

Catching Your Memories

Leo Couture WWII Navy Veteran

Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the Catching Your Memories podcast. Everybody has stories/memories to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in.

In this episode, Leo Couture, who grew up in Bath, Maine shares some of his memories of World War II when he spent nearly three-plus years in service in the South Pacific. Leo joined the Navy at the tender age of 17 and was quickly sent to sea aboard the newly commissioned cruiser USS Canberra. He saw 11 battles, including one that nearly sunk his ship.

Leo is 97 now, but his memories of his time in the Navy are as clear as if they happened, not nearly 80 years ago, but just yesterday.

Diane Atwood: We are recording now, Leo, this is the real deal. Are you ready to be interviewed?

Leo Couture: I am ready, Teddy.

Okay. Well, I am with Leo Couture. That's correct.

Good French name.

Oui.

Oui. Well, thank you, Leo, for inviting me into your home. This is your home. You live in an assisted living facility.

Yuh.

And you've been here for about three years, you told me?



Three years, yuh.

How old are you?

Going to be 97.

And up until three years ago, you lived on your own?

Westbrook, Maine.

All by yourself.

Yeah, in an apartment there through the Westbrook Housing.

Well, I have to ask you, before we get into the meat of our interview, how did you get to live so long, and to be so robust?

No drinking, no smoking, no drugs, clean, healthy, religious living.

You were born in Quebec?

1925.

And then when you were five years old, your family moved to?

Bath, Maine.

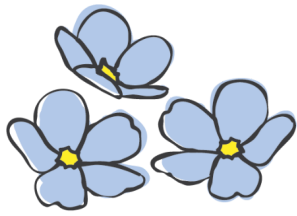
Your dad got a job at?

Bath Iron Works.

And so, Bath, Maine is where you grew up?

Till I was 17.

And what happened when you turned 17?



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Went into the Navy.

17 is kind of young, isn't it?

I went in on a mini (or midi) cruise, that's 17 only.

And what does that mean though?

A mini (midi) cruise means I had to be 17 only, and I was accepted in that program, okay? So, when I was 17 I went in the Navy.

And then that was during the war, World War II?

Oh, of course.

And is that why they had this program because they were trying to get?

Yes, to get the younger people in.

What was it that made you want to join the Navy at 17?

Because I wanted to fight for my country. I wanted it free.

I'll bet you, your [00:02:00] parents, weren't too excited about that.

Well, my parents, they didn't realize exactly what I was going into so they accepted it.

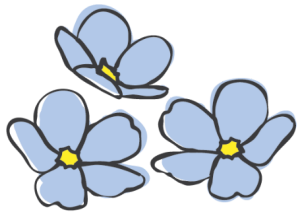
Did you have brothers and sisters?

I had one brother, Louie. He was in the Navy with me too in the South Pacific.

And he was older than you, I'm guessing?

Yeah, by three years.

Okay. So let's start with when you joined the Navy, what was that like for you? What did you have to do in the beginning in the program?



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We had to go to boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island. That was for seven weeks. We got all our shots, our haircut, made sure we didn't have lice and all that type of thing.

Was that an awakening for you? I mean, was it a totally different way?

I was a freelancer, you know, I was in high school and I played sports, and all of a sudden I'm just a person in the Navy.

So you were [00:03:00] nothing special in other words?

No, no, no.

What was the training like?

Rigorous, yeah.

What are some of the drills that you had to go through?

We went through marching, we went through swimming, we went through all our visual training school. We did everything we had to do to become a Navy personnel in seven weeks. If we didn't do what they wanted us to do, we got like kitchen duties. If it was worse than that we went into the brig, the jail, so I didn't want to do that so I followed their procedures.

I had a feeling that you were as well behaved as you could possibly be.

Oh, oh, oh, yes, ma'am.

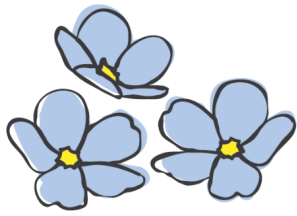
So, when you came out of boot camp, do you think you were a different person?

They made a man out of me.

So you had no regrets about going through this beginning?

Oh no. I enjoyed the Navy, even though it was a war. I found myself.

Explain what you mean by that, you found [00:04:00] yourself.



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Well, I came to a fork in the road left and right. So I took the right fork, so I was all set. See?

