

The Real McHale

Actor Ernest Borgnine gives us the straight dope about his navy life before and during World War II—and how he ended up becoming an actor.

Introduction and Interview by Jim Kushlan

PRACTICALLY THE FIRST WORDS HE SPOKE were “Call me Ernie, OK?” So much for my “Mr. Borgnine” approach. But the spunky 93-year-old on the other end of the phone line was definitely not the “mister” type. Ernest Borgnine was unpretentious, friendly, and more than happy to talk about his 10-year navy career before and during World War II.

That was back before Borgnine found fame as Sergeant “Fatso” Judson in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), the title character in *Marty* (1955), General Worden in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), and Lieutenant Commander Quinton McHale in ABC’s 1960s TV series *McHale’s Navy*—to name just a handful of highlights in a robustly successful acting career.

Borgnine (originally Ernest Effron Borgnino) turned to the navy shortly after graduating from high school in his home town of New Haven, Connecticut, in 1935. He traded a job as a vegetable-seller for service aboard the USS *Lamberton* (DD-119), a 1917 four-

stacker destroyer—the kind of ship sailors called a “tin can.” Based in San Diego, the *Lamberton* towed targets for practice bombings by navy ships, planes, and submarines, and later converted to minesweeping duties. The destroyer moved to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in September 1941—and a month later, Borgnine left the navy.

Scarcely two months passed before Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor, and in January 1942, Borgnine rejoined the navy. This time, he served aboard the USS *Sylph* (PY-12), a converted yacht assigned to patrol for German U-boats, train naval officer candidates, and serve as a floating school for sonar operators. Borgnine’s WWII service took him to coastal New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Florida before his discharge as a gunner’s mate, first class, in September 1945.

That’s the background. Now let’s hear the story, straight from Ernie.

OH MAN, I TELL YA. She [the *Lamberton*] was built in 1917, believe it or not. And when I first went aboard I thought sure it was a cruiser, you know? I mean, it was that big for me.... I was a recruit and I looked up at this thing and I said, “My God, what a battleship!” never realizing what it was all about. But I soon got to know the ship and its crew, and it was one of the most wonderful times of my life [that] I really look to with fondness, because of the fact that, I don’t know, there’s just something about a destroyer that brings everybody together....

...The next thing I knew I was, naturally, on the deck force, and I had one idea in mind: to...skipper the captain’s gig. Oh my goodness, and that great day came and the bosun said “OK, son, I’m going to put you in the boat and let’s see what you can do with it....” Boy, I polished that sucker up till you wouldn’t believe it. It was just beautiful. And that afternoon—when they said “Bring the boat alongside,” I came alongside and put one foot on the gang-

way, one foot on the boat. And, “Yes sir, coming aboard.” And he [the skipper] said “128th Street.” “Yes sir.” And I pushed off. As I pushed off, my foot slipped because I had polished it [the gig] so much, and I went right down between the boat and the gangway. I came back up, so help

me God, I looked up, and there’s the skipper looking at me and he said, “No, no, I said 128th Street.” My engineer, he just gave it to me for days.

...As time went on, we had...one of those officers that came aboard that...kind of made it miserable for everybody. So everybody was saying, you know, “Then let’s get the hell off this thing.” But I stuck with it and extended my time for two years more and then I—after six years—I said, “Well, that’s enough. I think I’ll go home and see what it’s all about.”

...Now that was September—and...the *Lamberton* had already gone from San Diego to Hawaii, and we were way over in the backwaters of Hawaii. And my time came to leave, and I said, “Good-bye,” and the executive officer said, “Where you going?” And I said, “I’m gonna go home,” and he said, “What? You’re not reenlisting?” I said “No sir.” And he said “Well, you’re going to be the guy in the back row as we come marching by...with victory.” He’d already been thinking about war.



AMERICA IN WWII COLLECTION



In *McHale's Navy* on 1960s TV, WWII veteran Ernest Borgnine (opposite, front and center) could do "everything...I couldn't do in the regular navy." His portrayal of vicious Sergeant "Fatso" Judson (above, left) in *From Here to Eternity* was based partly on a tough bosun's mate he knew.

