

Interview of Navy Service Member Augustus Prince, October 20, 2004

Judith Kent: Today is October 20, 2004. This is Judith Kent speaking from the Flagler County Public Library in Palm Coast, Florida. Joining me today is Augustus Prince, who was born on [birth date redacted].

Augustus Prince: January 11.

JK: Mr. Prince now resides in Palm Coast Florida and our cameraman today is Dr. William Kent.

AP: It was January 11, 1924.

JK: Eleventh? Thank you. Change that. Welcome to the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project. Thank you for sharing your story.

AP: Well, thank you for inviting me.

JK: Okay. Would you tell us the branch of the military —

AP: Yes.

JK: — in which you served?

AP: I was in the US Navy USS Santee CVE-29. It's a carrier escort...

JK: And during what period was that?

AP: Let's see... it was 1944 — 18 months — to 1945.

JK: Okay.

AP: The specific month I...

JK: No, that's ok. And your rank?

AP: Radarman, second class officer.

JK: Okay.

AP: Petty officer.

JK: Alright. Let's go back to the beginning now. Tell us about your family of origin.

AP: Well, I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My father, Augustus Prince, mother, Jeanette Prince. I have- I had- two brothers. One is deceased, Eugene and Walter, and we lived in Philadelphia practically until I graduated from high school then went into the service.

JK: You hear a lot about family values these days. What were some family values that were stressed at home?

AP: Well, I guess it was — I was from a single parent home and my mother stressed discipline, first of all, honesty, and also education. I still remember ___ times when I'd come home from school, and she would work two jobs to support my brother and I, and she would ask 'have you finished your homework?' Now, my mother only went to fourth grade, so she couldn't help us with our homework. And, naturally, we would say yes because we wanted to get outside and go play; so she would say 'read the Bible.' So, naturally, we did our homework and I think it paid off later on because I realized the importance of education and it certainly has helped me since then.

JK: Okay. Were there subjects in school that you liked particularly?

AP: Math and science.

JK: Okay. What was going on in your life just before you entered the service?

Augustus Prince: I was working at Sun Ship yard in Chester, Pennsylvania, which is interesting because the ship I later served on was built at Sun Ship.

JK: Oh, really?

AP: And, that's another story, I guess. But at least that's where I worked there after graduating from high school. I didn't have enough money to go to college so I was going to work until I had enough funds to go to college, but in the interim, I went to the service.

JK: Okay. And why the Navy?

AP: I think it was because my brother was in the Navy, to be honest with you. He went in ahead of me and I chose the Navy.

JK: As an African American were there...

AP: When I went in there was still discrimination in the armed services and later on, just after I finished my basic training, I think it was President Truman opened up all areas in the Navy to minorities and I chose radar school, primarily because I was interested in electronics at the time — anything which dealt with science and as it turned out, I was accepted to go to radar school. I was the first black radarman in the Navy and served on the carrier. So, I have some pictures and newspaper articles ___+.

JK: Do you remember the first day you arrived at the ship?

AP: Yes. Maybe I should give you a little background.

JK: Okay.

AP: In radar school, I was top in my class — only black — and I think there may have been 50, 60 radarmen and the procedure was if anyone needed radarmen, any of the ships in the area needed radarmen, they would come to the radar school, naturally. And usually I was the one who was given the papers to go out, to take two or three other radarmen with me. And three times I went out and three times I was sent back because for some strange reason they had sent more 'quote' than they needed. So, finally the last ship I went out, and subsequently served on, was the USS Santee CVE-29. And I'll never forget Lieutenant Fergus, who was commander of the ship's radar, I asked him — I said 'if I serve on your ship, will I serve as a radarman?' And he said 'you finish radar school, that's where you'll be.' And I did...and I did very well.

JK: Good for him, then. He had the courage —

AP: I have letters from his son...

JK: Do you?

AP: That — I finally located him and I'll give them to you because he was the one that gave me the opportunity. I didn't think I would be so emotional about this, but when I look back ___+

JK: What a turning point.

AP: — he was very instrumental. And to give you a little more background; one of the ships that I was denied the chance to serve on was sunk two, three...about three months later. I'm not gloating about that —

JK: No, no.

AP: — but the point ___ that somehow, maybe it was someone looking out for me. So, that's what I did. I served as the radarman and I was on my watches I usually was the one that was in charge. And CVE-29 was one of four CVE ships. They were the Santee, my ship, the Chenango, the Suwannee and there was one other... I have it here...let's see. Chenango, Sangamon, Santee and the Suwannee. There were only four CVEs since ___ converted oil tanker with just a flat top on it. We had one five-inch gun; well, we had two. But, we did very well as far as our fighting was concerned, got quite a few —

JK: So, it wasn't as hard, just some of the area —

AP: Oh, no it wasn't, it was called a carrier escort —

JK: I see.

AP: — it wasn't one — although we served with other, the bigger ones, like the, let's see, Lexington — I have them listed here... Enterprise, Princeton. They were all the biggies; we were the smaller ones...