And you knew that it was right for you?

Oh yeah. Yeah. I knew that the Navy was my thing.

So at 17, you joined the Navy and you know that you're going to be going to fight.

Oh yeah. It was inevitable. When you went into the Navy, knowing that you were going to be going off to war, were you at all afraid?

Diane, when you're 17 years old, nothing makes you scared because you don't know any better.

I'm guessing that in those four years, though, there were moments when you were afraid.

I guess so, brother, had them planes trying to kill you with strafe, from the ships, and then we got torpedoed, aerial torpedo, and we got hurt awful bad. The Battle of Leyte Gulf. I lost a lot of shipmates.

I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like.

They come down and strafed. We used to [00:05:00] hide underneath a four-wall, steel wall. When you come in and strafe, we would hide.

So that term strafe?

Means the machine guns from the planes would tat, tat, tat, tat after you, trying to kill ya.

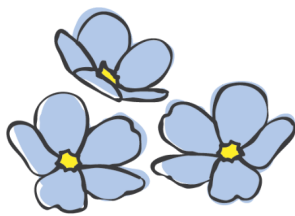
Huh. Let's go back to boot camp. Do you graduate from boot camp?

Oh, yeah, seven weeks, everybody graduates.

And then what happened? What's next for you?

I went aboard my ship. We put her in commission, Boston Navy Yard.

So nobody had been on board this ship before?



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We put in a brand spanking new cruiser.

Was there a big ceremony? Oh, yeah. When you put them in commission, that means it's for real.

Must've been very proud.

Yes, ma'am.

How many of you were there?

About 2,600 aboard ship.

Wow. What was your position on the ship?

I was a fire control man.

So, you're a fire control man, you're not the only one. There must have been a whole bunch.

We [00:06:00] Oh, we had two divisions, one forward and one aft, because when we fired, when we went to general quarters, we didn't have to run all the way to, to the front of the ship. We were right there in the back in the stern.

So, describe for me when you're on duty, what was it exactly that you had to do?

We just stood there and waited. Waited for the war to come to us.

Oh, and where were you stationed?

On the fantail up high on a crow's nest. I was up on a special built place for us where we could hide from the planes. I was on the captain circuit. We used to talk back and forth between me and the captain and Admiral Halsey. We're up kind of high because we had to look and see everything. And we're in charge of the 40 millimeters and the five-inch, that's the number of the guns.

Where was the ship all this time?

In the South [00:07:00] Pacific?



You commissioned the ship.

In Boston, we went to, uh, San Diego, we picked up 500 Seabees and we dropped them off at Pearl Harbor. then we went out to fight the war. We operated under the Third Fleet and the Fifth Fleet. When we operated this side of the equator, we were the Third Fleet. When we operated the other side of the equator, we were the Fifth Fleet to confuse the Japanese.

You waited for the war to come to you, you didn't go looking?

Oh, we went looking for it. That's what we were there for. I used to look up at the **5SK radar** was on top of the mast on top of the ship and she'd go like this she'd be operating. And then when she stopped, means that we picked something up. Then they come back around, stopped again.

So you knew exactly where the enemy was?

Oh, yeah, we're on the radar.

Then what would you have to do?

Get ready to fight. [00:08:00] I didn't fire the gun. I wasn't down on the mount per se. I was on this little platform, which had a wall so they couldn't kill us. Cause they used to come in the back and strafe. You know what strafe means?

Yes, you told me it's when the machine guns are going ...

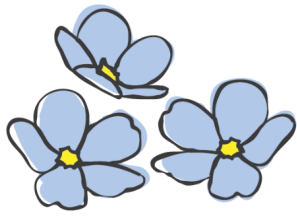
That's correct. So anyway, I was on the 5JP circuit which was the captain circuit between me, the captain, and Admiral Halsey. I used to relay the information from one to the other, to the gun mount.

That's a pretty important job, Leo.

Yes, very much.

And so you'd let them know what was going on. And then somebody else was manning the guns?

That's correct.



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How many battles do you think you were in?

Eleven. We went from Pearl Harbor. Well, we went from the Gilbert Islands, which was Majuro, Eniwetok, then we went to Saipan, Tinian, and Guam, which was the Mariana's. Then we went all over the South Pacific.

And along [00:09:00] the way, you participated in 11 different battles.

