

# Lee Earl Barret, Jr.

U.S. Navy, Commander

1923 - 2003

Written by Caleb Minear and Emily Setler

Instructed by Rebecca Bartlett

Lee Earl Barret, Jr. was born in Beckley, West Virginia, on February 27, 1923, and attended Woodrow Wilson High School. Beckley, the county seat of Raleigh County, was then a mining town of 28,030 residents.

From a very young age, Barret knew he wanted to work with radios. As a child he had radio equipment in his backyard, and by age twelve had honed his skills making calls over the airwaves. This passion would eventually dictate the course of his military career.

Barret enlisted in the U.S. Navy on January 27, 1941, just a month short of his eighteenth birthday. In doing so he left behind the remainder of his college education, having only attended his first year at Beckley College. In the war to come, however, it didn't matter. The energy Barret had put into his childhood passion meant that he immediately went to work with radios.

As the United States was drawn into World War II at the end of 1941, Barret was stationed aboard the *USS Ellyson* (DD-454) as a Chief Radio Technician, a post at which he remained for much of the war. As a radio technician, Barret would have been responsible for establishing communication links and ensuring all of the related equipment was in proper working order. In fact, Barret may have even been one of the radiomen directing the destroyer's gunfire when the *Ellyson* provided support offshore at Pointe Du Hoc, France during the D-Day landings of June 6, 1944, shelling German positions to cover an amphibious attack by U.S. Army Rangers.

Following the success of the Normandy landings, Barret and the *USS Ellyson* sailed to the Mediterranean to cover the Allied landings in southern France. On August 15, 1944, Barret again manned the radio as his ship shelled Axis defensive positions on the coast between Toulon and Cannes



**1939 Woodrow Wilson High School senior portrait of Lee Earl Barret, Jr. By this time, he had developed his lifelong passion for radio.**

*Jeff Miller Web Pages*

## Lee Earl Barret, Jr.



**Lee Barret spent several years aboard the destroyer *USS Ellyson* (DD-454), known affectionately as the “Elly Mae” by her crew. *NavSource***

as part of Operation Dragoon. The amphibious assault was a success. Allied forces were able to liberate southern France and capture valuable seaports such as Marseille, Toulon, and Nice. The flow of reinforcements into Europe had been slowed by the overcrowded ports of Normandy, and these new harbors significantly aided the Allied advance.

As Allied ground troops began to surge into Europe, the Navy transferred Barret and the *Ellyson* to the Pacific. Converting the ship into

a minesweeper and reclassifying it as DMS-19, Barret and his ship arrived off the coast of Okinawa on March 24, 1945. The experienced crew prepared for another amphibious invasion by sweeping the landing approaches for mines. As the assault commenced on April 1, *USS Ellyson* patrolled the fleet's outer perimeter, scouting for enemy ships and aircraft for the duration of the battle. Incoming kamikaze and aerial attacks were a frequent threat and Barret, as a radioman, would have been responsible for warning the main fleet. Losses in American ships and crews were heavy, and by the time the battle for Okinawaka concluded on June 22, 1945, only *USS Ellyson* and two other ships from a squadron of twelve were undamaged.

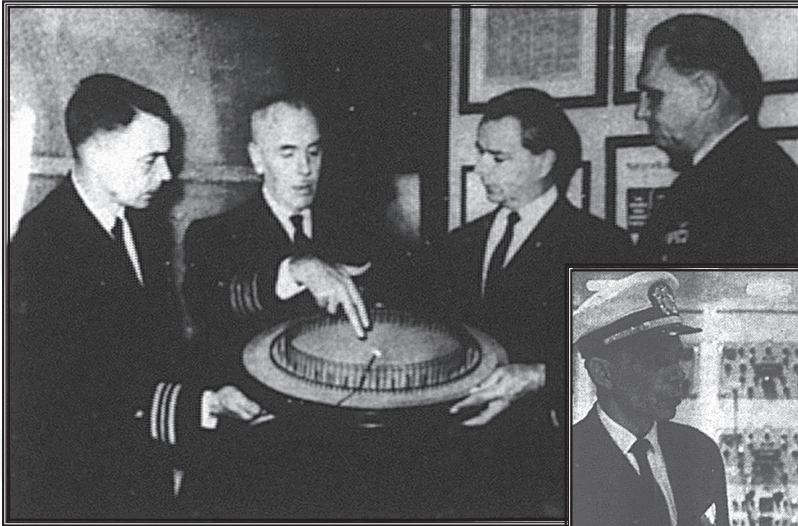
Barret remained aboard the *USS Ellyson* until the Japanese surrendered on September 2, 1945. The ship then docked in Kure, Japan just outside of Hiroshima as part of the occupation. Barret, by then a chief radioman, remained in Japan until June 1946 when he returned home to West Virginia on temporary leave. He had served five years aboard the *Ellyson*.

Life aboard the destroyer would not have been easy. “Tin cans” was the slang term for the fierce little ships, referring to their small size and fragility under heavy fire. The *Gleaves* class of destroyers, of which *Ellyson* was the twentieth built, wasn't the newest or modern design. All the sailors (except the officers) slept in one large compartment that often took on water during rough weather. There was only one washing machine on board for nearly 300 men.

