

Portrait of a Veteran Twice Drafted: Engineman 1st Class Francis Austin

Francis “Frank” Austin certainly holds one unique distinction in terms of military service to the United States of America. Frank was drafted into the Navy twice - during World War II and again during the Korean Conflict. How was Frank so fortunate (or unfortunate) in order to attain such notoriety? Frank didn’t feel “too hot” over the turn of events which lead to him receiving draft notices twice and two honorable discharges from the Navy.

Frank’s birth and upbringing in central Virginia was not unusual. He was born on May 21, 1925 to Willie and Mary Kyle Austin of Buckingham County, VA. Frank was the oldest child - four brothers grew up with him. His environment in rural Virginia taught him a lot of discipline and responsibility. Frank received his education in Buckingham County and graduated from Buckingham County Training School in Dillwyn and then enrolled at Virginia State College in Petersburg.

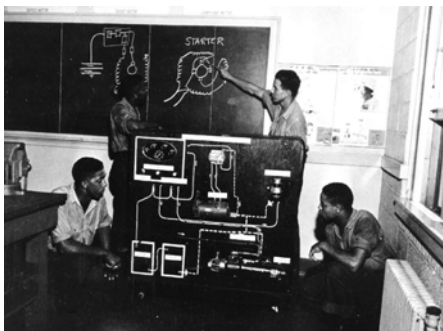
As the United States was forced to enter World War II, Frank received his draft statement from Buckingham. Since he “never liked water, had never been a sailor or wanted to be a sailor,” Frank requested to enter the Army or Marines. His request was denied and he was drafted into the Navy in 1943. His basic training occurred at Camp Robert Smalls in Great Lakes, IL.



A Navy Captain inspects Service School personnel at Camp Robert Smalls, Great Lakes, IL, in 1943. *Photo courtesy National Archives.*

From there, he was sent to Navy Service Camp at Hampton Institute, (now Hampton

University) in Hampton, VA for machinist and motor craft training. With the type of training



Sailors study small craft & automotive electrical systems, while in training at Hampton Institute during World War II. *Photo courtesy National Archives.*

that Frank had received at Hampton and Virginia State, he found himself as a member of a unique club - a member of the first group of Black Navy personnel that could serve in capacities other than as cooks, bakers or cleaners. Prior to this time, blacks in the Navy could only serve in capacities related to cooking and cleaning.

After graduation, Frank was sent to the Philadelphia Navy Yard to await assignment as a Motor Machinist 1st Class. His first assignment was at the Naval Air Station in Atlantic City, NJ. But since there was no place for anyone with his training in Atlantic City, Frank was placed into the transportation department and was responsible for hauling Navy equipment to any air station on the East coast and also to pick up plane parts or damaged aircraft and bring them in for repairs. He traveled to Cherry Point, NC, Otis Field, MA, Mechanicsburg, PA and many points in between. As a driver, Frank was not assigned to stay on the base but went on the road and was given a “subsistence” to live on. During this portion of his service, he often traveled from Atlantic City to Norfolk. This trip was usually a “lot of fun” because the drivers were allowed to have police escorts in each state - NJ, DE, MD and VA - and could drive as fast as the truck could go. If the load was not important, there would be no police escort but the drivers were given orders, which stated that troopers

or law enforcement agents did not have the authority to impede the progress of the cargo. If drivers violated any laws, the only redress that the cops had was to report them to their bases. Frank performed this job for two years and found it to be “quite interesting and quite comfortable.”