That's correct, yeah.

I'll bet you you remember that first one?

Very much so. Eniwetok. We finished up the tail end of Guadalcanal, but we weren't in the Guadalcanal zone long enough to get a star, a ribbon at sea. We went from Majuro to Enewetok, that's part of the Gilbert Islands. Then from Saipan, Tinian, and Guam, which was the Mariana's. Then we went out, really went after the Japanese.

Okay. So that first battle, the first of the 11, that was in the Gilbert Islands?

That's right. Eniwetok.

And can you remember that moment when you realized, oh my gosh, this is for real?

Very much so.

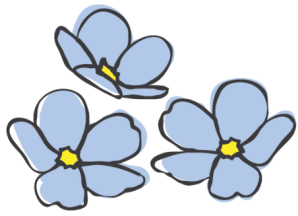
Can you describe it for me?

Well, I was 17 years old, Diane and fear had not anything in my [00:10:00] vocabulary. When you're 17, you're afraid of nothing.

Did you become afraid in that moment when you realized this was it?

I had fear. Anybody says they don't they're foolish.

And so when the attack happened, did they strafe?



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Oh yeah, we hid under that four-foot mountain. Remember I told you it was a round thing and we could hide here, there, there, and everywhere. So, when they come in this way, we got in under the thing this way, if they came in this way, we got into this way. To hide. So they wouldn't kill us.

Did you lose anybody?

No, we were lucky, but we had a big fleet out there. So we had a lot of protection.

So, you weren't out there obviously by yourself?

Oh, no, God, we had like 16 aircraft carriers, four battlewagons, six cruisers, maybe 40 destroyers in one fleet. One part of the fleet.[00:11:00]

Did you take over the island?

Oh, yeah, we landed the Marines. We strafed and bombarded the islands. So the Marines could land.

And the same thing over and over again?

That's right.

What was it like aboard the ship when you weren't being attacked?

Well, we did our washing, uh, we wrote letters home. Did you ever see a V-mail?

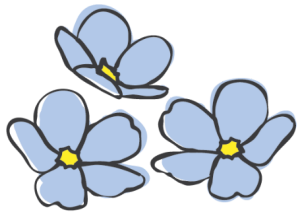
It's not a piece of paper that you put into an envelope. It's all one you write on it and fold it up.

Yeah, and they send it out, yup.

I have seen those because I'm an Army brat.

Oh my God.

My dad was in the army and I think that he might've corresponded with family using V-mail.



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Probably, yes.

Yeah. So I'm familiar with it. So, in between battles, you had your chores, you had life aboard ship.

Letters and then we did our washing a little bit. They picked up the laundry. We had a big laundry aboard ship. We had eight mess rooms, eight mess rooms to eat [00:12:00] in, four on the starboard, four on the port. You know what port and starboard is?

Left and right?

Yeah. Port is left, even. Starboard is odd numbers.

I didn't know that.

1, 3, 5, 7. 2, 4, 6, 8.

And did you have a bunk all to yourself?

Yeah, oh, yeah.

Well, you had a bunk to yourself, but where you were you in a...

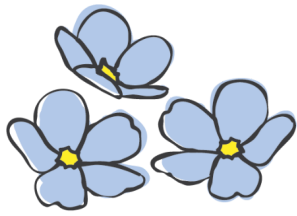
I had a hammock cause you could push them right up. They had to make it so that we were comfortable and it was accessible to the Navy. If they had to run back and forth, they didn't want to have to fight a hammock.

So they just got pushed back?

Pushed out against the wall, against the bulkhead, which is a wall. they was clipped in there.

How was the food?

Good. We were big enough so we could carry fresh milk, fresh veggies. We had two soda fountains. When we fueled a destroyer, we gave them oranges [00:13:00] and they gave us ice cream.



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Isn't that called camaraderie?

Yup.

Did you spend your entire time after you graduated from boot camp on this ship?

Yes, ma'am.

Did you get seasick in the beginning?

No.

Thank goodness. When you got off that ship after nearly four years, You had to get acclimated to walking on firm ground again?

Yup. Yup.

When you finish the mission at Gilbert ...

Went to Mariana's.

Was there a gap?

Yeah, there was a gap is quite a distance between Majuro and the Mariana's. There's quite a space.

And so things were pretty calm?

Until we got there.

And how much time did you have for calm?

