

Interviewed by Judy Allen at home of Stephen McGilberry in Wewoka. 10-21-2022.

Stephen McGilberry spent six years in the US Navy. He served from 1942-1945 and again in 1946-1949.

"I was sent to training school right out of basic, from there I went to my assigned ship. It was way off somewhere – we had to travel different places to get to this ship. We were catching up to the USS Marblehead." Stephen served on the Marblehead in the Pacific Theatre three years during WWII. "I worked in the fire rooms where they make steam. The steam is used for electricity and everything. My job helped provide power to the ship. They couldn't have power if we didn't do our job, so we worked seven days a week," he said.

"We were assigned a certain job. If we came into battle, we were called into battle station. While in battle station, we were assigned a certain job, too. We were to supply ammunition for some of the 20 and 40mm guns. We had to keep up as they were firing. There was a certain compartment where ammunition was stored. We practiced now and then, but when we were in real battle, it was something else!" said Stephen.

He said the food on the ship was "fair".

"I made friends on the ship. I worked with Jeffrey Barr. He made it through the war, too. Thirteen of Stephen's buddies from Jones Academy are on the WWII memorial at Tushka Homma.

"We stayed on the ship most of the time, didn't get any leave time," said Stephen. He said they had a supply ship to resupply them, so it was rare to get off the ship. The enlisted men had movies for entertainment," he said. "The only time we had new movies was when another ship came by and we traded movies!"

When he joined the service, Stephen thought he might join the Army. "At the start of WWII, England was fighting Germany and draftees were entered into a draft. When your draft number came up, they would call for duty in the Army. Meanwhile, I went to school for certain things, and was trained as a machinist. When I asked if I could have a certain job in the Army, I was told "No, we will put you where we want you." So I went across the hall and joined the Navy."

Stephen attended basic training at Fort McClellan. "I'd say for a young man, basic training in the military would be very good. It keeps them on track for what they want to do in the future, plus they get training, also." Before joining, Stephen had been in Oklahoma City. He took a train to basic at Norfolk, Rhode Island. He went to the East Coast for work, just before joining the Navy. He joined while he was on the East Coast, and had a job in New Haven, Connecticut.

"For a period of time, we did escort duty for the flagships going from the United States to England, traveling on really rough water. We were short-handed and they put us on four hours work and four hours off. This went on for two weeks – four on and four off – it was something else. We did that a couple of times," said Stephen.

Going over was pretty scary because Germany had all those submarines out there. They were sinking supply ships and I don't know how true it was but we heard if Germany sank a supply ship they wouldn't go back to help. If the men got in the water, they would perish in the water. I heard if we were torpedoed to kind of forget about it because we were doomed. We thought and worried about that all three years. Submarines were more or less after those supply ships," said Stephen.

Stephen was not married when he joined the Navy. He said, "Mama and Daddy were at home, and I had two sisters and a brother. My Brother, Cheedle, was also in the service. He served in the Army, then joined the Air Force until his retirement." Stephen's son, Charles McGilberry, a Vietnam Veteran, served 1972 and 1973. He was willing to go overseas but was not sent. Charles died September 2022.

Stephen was born in Oklahoma near Stigler. "Dad had a farm to work and had inherited another one near Atoka. My Dad was Solomon McGilberry and Mom was Vera Hopper. While Dad was working on the farm, some other different towns started striking oil and he followed oil field workers. We were in Seminole about three years and then went to OKC," said Stephen. While living in Seminole, he attended the Indian Nation Baptist Church and remembers the Choctaw hymns that were sang there.

He said some of his best memories include going to boarding school at Jones Academy. "It was during the depression. "I liked the athletics and the music class. I went out for football and stayed on team a while. When the school hired a man who was a boxing instructor, I went into boxing and stayed with it."

He eventually married Vera Wilkerson, and they were blessed with five boys and one girl. "Being the age I am is one thing, but I wouldn't recommend it. You live to see all your friends go." He has also lost his wife and five sons.

"A message I would like to leave for future generations is to get a good education, do things you like to do, and learn things that will take you through life."

When asked what was the greatest invention of mankind, Stephen said, "The ability to send a man to the moon!"

Stephen said he was happy to participate in the Veterans book and archive project "so people down the road will see it and maybe benefit from it." He also said, "I would like to see the Choctaw Nation continue doing the things they are doing. Helping those in need."