

# **John B. Whitehead**

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## **John B. Whitehead**

Today is December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1993. My name is Gerhardt Seegers. I am a volunteer at Midway Village and Museum Center. We are in the office of John B. Whitehead who lives at 2417 Barrington Place, Rockford, Illinois. Mr. Whitehead served in a branch of the United States Army during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war. First of all, John, I thought you would like to introduce yourself for us. What is your full name?

**WHITEHEAD:** My name is John Whitehead. We are sitting in my office at 5100 East State Street, on the first day of winter, 1993, Gary Seeger and I.

**SEEGER:** Were you born in Rockford, John?

**WHITEHEAD:** I was. I was born in the old downtown Rockford Memorial Hospital on Elm Street.

**SEEGER:** What is your date of birth?

**WHITEHEAD:** September 10 of 1923.

**SEEGER:** Would you also give us the name of your parents?

**WHITEHEAD:** My father was Loren L. Whitehead. My mother was Harriet Burpee Whitehead.

**SEEGER:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**WHITEHEAD:** I have two sisters. My sister Ruth, who is three years younger, who is married to Dan Nicholas; a sister Jean who is three years younger than she, I guess was married to Page Reese.

**SEEGER:** Going back to your time in the military, what was life like for you prior to the war? What were you doing prior to your service?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I graduated from Rockford West High School, the first graduating class in 1941, spring of '41. I was the class valedictorian. We had the big graduation at the Coronado Theater. I got a scholarship and went on to Northwestern University. That being the fall of '41 and war was all the way around us but not upon us. I joined the Navel ROTC. So I had 2 years of normal college life. Then the Navy took over the campus as a training center and we lived our life as trainees in what was formerly our fraternity houses, but now we stood watch and marched and exercised and all these things that went on from '43 to early '44, when they suddenly decided they were running short of Naval officers so they dragged us out slightly ahead of time and I went on to serve there.

**SEEGER:** Were you inducted then? In ...

**WHITEHEAD:** I was commissioned as an Ensign in February of '44 having been indoctrinated as a seaman, I guess you would say in the summer of '43.

**SEEGER:** What did you do after your commission? What was ...

**WHITEHEAD:** Well I was shipped to the Philadelphia Navy Yard and outfitted with woolen shirts and so forth, that being February. We were sent down to Cape May, New Jersey, where there were a number of fledgling officers like myself, and we served on various small craft that did patrol duty off the mouth of the Delaware River. Some minesweepers swept that area because the

German subs, early in the war, had been active in that section. So I was at Cape May for about four months. Then I was shipped down to Miami, to the Small Craft Training Center where we were trained in underwater sound detection at that time. Then I was sent to the Naval gun factory at Washington, D. C., [Washington Navy Yard] for about three or four weeks, or a little longer. We were finally assigned to the PGM-32 which is a patrol craft which was being built in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, as many of the smaller ships were at that time, [at] the Smith shipyard there [Leatham D. Smith Shipbuilding Company].

That ship came down through Lake Michigan, through Chicago and the Illinois River and down the Mississippi and down to New Orleans, where I met it and we outfitted it, took it on a shake-down and so forth. From there, we went through the Panama Canal; up to San Diego; up to Pearl Harbor and down to the Southwest Pacific and down to \_\_\_?\_\_\_ where the war had just finished. Up to \_\_\_?\_\_\_ for a couple of weeks and then they sent us to Okinawa at the end of the Okinawa invasion.

Later we went on into Japan after that. We were on a ship that was built because the famous wooden PT boat that President Kennedy and others were on, which were very zippy Chris-Craft type ships, were attempting to clean out the Japanese barges that were in the Philippines. This was before—I don't know—it was right about the time when MacArthur returned to the Philippines. These PT boats were faced with rather slow moving Japanese craft that they put heavier guns on and they were blowing these wooden boats out of the water.

