

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Robert E. Firchau

Conducted by Martin W. Thomas

January 25, 2005

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 January 25, 2005 at the Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Martin Thomas. I'm talking with Robert E. Firchau. Mr. Firchau was born on March 17th, 1922 in Hoopstown, Illinois and now lives Glen Ellyn. Mr. Firchau learned of the Veterans History Project through Joe Popowitch, here at the library. Mr. Firchau has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here, then, is his story.

Mr. Firchau how would you prefer to be addressed during this interview?

Just call me Bob.

Thanks, Bob. And Bob, I know that your service is very complex, involving several different branches and over a span of many years and wars. To start at the beginning, when did you first enter the service and what branch did you join?

I had joined the United States of America Merchant Marines. I'm from the Merchant Marine Academy and was scheduled for Kings Point, Long Island and since the service was filled at that time, they shifted me to San Mateo, California.

And what year was that?

December 5th of 1942.

December 5th of '42. So we were already at war. Where were you living at the time, Bob?

I was attending the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago studying mechanical engineering with an industrial engineering option and also studying U.S. Constitutional Law.

Part 2: Entering the Service

Were you drafted or did you enlist?

They were going to draft me; they gave me the option to be drafted or join and. I preferred to be in the Merchant Marine Academy because of the Naval Reserve status which I already held from school.

Had you completed your course work at IIT when you joined?

No, I had not. I was still taking courses in the junior year and I was pulled into, I had to go on active duty before I could complete so I came back after World War II for a time.

And where were you inducted?

To the best of my knowledge, I think it was in Chicago at the U.S. Maritime Service, downtown Chicago.

What were your first days like?

I was somewhat confused at first. Then they pulled me in and sent me to Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, New York. It was a mad scramble of getting uniforms and sizes and clothing issued, getting shots and shot records and getting generally acquainted with who was who and what was what and where.

Part 3: Training

Besides being in processed at Sheepshead Bay, did you also take your boot camp there?

Yes, that is correct.

Was your boot camp integrated with the Navy or was it strictly a separate boot camp for Merchant Marine?

This was a separate boot camp; it was called the U.S. Maritime Service. They began shifting people around and promoting them and some they down graded. It was a little bit of everything.

You're the first veteran I've interviewed that took boot camp in the Merchant Marines. So I don't have any idea what their boot camp was like compared to say, the Navy boot camp. What were some of the things you did in boot camp?

I was very much disgruntled with this because many of the people that were running these camps were X-Navy retirees and they were trying to pick up and make it just like the Navy had been. It was a hodgepodge of everything and pretty soon you were pretty disgusted.

What was your grade at the time you went into boot camp?

I was a Third Class Apprentice Seaman and immediately thereafter, I went into the Merchant Marine Academy in San Mateo, California.

You went to the Officer Academy?

Yes, that is correct.

Were the pay grades and the officer ranks in the Merchant Marines similar or identical to the Navy?

I can remember making Fifty dollars a month and that's about all there was until they finally sent us out to sea whereupon we were given a little more money then.

Had you ever been away from home when you were sent out to Sheepshead Bay? Had you ever lived away from your family?

I went to college at Tri-State College of Engineering in Angola, Indiana and I also attended Northwestern University Night School in Engineering.

So at Tri-State you were away from home for periods of time?

Oh, maybe a month at a time or a semester or a term at a time.

How did you feel about being away from home and in the Merchant Marine out in Sheepshead Bay?

It didn't bother me at all.

How long was boot camp roughly?

Three or four months. In Sheepshead Bay and when you were in the Merchant Marine Academy, some people got as little as six weeks of training in the early phases of World War II and you could be out to sea.

Did you go straight from boot camp, then, out to the Academy?

No, I would say boot camp came later; there was a reason for that which I prefer not to discuss unless you want me to.

I'll leave that up to you. There's going to be an enigma. Your first exposure to the service was the Merchant Marines and your first time was at Sheepshead Bay. Is that correct?

The very first was the U.S. Merchant Marines Academy at San Mateo, California.

O.K., that was before boot camp.

And some of those classes only lasted about six weeks.

When did you go to San Mateo?

As an Engineering Cadet.

Was that before December 5th, then?

About the same time. It was very early on. I had a friend who had been there ahead of me and so I followed suit as fast as I could.

Training at the Academy at San Mateo?

It started in Kings Point Long Island, the Merchant Marine Academy and then was shifted over to San Mateo, California.

Were you actually at Kings Point, yourself?

No.

O.K.

During World War II they were shifting people over the place, just wholesale.

But you, if I have this right, you went into the Merchant Marines on December 5, 1942?

That is correct.

Where did you go first the, San Mateo or Sheepshead Bay?

I went to San Mateo, California.

O.K. You went there first.

And they threw us in with many Navy War Shots from every branch of the service, especially the Navy Air Corps Cadets.

What did you call them? Navy War...?

Navy Air Corps Cadets.

Oh, Navy Air Corps. I thought you said Navy War Shots.

And they just never worked out and they were pushed off into the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and it caused a lot of friction and a lot of trouble making. And I was glad to be away from them as fast as I could get out of there.

Do you want to talk about the circumstances of going from the Academy to Sheepshead Bay or would you rather ...?

O.K. In the photographs which I have made available here, ninety-five per cent or better of the Navy Air Corps Cadets who wore 3/8 of an inch golden braid were well known trouble makers from every branch and they booted them out and left just the bare bones of Merchant Marine Academy cadets. In the process of reshuffling, I ended up going to Sheepshead Bay for some of my engineering training.

O.K.