Oh, God, three, four or five days.

Oh, I thought you were going to say weeks, but just a few days of getting geared up for the next battle.



Getting stuff done and getting acclimated, getting back.

And so then you were back at your station and same thing watching the radar?

[00:14:00] Yeah. And she'd go like this.

And then it would stop and you'd know, oh, here we go again.

God, take care of me.

You're a very religious man.

Yes, ma'am.

Did you do a lot of praying when you were out there?

I've prayed as much as I could.

Probably prayed more than you ever had in your entire life, even?

No, I've prayed a lot, maybe not as much as in the Pacific, but death was always at my side. Always, always. You didn't know when it was gonna come out of a cloud or out of a rain bank or what.

And you didn't always hear it, right? A plane might appear out of nowhere?

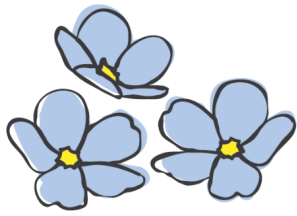
That's correct. Out of a rainstorm. See, they can't pick it up. Radar's no good in rain or fog. So, we had to be able to have visual contact with your eyeglasses.

You had to have a lot of eyes and a lot of ears didn't you?

Well, we had about 628 on the cruiser.

Did women ever serve on this ship? [00:15:00]

Not during the war, now they do.



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So, let's move on to this next set of islands.

Saipan, Tinian, and Guam.

The second group of battles, same deal. Did they strafe you?

Oh yeah.

Is that always what happened?

Well, if they came in low enough, if they got beyond the firing we put up, the bullets we put up, then they come in firing on us because if they knocked us out, they knocked out the millimeters and 40.

What's that mean?

40 is the size of the gun.

Okay. So, sometimes you could get to them before they got to you?

Sure, we were on radar.

And that was the point, get to them.

Yeah, we knew where they were coming from.

But sometimes that didn't happen?

If it was foggy or rainy or something like that, it couldn't pick them up. They come right, woo, come right down on you about 350 miles an hour.

Wow. So you experienced that one too.

Woooo.

That was bad.



Very bad.

Did that happen often?

Enough. You see, I looked up on the main radar on top of the ship and when she stopped, that means we had picked up an enemy ship, a bogey, we called them, a bogey. And we'd wait for them. And if they broke through our firing, we had to hide underneath the four-foot circle.

And so, if they broke through before the ship had an opportunity to knock them out, that was a whole different battle?

Yeah. We hid under the four-foot, two-inch plate. So they gave us protection.

So you hid there, but what about the guys that were operating the guns?

They were on their own. They had to hide, too, you know.

They had to shoot and hide?

Yup.

But you never lost the ship?

No, we got hit very badly.

Tell me about that battle.

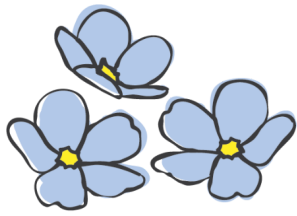
Bad. Leyte Gulf. It's the Gulf of Philippines. We brought MacArthur [00:17:00] back in the Philippine islands. Then we got torpedoed.

So you had him on board that ship?

No, he was on the flagship.

But you were part of the fleet.

That's correct.



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And on one of these ships is General MacArthur?

They never told us which one.

And he made it safely to the Philippines?

Yeah, we put him there, and then we got hit. We got hit by a torpedo, an aerial torpedo. And they towed us up to Ulithi. That's the name of the island. They had a dry dock and they put us into the dry dock to take care of our wounds. We had no way to fire. We had no power, no nothing, no food.

Because they had done such damage to the...

To my ship.

I always think of torpedoes as being underwater.

No, planes carry torpedoes.

So they drop them?

Yeah. That's what we got hit by. They're the bigger ones.

By just one or by several?

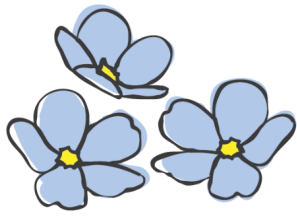
One. It's enough.

What kind of damage did it do to the ship?

[00:18:00] Knocked everything out. There was nothing running on the ship. Everything was dead. Even the engines.

Did you lose any people?