So they built our ship, a sturdier vessel with a half-inch of armor plate, a three-inch gun and a lot of machine guns and so forth. We

were to go down there and clean out the Japanese barges, but by the time we got there, why the war had been won in that area and the barges had been sunk by some other means--aircraft I suppose. So then we were assigned to work with a mine-sweeping fleet which were extensive out in that area; around north of Okinawa, because the Japanese had heavily mined the homeland waters. And so forth.

At that time we were about ready to finish off the Japs in Okinawa and they were going to invade the Japanese homeland. So we would follow along behind the 30 or 40 minesweepers. They would have cables drift out behind the ship; that had underwater veins that would hold these cutters down under the water and they would steam back and forth, then the cables would pick up the mines that were moored by cables themselves. They would slip back along the cable to the cutter at the end of the line, which would then cut the cable on the mine. And the mine would pop to the surface, and somebody would have to go in and detonate them and that was primarily what we were doing.

So we were slowly steaming back and forth in the China Sea, getting ready to go into Japan, when the first atomic bomb was dropped. And of course this [mission] came to a basic conclusion at that point in time. So our ship was then ordered back to Okinawa where we took on fresh supplies and then steamed up to the [unintelligible] I think they called it, which was the bay outside of Tokyo Bay. By that time the second bomb had been dropped. The Emperor decided that they were going to surrender. The point was that they couldn't send these large task force vessels, the aircraft carriers, and the battleships and so forth into Tokyo Bay without being sure that they weren't going to run into mine fields. So our group went in

ahead of that in ahead of that and swept Tokyo Bay and made it safe for the hospital ships to come in and that sort of thing.

**SEEGER:** Were you there when they surrender was signed?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, the surrender was signed a few days after the main occupation of that area. By that time, why, they had already-made plans for us to go to some of the other coastal cities of Japan and sweep the mines out of their harbors. On the day before the surrender on the Missouri although we were as close as a thousand yards from the Missouri. We were ordered to steam out of the harbor and leave. We were close to signing the [unintelligible]. It was an interesting High School reunion I had last year because a friend of mine who I hadn't seen in 50 years, was in the Navy and was saying that he was on the first ship in Tokyo Bay. I said, "What do you mean, the first ship. You couldn't have been, because I was there!" He was on a destroyer that was in Task Force 38 and they were outside the in main harbor outside of Tokyo Bay, but they were unable to go in until we [our gunship] had gone in with these minesweepers. So this chap, when he got back to California, wrote the Navy Department and sent for all of the ship's records of his ship and my ship--the minesweepers that I was working with. So he says that he had to admit he was not the first ship in, but he probably was the first destroyer.

**SEEGER:** Do you have any contact with any of your shipmates?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, surprisingly, but it's like being an immigrant from the old country or something. You kind of cut the ties and everybody had pleasant friendships but bad memories of the war. We have never been close, never had a reunion or anything

of this sort although we have a mixture. We had about a half a dozen officers and about—I think we had 65 other enlisted men on board that came from all over the country.

**SEEGER:** And you had how many men total were on board?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, there was about 70 of us altogether. I started out as the lowliest Ensign and worked up so that when the war was over why then, of course, the senior people who had been around longer like our Captain. My original Captain had been in the North African campaign on a destroyer then shipped then over to the Pacific on our ship. He had quite a bit of seniority and he left almost as soon as the war was over.

In any event we swept the waters around Sendai up on the northeast coast of Japan. Then we went around to the southwest coast around [unintelligible] where I had a reunion with half-dozen friends from Rockford who were also in the Navy. Then after that, we went back down through the Marshall Islands and back to Pearl Harbor.

My wife, who I had met at Northwestern, and I were engaged, of course, all during this time. So I told her that it looked to me like we were going to be coming back to the States; we should plan to get married. Somewhere in 1945 that would have been. So she went ahead merrily with all sorts of plans as you would for a wedding in July. Before anything else—let's see—we went from Pearl Harbor back to San Francisco and that's where I guess I wired her and said it looked like I had time off.

Lo and behold, they decided to hold the atomic bomb tests at Bikini. So our ship was a nice little taxi- (sort of) sized craft, so they said that we should take on a whole new

crew and go back to Pearl Harbor from San Francisco and stand by to go to Bikini.

