

## 63 years later, he's still serving the U.S. military

1. *The Times-Union*

CODY PEARCE

PONTE VEDRA BEACH - Faced with choppy waters, seasick troops in his boat and other boats sinking after hitting mines, Jim Gaff was determined to get the job done.

"Let's get to the beach" thought the 17-year-old Navy coxswain as he piloted his wooden landing craft toward Normandy, France.

It was June 6, 1944. Gaff was transporting troops and supplies to Utah Beach during Operation Overlord, better known now as D-Day. He also ferried the wounded back to larger troop ships offshore.

"The worst one was a glider pilot who'd broken every bone in his body," Gaff said. "I remember his teeth had gone through his upper lip. He looked like he had a mustache."

Lacking rest or sleep, he eventually made more than 50 trips on June 6-7. It was his first test under fire as a sailor, Gaff recalled in the work den of his Ponte Vedra Beach home.

Gaff, 81, is known in the community not only as a veteran of D-Day but also as a generous promoter of military appreciation.

"Jim was called to do something tremendously courageous that day," said Dan McCarthy, director of military affairs for Jacksonville. "He grew up real quick."

Gaff's story began in his native Rhode Island on Jan. 25, 1943, when he and his best friend, Wes LaSalle, went to the local enlistment station. "My parents weren't happy about it," he said. "But at the time, everyone was going. You felt like a slacker if you didn't go."

Gaff was so eager to join, he interrupted his high school career, leaving for Navy training camp after his junior year.

After training in Little Creek, Va., he traveled to North Africa and later Sicily before ending up at Plymouth, England, where preparations were made for Operation Overlord.

The invasion encountered many problems. Rough seas forced the original planned date of June 5 back one day. There were rumors of a German gas attack. Gaff explained that his troops were afraid of this possibility, prompting them to wear lots of "heavy, itchy" equipment.

Gaff was most fearful of mines. Before setting out to the beach, he witnessed two ships, an LST in front of him and a coastal steamer behind, "disappear in a geyser of water"

from the underwater explosives. His fear became all the more prescient upon realizing that an LST was over 300 feet long and made of steel while his landing craft, at 36 feet, was a mere fraction of its size and made of wood.

After D-Day, Gaff volunteered to help out the Army, transporting infantry across the Ruhr and Rhine rivers in Germany until May 1945, when victory was declared in Europe. He said he was part of the first convoy to return to America.

Amid great fanfare, there was also sadness as Gaff found out his best friend, Wes, died while serving in Guam.

"I would have been there," he said, reflecting on how Wes joined the Navy first while he finished his junior year. "I didn't even know when it had happened."

### **Devotion to the military**

Gaff finished high school after his discharge from the Navy following Japan's surrender and later entered Stetson University in 1947, where he studied economics and history. After graduation, he became a trader at a stock brokerage firm in Fort Lauderdale and later joined the Fort Lauderdale Council of the **Navy League** of the U.S., of which he eventually became president.

Gaff retired from his brokerage firm in 1993, when he moved to the Plantation in Ponte Vedra. His wife, Donna, was a native of Jacksonville.

But his devotion to the military continued as he remained active in the **Navy League's** Mayport Council, raising money for the Navy and Marine Corps Relief Society.

"If the military community needs something, Jim is always there," McCarthy said. "Much of his work goes unnoticed."

But not always. In November, Gaff received the Spirit of Hope Award, named in honor of Bob Hope. The award is presented annually to exceptional entertainers and other distinguished Americans for their patriotism and support to the military through the United Service Organization.

"Unexpected" was the first word that came to mind when Gaff reflected on the honor. He now shares in a lineage of past recipients including former President George Bush, former U.S. Sen. John Glenn and Walter Cronkite.

### **Sparing no expense**

This past April marked the fifth anniversary of Navy Appreciation Day, a military-community event that Gaff organizes every year at the Plantation Country Club at Ponte Vedra. The gathering offers today's military veterans a chance to play a full round a golf, free meals and plenty of prizes.

"Jim is a catalyst for respecting the military," McCarthy said while explaining how Gaff has fostered the support of his entire neighborhood. "He spares no expense when it comes to helping the men and women who serve."

Gaff is more reserved when asked about his work for the military community.

"I just want to tell them how much we appreciate their sacrifice," he said.

His sentiment for today's troops mirrors his own reflection of D-Day and the importance it holds.

"I knew then just being a part of the day would be one of the key events in my life," he said. "And I'm even more glad to have survived it today."

When asked if he had any advice for someone going off to war in Iraq or Iran, Gaff's message was simple: "Come home safe."

