

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

George A. Travers

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

June 17, 2004

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
in partnership with the Library of Congress

Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on June 17, 2004 at the Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with George A. Travers. Mr. Travers was born on April 21, 1922, in Detroit, MI, and now lives in Burr Ridge, IL.

Mr. Travers learned of the Veterans History Project through the Indian Prairie Public Library's newsletter which contained an article describing the project. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story:

Mr. Travers, how do you prefer to be addressed during this interview?

George is fine.

Part 2: Entering the Military:

Thank you, George. First, we'll talk about your entering the military. When did you enter the service?

In the middle of June, 1942. I waited until I completed some classes I was taking at night at North Park College in Chicago. I was working at the Edison Company at that point.

So when you went into the service you were already employed...

Yes.

...and what were you doing at the Edison Company?

At that point I was an office clerk in the office of the Vice President of the company.

And where were you living at the time?

In Chicago. On the north side of Chicago.

With your family?

My parents, yes.

Did you have siblings?

I have a sister. Seven years younger than I.

Were you drafted or did you enlist?

No, no, no. I enlisted.

And what motivated you to enlist?

Patriotism and the sense that I would probably be able to qualify for a petty officer's ranking in the Navy, because I was a shorthand writer and a typist. And I thought I could probably qualify for a Yeoman's rating, and I certainly did. I went to the old Post Office building downtown and took the test in shorthand and typing, passed easily and was awarded a third class petty officer's

rating when I enlisted.

Well, that was the next question I was going to ask you. Which branch of service? It was...

United States Coast Guard.

It was the Coast Guard, not the Navy, but the Coast Guard.

Right, and for your information, in times of war, in fact there's a resolution passed by the Congress, that the time war breaks out, that it moves the Coast Guard out from beneath the Treasury Department, or whatever it is, now it would be under the Home Security people...

The Homeland Security, yes.

Yes. They move it out from underneath whatever civilian agency it's under at that point, to the United States Navy for the duration of the war.

I see.

That's how it worked in World War II, at least.

George, where were you inducted?

Right in Chicago. At the Post Office Building, downtown Chicago.

You were sworn in at the Post Office?

Yes.

Part 3: Boot Camp

What happened after you were sworn in?

We got on a train and went, about 150 of us, went on a train to Curtis Bay, MD for our six weeks of boot camp. The US Coast Guard Training Station at Curtis Bay. MD. C-U-R-T-I-S, Curtis Bay. That's six weeks there.

OK, would you tell me a little bit about your boot camp? What it was like being away from home and...

I had no problems being away from home. I had traveled with my parents many places before that as a youngster, so traveling was not foreign to me, nor was the idea of being in a large group of men at all difficult, because I had been an athlete in my high school days and so I was familiar with being in crowds of guys. It was OK.

So the adjustment to military life...

Was minimal.

Was minimal for you?

Yes.

When you went through boot camp did you carry the rating of Yeoman?

Yes, I did.

Yeoman, did you say third class?

Yeoman third class.

Yeoman third class.

And as a result of that I was asked by the Coast Guard Petty Officer, a Bosun's Mate who was in charge of our little group of 40 men, if I would be the clerk, and take care of paperwork and so on. Which I did, during my six weeks of, that sometimes excused me from some other kinds of physical labor that other guys were doing. So I was looked upon (laughs) as some kind of a wimp, I guess. (both laugh) But as it turned out, it was good for me to get the idea of doing work for the Coast Guard in terms of paper trails. I learned about paper forms and so on, which, you know, personnel forms and other kinds of things that the Coast Guard had its own array of forms and regulations that they followed out.

Part 4: First Assignment:

Where did you go after boot camp?

I went to the Coast Guard Clothing Depot at 61 Hudson Street in New York City, which was the East Coast focal point for all of the clothes purchased for the US Coast Guard from the first part of 1942 to the end of the war. My stint there was only from the middle of July, the end of July, like the 24th or 25th of July 'til the 11th of November, and I was there for those three or four months. I was on a subsistence allowance and so I lived as a civilian, really. I, two other sailors and myself lived in an apartment on East 93rd Street in New York City for those three months. We shared expenses and, so I was like a civilian for those months. I came down to work in the morning on the subway, went back in the evening at 5:00. I worked an eight hour, I had to stand watch at the warehouse with a pistol at my hip, for the first time in my life, for a few evenings in those months. The duties were changed, rotated from time to time. Because I was a Petty Officer, I was, that was part of my expected duties. When I was there I was the only shorthand writer among the guys who were yeomen. There were lots of yeomen and storekeepers there, but there was, besides myself there was only one other guy who could write shorthand. And so the skipper of the outfit and his principal two lieutenants really made use of my shorthand writing to get letters and other things and other kinds of documents and reports put on paper. So I became very valuable very quickly and made Second Class Petty Officer in a matter of weeks. And First Class Petty Officer in two more months. So by the time I left there in November I had moved through two grades to become a First Class Petty Officer within five months of my enlistment, which is kind of rare. But it's only because I had that specialized skill that moved me ahead of everybody else to get the, nobody was ever jealous of me because they knew that they couldn't do what I could do, which was write shorthand.

Now this clothing depot, was that a distribution point...

It was a, yes, but, it was, all the clothing was ordered from there, the melton, the whole big rolls of cloth came in to there. And it was then parceled out to the garment district to make the jerseys

and the pants and all the rest. They came back there and then they sent it out around the east coast. So it was a very interesting proposition. They had a couple of guys there who were professional, who were full lieutenants, two strippers, who had never been on a ship in their lives, who would never get out of that office for the time they were there, because they were buyers. They were very skilled, people who came out of, two fine Jewish men, who came out of the Garment District, into the Coast Guard, did this stuff for the Coast Guard, and were properly rewarded for it. The skipper was a full fledged Commander, and he did the, he had had sea duty and all the rest. But these two guys would never see sea duty because they were specialists. And as a result of which they did very good work, and they bought shoes, they bought all the GI issue, you know, underwear and blankets and clothing, and the officer, they made officers' clothing as well. They didn't have to, but they did it as a service to the Coast Guard officers. The Coast Guard officer could buy his own uniform at a naval store, an Army/Navy store. Or at some other private contractor who could do those things. But the Coast Guard clothing people offered the officers very fine clothing, and when I later became an officer, we'll come to that later of course, but when I became an officer I insisted that I get my clothing the Coast Guard clothing people (laughs) because I knew I would get good stuff.

So from the Clothing Depot...

All right. Then I put in for sea duty, because I wanted to be a, I wanted to have some sea duty. And I was not satisfied, most of the guys there were perfectly satisfied to spend the rest of their time at the Coast Guard Clothing Depot, because it was a beautiful, it was like a civilian job. And they got fairly good pay for it, they got subsistence allowance, and most of them lived within a close radius of New York City. A couple of them lived up in Connecticut. I visited with one of them one weekend, up at his home in Connecticut during that time. But for the most part they were perfectly satisfied to stay there. I was not. (tape recorder is turned off briefly for an off record clarification)

OK, and from the Clothing Depot you said you were there 'til to November...

Yes, I was assigned...

...of '42.

I was assigned then to the Coast Guard Cutter Harriet Lane. H-A-R-R-I-E-T L-A-N-E, Harriet Lane. Which was named for the First Lady of the White House during the presidential years of a man named Harrison. This was his niece. He had no wife, and she was the First Lady of the White House. And the cutter was only 125' long. Displaced a little over 100 ton. And it was manned by 45 men and six officers. It was assigned to northern sea lane patrol duty. The northern sea lane patrols extended from Boston, was the southernmost point, to Cape Breton Island, and then up to Greenland. The northernmost point was Greenland. There was part of the patrol was kept in Halifax, but most of them were from Boston or from Cape Breton Island. That was Canada, of course, but the US had used a base up there off, and also had a base up on the southern tip of Greenland called BW1. I don't know what that stood for, but BW1 was the northernmost point of the Northern Sea Lane Patrol. Our job was to escort vessels in convoy, or alone if they were disabled. That was our particular responsibility, was disabled vessels. To a port where they could get repaired if they were disabled. So a typical situation would be for a liberty ship or a vessel carrying cargo of some sort, tanker, whatever, to leave Boston in a

convoy with us as one of the outriggers, outships, the patrol pickets, and at some point became disabled, and could not keep up with the convoy's speed. And when it dropped off we were always the one that was assigned to escort the vessel to a harbor where they could get repair work done and rejoin a later convoy.