We had to cancel the wedding plans. This must have been in January or February of '45—or '46 because we were going to talk about a wedding in the early spring of '46. I ended up sitting in Pearl Harbor waiting for the armada to go to Bikini to form, and my time ran out; my points, as they termed it at that point, [and I the ship] over to my executive officer. We came back to the states in June; we were married in July in New York.

**SEEGER:** When did you separate from the service?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, it must have been late June of '46 and we were married in July.

**SEEGER:** What was your rank then?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I was a Lieutenant Junior Grade, which was one above being an Ensign.

**SEEGER:** Did you have leaves or passes during the time you were in the service?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, not when you left the States, but prior to that time, I got home at least once that I can recall.

Other than that we were pretty much confined to what was really quite a small ship by Navy standards. Although, if you owned it, you'd think it was a hell of a big yacht! It was a sporty little craft that did about 25 knots. We were living in close confinement with your fellow shipmates. It was interesting. We didn't really have any narrow escapes. We were close to a lot of big ships that had been damaged in the war. I think that there were kamikaze pilots out there in

the Okinawa area; we saw a lot of banged up stuff.

**SEEGER:** Were you involved in any campaigns?

**WHITEHEAD:** Not in the term that you would use it, like an invasion of this island or another. By the time we were out there—by the time we arrived off the shore of Okinawa on—the day when the rocket ships were standing off the beach just raining what looked like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July; raining rockets in on the shore. There was still a lot of fighting going on in there. A lot of guys that got killed after that but, [in] those island invasions, unless you were on the small craft that really ran up on the beach and dropped the front door and soldiers ran out of, why we were not in a position to take part in that. We weren't as big as say a destroyer; that could operate with the task forces that would be protecting the larger ships and shooting at aircraft. So we were kind of an in-between Navy [vessel], I'd say.

**SEEGER:** Did you—were you strafed by any planes at the time you were out there?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, we were—what do I want to say?—A few cases at night when we'd be steaming along without lights and couldn't see a darned thing, where planes would zoom down right over the top of the wheelhouse. We were never quite sure whether they were Japs or friendlies, but we were never in danger.

Our main danger was when we were destroying mines like—they could go off like a ton of bricks throwing shrapnel into the air. So everybody had to have flack jackets and helmets on. I remember one morning, out there when I had the watch when we destroyed 45 mines in a 4-hour period. Those went off with a boom. You couldn't get too

close because they would set your gyrocompass off its track and destroy and hurt your own ship. The percussion—if you were too close to a depth charge or something.

**SEEGER:** How would you destroy these mines?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, that was left to the ingenuity of each ship, but in our case we finally resorted to the skill of a lot of the crew men that would come in and out of the woods and the hills of Kentucky who were sharpshooters. We set them up on top of the wheelhouse with 30 caliber rifles and they would wing away at them like he was shooting at the Hatfields and McCoys.

**SEEGER:** What would they have to hit a certain areas—strike a certain area?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I guess so. I was never quite sure of that. These things [mines] had—they were probably three feet in diameter. They had horns. Now whether we had to hit the horn or whether just the concussion of a bullet would set it off, I can't remember. When you hit it off, you knew it. Earlier, why we had tried to use 40 mm cannon and 20 mm machine guns, 50 caliber machine guns, all of which we had on board. All that would do—like skipping a stone. You had to get high enough to come down on top of it.

**SEEGER:** Did you have any casualties on your ship?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, I don't think so, other than total seasickness on the part of a few people, we had no problems.

**SEEGER:** Were there storms? Did you have some storms at sea?

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah. We were a couple of times out there in the Okinawa area where they would send the small crafts such as ourselves into any kind of protective inlets that they could find. We were never captured, or anything like that.

**SEEGER:** Then what did you do when you were separated from the service? I know you mentioned ...

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I went back to Northwestern and finished up my last year. As I say we had been taken out of school a year early and commissioned. So I went back and finished up. My wife worked for the Encyclopedia Britannica in the loop, [she] supported us. With the help of the GI Bill we got through. I came back to Rockford or we came back and I went into the real estate business that fall and I have been here ever since.