'Cause we'd been working out and having all kinds of maneuvers.... They were having...planes come in every day for...mock maneuvers, in other words. We'd follow them along with guns for a while.... And the only thing that really made us mad was...when they burnt the sugar fields over there in Hawaii, and all that gum from the sugar canes would come down on board the ship. And were we all...just disgusted. But ah, listen, what are you gonna do?

...Getting ready to make all this war thing...nobody paid attention to it really, because of the fact that, hey, listen, they were just maneuvers. Well, I got paid off and went home in September [his official discharge was in October]. And December, the Japanese, naturally, being a little smarter, they didn't come on a Saturday or a Friday or any other weekday, they came on a Sunday when nobody [expected] anything.... And bam! It caught 'em with their pants down. And that was the end of that. And pow! All of a sudden I said, "Look—I've got to go back." And so I went back.

But my mother made me wait until they called me.

Oh, I will never know, but...I'm sure that she kept me from going to the Pacific. As it was, I was then working in a factory doing inspection work. And the inspectors didn't like me too much because they would take all day long to set up a thing for inspection, and I would bam-bam-bam, there you go—and 10 jobs already done for the day. And I was much younger, of course. And they said, "You're going too fast for us," and I said, "Sir, I'm sorry, but that's the way I work."

Anyway, the day came that my mother said "They sent the postcard." I said "Mom, I've gotta go this time." So I went and put on my clothes and I went down and I put my right hand up and the guy said, "Where the hell have you been?" and I said "None of your damned business!"

When I went back to get my pay, who the hell should be there but the old yeoman from the *Lamberton*. And I said, "Where the hell did you come from?" and he said,

"Oh, I got paid off and I'm still back in the service again." He said "But I knew you were close by, so I thought I'd come up here. Your mother said you were at the factory." I said "Yeah."

So, he said, "You know, you put six years in at sea already." I said, "So?" He said, "You've got shore duty coming." I said, "Shore duty? In the middle of a war I've got shore duty?" He said, "Absolutely. You know, after all, you've done your service for six years at sea." "So," I asked, "what do you want me to do?" And he said, "Well, we'll put in for the First Naval District [which comprised New England]."

And we put in for the First Naval District, and they came back and they said, "Well, we haven't got anything for you right now, but we'll put you on board a ship for inland"—what did they call it? Anyway, we were supposed to take out these recruits, naval recruits from Columbia College. And they were becoming officers, you know? You take 'em out at sea and show them how to run the guns



BOTH IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ERNEST BORGNINE COLLECTION

Borgnine was in the navy 1935–1945, with a brief hiatus October–December 1941. Before the war, he served aboard USS *Lamberton*; in this photo (above), he’s at left, behind the second seated officer. During the war (inset), he sailed aboard USS *Sylph*, a sub-hunter and sonar school.

and everything else—not that they knew anything about it! What the hell, half of them were sick anyhow.... But, we were doing our duty!

So I ended up staying on board that—believe it or not—a yacht. Yeah, the *Sylph* was a yacht. It was a yacht that was called the SS *Intrepid*, and it was owned by old man Murphy [William Lawrence Murphy], who made Murphy beds [the fold-away beds that disappear into a wall niche]. And I had my own private stateroom, I had...O God, I tell you, what a hell of a war I fought!

But we did all kinds of things. We went out looking for submarines and we had one dead to rights one time. And the skipper...said “Listen, when I blow the whistle, let those things go [depth charges]. Set ’em for 75 feet [detonation at that depth], and off we go.” Yes sir, he blew the whistle and off they went. And all the guys—the kids—had never seen a gun go off before.... And they were saying, “Ah!” And I was kicking them in the behind going, “Come on! Load it up! Load it up! Let’s go!”