And what was the biggest threat? Was it submarines?

Submarines! Oh yes!

Was that the only threat?

That was the only threat. The U-boats were operating in the North Atlantic. They were operating along the Atlantic coast. They used the backdrop of the lighted village, cities, to silhouette vessels that they could pick off. That's why the blackouts were extensive along the coast, because of the, but even without that, just automobile lights and other things would give a glow to the sky, and those U-boats would have a picnic just picking people off, picking ships off, and um, but the destroyers, destroyer escorts and frigates, all of US registry, you know, United States Navy ships, and a few cutters, like a lot of those 125 footers, the 165' cutters, a 239' cutter, a 327' cutter, all of which, the 327' was as long as a destroyer, big as a destroyer.

Now, what would your role be in the event of an attack?

We would, if somebody attacked we had all the equipment necessary.

What was your armament?

We had a 3.23mm canon on the bow deck. We had 20mm Oerlikon guns mounted on the wing of each bridge, and we had depth charges.

You said Oerlikon?

O-E-R-L-I-K-O-N. It's a Swiss made or German made 20mm, and also made 40mm guns. They were widely used in military, in the Navy and the Coast Guard in WWII. So that was our armament. And we had all the interior sonar, we had sonar, we had radar, primitive, but it was still radar. We had tracing gear, tracking gear for the depth charges and so on.

The cutter carried depth charges as well?

Yes, yes.

Did your cutter see any action?

Yes, we saw several scares, I do not know at this point whether we were ever credited with any successful attacks on submarines. The one that we did get some credit for, at least initially, and in written form at some point, was in the summer of 1943 off Provincetown, Massachusetts. A German submarine, we picked it up, we hollered for help. A DE coming out of Boston was half way down there before, it was headed down there...

When you say DE you mean destroyer escort?

Destroyer escort. Who then went to flank speed and took over from us. We were tracking this

sub. We had, we got a good record on it, had good pings off him, and when he saw our size I'm sure he thought we were not worthy of a torpedo. Okay, that was our conclusion. By the time the destroyer escort got there he was still within our sonar. He was still, we were still on the shelf, we were still on the continental shelf. And so he could not submerge beyond the 60 fathoms at that point off Provincetown, and so we were credited with an assist. And there were floating life jackets and other things. Either they jettisoned them or we sank them, we're not sure. The shelf ends another four - five miles off, and I don't know if they got over that shelf, and if they ever surfaced again or not. I don't know how badly they, we dropped depth charges. We got close enough for one run on the depth charge before the DE was, we could see it coming up. But we had them on track, and the skipper said, "We're going to go after this guy and at least give them something to think about." And so we dropped off, I think eight depth charges, and it went pah-boom, pah-boom, you know. It was really very dramatic for kids that never saw any kind of combat before. It was, underneath us, not visible, it was certainly there because we picked them up on the sonar pretty well.

Now at this point in your career you were a Yeoman 1st Class,

Yes.

And your official job had been shorthand. What did you do on the cutter?

Well, all the paperwork. We had no storekeeper, so I did all the; this made me a well rounded, I knew all about stores. I learned all the stores forms, and how to order things, how to get toilet paper, you know, how do you get stuff for a ship? So all of those things came to me, and I have almost a photographic memory in some respects, and I memorized all the numbers, all the service numbers of all the guys on the ship, in a matter of a couple of days.

(laughs) That's 25 plus 6 officers.

Forty-five guys, I knew 45 numbers. And I would, so when I would type out the departure list, to leave with the captain of the port in Boston, when we left to, out on patrol, I would simply sit down and type the names. I knew them, alphabetic, I had them all alphabetized in my head and would just write the thing up, which was, when the skipper saw me doing it he said, "What in the world are you doing?" And I said, "I memorized all those," and he said "I don't believe that." I said, "Take a name," and he picked a name and I gave him a number, and he said, "I'll be dipped." So that was my particular skill at that point. So what I did was be the Yeoman for the ship and the storekeeper for the ship, but once you left shore there was not a whole lot to do. The skipper wanted to dictate a letter that was fine, one of the other officers wanted to do any private letters or writing that I could do for them I would gladly do it. But once you left Boston and headed out to sea for seven days, it wasn't really a whole lot to do. And after about the second trip out I said to the skipper, "Do we have a quartermaster striker on board?" And he said, "No we don't." I said, "Would you allow me to be a quartermaster striker for the time we're at sea?" He said, "Why do you want to do that?" I said, "I want to learn some navigation, I want to learn some..."

What is a...

A striker is the fellow who's trying to get the job. He's a seaman first and he wants to be a quartermaster. Wants to get a petty officer's grade.

Ah, striker just means a candidate.

A candidate for the job of quartermaster 3rd class. And so I said I'd like to take the, there was a place on the billet for that. And I didn't know if any of the seamen were doing that, so I asked if, this was maybe before Christmas I asked this, and so by the time we were going up into really serious northern waters, during the first part of 1943, up the Greenland coast, that was really tough, those were really tough exercises because the ship wants to freeze over, you know, if it gets spray and the spray the ship can get iced up, and the ship can capsize because of the...

Extra weight?

Extra weight on the top side. So it was a very hearty crew that undertook this. You had to be pretty savvy seawise to be up there because if you weren't properly protected you could end up in some serious frostbite in a hurry. I remember getting up one morning and going (laughs) the ship, we were bunked four high, in very, in quarters the size of this room, four high, and I had a top deck. I was a first class petty officer. I was the top. But the skin of the ship was within reach. By the time we got up to Greenland there was a half inch of ice on the inside of that ship. Condensation. Condensation on the side of the ship that froze. So, my first experience of sleeping (laughs) was next to an iceberg (both laugh). So we had to stay clothed all the time. Seven days. You never got out of your clothes once. Good food. Nice guys. Good rapport. Good esprit de corps. And I learned how to do celestial navigation, land navigation, what do I want to say? Terrestrial navigation. You know, with a slide rule, a point here, a point here, and you triangulate and you get the spot.

Now at what point did you decide that you might like to apply for the Academy?

The skipper said to me, we came back in, and I had made an entry into the log, and he said to me, he was standing over my shoulder and he said, "Would you," he was a Swedish man, Carl A. E. Lindquist by name, and he said to me, "Would you like to go to the Academy, Yeoman?" And I said, "Yes, I would, Skipper." I said, "Would you send me, would you endorse the letter?" He said, "Yah, you write the letter, and I'll endorse it." So I wrote the letter for myself and he endorsed it. We sent it in to the Coast Guard Academy and in three weeks we got a reply back, "You're a candidate." So, this was in the late summer, maybe in the end of August, 1943, and so he said, we get the letter and he came in and said, "You're a candidate. I gotta get a new Yeoman." And he himself left at that point. A new skipper came on, by the name of Joseph Green, and so I just got to know him a little bit before I left. I left on the 10th of October, I guess it was, and went down to New London. And I had married by this time, and my father had died, so I had a very interesting year in that, 1943. I took some, I had to take some leave to go to my father's death. I had already married my wife back in February of that year, so I had two big events in my own personal life in that year '43.

So you were married...

February 12th, 1943.

And that was while you were on the sea duty?

Sea duty. Exactly. I had a week's leave.

And where did your wife live while you were out at sea?

She lived in Boston. I had an apartment, that we got, an apartment in Back Bay, and she was there for the duration. She left sometime after I was out on the LST, but that's another story.

So then you went to the Academy. Was the Academy in New London?

New London, CT.

Is it still there?