Up on the fo'c'sle, up on the main part of the ship, where the number one and two turrets are, up under there, we lost a lot of men. Cause the torpedo went right inside. See what they do is they



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have a torpedo and that torpedo's got a round thing which chews up the iron and we follow that, and that's how we got inside. Blew us up.

Did you get hurt?

No, I was way up top on the other end. I was on the stern, fo'c'sle meaning the bow.

I'm learning lots of Naval terms here, thank you. But you lost a lot of men. You lost hundreds of men?

I don't know. They never told us no. We buried them up in the little island of Ulithi where the dry dock was. They never told us, they never tell you how many you lose.

Because that would really...

Demoralize [00:19:00] us.

Did you have to be towed to this island?

Oh, yes.

You must've been in danger of sinking.

We were in danger of everything.

Being hit again?

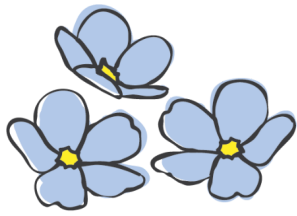
Of course. They were out to try to sink us.

So, I'm picturing that you're being towed, but you're also being protected as much as possible.

Yeah. We were being protected as much as we could, but we had no way to hide. No way to get away from them. We were only going five miles an hour being towed by a seagoing tug.

How long did it take to get to the island?

Long time to Ulithi.



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Ulithi.

There was a dry dock there and they put us right in and they fixed our trouble. We worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they had to take all that old metal and all the bodies out of there.

Pretty amazing to be able to rebuild that.

Well, what they did is they had in Boston, they had every one of the [00:20:00] ship's compartments and the pieces of steel that put it together. All they had to do was fax that number, take that number out of the ship's inventory, and put it where it was bad.

Oh, so they just replaced it with something that was already built.

That's right, replaced it.

When you were on the island, you were participating in getting the ship back in order?

Yeah, we worked 24 hours, 24/7.

And you buried the dead.

They did, not me. They did.

What do you mean by they?

The Medical Corps. We had a hospital and everything.

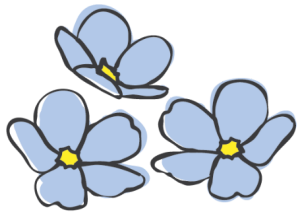
Then you get back out to sea. The ship is repaired, and where do you head after that?

Temporarily.

What do you mean?

When we got back to Boston, they tore all that out. Put the regular stuff in there, regular replacement parts.

So, the ship got temporarily repaired on this island?



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So, we could get back to [00:21:00] Boston, our home port. There they put us into a dry dock, refurbished (whistle), out to sea.

That must have taken a long time though.

No.

But you were in the South Pacific.

Yeah, we went through the canal.

And then where did you head?

We were headed up towards north, North Pacific. Cause they'd already landed on Alaska, you know.

Oh, I didn't know that.

Oh yeah. they landed in Kiska and Attu in the Pacific. We went through the canal, we stopped at Pearl Harbor, replenish our food supplies, [00:22:00] our oil and everything else, and went back out.

And you still saw battle, but nothing like what had happened to you?

At Layte Gulf? Oh, no. no, no. Gee, no.

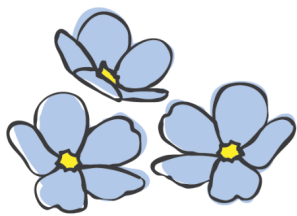
How did you know the war was over?

Whistles and blows and all kinds of stuff.

And where were you when you learned the war was over?

We were out in the Pacific.

And you remember that moment?



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Oh, did I ever. Wasn't I happy? You know what the first thing I did? I thanked God for putting me safe. I prayed thank you, Jesus. Because I could have been a number.

And you never got hurt at all?

No. The war was over and I had made it and my brother Louie made it. He made it.

Where was he all this time was he also in the South Pacific?

He was in the Pacific.

You went back to Boston at the end of the war. And what did you do?

I waited for my retirement to be up, my enlistment.

And did they have work for you to do?

Oh, yeah, we worked on the ship.

Was it hard for you to make that transition from being at war [00:23:00] and then out to sea, to it being over?

We couldn't believe that we could sleep without a life jacket on. We couldn't understand why.

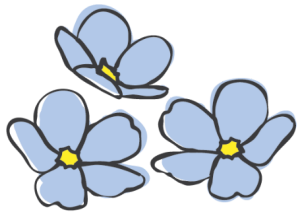
Or to not have to be watching the radar all the time.