**SEEGER:** 1946?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well this was 1947.

**SEEGER:** I forgot the year of school there?

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah. My naval career was not heroic but it was very interesting. We saw a lot of the world that we would not have seen before and probably don't care to see again.

It was interesting to anchor in Tokyo Bay the first night without lights and you'd look ashore you'd see some of the activity vehicles and a few of the lights. When we steamed into the bay you would see the shore batteries that had a white flag tied around them. You weren't quite sure whether some renegade might decide that he was going to take one last shot at you or not. But going ashore, why the devastation was just so enormous that Yokohama, which was just

south and adjoined Tokyo, had just been flattened by firebombs. People were living in tin huts just among all this rubble and they suffered enormously, so you can see the atomic bomb was just the finishing touches.

**SEEGER:** Were there any American prisoners of war in Tokyo?

**WHITEHEAD:** Oh, yes. I'm sure they were sprinkled all over Japan. We had—there was one three-story warehouse that was on the waterfront there, somewhere south of Tokyo. That had a great big hand-painted sign on it that said, "We are Yank prisoners. Come rescue us."

What had happened was apparently when the Emperor said, "Surrender," they handed the keys to the jail to the inmates and they walked away. So ultimately, after we finished the minesweeping, the hospital ships came in. They would dock right near this place, and I presume that's where the prisoners went.

**SEEGER:** So you never had any contact with the Japanese?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, we went ashore a couple of times there early in the first three or four days. The people were very deferential. They would—you'd walk down the street with a 45 holster on your side. The people would bow and get out of the way. It was just like the Emperor was walking down the street.

In those days, why, they were wearing wooden clogs for shoes and they were the historic type of Asiatic shoes there, made out of wood bottoms and so forth. I brought home a pair that I took off of somebody's front porch over there that—not sure it was the best thing in the world to do but ...

**SEEGER:** Where were you at the time the first atomic bomb was exploded?

**WHITEHEAD:** We were out [in the ocean], south of Japan and north of Okinawa, east of China out in the China Sea, just steaming back and forth, according to somebody's plan, where the mines were or were supposed to be. There was literally a plan for the invasion of Japan at that point. Nobody looked forward to that, but they felt that some of those islands would have been difficult to take where the homeland would have been the World Series of that type of war.

**SEEGER:** What were your feelings when you had heard that there was a destruction of a town?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well we didn't have any concept of what it was. I mean, nobody in the service knew anything the atomic bomb. It was just the fact that the explosion larger than anyone had seen before and dropped on these towns and so after all the bombing that had gone[on] over in England and Germany and so forth, we figured it was something a little bigger than that—the conception of the [unintelligible].

**SEEGER:** When did you find out just how large this bomb was?

**WHITEHEAD:** I suppose that after a few days, why then the armed forces radio or somebody was talking about some of the details to others as to what it was. I don't think they really knew what they had done in terms of devastation. The damage to humanity over there was terrific. I don't think anybody in the service regretted it before or after, to be honest with you, because I think we've got a lot of guys around today who wouldn't be here if they had to walk over the beaches of Japan to win that war.

**SEEGER:** Did you have any contact with the Veterans Administration following the War? Did you have any occasion to use their services?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, I was—when you're discharged, I had to go to Great Lakes to be discharged. You enroll at the college with the GI Bill and other than that I have never used their medical facilities. I paid the premiums on my life insurance for 40 some years, now. Hope to collect on that someday.

**SEEGER:** Did you receive mail?

**WHITEHEAD:** Oh, yeah.

**SEEGER:** Did you receive mail on a regular basis?

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah. They were very good about that. I suspect that the frequency that I received them was less than some of the big ships. But we might go to two or three weeks, let's say on a rare occasion, and not see any mail, but then there it would be. I wrote my wife every day during the time I was over there, and to my folks frequently, and it turned out that both of them saved all the letters.