Yes, it is. Beautiful campus. It was a beautiful setting. Right across from the US Naval Submarine Base on the Thames. They call it "Thames" instead of "Tems," river in Connecticut.

So the Coast Guard Academy, how long did that...

That was a 120 day program. The Officers' Training Course. Not training, but Officers' something course. OCS.

Officers' Candidate School?

Officers' Candidate School. That's what it was, you've got it.

Do you want to tell me a little bit about your time in the Academy? How that went?

Yes, I would. There were 565 guys in my class of October 1943, it was called 10/43, was the number of our class, and four months later there were 255 of us graduated. I had nothing but a high school education at that point, except for a couple of courses at North Park College at night. (pause) And through some amazing good advice I graduated sixth in my class. That's only important in terms of your promotion, because very often when a promotion came to the next grade they would chop it off at some point. The higher up you were on that list, the better off you were, the sooner you got your promotion. So, I did not even know this until the promotions came through. I did not, I had no idea of the importance of this. I didn't know where I finished in the class, all I knew is I finished. I got the best advice in my life the first day I was there. I was there all by myself, I got there on a, class didn't start until Monday morning. I got there Saturday at noon time. Nobody was in my, there were four to a room, four guys to a room, all by alphabetical order. And, and, I was all by myself. It was four o'clock in the afternoon on a Saturday and a guy came in, in a sailor's uniform. And he looked through the whole place with a flashlight, and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I am the, I'm on fire watch." I said, "Fire watch?" He said, "Fire watch." I said, "What does that mean?" He said, "It means that I have to go through every room in this entire building and I have to find out if there's any fires." I said, "Wait a minute, you're assigned to do this?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Isn't that pretty silly?" He said, "Listen I got real good advice for you, if you follow the advice you'll graduate, if you don't follow the advice you won't graduate. In obscurity lies security. Don't raise your head. Don't volunteer for anything. Don't look good. If you ace a test make a couple of mistakes deliberately, so you don't look too good, because cream may rise to the top but it also gets its head taken off." (laughs) So, he said, "I'm going to graduate next week, and nobody knows my name. (interviewer laughs) What you've got to do is say the same thing, tell the guy following me, following you, the same thing. Don't let anybody know your name." It was the

best advice I ever got. (both laugh) And I graduated then.

You graduated in...

February of 19 (pause) 44. February of '44. I was assigned at that point to the Captain of the Port of Boston, Mass.

You call it Captain of the Port?

C O T P, captain of the port of Boston Mass. First naval district The Coast Guard was divided into the same districts as the Navy. So the First Naval district which consisted of from I think some place in Rhode Island up to Maine. And the Second District started in Connecticut and went down to New Jersey, and so on. And all around the country, thirteen I think naval districts were in place. So the First Naval District had responsibility for the maintenance of the Port of Boston, which had a very, very complicated entry point, where gates were dropped at night and picked up in the morning, to prevent submarines from entering through the gates of the, so the entire gate was made of heavy grade metal which dropped down and was not anchored but was held to the bottom, held in place at the sides. I think it was only about 200 yards across, you know, the harbor.

And what was your duty?

My duty, I was on a light ship, the Boston light ship, which was anchored about two miles out off of the Boston harbor entrance gate. What sailors called "the Graves," which was a series of shoals and rocks before you enter Boston harbor. And our job was, on a daily basis, to challenge every vessel coming into the Port of Boston from wherever it came from.

And how do you do that?

It was escorted, the escort vessel would signal us, and then we would reply back and give us the light signal for the day. But, what was the password. It was Omaha, they'd flash Omaha, if it were Raccoon they'd flash, right, whatever the word was.

Did they have to identify the ship they were escorting as well?

Oh, yes.

And did you have a list of...

That's right. From that point on we had to authenticate that this was a valid thing, and not a ruse of some sort. So, if it was by convoy, if it was a whole convoy coming in, then we would get the senior officer present would get on the voice radio and talk with the hill, up in Boston, where the control was. That's to whom we reported. And so we would allow ships, any ship coming in by itself would have to meet that standard on a given day.

So this duty would really be a daytime duty? At night the gates go closed.

That's right...

Were you able to go home at night then?

Oh, no, no, no. I'm still, three days on, three days off.

Ah, I see.

Seventy-two hours on, 72 hours off. It was my responsibility. I did that from the first week in March until the first week in June, of 1944.

And then what happened?

Then I again asked for sea duty, and I was assigned to a Coast Guard LST group being formed at the Norfolk operating base in Norfolk, Virginia, preparatory to going to take possession of and to man and to operate a US Coast Guard manned LST for further assignment. So I went to the Coast Guard group of officers in training for LST duty in Norfolk early in June, and by the end of August we had done all of our work.

And the work consisted of training?

Training. The 110 men and eight officers, I was assigned to be the stores officer because I knew stores. I'd been a yeoman, so the skipper figured I'd be well suited to do stores work. So I was still an ensign, still an ensign, so I was lower. The skipper was a two striper, the exec was a J G.

Now, when you say two striper what is that, exactly?

Full lieutenant. He was a lieutenant.

He was a lieutenant.

The executive officer was lieutenant JG. The engineering officer was a, all the other officers were at that point ensigns. No, I'm sorry, communications officer was a lieutenant JG as well. So we had three Lieutenant JG or greater and the other five guys were ensigns. So, it was, but all raw, new officers, if you understand. LST's were designed by the US Navy to be expendable. They were never entered, as a destroyer would be entered on the books of the navy. It never had to be accounted for as the destroyer had to be accounted for. It followed, it went under the Navy rules, it sailed under the Navy it's called BUPERS, Bureau of Personnel. It served under BUSHIPS, Bureau of Ships. It served under all those, it was responsible to them for reports and any repair work to be made, and so on; so that it was a properly recorded ship, but it was expendable. It did not have to answer if it got sunk. There was no accountability to speak of. I'm sure that...

Was that because they thought the likelihood of...

Coming back was remote. That was the idea.

Where were those built, do you know?

They were built right here in Illinois, down in Seneca, Illinois.

Seneca, Illinois? That's why I asked. I...

And the others were built in Shippingport, PA, I'm not sure of the other places. But there were 4 or 5 places around the country. On the west coast as well.

Do you know where the one on the west coast was?

I'm trying to think, Treasure Island, I think, but I could be wrong.

Did you...

Anyway there were a number of those places where LST's were made. They were put together, they were 327 feet long, 50 foot beams, 12 foot drafts, maximum. And they were built to be taken on the shore and slammed into the beach, the bow door would open, and whatever was in the tank deck would be moved out. Uh, it could accommodate 100 plus visiting troops or transport troops, plus a crew of I'd say about 108 men and 8 officers. The quarters were quite nice, they were all, a brand new ship, you know, everything was brand new.

And it was an oceangoing vessel?

Oh, except, let me explain, my own feelings about that. We headed down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, to be outfitted because all of the stores and the ammunition and fuel, and all the rest were all at, all in New Orleans.

Now, you say you headed down the Mississippi River...

We went on the Ohio, see...

From Shippingport, Pennsylvania?

From Shippingport, PA down the Mohonganila I guess, the something else, and then finally out to the Ohio and finally out to the... So that was a whole week long vessel. And our skipper never touched it. We never touched it. It was all owned and operated by a pilot, river pilots. They came on every day and took us to the next anchorage. And this was a regular routine, they had a full routine. "Cause they were turning out these ships one and two a day. They made 1171 of these ships, 1171 of these ships were made. We still have an association of people who belonged to them. It's called the USS LST Association. I'm a member. I go every year to a conference. Um, and I meet with 14 or 15 of my shipmates who are still alive and still coming to that thing. Um, the uh...

So you went down the Mississippi...

And we put on, we got on...

...this was with the full complement of the 110...

full compliment...

crew...

and we did all kinds of drills,

...and the 8 officers?

We did all kinds of drills.

While you were in route?

While we were in route. We got familiarized with everything that, everybody did everything they were supposed to do to learn how to, we'd seen at the Norfolk base we'd been through one of those things, we knew what we were supposed to do, now here it was, our own. And so we made it our own.