**WJBK 06/07/07 11:35:05:**

Captain Jr Hailey, the commanding officers of the Roosevelt. Welcome to Detroit. >> Good to be here. >> I didn't know it was coming. >> Before I explain why we're playing catch, I understand the Theodore Roosevelt has a strong connection to Detroit. >> That is true. The sponsors us. Every year probably five or six times a year -- >> I knew I would drop one. >> Five or six times a year they come out to the ship and make sailor's happy. >> That was a good catch. >> It was. >> It has also played a big role in the current conflict as well, right. >> That is true. We saw action in all three of the recent times we went to sea over the last five years. >> Now, let me explain why you and I are playing catch. I know you're also speaking at the Grosse Pointe yacht club, but the big deal is tomorrow you'll throw out the first pitch at the Tigers game, right. >> That is true. >> You're a man who received the flying cross and so many medals. How does throwing the first pitch stand up to that. >> At the top. >> Really? >> I'm hoping I don't get it into the dirt. It has to make it all the way to pudge. >> Are you nervous? >> Of course. You're much better thrower than I am. >> We're practicing here, you'll get it. >> Okay. >> There is something else that you were excited about. Here is a man who spent, what, your naval aviator so you have logged like 34 hundred hours or something, right? >> A lot. >> Yet, this something that is something different and new for you, right? >> Yes. >> And the other thing you were excited about was seeing how one of our G.M. cars is made. >> I asked to go out to the plant because this is the hartland of America and it's what we're about and the reason we serve is to support and defend our ability to do exactly what I wanted to see happen, which is the folks who work at G.M. >> The other thing I'm sure you're doing today is throw a baseball on TV while doing a live interview. >> That is true. I thought chewing gum and walking was hard, but this is a challenge. >> What will your technique be tomorrow? >> Slider. >> Really? >> I practiced a little bit before I came here with my assistant navigator who played varsity baseball for the naval academy and he showed

me how to throw a slider. >> Let's see the technique. Whoa! All right. >> It will be harder. We'll be 60 feet or so away. >> We'll watch you tomorrow. I think a lot of people will watch. Good luck with that. Thanks for being with us and for all of do for our country. >> Sherry?...

## **Navy League to Adopt CG Station**

U.S. Coast Guard

PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen

June 03, 2007

CLEARWATER, Fla. - Coast Guard Station Sand Key, in Clearwater, Fla., is scheduled to be formally adopted by the **Navy League** of the United States during a ceremony at Station Sand Key June 4 at 8:30 a.m.

Guests in attendance include Frank Hibbard, the Mayor of Clearwater, and Ken Brown from the Clearwater Chamber of Commerce.

The **Navy League** of the United States, founded in 1902, is an organization dedicated to supporting sea-going service members and their families. For more information check out [www.navyleague.org](http://www.navyleague.org).

"Station Sand Key is honored to be adopted by the **Navy League**, and we appreciate that they recognize our contributions to the community," said Chief Warrant Officer Randal Ryan, Commanding Officer of Coast Guard Station Sand Key. "We are grateful for their efforts and advocacy for the sea-going services and their dependants."

## **Mike Reagan to Host Benefit for USS Reagan**

June 11, 2007

*NewsMax.com*

National radio and television personality and NewsMax columnist Michael Reagan will host The Reagan Golf Classic and Legacy Dinner, to benefit the Michael and Colleen Reagan Scholarship Fund for sailors serving on board the USS Ronald Reagan.

The event will also benefit the San Diego **Navy League** and the San Diego Armed Services YMCA.

Michael Reagan, the son of the late president Ronald Reagan, and his wife Colleen created the Scholarship Fund as a way to honor sailors serving on board the ship that bears his father Ronald Reagan's name.

The Fund augments the Navy Tuition Assistance program by providing financial assistance to USS Ronald Reagan sailors who are continuing their education.

Michael also recently announced the formation of the Reagan Legacy Foundation, a non-profit organization that will support the Michael and Colleen Reagan Scholarship Fund as well as other efforts including education and research on the history of the presidency of Ronald Reagan and finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

The event, sponsored by Mercedes-Benz of San Diego, will kick off with the Reagan Legacy Dinner on Sunday, Sept. 9 at the Del Mar Fair Grounds, and the Golf Classic will be held Monday, Sept. 10 at the Coronado Municipal Golf Course.

Two tournament winners will receive an all expense paid trip to compete in the 2008 Mercedes-Benz National Championship in Kaanapali Maui. Presentation of the Golf Classic awards will be held at a special reception on board USS Ronald Reagan immediately following the tournament.

Popular San Diego radio personalities Roger Hedgecock and Mark Larson of AM 600 KOGO will serve as masters of ceremony for the events.

The San Diego **Navy League** is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating citizens about the importance of sea power to U.S. national security and the need to provide meaningful support to those serving in the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marines and their families.

Some of the **Navy League** programs include the Warrior Foundation, which provides funds to aid wounded Marines and Sailors at Naval Medical Center San Diego and Camp Pendleton; Homefront San Diego, which provides grants for repair or replacement of major essential items for families of deployed service members; and Operation Welcome where **Navy League** members supply materials for families of every returning unit to make "welcome home" signs.

The San Diego **Navy League** also sponsors the Annual Ombudsman/Key Volunteer Recognition luncheon.

## **US coast guard cadets help at "I Can" home**

*Netherlands Antilles Daily Herald*

DUTCH QUARTER--A group of 56 men and women of the Coast Guard Academy Cadets of New London, Connecticut, along with members of the US, St. Maarten- based **Navy League** and several other individuals volunteered ground work and painting at the "I Can" foster home on Saturday, June 9.