So we loaded up this Y-gun [a Y-shaped device, fired by a gunpowder charge, that propelled barrel-shaped depth charges over a ship’s sides] and off it went again, “Bwonk!”—and then off it went. Well, I tell ya, we knocked off about 10 of ’em and I’m still waiting for one to go off. And I’m saying, “What the hell is wrong? I set these things for 75 and I don’t know what the hell is happening.” And the one went off at a long distance and I said, “Good

God almighty!” In the meantime we lost the submarine and the ship that we were guarding sailed away from us.

So we went back into port that day and the skipper said, “We’re going to have an investigation on this.” Sure enough, they came aboard...and they started taking off the—what I had left—the depth charges. [One investigator said] “Now wait a minute, hold it. You got a chipping hammer, gunner?” And I said “Yeah.” And he said, “Just a minute.” So he took a chipping hammer and he knocked off about 76 coats of paint and it said “manufactured in 1917.” That’s what we went to war with!

WE HAD A 3-INCH/50 [a gun that fired a three-inch-wide projectile from a barrel 50 times as long as the projectile’s width] mounted on our afterdeck that we were afraid to shoot because of the wooden decks.... They hadn’t taken the decks off. But they had reinforced it and everything else, [with the gun] in its own cubicle and everything else. But they were afraid to shoot it.

You had six .30-caliber air-cooled Brownings [machine guns] that would be like mosquitoes attacking against a submarine.... I could have done more damage with a slingshot, I think.

They put us up to Quonset Point, Rhode Island, and we stayed...for a while, and then they put us down in Florida, where we became an underwater sound school. So they kept me around, and I kept saying,

“Hey, listen, I’m a gunner’s mate, you know? Maybe I should go fight.” “You stay right here with us. This is good. It’ll be OK for us.” So that’s the way it went.

I remember one time we were operating with one of our own submarines. They would throw up a cloud of air from their ship below. We would put dye—a bucket full of dye—where they...just as we went over them. We’d throw the dye and they would send up that whatchacall and see how close we came together. And that’s as far as I know what the hell we were trying to do. But we were all down below, and it’s a little shaky..., and everybody’s having sandwiches, and I’m hanging on to the ladder to go up topside. Suddenly there’s a great big wrench. The ship started up and the forward part started to go up and up and up, and I thought, by God, we’d hit that submarine. And I said, “O my God, we’re another S-4” [a US sub accidentally sunk by a coast guard cutter in 1927, with loss of all hands]. O God, I remember that one when I was a young kid.

So, I was the last man up the ladder, believe it or not—and I had my hand on the ladder, ready to go! But I reached down, and it was one of those wonderful things that you see in comedies. I was reaching for a life jacket and—there was none there! It was zip-zip-zip-zip and everyone’s gone, you know? It was comical, it really was comical.

But fortunately, all we had done, the submarine had taken off our sound gear

and stripped it, down at the bottom of the ship, naturally. But they [the sub and its crew] were OK. And they came up shortly afterwards and boy, did we breathe a sigh of relief. So they went on back. And...we headed down to Brooklyn Navy Yard, and they restored our things for us and made us even better than we had been before.

So by that time the word came that we would go down through to Florida and become a sound school. So that's where we spent the rest of the war. But believe me—I know, I've gone down there to take a look at where we were, out at Fort Lauderdale—what used to be jungle and a little bit of the inland water canal is now nothing but...a couple of big highways and all kinds of hotels.... And I couldn't even find the place that we used to go to....

[After leaving the navy at the war's end] I tried to get a job, but the jobs all seemed to be filled.... And besides that, look at these guys working these factories. And I was 28 years old, I'd always been out in the open, you know, and built like a bull. And I said to myself, "Me? Lock myself up in those jailhouses? That's worse than going to jail, for heaven's sakes." So I'd take my lunch and go to the movies or...the park and watch the birds for a while and feed the squirrels, and then go home.

And one day I went home and I said, "Mom, for two cents I'm gonna go back in the service, do my other 10 years, and get a pension. At least I'll have something." And that's when she uttered the famous words: "Have you ever thought of becoming an actor? You always loved to make a damned fool of yourself in front of people. Why don't you give it a try?" And I said, "My God! I think that's what I'm going to be."