Now did you spend any time in New Orleans before you departed to...

Only a couple of liberties there, but I think it was about, from the time we got there until we came back...we went over to Gulfport, MS and had a number of, we had armament put on there, heavy armament. The armament had been stored below, and at Gulfport they had a facility that installed all our 40mm and 20 mm guns, our director, that is the automatic computer like a Norstad, like a bomb sight.

Oh, like a Nordon bomb sight?

But it was designed to control a 44 mm gunsight. It gives you a, figures out the lead, the trajectory, figured out the wind and variations of the ship. But the guys had to learn how to use them, and so that was our next job, and so we had a shake down cruise. So we get all ourselves out there, and everything done, and we're sent out to Florida, Panama City, to get a shake down. And for a whole week we're under the guidance of a full four stripe Navy Captain. He comes on at eight o'clock in the morning, he leaves at four o'clock in the afternoon. He takes us through all kinds of drills. A surprise drill, and the one that we have to pass with glowing colors happened to be the luckiest thing in my life, up to that point. There were six of us, six LSTs taking this shake down, and we beached at a place, an island off Pensacola, FL. Off Pensacola. It's an island out there, I don't know what it's called. And we beached there, and the beaching, of course was, the Captain was doing, he had the stopwatches, all the rest, and wanted to let go of the anchor and so on. Because when you go in, you drop the anchor, catches the, and when you come off you crank the....

You winch yourself back out, huh?

And so to do that precisely and do it well, the first time out, is very often a big problem for the Skipper and for the guy who is on the stern anchor, who was me. I was the stern anchor guy. I'm the low guy on the totem pole at this point. I got a bosun's mate and two seamen. And when the skipper says, "Drop it," we gotta drop it because it's called from above. So the thing goes out, pays out, get it taut, and I'm standing there and looking out through the, there's an opening under the gun tub above us, and I'm looking straight out at the stern, and there's something coming at me. I got glasses, and I said, "Skipper! We've got planes coming in from the stern! Tell the conn there's planes coming in from the stern!" So he calls them, we go to general quarters, and the Captain, a four stripe captain, is astonished that we picked this up. Nobody picked this up but us. And later we found out that very often none of the six ships pick it up until they're overhead. And we got...

That's part of the drill?

Part of the drill. But nobody knew this. A surprise thing. And I just, I saw these things right at the top of the water. You know, they're coming at them at masthead height. It (laughs) was pure

luck. There was a guy up on the stern who was the lookout. He didn't see it. There were all kinds of guys up on the stern looking out there. I just happened to see them. And I got 20/30 vision to begin with, so I'm saying to myself, "I'm not sure what I'm seeing here," (laughs) so I bring the glasses up and I see their planes, six of them coming in. And I called them to attention, and the four star captain gives us an A rating for the day. So, (laughs) pure luck, OK. Anyway, finish the shakedown cruise, got back to New Orleans, got all our ammo on board, and then we went down through the Panama Canal, and out to the West Coast, and we went in to Long Beach, CA. And Long Beach, CA, we get our final outfitting before leaving the country. This, now, takes us from, we're now at, out in the first part, last part of October. Of 1944, the last part of October, and we learn at that point that we're going to have pontoons attached to our sides. Well, we didn't know what they looked like or anything else. What do they do, they do this up at Point Hueneme, CA. Oxnard, CA. Never heard of this place in my life. So we go up there, a little port there, a little harbor, and we pull in there, and in about a week's time we have these huge pontoons. They must be five, if you think about it in depth, first of all, five feet deep, and 15 feet wide and 45, 50 feet long. And they're two sections on each side, so there's four whole sections. These are welded to the side of our ship. (pause) No, that's not right. They are chained to welded posts on the side of our ship. So, first of all they got a welder up there to put these posts in, these stanchions, and then we've got, he has to put a weld on the bottom of the deck. On the bottom of the hull, rather. So the chain can be locked in there. But around the pontoon, and then attached to this pole and secured securely. So we're talking about some pretty heavy seas before we got out there where we're going. So all kinds, there must be ten or 15 of these chains on either side of the ship. So it takes a long time for these welders to do this, get the thing up, put these things up, they used a huge crane to bring these things up alongside, hold them in place while the guys put the, it was a... Now the purpose of the pontoons is, so in case you take the Marines in Tarawa or, as we were, Iwo Jima, we never had to use them because we never got to beach where the contour of the beach wasn't perfectly capable of beaching. But if you came to one that had a sandbar in front of it, you hang up on the sand bar, you couldn't get to the beach itself, the pontoons would be released, cut by torches, brought forward, tied together, and allow the tanks to move from the tank deck, the men could get ashore, but they couldn't take the tanks ashore.

Oh, so these pontoons were a bridge?

A bridge

Oh. It had nothing to do with keeping the LST from capsizing...

Oh, no, no, no.

...Strictly as a bridge from the LST to the shore.

On the unlikely possibility that you would get hung up on a sandbar and couldn't get your tanks off.

Well, these pontoons, the way you describe them, they sound very heavy.

They were very heavy. They...

Did the LST ride significantly lower in the water?

Oh, we could always balance that, you know. We had plenty of ballast. We always kept our free board pretty high. I mean, we just did it by ballasting. Because your fuel takes up, as you use fuel you can take up additional ballast to keep it in balance. So that's a job for the engineers to take care of. Wasn't the deck officers' job. So...

Okay, laughs. So the pontoons were attached.

At Oxnard, and they went back then to Long Beach and formed a flotilla of 12 LST's. And went from there, in formation, with an escort, just two DE's and went with them to Hawaii and reached Hawaii on the first part of December, the first part of December, 1944. We spent the next (pause) five weeks in Hawaii going through the drills. Not in Honolulu itself, but we beached on Maui, we beached on Kauai, um, we did all kinds of beaches. Various kinds of beach contours, that was the whole, get to know the different contours you got to face. We didn't know where we were going. No one had any idea we would be at Iwo Jima. We never heard of Iwo Jima. We had no idea except we were going to the Pacific where the war had now gotten to a place where we were putting the Japanese on the run. The Japanese by this time were fleeing from, without even showing up sometimes. But they knew that they were in big trouble. So they were entrenched and pulling back. They were also pulling back on the mainland, of the Asian mainland because of the very same thing. They could not control the beachheads any longer. Philippines were now in the hands of the US, Mac Arthur's back in Manila, these things are all happening like tumbling blocks. Like dominoes. And Japan is now in retreat. So its, we are unmolested all the way out to Hawaii, and we were at sea for ten days between there and Saipan; and it wasn't till we got to Saipan that we learned what our eventual destination was. Which was this little island in the Ryukus that had been such a thorn in our side for all the time we were trying to get to the Japanese homeland. So the war then became very, very important to us. We suddenly found ourselves in a crucial point in this little bunch of LST ships, vessels, that we were going to play an important role in probably the toughest landing, and the toughest single outpost of the Japanese army, still intact, because it was the listening post that warned Tokyo that the Air Force was coming up in whatever numbers. So this little island out there, it was the eyes and ears of Tokyo 750 miles north of them. So when they saw the aircraft coming overhead, the flying fortresses with the fighter escort and all the rest, they knew that they would be there in two hours, so they would be prepared to deal with any bombardment from the air.

Part 4: Combat

And this was Iwo Jima you're talking about.

It was Iwo Jima I'm talking about. So Iwo Jima was a reporting base for anything they could pick up coming. And they had to, from the Marianas, there was no other way to go except right over the Ryukus. And that radar would pick us up even without being within sight of the island, they'd still pick us up. And, there was no way to get back. Once you got dinged over Tokyo there was no way to get back, no place to land except all the way back to the Marianas, three and a half hours later. So we had to have enough fuel to fly from the Marianas to Tokyo and back, 3000 miles all total, and you did that every day. And so we were losing planes very, very often. As, furthermore, to begin with, they did have, they had a fighter group on that island. But in the summer, 1944, the battleships came and the aircraft carriers came and flattened everything above ground on the island of Iwo Jima. We didn't know anything about this. We didn't know anything about this at all. So we got to Saipan, we found out what we were supposed to do, we

went to some drills there, got our Marines aboard, got our tanks aboard and we, um (coughs)
Excuse me.