The group painted the roof of the home, redid the fencing of the yard, re-established concrete supports to the swings, installed a concrete foundation for a generator, installed a clothes-line, and dug an 80-foot trench to help rid of the water running on a daily bases from the laundry machines.

A plastic table which was being used as a dining table was also replaced with a 24- foot picnic table. All materials for the upgrading process were donated by Builder's Paradise. Today, the volunteers will continue with the planting of banana trees on the property. These trees will help relieve the issue of run-off water from the home.

According to President of the **Navy League** Art Natcher, the occasion was a great exchange between the children of the home and the sailors. He encouraged members of the community in general to join in on the efforts of the **Navy League** to assist community programs.

A group of 130 Coast Guard Academy Cadets of New London, Connecticut on board the Coast Guard Cutter Barque Eagle, docked at the cruise ship pier on Friday, June 8, following an 11-day training voyage from Barbados. The historical vessel is on a three-day stopover. The crew and cadets took part in community projects in each port they visited.

## **Deadline for Navy League Scholarships is July 1**

June 11, 2007

*Meridan Star*

What is it?

Each year, the Meridian Area **Navy League** awards two \$500 scholarships to deserving students to help with costs of higher education.

Who is eligible?

Dependent spouses and children of active duty military members currently serving at NAS Meridian; dependents of retired military members who previously served at NAS Meridian and now live in the local area; and NJROTC cadets from the local area schools are eligible to apply for the scholarships. Applicants must plan to attend either an accredited junior college or an accredited four-year college or university.

When's the deadline for applications?

All applications postmarked by July 1, 2007, will be considered.

Where can I get an application?: You can pick up an application at the NAS Meridian Navy College Office, located in Bldg. 255, Room 234, phone: (601) 679-2671; or you may get one at the East Mississippi Business Development Corporation, located in Union Station, phone: (601) 693-1306.

Where do I send them?

Applications should be mailed to the Meridian Area **Navy League**, P.O. Box 790, Meridian, MS 39302-0790 or you can hand deliver them to the Meridian Area Navy

League, located at EMBDC in Union Station. Deadline: July 1, 2007.

When will the selections be announced?

The scholarship committee, consisting of three members of the Meridian Area **Navy League**, will evaluate all applications. The scholarship committee will present the selected applicants and alternates to the executive committee for approval prior to awarding scholarship funds. Alternates will be selected in case the selected recipient is unable to accept. Scholarship funds will be presented in the form of a check payable to the college the applicant will attend. Scholarships are to cover basic tuition, fees and books.

### ***The City has new ambassadors***

*Caller Times – Corpus Christi, TX*

The award of ambassador for the city of Corpus Christi of select active duty military personnel became effective in April. Since then, two certificates were awarded on April 27 and another 20 were awarded on May 17.

This program was a concept that was introduced to the mayor and City Council on April 10. The program was reviewed, approved, and backed b y the local **Navy League** and the local Fleet Reserve Association.

The good effect that this program will have for the city cannot be measured. To the best available information, Corpus Christi is the only city in the nation that gives ambassador certificates to our active duty military personnel.

In our all-volunteer military, there is so much competition for advancement that selection boards will look for other accomplishments (such as community volunteer work, helping with Boy and Girl Scouts, or, for instance, being named a goodwill ambassador for the city of Corpus Christi.

The young people who receive this certificate will likely take it with them and tell others about how great our city is; some will likely return to make this their home after they retire.

The goodwill ambassadorships will also strengthen the positive relationship between Corpus Christi and the military. This is always a major factor considered by a base-closure panel.

As the program works, all local commanding officers of all active-duty military units will receive a certificate that names them as "Military Ambassadors of the City of Corpus Christi." Officers have also been given the authority to name outstanding personnel to also receive such a certificate. The certificates are signed by the mayor and presented to the recipients. This unique program received the enthusiastic backing of Mayor Henry Garrett and members of the City Council. This is a win-win program for

all concerned.

Jack Ussery of Corpus Christi is a retired senior chief petty officer of the U.S. Navy.

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## **Former Navy Man Gets a High 5 Surprise**

*KSL TV*

June 13th, 2007

(KSL News) A former Navy man is passing along his knowledge and passion for the U.S. Navy to some Utah youth. One of his junior officers wanted to see his efforts recognized, so we gave him a High 5.

Jeff Marsh is the commanding officer of the **U.S. Naval League Cadets** in Salt Lake City. The program he runs provides mentors for young people, teaching them naval skills like seamanship and aviation.

Michael Babinsky nominated Jeff for a High 5. "He leads by example, giving those characteristics to Utah's youth, and just does an outstanding job of that," Michael said.

We surprised Jeff on a field trip at the Hill Air Force aeronautical museum.

"We have a great bunch of cadets," he said, "and a great bunch of officers. It's just a real pleasure working with them."

As a thank you, Jeff received a KSL goodie bag as well as some Dairy Queen gift certificates.