And I'd never had a lesson in acting or anything else, but Yale was right there in New Haven, Connecticut, and I said, "By God, I'm gonna go to Yale." So I went down to Yale, all decked out nice and clean. And I met up with this wonderful Dr. Cole, who was the head of the Yale school of drama. And he says, "Yes, yes, we can take you, but you'll have to do two years of undergraduate studies." And I said, "Well, what would the studies consist of, sir?" He says, "Well, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, algebra..." I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, sir—I'm sorry, but those are my worst marks I ever received. I think they just let me get by because I was a good-looking

guy." And I said, "As far as I'm concerned, I don't want to be a mathematician or a scientist. All I want to be is an actor." He said, "It'll take two years of undergraduate study." I said, "Thank you very much, sir."

So I finally found a little school up in Hartford, Connecticut [the Randall School of Dramatic Art]. And they used that...GI Bill. And they were happy to get it because, naturally, it helped them.... By the time I finished the first year, I had already done two leading roles in two shows and gotten the first good reviews in 14 years by the critic over there....

[A fellow aspiring actor] said "I've been asked to go down to this place called the Barber Theater of Virginia." And he said "Maybe you'd like to come with me?" He said, "What the hell, maybe they can use an extra hand...." So we went down, and he stayed one day and I stayed five and a half



Admittedly "built like a bull," Borgnine was repeatedly cast as a tough guy. But his sensitive portrayal of a lonely bachelor who finally finds love in 1955's *Marty* (above) won an Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role.

years! And that's where I really learned my profession—the hard way, watching and doing everything but acting. And one day they said to me, "We've got a part for you. You want to be an actor?" I said "Yes sir!" They said, "OK, you just...you're going to be a union leader." I said, "Well, where's my sides?" [pertinent portions of the script]. They said "No, no, no sides. You've got no lines. Just walk from one side of the stage to the other." I said "Alright. I can do that." So...I got myself a big cigar, you know, and a kind of a jacket and everything else—I walked across there lookin' important as hell. There was a critic happened to

be in the theater, and she said, "Of all the people that were in that show," she said, "the only one I believed was the fellow that walked across the stage—the union leader." I said, "Oh God!"

Well, one thing led to another, and the first thing you know, they started using me and pow! ...By the time I'd finished I was doing all the lead parts and everything else in the business, and that's when they called me to go to New York, and off I went. And the rest of it is history.

I asked Borgnine if he ever ran into anybody like Sergeant "Fatso" Judson, his character in From Here to Eternity, while he was in the service.

IT WASN'T SERGEANT "FATSO" JUDSON, but this guy—his name, I don't want it mentioned, because he was a hell of a good bosun's mate. And when his cigar was down—you know what I mean? and he was just sucking on the cigar—that was fine. When the cigar stood straight up in his mouth, watch it, boy, he's out for blood! And so, I half based my character in *From Here to Eternity* on [him] and just thinking in my own mind what would've happened....

Next, I asked him about the relationship between his real navy experience and McHale's Navy.

McHALE'S NAVY WAS A CINCH. You know, I did everything in *McHale's Navy* that I couldn't do in the regular navy! Including riding behind my boat on a sled. I had a ball. ...And for a while they said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute—the navy doesn't like this." And I said, "Well, too bad," I said, "this is *McHale's Navy*, not the regular navy." And they said, "Well, don't call us, we'll call you."

One day, about two years into *McHale's Navy*, I get a call to go to the Pentagon. And I said, "Good God! What did I...?" So I ended up in the secretary of the navy's office, you know, and he brings me in for lunch, and we're sitting down to a beautiful lunch. And I said, "Sir," I said, "this is wonderful. But why?" He said, "You know something? You're the greatest recruiter we've ever had." ★

JIM KUSHLAN is the editor of *America in WWII*. He spoke with Ernest Borgnine by phone on August 24, 2010.