Quite all right. George, you told me that the size of your LST is 357...

327

327 feet long, 50 foot beam, and you already have a complement of 110 men plus 8 officers, correct? And, so how much room do you have left on this ship, how many tanks, how many marines, how much other gear?

We put tanks and DUKW's, called "ducks," but they were like amphibious tanks, like amphibious tanks for men only. In other words it was not armed. Not armed, but lightly.

Just transport.

Just transport, from a floating platform to a beach. That was its purpose.

Now, these ducks, were they wheeled or did they have treads?

Wheeled, they were wheeled.

They didn't have treads, they weren't a half track?

They weren't a half track, they were wheeled.

And DUKW do you know what that stands for?

No, I don't. I did not understand what that meant.

OK, but they were commonly known as "ducks."

They were called ducks. In fact there's still some in operation down in Florida. They carry people around.

Up in Wisconsin, too.

Wisconsin, too. OK. (both laugh)

Up around the Dells.

OK. OK, well that's what they were used for. (tape ends)

We just switched the tape over to the other side, and when we did that, George, you were telling me about the ducks and you said off record that you wanted to talk about the LCP's as well. Please continue.

The "Landing Craft, Personnel, the LCP'S were held in davits, like rowboats, on a ship. And to be lowered, and they were our own vessels, that were manned by our own crew. And so we could put a tank and some eight guys in it, or we could put 40 guys in it. And on D Day, it took us, now from Saipan to Iwo, it took some couple of days, three or four days. And we wound up there knowing that what we had to do, we had been briefed on the way up there by the marine

battalion we had on our ship. It was 147 guys, includes six or seven officers and, um, the guy that bunked with me was a guy named Hadley, a major, and he occupied the upper bunk in my stateroom for the trip up from Saipan to Iwo.

Excuse me, the LST had staterooms?

Oh yeah. Oh yeah, we had a very nice room.

So now you've got your full complement of men plus a whole marine battalion, did you say?

No no. It's only 147 guys.

Oh, Okay.

147 guys, but they were from a battalion. I think the battalion was split up among three or four ships. I don't remember what a battalion was, to get to take them. But they had a definite landing place. In other words we knew the beach had already been marked out by the planners, and we knew that we had to get our marines on D Day onto the small boats, the LCP's, and the ducks. We had to get them on board because they were not going to hit the beach with us in it. We were too big a target. What they wanted to get on was any kind of small boat and so the number of ducks that we were assigned, and half tracks, floating half tracks that we had, um, were the same number as marines we had. So they were assigned in blocks to take care of. Every marine had a spot to go on. He knew where he was going when he left the ship. Um, the ducks were rolled right out the front door, you knew, through the open bow door. The LCP's had to be lowered over the water, and they climbed on.

How close to shore did they plan for you to open up?

1500 yards.

1500 yards, and at that point the ducks...

It was called the, it was called the "line of departure."

Pardon me?

It was called the line of departure. There was a beach master to whom we were accountable, by audio, by voice radio.

At 1500 yards you, how did you physically get the ducks and the LCP's off the LST's and into the water?

You open the bow door. They come right out. They can just stream right out. The bow door does not, it's above the water. In other words, the hull of the ship comes up and the bow door, and there's a ramp, and they go off the ramp and right into the water. So it was not a problem at all. And so our coxswains and our motormacs got into the LCP's and got down into the water and we put 40 guys in each of those vessels, and another 20 or 30 guys in each of the two ducks, and off they went. We had two ducks and two LCDP's.

Now, as each vehicle goes off does the LST ride a little bit higher in the water?

It's a big ship.

So it didn't have any effect. You didn't have to lower the...

No, no, no, no.. It was a big ship. Now the whole back half of our tank deck was full of munitions. We had 50 mm, sorry, we had howitzer ammunition and mortar ammunition.

Would the plan be for somebody to come back later and pull that off and take it ashore?

Yeah, yeah. They took it out with them for the, and we also had the actual guns. They took guns with them, in the LCP they would take a howitzer, a small howitzer. Or they'd take, um, a couple of the small mortars. So every group that left our ship had munitions and weaponry and, um, the first line of artillery, the first little bit of artillery.

You mentioned the Oerlikens, you were carrying those, as well?

They were for us for defense. They were ours. They did not leave the ship.

But you have a photograph here of one on shore?

Ah! Those were transported by us, and they were put on a carrier, a wheeled carrier, and they were dragged up into those positions with the foxholes and used as offensive tools, offensive weaponry. So you had, we didn't have all of that, we just had, as I said, the ammunition and the mortars and howitzers. And we didn't just get on shore to do that because the shore line was not what we expected to have happen. Nobody expected to see the kind of, we knew it was going to be tough, but had no idea how tough it was. Because Suribachi was, they'd had this island from 1908, they knew eventually, if it ever came to it, was the last line of defense between them and the homeland. By sea.

So they defended it a lot more vigorously?

So they put 22,650 men, Japanese, were on that island. 22,650 Japanese were on that island. With a major general in charge. (pause) So, when we came up, on the dawn of February 19, 1945 we were facing a formidable arsenal and fortress. It had been bombed from the preceding June, from the air. The air field was a wreck, it was full of holes, full of craters. They had not had a chance to fill it because without their, next bunch of planes coming over would bomb it again, so they, it just was a losing battle for them. But they honeycombed the entire thing with large underground chambers, rooms heavily structured. They had it, as I say, for literally 40 years when we got there. And they knew this was going to be a very, very tough assault. They were committed to die. They'd all taken the Bonsai, they that knew they were committed to die if they had to. They would defend it to the last man.

When you say "taken the Bonsai," what does that mean, exactly, to you?

They've sworn that they would give their life for the Emperor. Every man there had done that. from the Major General on down to the lowest private. (pause) And they were cut off. They had no means of getting back to the, they had no means to get home, they couldn't get, their aircraft were all scattered in parts all over the airfield. They had no vessels that they could get back on. They were cut off. They were doomed men. But they made a very tough fight out of it because they had this entire beach line, they knew they had both beaches lined, they had guns trained

from Suribachi, this 450' high mountain off the end of the island, which looked like the, it was a pear shaped island and this thing looked like (gestures) the core of the pear, the bottom, with a 450', it was the most, the volcano, the volcano went down to the bottom of the sea.

What did?

The volcano itself. It was a dead volcano. But the volcano line had gone all the way down to the bottom of the sea, and the island had been really a result of volcanic action in the millennia past. How long it had been there I have no idea. The Ryukus are an old, old island chain, so this was the bottom of the Ryukus. So, here we had this little island, let's see, five miles long and three miles wide at the widest part. Pear shaped. And it had 22,000 Japanese on it, and the people at Suribachi were completely cut off from the people in the north. There was no passage from Suribachi to the underground um, uh, hives of the north. No way to get there. So the guys at Suribachi were there, they were isolated. It took us, and the main problem with combat on Iwo Jima was that they had a large 75 mm, or greater, I'm not sure, 155, whatever it was, millimeter howitzer emplacement at the top of the mountain, 2/3 of the way up the mountain, with steel doors that opened up, the thing slid on a track, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, pause, pull it back in, pull the doors closed. That was the killer. We lost, I believe, 1,200 men the first day. 1,200 dead, not injured. 1,200 dead men the first day.

What about air strikes against that...

Oh, they had air strikes. They had the Missouri. We bring the Missouri up, point blank range. It was, it's firing "garbage cans" full of ammunition. That's what those 16" guns, that's the kind of, you could see a garbage can go through the air. You could see it.

You could watch the shell go through the air?