JK: So, where did you join the ship?

AP: In San Diego, Port Loma — forget what date it was ___ and we left immediately for ___ Hawaii.

JK: What was your first impression of the ship?

AP: I was very impressed; the thing I was concerned with was, at that time, since they didn't have any...the only minority, blacks, were cooks and bakers and they all had to sleep in a segregated area and Lieutenant Fergus always said 'you sleep with the rest of the crew,' which ___+ and I got along very well, in fact, I was sort of...how can I put it...admired, in many respects. I taught a lot of the other radarmen their algebra and geometry and what-not because I did have a little more education and it paid off because they began to respect me. Incidentally ___+, did I tell you I was Middleweight Champion of Task Force 58?

JK: No.

AP: Boxing. That's an aside. I couldn't find some of the pictures; I have them somewhere, but it was interesting, because I always said 'well, I'm going to get out and I'm going to be a boxer,' well, my mother took ___+.

JK: No way.

AP: No, she came down to the — I guess I'm getting off the path...

JK: That's okay.

AP: — she came to the gym one day when I was going to practice for ___ and she pulled me off by the ear. I was so embarrassed I never went back. That's, of course, that also said that wasn't for me. Later, I went to, you know...

JK: So, athletics has always been a —

AP: Oh yeah, yeah. It's still, yeah, yeah. But, not boxing.

JK: No. So what was the first combat that your ship encountered?

AP: I think it was ___+? No, Okinawa. That was the big one. Okinawa. That was really big, in fact, that was the largest Navy encounter in World War II, anyway. I think one of seven naval casualties were at Okinawa. I remember first, before we got to Okinawa, we had to, I guess, take care of a few other places; like I think we went to Saipan and a few other...Guam — and I was at sea three months without seeing land and that's why today I said I don't think I want to go on ocean water —

JK: No cruises for you.

AP: — no cruises for me. I've seen enough water in my time. But Okinawa was the big one and there we encountered... kamikazes...lost a few men...

JK: What would a typical day, if there is such a thing, be in combat for you?

AP: Well, a typical day would be, you had a watch and, usually was a four hour watch, four on and four off, and it varied. Usually during the watch, you were either what we called the ship's... — anyway, we had what you called the CIC, that's combat information center, that's where you set in front of the radar screen and you would watch the radar go around and pick up any incoming enemy planes. Then you had the bridge watch, that's what I would say, so then information that was sent from CIC up to the bridge, we could plot it so we would know exactly — and we had a commanding officer, or

whoever's in charge, he could see exactly what was going on as far as whether we should scramble that aircraft to protect... so that was the main thing at Okinawa, I think, and we also later — well, I guess I'm getting ahead of myself — we stayed at Okinawa until we heard the fact that the... we were getting ready to go to Japan, that's right —

JK: For the invasion.

AP: — for the invasion of Japan and they had three units they called Federal One, Federal Two, and Federal Three; I think we were Federal Three which we were going to Northern Japan because they gave us all _____. And en route we heard that a bomb had been dropped; we were only 60 miles from Japan and we thought it was Tokyo Rose kidding, you know, because we used to get her and she would play some nice music like that, but then she said someone said a bomb had been dropped and it was at Hiroshima. We were only 60 miles away. So then we got orders just to circle. And then, I think we... — a week later Nagasaki was hit and that's when the war was declared over, but we still weren't sure. So we stayed in the Sea of Japan maybe two or three weeks, I think, finally _____ go to Honshu, I think it was, to check, the planes went up to make sure. And we found out later that the Japanese had, I guess, all their planes ready, about four or five hundred suicide kamikazes ready, because they knew we were going to invade, of course the bomb made them change their mind, after that we sailed to Formosa, Taiwan to pick up Australian prisoners of war. And that's what we did most of the time —

JK: Bet they were glad to see you.

AP: Oh, yeah, you're not kidding. They were really glad they were emaciated and their legs were bloated, they couldn't even put on pants. But they were really glad to see us and I think we took them back to — was it Guam or Pearl Harbor or _____+ anyway then we went back to pick up more, so that's what we did most of the time after the war was over.

JK: Did you have any shore leave during that period?

AP: Yeah, the Philippines...I have some pictures — I went Guam, Saipan. I don't think — we didn't get a chance to get off at Okinawa, some people did but I didn't. In Japan, I didn't get any leave in Japan, because there were two reasons; one, I think, was that they weren't too sure at that time whether there would still be some people on the _____+ Saipan, that's where they found that — lot of Japanese didn't even know the war was over; they were hiding in these caves... the war was over, but I didn't get a chance to go to Japan. But Philippines, Guam, Okinawa; these were the South Pacific experiences I had.

JK: Joined the Navy and saw the world.

AP: Yeah, well at least the South. And I can say I learned a lot, I grew up in the Navy. And I think the most important thing I learned was I'm as good as anybody. I owe that to Lieutenant Fergus. Even today, I still think... when he told me, he said 'you finish radar school and that's what you are.'

JK: You earned it. You got it.

AP: Yep.