there his ship was transferred back to Seattle to the Bremerton Navy Yard to be converted into a communications and hospital ship, a job that gave everyone their first long liberty in a long while.

#But before the Calvert returned to action, the war ended when Japan surrendered on Aug. 15, 1945, after the U.S. dropped one atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6 and a second on Nagasaki on Aug. 9. Baumgardner remembered exactly where he was when that latter happened.

#“I was standing on the bridge when the news came over the radio system of the atomic bomb exploding on Nagasaki. I cried like a baby” from relief, he said.

#But although hostilities had ended, Baumgardner’s tour of duty had not.

#“We wound up back in the Philippines. I hadn’t earned enough points to be discharged yet,” he said.

#When that time finally came, he was transferred to a base on the island of Sumar, then came back to the U.S. aboard another ship, arriving in Seattle in October 1945 where he was discharged.

#“My war was over,” he said.

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