Through the air. Wasn't hard to see. And they were firing, the first time it went off we didn't know it was there. We were at the line of departure for another purpose. This was on the second day. We thought we might be able to go in and hit the beach. They thought they had a beach cleared. But that's a whole other story. And I'll come to it in just a minute. We were waiting there to go to the beach and get this ammunition off, which we wanted to do, obviously. We get hit with that stuff, we're gone. Um, all of a sudden this KABOOM really flattened us. We were looking on the beach, the 150 guys behind us, Missouri turn on (laughs) here's this thing, got these things, KABOOM, KABOOM, KABOOM. It nearly deafened me. I had never been at, had ear problems before. It didn't, wasn't serious, but it sure did (laughs)....

Yeah, it startled you.

(laughs) Boy, it startled us. And they were aiming at that hole. When that hole opened up they fired at it. It took them three days to do that. They didn't get to that thing until the afternoon of the third day.

So it was finally knocked out by naval fire?

Naval fire. Not by... And the thing would rain death on that, on that island. For 72 hours.

And so, of course, that was why Mt. Suribachi was so important and...

Oh! And we saw, now see, the beach is on that windward side. On the leeward side, rather. Was the most appealing. On the west, on the windward side, were terrible because you had all this surf piling up.

The what was?

Surf.

No, you said...

On the windward side, of the island. On the west side of the island. The wind coming up from the west., would carry a much higher wave. So we (recorder is turned off momentarily)

The combat crises on the beach came about because of the nature of the sand. The sand was volcanic ash. It was like coffee grounds. Same color, same constituency. And it was, you know, millions of tons of it. From the past volcanic action of Suribachi. And the stuff was of such a nature that if a vessel got caught up in it, like an LCV or a duck, or a half-track, and got caught sideways by the wave, you could never get it off. It got sucked in. You couldn't get a cable to it. If you did get the cable to it, it would snap the cable before you got it off.

Almost like a quicksand action?

Well, it just (makes squeaking sound), the suction just held the thing in place. If you look at some of the pictures that I have you'll see that the place was littered with the debris of LCVs, of the little carriers that they used to bring the bigger guns up on shore, anything that was detached, that was allowed to remain on the beach, got sucked into that sand.

You had some excellent pictures of that, and I will try to have those accompany this...

...because it was the debris that caused all the problem. Other words, you couldn't, we couldn't beach the LSTs. You had too much debris. You bang into it, you wreck your bow doors, you'll be of no use for the rest of the combat. It also slowed down everything. It slowed down the access of the manpower, getting, because of the nature of the sand, it slowed, it, and also the litters. We had people dying there. There were 1,200 deaths. And under the guns of Suribachi, the chaplains were performing funeral, burying the dead in the sand. It was, it was, it was, the closest thing to hell...

They were actually burying them there?

Oh yeah. It's the closest thing to hell I think I'd ever come close to. We could see it. You know, we were 300 yards off the where the flash is, only 200 yards away, might be a block away, you could see everything. You could see their faces.

Now one thing I want to ask you about, before we, before I forget it, you talked about Mt. Suribachi and the importance of that, and we know about the, one of the defining photographs of WWII in the Pacific was Joseph Rosenthal's picture of raising the flag. Did you actually see that from your LST?

Yes, we were 1500 yards offshore. Was at the line of departure, on D-day plus four. We were hoping to get in. We had all this ammunition. They were short of ammunition on the beach.

And we were waiting to get some clearance. The Yellow beach was totally wrecked.

The fighting was still going on when that flag was raised?

Right along. The thing is still very much in the air. Very much in the air. Very much of a coin toss at this point.

Did you know to be watching for the flag or did you just...

No, I had no idea. I had no idea. I had no idea.

...somebody said "Look at the flag."?

We saw the first flag, which got kind of a roar on the beach. And somebody says, we wondered what it was, and one of the guys that were up there pointed up there, and we looked up and, sure enough, there was a small flag. We were still there waiting, still waiting. And we heard this other roar, and we saw the bigger one going up. I would not have known that the five or six guys, we saw it in place when we got up there, that's all I saw. We saw the raising of the flag, yes. We were only...

You say you saw it when you got up there. Did you actually go up there?

No, no, no. I saw it, when it got up there.

Oh, OK.

Now, I've got some of the photographs that were taken from Suribachi.

OK.

From the lower part of it while this combat was still going on, the lower part of it, which was under the guns. See the guns could not fire down this way (gestures with a downward motion). They could fire out. Because they could not depress them enough.

Right.

So. So, that we had Marines on the lower edge of Suribachi from day one. Underneath the guns. And probably the safest point on the island at that point.

Now you told me, George, that the, the entire action took 81 days...

Well, it took 23 days for securance.

23 days for what?

To secure.

To secure the beaches? Or to secure the island?

To secure the island. Now, that, but there was still, we accounted for something over 15,000 dead Japanese by that time. We knew there were over 22,000 some odd, our intelligence had told us that. But the figure was between 22 and 25 thousand. So we knew there were a whole

bunch of other guys up there. So the island, from day 10 onwards, to day 23, the action moved from the airfields and Suribachi to the north, where it spread out to this three mile wide, three mile long, nine square miles, all of which was honeycombed. So we would send small groups. Very dangerous. Very, very dangerous work. It was by pill box by pill box, hole by hole (sorts though photographs). Here's what one of those things would look like, (continues to search for photograph) the holes would look like. Like (pause) Somewhere in here I've got one. I don't know where it is. Let me see. Maybe I can show you what the hole looked like. Nope. Nope. It's here somewhere. Where is it? Where is it? Where is it? Where is it? It's one thing I want to show you and I can't find it. Ah, here it is! There. (both look over the photo). That's pretty badly wrecked. But that was a pillbox, and underneath the pillbox was the connection to the next pillbox, and the next, and a network of openings underneath.

Now you have an array of photographs here, George, that I was able to scan some of them before we started the interview, and we'll see if we can't get those all included. Um, you told me when we were doing the scanning that a friend of yours took these. Was that...

Yes, one of the members of the crew.

A crew member of the LST?

Of the LST.

And you said he was an amateur photographer and he used a...

A Kodak box camera (both laugh). A little bitty, (laughs) about six inches in, cubed. And we didn't know what he had taken, because he couldn't develop them out there. He didn't get them developed until we got to Manila. Six, four months, six months, no, sorry, it was at Guam. It was after, it was the middle of June before we saw any of the stuff.

So, for the entire 81 days, the 29 days of securing the island...

24 days.

...and then the mopping up or whatever you referred to it as, afterwards, you were on the LST offshore?

All that time. All that time. We did lightering service, called lightering service, which we would go to the cargo ships and take airplane parts and bulldozers to smooth out the airfield, and all the accouterment of a full size air base, had to be put on, put up. The Quonset huts, the control tower, the radio equipment, the weather station, because we had everything weatherwise, every weather measurement the Japanese had, had been blown to smithereens in the preceding months before the, but the first planes coming back from, we didn't see the planes going over, the coming first planes coming back, and disabled, and land at Iwo Jima, were there before the island was secured. (interviewer laughs). So the remedy, and the purpose of our doing it, was right in front of our eyes. There was no question but what we had done the right thing. No question that what it cost us, 8,400 men died on Iwo Jima in those first 23 days.

8,400 Americans?

Americans. Died. Put that in contrast with the 800 some odd have died in Iraq since April of

2003. Here it is, you know, June of 2004, we haven't got to a thousand yet. We had 1,200 the first eight hours. 1,200 dead the first eight hours. I mean, people don't understand that, the gross nature of, the Marines lost more men on Iwo Jima, they lost every, if you put all the battles of the Pacific together, it won't reach the number of Marines that died at Iwo Jima. There were only 12 DSC's, Distinguished Service Medals, highest ranking medal given in the United States military, only, to the Marine Corps, only eight of them in WWII. Six of them are Iwo Jima. That tells you something about the nature of this battle. It was the most intensive single combat area, not only in the Pacific, but in the entire war. Yard for yard. Omaha Beach was right up there with it, but when you see *Saving Private Ryan*, the first 30 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, was happening on Iwo Jima for the first full day. And part of the second day. And part of the third day. It wasn't until the fourth day that we could land. We couldn't get on the beach until the, the day that the flag went up we went in on the Purple Beach, and landed on the Purple Beach.