We were on our way to Boston. We couldn't understand why we were able to sleep without escorts or without people that were watching over us with other ships. When we got the Boston and we got to realize it, we were home free. You don't know what a relief that is, dear.

Did you suffer any after-effects?

No.

Nightmares or anything like that?



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Oh, I think about it quite a lot. I think about getting hit. I think about getting towed. I'd be foolish if I said I didn't.

And how do you deal with that?

You just fight it, you just lick it. Very simple.

It's not easy for everybody to do that, is it?

Well, I said to myself, Leo, this is what you got to do. They can help you, but you got to go the rest of the way. You can carry it down to the five-yard line, but now you got to score the touchdown. [00:24:00] That's mental, mental, mental.

Did you ever need to get a little bit of help? Therapy or anything like that?

No.

When you first came home that people want to know what it was like for you?

When I came home, I just told him it was very tough. Very, very.

And then the rest of your life began.

I went back to high school.

That's right. You were still very young. You went back to high school, you got your diploma.

And I went back to prep school. MCI Maine Central Institute got my diploma, and then I enrolled in college in Syracuse.

Did you finish?

No.

But you went on to get a job you told me selling stocks and bonds, which was rather boring?

Very.



So you went on to become a car salesman.

Aaah.

You loved that.

Made a lot of money, oh, tons of money. I put it all away, too.

Good for you, but you enjoyed that very much?

I never, I couldn't get up soon enough to go to [00:25:00] work.

What was it that you liked about it?

The confrontation between people.

You sell a lot of cars?

Very many.

Good for you.

1988 I was the number one Lincoln Mercury salesman in the country.

Wow. You told me that for two years, while you were working at, where was it in Westbrook? I was there 11 years. Norman Lincoln Mercury.

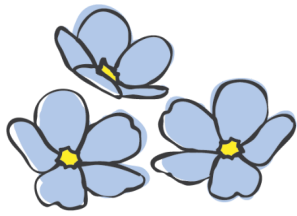
So you worked for Norman Lincoln Mercury in Westbrook. And for two years you did their commercials for them?

Yeah. And that's okay, Norman!

I could maybe go back and find some of those commercials. That's you on camera.

Oh, yeah.

I'll have to look for them.



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Channel six.

Okay. Um, highlights of your life. Being in the Navy, fighting in World War II, and for a different reason, being a car salesman. And now we're going to fast forward, well, you got married, you have a son, very close to your son?

Very.

And he lives in New [00:26:00] York and you live here in Maine. And in fact, he called you just before we started the interview.

He calls three nights a week.

That's really nice. You are now 97 years old and you live in an assisted living facility in Freeport, and you've been here for three years. So you lived on your own well into your nineties. Yeah. What's your life like today?

Oh, today it's okay. They're good people.

Not quite as exciting as it used to be?

It never can be.

What do you want to be remembered for when your time does come? That I fought for our liberty.

Is there anything that you wish I had asked you that I haven't?

No.

I heard that you used to be known as what? The Frank Sinatra...

Oh, I used to sing for myself and that type of thing.

Did you ever sing professionally?

No, no. I never got into that.



Well, what did they [00:27:00] call you in the Navy?

I called myself The Seagoing Sinatra, not the Navy.

Would you like to say goodbye with a song? You love to sing.

Yes, ma'am. And now the end is near. I face the final curtain. I'll play my love, for which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full, I plan each step along the highway. Oh, no, much more than this. I did it my way. Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention. I'll state my case of which I'm certain. To live a life that's full, I planned each well along the byways. No, much more than this, I did it my way. [00:28:00] What good is a man? What has he got? without himself. then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels. Let the record show Leo took the blows and did it his way.

Thank you.

That's okay, Norman.

I got that.

Diane Atwood: That brings us to the end of this episode of the Catching Your Memories podcast. Many thanks to Leo Couture for sharing his memories of serving in the South Pacific during World War II and also for wrapping up our conversation with a song!

Be sure to come back next week for another episode of Catching Your Memories. And if you have stories or memories you would rather not share in a podcast but would like to preserve for your family, I also record personal interviews. You can learn more about that, including pricing, at CatchingYourMemories.com.

This podcast was created, produced, recorded, and edited by me ... Diane Atwood. Catching Your Memories — The interview of a lifetime.