Frank was eventually sent to Camp Peary, VA for logistic training, which would enable him to be behind the Marines during the invasion of Okinawa. However, at the time of his training, Frank was not aware of what he was preparing for. The invasion of Okinawa started in April 1945. Frank’s unit came in behind the Marines with food, medicine and other supplies. Since it was almost dark when they disembarked from the ship, the unit did not have time to make camp, and Frank spent the first night hunkered down in a sweet potato patch. The tropical night was illuminated by bombing and heavy shooting, and Frank and his fellow soldiers were just hoping that they “didn’t get blasted out of the potato patch.” Even though the soldiers in his unit were equipped with rifles, Frank and his buddies never used them despite



African-American soldier at rest during invasion of Okinawa. *Photo courtesy of National Archives.*

facing heavy gunfire. Frank was blessed since he was never injured even though some in his unit were. The men in the unit slept in pup tents

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as they constructed barracks made of tent and plywood. During this construction phase, the men worked in 12-hour shifts with half working during the day and the other half at night. As part of the support given to the invading forces, Frank found himself using a bulldozer to clear ground for a hospital. Others in his unit blasted coral reef in order to allow boats to approach the coast. The Buckingham native not only confronted chaotic conditions associated with the war, but he witnessed two typhoons while in Okinawa. One of them blew away the mess hall and Frank's unit had to wait for food.



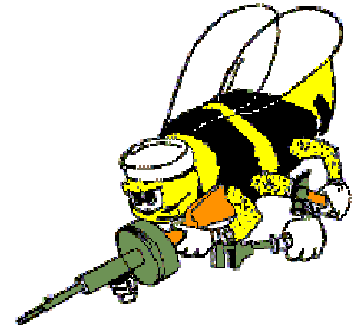
Construction of a prefabricated steel storage warehouse by members of the 34th Construction Battalion in South Pacific during WWII. Photo courtesy of National Archives.

During this busy and frightening time, Frank and his fellow soldiers found ways to keep from worrying too much about the war swirling around them. Formal entertainment for the troops in Okinawa “was out of the question - mosquitoes entertained us.” To help alleviate the tension, Frank wrote letters to his family and mailed them home using “V-mail”, which was cost free. His letters were usually censored to eliminate details of his whereabouts. Some of his buddies took pictures and then sold them to fellow soldiers, often selling them at greatly reduced prices to avoid being caught peddling them. There was also a black market specializing in the sale of cigarettes by those soldiers who didn't want their allotment. There

was also an allotment of a certain number of cans of beer per week but some soldiers would often sell their allotment on the black market. Some of the soldiers who worked in the kitchen also found a method to help alleviate the tension of battle. They made a concoction of raisins and dried peaches, which had been allowed to ferment. This beverage, dubbed ‘Raisin Jack’, would be shared - not sold - by the soldiers. It was so popular until it would often be carried into the hills by soldiers on missions but on one occasion, a soldier out in the field became so hot and thirsty until he was willing to trade his canteen of Raisin Jack for water. The existence of this alcoholic diversion was kept from the Top Brass.

Frank was finally transferred back to the States on Dec. 6, 1945 and went to Brooklyn Navy Yard to await his next assignment. But much to Frank's joy as he awaited his orders, the war ended and he was discharged in May 1946. The newly discharged veteran met a young woman in 1947 and he and Edith were married on Nov. 17, 1947. The young couple lived in New York City but the bliss of the Newlyweds was disrupted by his second invitation from the Selective Service a year later. He was - according to his invitation - drafted again. This unusual situation was even more unique since Frank's stint in the Reserves had expired when the draft notice came. He was instructed to report to Whitehall St. in Brooklyn for induction. Frank reported feeling confident that once he showed his discharge papers to the officials that this mistake - unusual circumstance - would be corrected. There was no such luck, however. The officials looked at his papers, laid them aside and filled out papers ordering him to report to a ship in Norfolk in seven days - seven days to quit his job, make provisions for his wife and report to Norfolk. He was officially drafted for the Korean War in 1950 and after reporting to Norfolk helped to load a ship, The Demona Island ARG9. Frank and his fellow Navy men sailed through the Panama Canal, stopped in San Francisco to load other supplies and finally ended in Sasebo (past Okinawa). In Sasebo, his unit was placed on a yard oiler - a small tanker - and Frank held the rank of Engineer First Class making him second-in-command on the tanker. The yard oiler was responsible for hauling high octane gas from Sasebo to Pusan,

