

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lanier W. Phillips

PERSON

Phillips, Lanier, 1923-2012

Alternative Names: Lanier W. Phillips;

Life Dates: March 14, 1923-May 20, 2012

Place of Birth: Lithonia, Georgia, USA

Residence: Gulfport, Mississippi

Occupations: Sonar Technician

Biographical Note

Sonar technician Lanier Phillips was born on March 14, 1923, in Lithonia, Georgia, to sharecroppers. Phillips attended the Yellow River School, the only colored school in DeKalb County, until it was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan in 1929. As a remedy, Phillips was sent to live with relatives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1932; there he attended Main Street Elementary School and Howard High School in Chattanooga until he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1941, at the age of eighteen, in order to escape the rigors of sharecropping in the South.

In the Navy, Phillips faced strict segregation. After boot camp, aboard the U.S.S. Truxton, Phillips began working in the mess hall alongside other sailors of color. In February 1942, the U.S.S. Truxton, the Pollux, and the Wilkes capsized off the coast of Newfoundland; 110 sailors were killed aboard the Truxton alone. Phillips was the sole African American survivor, finding refuge aboard the last raft. A group of Canadian townspeople rescued Phillips and 185 white sailors. Phillips would go on serve in battle with the U.S. Navy several times throughout the course of World War II.

In the 1950s, Phillips applied to the U.S. Navy's Fleet Sonar School; he received a letter of recommendation to this post from Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan. In 1957, Phillips became the U.S. Navy's first black sonar technician. Phillips retired from the U.S. Navy in 1961, and began work as a civil technician with EG & G, a systems engineering firm; at this time he also began work with the ALVIN deep water submersible team. Phillips later joined the deep sea exploration team of Jacques Cousteau and assisted in the development of deep sea lamp technology.

During the 1960s, Phillips marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama. In 1977, after his wife's death, Phillips sought relief from the growing racial

tensions of northern cities, so he moved his family to his hometown of Lithonia, Georgia.

Lanier Phillips passed away on May 20, 2012.

Related Entries

The Howard School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Yellow River School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Main Street Elementary School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Howard School of Academics and Technology [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

U.S. Navy [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1942 to 1961]

Mess Attendant; Sonar Technician

EG&G [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1961 to ?]

Civil Technician

Memorial University of Newfoundland [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Honorary Doctor of Laws

U.S. Navy Memorial Foundation [MEMBEROF]

[from ? to ?]

Winner, Lone Sailor Award