Now we have kind of a running history of what was going on day by day. As you read those, the fact that you had to be [unintelligible]. In the first place, the officers censored mail of all of the enlisted men, to make sure you weren't giving away any State Secrets of War, which I think looking back on it, it's rather hilarious. Importance of our activities probably was not paramount to what happened in the war, but in writing yourself, why then you had to be careful. You couldn't say, "Tomorrow we're going to be at Okinawa."

In our case, I had taken an Atlas of the Pacific area and set it out into grid numbers, so when I referred to grid 47 why they could take out the Atlas and see where grid 47 was. At that point, I was sure the Emperor didn't have a similar book, so ...

**SEEGER:** What was the most difficult time during your time in the service?

**WHITEHEAD:** I think the transition from being a couch potato to a new enlistee in the active duty at Northwestern was probably as tough as anything could be. I never wanted to get up early in the morning. Certainly while you're living under military type conditions and they get you up at six o'clock and run you for several miles, climb rocks and so, they get you in pretty good shape.

Then we were commissioned and sent to duty on board small ships where there wasn't any room to be active and so our physical condition rose to a peak and then deteriorated as the war went on. That was the most memorable part of it. And interesting, because when you're mixed in with a bunch of men like that, you really don't know them as well as you should or their background.

I remember the gun control officer--not officer, he was a Petty Officer of some kind--on board who was in charge of the anti-aircraft guns that we had. Very quiet sort of a chap. So, he left the ship when I went back to college, and one day when I was in the bookstore in Evanston, I ran into this guy. I said, "What in the world are you doing here?" He said, "Oh, I'm here getting my Ph.D.!" Of course, I was still working for my undergraduate degree. So I'd been [kept off the ship] and I thought it made an interesting conclusion to our relationship.



**SEEGER:** Did you find—you mentioned there were five officers and ...

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah.

**SEEGER:** Was there a problem when you were an officer as far as contact with the enlisted men?

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah. That was the old Navy line. I guess we broke the rules as much as anybody did on a small ship like that but still the officers had separate quarters and it was, “Sir!” this and “Sir!” that. The officers had their own clubs on shores at Pearl Harbor or wherever they were. The officers had their own set-up. The enlisted men were in a different world as far as that part goes.

There was not a democratic relationship apparently. Let’s put it that way. Strictly from a racial point of view, because I don’t remember that there were many blacks in the Navy, other than stewards mates, who were the really the waiters in those days.

The only exception to that was that one of the first ships that I was on—it was down at Cape May, New Jersey. It was a wooden tuna fishing boat that had been rigged up as a minesweeper with electric cables to go out and detect—or break up mines that were electronic, I guess. I can’t think of the terminology. They were hooked up to great big storage batteries [unintelligible] sort of a minesweeper but they were [unintelligible] ships, and all the officers but me were Black.

That’s the only real occasion I can remember of being [with Blacks]—I don’t think we had no Blacks on board. I don’t know whether they ended up in the Army or whether that was by choice, or what went on but ...

**SEEGER:** Was this ship, one that you were on? That one you said was ...

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah. I was on it for a month.

**SEEGER:** You were the only white ...

**WHITEHEAD:** Yeah, I was the junior officer and I think there were 2 other black officers at that point but it was a very unusual occasion. I never saw a situation like that.

**SEEGER:** Did you ever find out how that came to be?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, because I was shipped on to another ship. From there I went to another ship. We rarely—Our history of duty was usually one of “to be prepared to move at any time.” Those smallcraft that they used along the Eastern Shore, there were a lot of converted yachts. The DuPont yacht was one of the ships that was in the harbor at Cape May. A lovely teak wood ship had been painted Navy gray top to bottom was out there [unintelligible] to a submarine.

**SEEGER:** Was that fairly common to see that? The ships [being commandeered] by the service?

**WHITEHEAD:** I don’t know how they handled that. I suppose the DuPonts probably would be glad to donate the ship [for their use] or something. Or the Navy might have leased them. Sort of like the Queen Mary; I am sure that the Conard line probably got some rent for the use of it. My Naval career was not [unintelligible] Halsey’s life with the—or the bombs raining down. The Jap fleet coming through the pass and so on. It was very ...