Korea. This run was very dangerous since there was bombing and Frank and his fellow crew realized that they were “sitting on high octane gas”. This mission even faced internal restrictions due to the high possibility of explosions - the crew was not allowed to smoke while on the eight-hour, one-way journey. Frank and fellow crew dealt with the tension by developing a close camaraderie - “You knew just about everybody's feelings about what they were doing, so you felt pretty comfortable with your group”. Just as Fate had intervened to place Frank back in the services, another intervention caused his duty to end. Frank got an infection while serving in Korea and was sent to a series of hospitals - in Yokohama, Japan; Mare Island, CA; Lakeland, TX; and St Albans, NY. He was given a medical discharge in St. Albans in 1952. His second stint with the services was over.



Logo of the Seabees, USN Construction BN, designed by Frank J. Iafate. The bee depicts Seabees as both construction and fighting men. Seabees were formed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Immediately after recovering from his illness, Frank tried to go back to school in NYC, but since classes were full, he went to work. He was able to make a decent living but since he wanted to “move ahead,” he ultimately enrolled at Delahanty Institute but the courses did not lead to a degree. However, he was offered a job to teach automotive trade in a high school in NYC and did so for a year before being employed by the Bureau of Motor Equipment in the city. In this job, Frank first served as a floating supervisor for the repair shops that serviced city equipment. Frank advanced to the position of supervisor, a job, which encompassed trav-

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eling to sites where city equipment was manufactured in order to ensure that equipment specifications were being met. The most hectic time in his job with the Bureau occurred during the period from December 1968 to March '69 when the City was paralyzed by several heavy snowstorms. During this period, Frank found himself working on twelve hour shifts every single day- even weekends and holidays- without a single day off. Someone on the job “dropped dead in the locker room, right down from him”- a sight that may have been reminiscent of his days in the service.

After his retirement, Frank and Edith moved back to Buckingham County in 1987 after almost 40 years living in NYC. Since relocating in his native county, Frank has been active in the



Francis 'Frank' Austin at the Barclay House in Scottsville, VA, on 20 July 2006.

American Legion, Post 134 in Dillwyn. The members of Post 134 give scholarships to deserving students, help clear trash from county roads, march in area parades and give picnics - all activities which keep the twice drafted serviceman busy. When reflecting back over his unusual stints, Frank notes that he kept mementos and notes of his activities but not a constant diary. “I only kept what I thought was important, not what I thought would be important to somebody else. If I had to go back and do it over again, I would keep a complete record.”

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WWII Poster encouraging skilled construction workers to join the USN Seabees. Poster courtesy of U.S. Navy Seabee Museum, Port Hueneme, CA.

USN Seabees in the Pacific Theater during WWII:

Seabees in the Pacific Theater of Operations earned the gratitude of all Allied fighting men, who served with them or followed in their wake. Their deeds were unparalleled in the history of wartime construction. With eighty percent of the Naval Construction Force concentrated on the three Pacific roads, they literally built and fought their way to victory.

In the North, Central, South and Southwest Pacific areas, the Seabees built 111 major airstrips, 441 piers, 2,558 ammunition magazines, 700 square blocks of warehouses, hospitals to serve 70,000 patients, tanks for the storage of 100,000,000 gallons of gasoline, and housing for 1,500,000 men. In construction and fighting operations, the Pacific Seabees suffered more than 200 combat deaths and earned more than 2,000 Purple Hearts. They served on four continents and on more than 300 islands.

The Seabees also played a key role in the last big operation of the island war, the seizure of Okinawa. The main invasion forces landed on Okinawa's west coast Hagushi beaches on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945. The Seabees' task on Okinawa was truly immense. On this agrarian island, whose physical facilities a fierce bombardment had all but destroyed, they built ocean ports, a grid of roads, bomber and fighter fields, a seaplane base, quonset villages, tank farms, storage dumps, hospitals, and ship repair facilities. Nearly 55,000 Seabees, organized into four brigades, participated in Okinawa construction operations. By the beginning of August 1945, sufficient facilities, supplies, and manpower were at hand to mount an invasion of the Japanese home islands.