The LST itself did?

Yes. And we got the ammunition off, we took back the bodies. We took back body after body, of Marines, back to the, to the hosp, these were people who were, dying but not dead. The dead were buried right under the shadow of Iwo Jima, of Suribachi, right under the shadow. And we took the wounded back to the Mercy, which was the hospital ship offshore. Including the guy, the major who slept above me in the ship, by the way. And I got to see him.

And he lived?

He lived. They were doing reconstruction, jaw surgery, when I left him. And took some bullets out of his arm. Um, so... (pause)

Is there anything else we should talk about then before we get to the conclusion of Iwo Jima? And I know you've got a hurricane to tell me about too.

Yeah, I'll tell you about that. But let's end the Iwo Jima thing by saying that after 81 days our ship was so battered with those pontoons on our side, and getting so, but it was a help because it did...

Oh, battered from the pontoons swinging on the...

Nope. Nope. Nope. Battered from running into the liberty ships (claps hands) and the...

Oh the debris you told me about, yeah.

Yeah. No, now you must understand. When you unload a liberty ship you're getting in very close to them. And they drop the stuff on your deck and you take it into the beach. All right. In that action, there's the heavy seas, (claps hands) banging, banging, banging, banging against the sides.

Do you have some kind of bumper that you hang...

Fenders, sure. Sure, they're out there. But you can't, when you're talking about ships that weigh, you know, in the thousands of tons, (laughs) some of those fenders, they're nice against the shoreline, against the docks, but you put two ships together (claps hands) and they're both

being moved together like that, you're going to suffer some damage.

Might help explain why they were considered expendable, the LSTs?

Yeah, they were expendable. They could be, they weren't accountable. And we got, so we finally finished up. And we were allowed to leave. And this was in May of 19-, May something, May 10th or 12th, back to Guam. We knew we had damage; we didn't know how much. The engineers, our engineers estimated that 12 of our 60 some strakes, that's the ribs, strakes, were damaged.

And how do you spell that?

S-T-R-A-K-E-S, strake.

OK. Thank you.

It means the ribs of the ship. That puts the hull attached. They thought that 12 or 13 of them were damaged. We got there, we found out that over 20 of them were damaged. Damaged so they had to be either replaced, which we did I think on eight or ten of them, and just rewelded on the rest. So that work took about ten days to two weeks. We were at Guam, and got repairs.

You say this was May?

End of May. We left Guam sometime the first week of June. We went to (pause)... it was later than that, it was later than that. Was sometime at the end of June, the first of July, where we went to (pause), we went to Subic Bay in the Philippines, which is on the west side of Leyte. And there we took on airplane parts and all kinds of other, and 40 guys who were an airplane repair and reconstruction crew, and took them up to Okinawa. Okinawa was still being fought. The Philippines had been secured long before, but Okinawa was still wide open. We got there at the second week in July, I would say. This was the time of the Kamikazes. And so we had, we were in the whole, this whole roadstead, with thousands of, well there were 900 and some odd ships in that Iwo Jima flotilla, 900 and some odd ships in that. There were at least another 600 ships that were now part of the permanent establishment of vessels being built up for Japanese homeland, which would take place in November. And so we were in Okinawa now in July, and there were, the Naha Harbor was so full of ships that we couldn't anchor there, so we were in the roadstead, a big long roadstead along the western shore of Okinawa. (coughs) There were islands out the west of us, among them Ie Shima and other things, places like that. In any event, we were there to discharge this tank deck load and this topside load of airplane parts and airplane ammunition and airplane fuel, all kinds of things that we had loaded up. There were six or eight of us LSTs that were doing this. We had no fear of submarines at this point. The Japanese navy was pulled all the way back to the homeland, to protect the homeland. So we then got the Okinawa thing unloaded, waiting for orders to go somewhere else, they said, "Stay where you are. We may be moving up the date of the assault of the Japanese homeland. So stay right where you are." So we did, and the Kamikazes came every night, and they never attacked us, of course. They were looking for battleships, and cruisers, and airplane carriers and all the rest, the heavier duty ships. And they found some of those, of course. But most of them got shot down. Our problem was we couldn't fire at them, because we were, we, they came at masthead height so you couldn't fire at them. If they came in at 5,000 feet we could all have unloaded our ack-ack at them, but we couldn't do that, so we were sitting ducks. We were at general quarters, we

were all at topside, everyone was ready to fire, everything could go if anything happened, if a guy came down toward us we could let loose at them, but they weren't interested in us. We were just expendable, you know (both laugh). We weren't a threat to the homeland. So, they concentrated on the cruisers and so on, and many of the ships did get hit. But mostly, they got picked off. Whenever they came up, the pickets would pick them off early. If they got through the pickets, the head of the roadstead, this long line of ships, and mostly because of the current up there, we were all faced north and south. We were not broadside. As they came over the top of the hill. If they swung around and came around this way (gestures), if they had enough sense to do that, but these were kids, these were 18, 19 year old kids, flying a plane for the first time, probably for the last time (both laugh), like these guys in 9/11, and they came in right of the top of, you'll see the hills that end in Okinawa, Okinawa swings out like this (gestures). The hills up there protect them, they come in at masthead height. They come over the, so we saw them come in at, we knew about it, the pickets would tell us, "They're on their way," so we would be alerted, general quarters sounded, everybody's on their station, ready to go, and then they would come and boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And most of them would go down from the front line of destroyers and cruisers that were up in the front, the very front phalanx. And if they got past that they would look for the, at the deep end there were the big carriers behind them and so on. So if they got through that, that's what they were headed for. By that time most of them had gotten shot down.

Part 5: Post Combat Service:

OK, so...

So that's Okinawa.

Yeah.

And at the end of that time we went back then to the Philippines to take on more cargo, and then we were, and we went to Okinawa a second time, and it was there that we got into this huge weather situation, which occurred in October 16, 17, 18th, 1945, where a huge hurricane, monsoon, whatever the name is of that weather disturbance, which came swinging in from the south going north, I mean southwest going northeast, in this direction (gestures). And when we came out of, there were 36 ships in our flotilla, 36 LSTs, with escorts at the far end of it. We were told to leave port and to find open sea, but to stay within general direction, visible distance of each other. So, initially at 500 yards distance, 500 yard intervals, we went to 1,500 yards distance and intervals. So that we were really spread out. Um, they've got, I've been in northeasters in the Atlantic in the Coast Guard cutter, and I thought I had seen pretty heavy seas, but I had never seen anything like this in my life. The wind...

Could you estimate the swells?

I will tell you all about them, in just a moment. The speed of the wind, they say, got up to 200 miles an hour on top of Mt. Washington on Okinawa, and at that point the anemometer blew away (both laugh), so that tells you what, nobody knows how hard that, the wind was blowing. but the effect out on the water was this: the swells were 900 feet apart. From crest to crest were

900 feet. So when you were up on the top of the crest, your screws were out of the water, you had no steerage, you were riding up there like a cork, and as you slid down you got steerage way, you got to the bottom you got into quiet water, and your screws won't help you at all. See, the thing that you had to be prepared for is to yaw. If you come down and yaw the next wave can flip you over. So that's why you have to be careful. You try to get on a quartering sea. A quartering sea is an easy way to ride out a huge storm. Quarter means you're to the right and rear of, like, if you're talking about a 360, you're talking about 120 on this side (gestures), and you're talking about, oh, maybe 210 on this side. That's what you're looking at, relative degrees of, zero is straight ahead, zero, zero is straight ahead. So, relative positioning would be that you'd want the water, you want the wind coming in coming in from either, from your southwest or from your northwest, from your southwest or your southeast, but you'd be going north. This was going north, northwest. So we had to get into a quartering sea. Well, that was easy to do once we got up around the Ie Shima. Once we got past that, then heading out into open water it was pretty clear we could do this. But the disorientation is, when you don't really know where the ship ahead of you really is, because you can't see it. He's either down in the wave when you're coming up, and you're just, on either side of you, you don't have any idea where these people are. The only thing that helps you is, when you're up on top your radar works. Your radar now works up on top. So you tell the radar guy, "I want to know if anybody is closer than 1,000 yards to me, I want to know about it." OK, that's what you tell him.