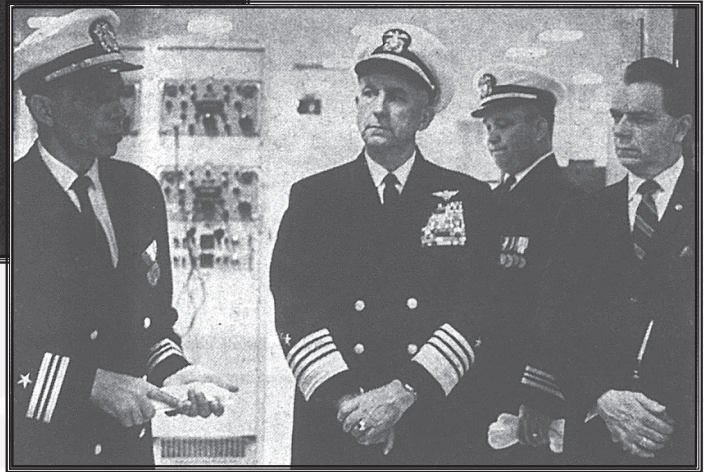
A determined and hard worker, after the war Barret was eventually promoted to the rank of commander, and served in both Korea and Vietnam. Between those two wars, when Barret was thirty-five, he married Barbara Marie Buscher Barret on October 11, 1958. Fourteen months later, the couple welcomed the birth of their son Lee Earl Barret III on January 15, 1960. Lee Earl III was born in Bethesda, Maryland, since his father was serving at the Pentagon.



## Lee Earl Barret, Jr.



Lt. Cmdr. Barret (far left) shows U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd (second from right) a model of the antennae under construction at Sugar Grove Naval Radio Receiving Station in West Virginia. *Mineral Daily News*, 16 January 1968, courtesy of West Virginia Archives and History



Lt. Cmdr. Barret (far left) provides a tour of the upgraded Sugar Grove facility on its activation day. Senator Byrd listens at far right. *The Pendleton Times*, 15 May 1969, courtesy of West Virginia Archives and History

By 1969, Lee Barret had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander. He was the officer-in-charge at Sugar Grove Naval Radio Station (in Pendleton County) in May that year, when it reopened after a \$32 million upgrade. Though the site had originally been intended for a radio telescope (similar to the one in Green Bank, West Virginia), that project was shelved in the mid-1960s. For several years, U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia vigorously pursued alternatives for the facility. Since Sugar Grove resides within a Radio Quiet Zone, the Navy eventually decided to relocate existing equipment from Cheltenham, Maryland, since excessive radio traffic was interfering with the latter's operations. The Sugar Grove base continues in operation to this day.

Barret had retired from the Navy on February 28, 1971. He remarried on March 28, 1979, to Cora Sue Crumb. The man with a lifelong passion for radios passed away on May 29, 2003, from natural causes, in the same small town he was born and raised in: Beckley, West Virginia. He was buried on June 2 at West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown. His transmissions may no longer ride the airwaves, but his service lives on.



# Lee Earl Barret, Jr.

## Sources

“Birth Announced.” *Beckley Post-Herald*. January 22, 1960. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/15783066/?terms=earl%20barret&match=1>.

“Bug Dust.” *Raleigh Register*. June 28, 1956. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/47869644/?terms=earl%20barret&match=1>.

Department of the Navy. “Report of Changes: USS Ellyson (454).” Group 24, Roll 32859\_242940, Catalog ID 594996. *U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949*. College Park, Maryland: National Archives and Record Administration. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.fold3.com/image/308331166?rec=290337164&terms=barret,e,le>

Hechler, Wolfgang and Ron Reeves. “USS Ellyson (DD-454 / DMS-19).” *NavSource Online: Amphibious Photo Archive*. Accessed May 18, 2022, <http://www.navsource.org/archives/05/454.htm>.

“Men O’ War in the News.” *Raleigh Register*. April 02, 1942. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/10680660/the-raleigh-register/?xid=637&ga=2.171353632.1420841756.1636553856-836511973.1636553856>.

Social Security Administration. *Lee Barret*. Social Security Death Index, Master File. Washington D.C.: USA. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse>.

Symonds, Craig. *Operation Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings*. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

United States Census Bureau. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, p. 1274. Accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/population-volume-3/10612982v3p2ch11.pdf>.

Virginia Department of Health. “Lee Earl Barrett.” Roll: 101172904. U.S. Marriage Records, 1936-2014. Richmond, Virginia. Accessed May 18, 2022, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse>.

Lee Earl Barret, Jr.

## Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery  
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354  
(304) 265-2044

Section 2  
Site 443

Date of interment: June 2, 2003

## About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301  
[programs@wvhumanities.org](mailto:programs@wvhumanities.org)  
[www.wvhumanities.org](http://www.wvhumanities.org)  
304.346.8500