**SEEGER:** How long were the days? Did you have long days?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well your days were when you were on watch for four hours and then you were off for eight, I think. Then you would be on for four and then you'd be off for four. Wasn't like being on a day shift or the night shift in a factory. You were constantly revolving, around-the-clock. In a small ship like that, why our boardroom and officers quarters were below deck, with no portholes. So there wasn't really any place [to go]—the weather was nice outside. You were steaming at any speed, why it was spray and water coming over the top, so you couldn't take a nice book and curl up on most occasions.

**SEEGER:** Was there regular [unintelligible]?

**WHITEHEAD:** I think so. Well, yeah. [Unintelligible] I find that, to my regret, was that I didn't have a camera along, but you weren't suppose to have a camera or film or anything. I got a few pictures somebody smuggled or took, but those memories are little hard to look back on. Fifty years to know just exactly how life was. I have spent quite a bit of time listening to short wave radio [unintelligible] So you could just hear broadcasts of Tokyo Rose. Listen to Hong Kong and some of the other stations that were around that area as well as the ones that were relayed from the States.

**SEEGER:** What did you think of the Tokyo Rose broadcasts?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I had no—I guess it was just entertainment. Hard to imagine that you were being seduced or persuaded otherwise. One of my favorite memories is listening to the World Series of 1945 in Tokyo Bay, which is the last year the Chicago Cubs

played in the series! So when they talk about that length of time, it really is quite a long time!

**SEEGER:** Is there any other episodes or events or details that we haven't touched on that you perhaps want to ...?

**WHITEHEAD:** No, I don't think so. The War years; I can remember standing watch with green water coming up over the bow. You would be drenched and saying to the other guy on watch, "These are the days we can look back on fondly." And I think we do to some extent. No matter how tough the conditions were for a small ship like that, there was a wet duty and it was a rough duty. It was just as comfortable being in bed as it was in any place, but yet there are people who were on a lot smaller ships.

Then you would hear these guys on the big ships get seasick and never get over it and were complaining about it.

**SEEGER:** Did you have any trouble with seasickness?

**WHITEHEAD:** I used to get sick for the first day out and then you'd get over it. We had some of the toughest guys on board that would not get over it. They would literally lie down on the deck in the wheelhouse when they were supposed to be on watch and froth at the mouth and we had to get rid of those guys. This was—they were of no value and it was a disservice to have them on board.

My brother-in-law was on the Yorktown and I remember visiting him one time over there in Japan after the war. His ship was in the harbor. He sent—I don't know. He was a lieutenant I think. He was a minor officer on a huge ship, with several thousand others on board. He sent the Admiral, or somebody,

[important] over to our ship. I went over and visited him and, of course, in those days any officer who walked up the gangplank and came aboard got the full treatment.

Then we went to the ward room and sat down to white tablecloths—celery and olives, all those things that we, in the small ship, maybe had forgotten that it existed, so to speak. We were eating pretty much Spartan food. Then you go up—I remember going into one of those typhoon retreats over in North Okinawa one time. We had been out [mine-]sweeping; the typhoon was approaching. There was still fighting going on on-shore there at Okinawa, but somehow a couple of Army officers came on board and I remember how appreciative they were of the food that we gave them from our ship. Because they had been eating out of a tin can or hardtack, C-rations, or something during that entire battle up there. It all depends on your views as to what you're being fed.

**SEEGER:** Did the typhoon hit?

**WHITEHEAD:** Well, I think it did but I think it didn't come into area we were in. When those things hit—well, the ship that carried the atomic bomb out there [unintelligible] Submarine I think, going down to the Philippines afterward [with] the Indianapolis, which was a big cruiser. There were two or three destroyers that went through the typhoon and literally took in water in the funnels and they rolled over to the point where the engine rooms were deluged and they literally sank. So even on a modern [unintelligible] ship like that when you get into bad weather you can be sunk. So life went on and we lived happily ever after. I guess that's all [I] can say, Gerhard.

**SEEGER:** Thank you, John.