So this went on for roughly three days...

Three days.

...no respite?

Well, the war is over. So there's nobody to worry about. All you're worried about, possibly hitting a mine that might be out there. OK. But that's another story in just a few minutes. And at the end of the storm we were so exhausted, we had been on our feet for almost 72 hours, that when the thing finally peters out, when you regather, regroup, you're now 200, 400, you know, 350 to 400 miles away from where you were supposed to be (interviewer laughs) because you would be going in the wrong direction. Okinawa is way back to your rear. So we all had to turn around and go back. It took us another day and a half to get back there, at 10-15, ten knots.

Now, after the hurricane in October, how much longer were you over in the Pacific before you came home?

Until well after Christmas.

But you did head, start heading home...

No, no, no, no. We took Chinese, we took Japanese soldiers home from China twice. We were in Korea, in first part of November, 1945. Pusan. And then we went up to Inchon and, which is the port city for Seoul. And we were there to deliver (pause) ammunition and weaponry for the American, we had troops up there. In Korea. We were outfitting troops to stay in Korea. This was long before the Korean war. This was to get, we also had to get back from Japan to Korea, I should say from Korea back to Japan. We had to get the military people back to their homeland, so we had two trips like that, taking Japanese soldiers from, and they all slept on top of the deck, and they rigged up wooden outriggers where they could use as toilets, into the water. They had

cans of dried fish and rice and so on.

Did you get a close observation of those Japanese?

Oh, yeah. Sure.

What was your observation of them, as far as their physical condition, their mood? Did they seem happy that it was over?

I wouldn't say that they were happy. They were resigned to their fate at this point, but they were glad to get back home. So that they realized that this was the end of their journey. They were going back to a ruined Japan, to a defeated Japan. They were not happy about that at all.

Did you feel that there was any (pause) disgrace that they would feel because they hadn't lived up, or died up to the Bonsai?

Loss of face, yeah. That's a loss of face. I would have to say that that was a characteristic that was pretty clear in both of these trips we took. We brought some back to Sesebo, and (pause) some back (pause) to another port. I've forgotten the other port right now. But we took them (pause)

How many Japanese would you have on board...

Three or four hundred...

...at a time?

Three or four hundred at a time. Um (pause) you don't want to hear any anecdotal stuff. You just want to know general things don't you? The interesting anecdote that I was going to tell you, you can go off the air now, just to hear this, and I'll repeat it if you want me to (tape recorder is turned off momentarily)

So, then, George, after the hurricane, and you made the convoys taking Japanese military back to their homeland, what happened next?

Well, we completed that work, and the only thing we had trouble with in that whole entire period, was mines. And I must say that there's another footnote to go back on something. We finally, on the way back to Guam, we cut loose those pontoons, and we fired 40 mm guns into them and broke them up and they all sank. So they're somewhere at the bottom of the ocean in about 12,000 feet of water, somewhere between Guam and Iwo Jima, OK? That's what happened to the pontoons. But we had mines sown by the Japanese in Korean water, so that anytime you went into the Yellow Sea, you had to be nervous about mines. And they were all contact mines. If you hit them, they'd blow up. And so we had lookouts. We did not travel at night. We would try to make port before, or we would slow down very much and use lights over the bow. We'd slow down to three or four knots and just use, but during the daytime we had two or three watches on either side to see if we could, and we did locate them and we could blow them up. I don't know how many, but I would say maybe half a dozen, maybe more. That if we saw a mine close enough that we could put a 40 mm shell into it and blow it to smithereens. And when it went up it was a huge explosion. So we were very glad to get rid of those. That was the only combat, procombat danger that we encountered, other than the weather that we had with the

hurricane. So it was all smooth sailing, and that's when this picture of me was taken (both look over picture- see exhibit accompanying transcript) That's, you know (laughs) a calm, beautiful day sometime in early October in the north Pacific.

That's an excellent picture, and we will definitely have that one accompany the transcript. So then you returned back to the States?

We came back to the States. We had, all of us had enough points to get discharged, and...

When and where were you discharged?

At St. Louis, eventually. So we came back by, on our little old ship, all the way back to Pearl Harbor. When we left the ship, our ship, we came back on another LST, back to San Francisco. And our ship went down the Panama Canal, through the canal, back up to Lake Ponchartraine, outside New Orleans, and there it became a rusting hulk. And it's since been destroyed. They were all melted down for new metal, subsequently. On Lake Ponchartraine or Lake Charles, I forgot what it was. One of those two lakes.

Part 6: After Service:

So you, was your wife down in St. Louis to meet you when you were discharged?

No, no. No, she was in Chicago And I came back up (pause) Oh, she did come down and meet me in St. Louis, you're right. You're right, she did come down and meet me in St. Louis. I sent her a telegram from San Francisco, "Meet me in St. Louie, Louie," (interviewer laughs) and she came. You're right, that was a good call. And we did meet and we had a little honeymoon of our own, and then we raised four children from that point on.

And you mentioned off record that you did go back to school, night school at Northwestern?

At Northwestern. I had twelve hours of credit at Northwestern, at North Park, when I started out. I got twelve hours of credit for the Coast Guard Academy. That was almost a whole year of credit when I, and I got twelve hours credit for life experience, I guess. I got another 16 hours for taking some GED tests and I got twelve hours for taking two prelegal exams, the University of Illinois, where you read the books, took the final exam that everybody else took, if you passed it Northwestern gave you credit. So I got almost 40 hours of credit, it was a third of my hours, before I went back to night school at Northwestern. And I got five more years of night school. I went to work for Edison, went back to work for Edison. I became the Secretary to the Executive Vice-president, and he finally made President and I stayed on as his staff assistant for a year. And I stayed with every chief executive officer of the company. I worked on a one-on-one basis until I retired in 1988.

So you made a career with Commonwealth Edison.

Yes, from 1939, if you count 1939 and 1988, the year I started, that's 50 years.

Wow! (laughs)

I retired six months after I was 65. I was the chairman of our centennial committee. We had our

100th year anniversary in 1987, the company did. And I had been there 50 of those 100 years.

Now, George, after, or since you were discharged, did you stay in contact with any of your...

Yes.

...wartime friends?

Yes. There's only one of our seaman, no he was a signalman, one of our signalmen, became very active in the LST Association, it was first formed some 27 years ago, and he sent letters out to those of us that he had record of. And we got some 40 or 50 guys at that point who let themselves, he has found everybody but ten of the 140 some people who passed through our ship in those 18 months, those two years. And so we have met privately as, the officers met as a group in 1983 for the first time. And since then all but two of the nine officers, or three of the nine officers, have died. There are two others besides myself. So six are dead, three are still alive. Of the crewmembers, of the 140 who we know were on the ship at one point or another in those years, we know the locations of all but 12 of them, I believe, and of those 130, 120 some, we do know who they are and when they were, of those, only 47 or 48 still remain alive.

How many do you expect to, you say there's a reunion coming up?

Yes. But most of these guys are, do not really like to travel that much. So we'll have between 15 and 18 of the 45 remaining guys will show up, in July, in Philadelphia. And we'll have three days of being together and enjoying each other's company, and then we'll say goodbye for another year. (pause) I'm the only officer that attends those things now, because the other two guys are really, they're just not fit to travel anymore. They just don't want to travel that far.

Part 7: Closing:

Well, with any luck we'll have this transcript of this interview...

I'd love to do it, yeah. I'd love it.

You could take that with you (laughs) to the reunion. Well, George, I'm about ready to wrap up. I thank you very much for coming today and participating in the interview.

My pleasure. I hope I wasn't boring you with all this.

Oh, not at all. Not at all. We are going off record.

All right, sir.