And then I came right back up because I had ham radios for a hobby since I was ten years old, I knew codes and so forth, and circuitry. They had an opening for Merchant Marines Radio Officers Training School and they asked me, "Bob, would you be interested?" And I said, "Yes, I'll take it." So I came right out of engineering, right directly into Radio Engineering, you might say, aboard ship and as a Warrant Radio Electrician as a specialist.

You went directly from the boot camp at Sheepshead Bay to the Radio Officers (Training School).

Yes and that was run at Hoffman Island, New York. Right off the tip of Staten Island.

You were trained there?

Yes.

You were there for training.

And then we were assigned to ships all over the world.

When you left the training at Hoffman Island, where did you go next?

The U.S. Maritime pulled us in and they began sending us all over the world, placing us on Merchant ships of all types. Some of them were Navy, some of them were straight Merchant.

We went off record for a few minutes. Joe Popowitch just returned with the photographs which Bob Firchau has loaned for copying. While we were off record, I did ask Bob a little more detail about going from the Academy to the boot camp at Sheepshead Bay because it doesn't really track. Bob was kind enough to explain what happened. He said he was a little reluctant to do so but he is willing to explain

how he happened to leave the Academy in San Mateo and go to boot camp at Sheepshead Bay. Bob, if you will, please, for the record, I'll let you explain that.

The Navy had a lot of people that they had taken in. They took them in so fast and they didn't properly screen them. They were real trouble makers and most of them were from the Navy Air Corps, all wash outs. They were screaming and cussing at you. They wore 3/8 of an inch gold braids. I only wore a quarter inch but they did not; they were not superior in rank except to make life hell on earth for you. As a result of causing so much confusion and trouble, I hauled off and popped the hell out of a couple of them. One, I beg your pardon, one. The Navy got together with the Maritime Service and I would say ninety-five per cent or better, of these people were dismissed for their activities and so that's why I took the action that I did. I never regretted it except I didn't hit him harder.

Do you know what the disposition was on that gentleman?

I questioned this because I was pulled in to 844 North Rush Street to the U.S. Maritime Office, and frankly since there were four branches of service involved here, there was a Naval Reserve, Coast Guard, U.S. Maritime Service and U.S. Merchant Marines and the War Shipping Administration also had another group. And they would just float you through these groups; wherever they needed you, they would tap you, you know. I questioned, well, if you're going to reprimand me, well, who? It got to be a real confusing situation and they put me on a troop train at about 4:30 in the afternoon in the Polk Street Station in Chicago that had just pulled in. That place is like a hog pen, put us on a troop train and sent us out. The ?? were like a hog pen with paper cups and everything and newspapers and the fellas were cuttin' up and having fun and joking. This went on until almost daylight. They were sleeping on the floors and any place they could. I whispered to a guy who came around with a push broom, "Hey, where are we?" He whispered in my ear he wasn't supposed to tell me. He says, "You're in Buffalo, New York." The next thing I knew, I was on a troop train, and again, sent to some place in New Jersey and then over to a U.S. Maritime Office in Brooklyn, New York and then the rest of it unfolded just like I told you. So, that's how I ended up with the U.S. Maritime. They didn't know what the heck to do since it was the first time they ever had that happen.

Bob, let me ask you this, if I may. You went from San Mateo then, apparently to Chicago. Was there a hearing or a Captain's Mast at Chicago? Did you have to appear?

They lost all my papers. Would you believe it? They lost all my papers?

Did you have to see anybody in Chicago or did they just make their decisions without you present?

They called me to go into Chicago and “You, stand at attention.” “Don’t you talk to this guy, don’t you talk to that guy.” They left me there until about four o’clock in the afternoon, without food, water, nothing.

And then they put you on the troop train to the East Coast.

And shipped me out. They were well pissed off at me for having hit this guy and I was glad to do it.

Do you know what happened to him?

Never heard. They lost all the papers and I think it was done intentionally. They deep sixed it because they didn’t want to deal with it. And that’s typical military for you. You had four branches of service here plus the War Shipping Administration so the next thing I knew I was, they ran me right through boot camp, not knowing what the hell to do with me. I took it gracefully because I had fun out of it because this is my second go-a-round. For that I got a chance to go to Hoffman Island Radio Officers School and came out as a Warrant Radio Electrician. I also came out with all my papers for seamanship in Marine Engineering, I have those. I sailed. So they could tap me and they would put me on board ship, maybe in engineering doing a lot of repair and maintenance work. Then the next thing you know, “Bob, we need you to send out some radio traffic.” I would be up there sending out commercial traffic and accepting commercial traffic back and forth. The next thing you know, you’re working with OSS agents all over the world.

When you left Hoffman Island... Were you there at Hoffman Island after your training period was over?

I was at Hoffman Island to complete the training as a Radio Officer.

When did you leave Hoffman Island, roughly?

1943. Approximately 1943 as a Warrant Radio Electrician.

Warrant Radio Electrician is that a ...?

It’s an officer status as a Warrant Officer.

Warrant Officer status.

You were a Warrant Officer Specialist, highly trained in traffic and handling code and decipher work not just commercial but for military purposes as well.

Part 4: Going Overseas

Where did you go after you left Hoffman Island?

Let's see, at Uniweetauk, Ulythee, Saipan, Tinion, Philippines.

Was this all aboard a ship?

Yes. Okinawa.

What ship was that?

I was on the Murray Blum and also the Mary A. Livermore and a couple of others. Previous to that I had been an American Navigator, American Engineer.

All after Hoffman Island?

Before Hoffman, just before, just for a short time because they kept switching you all over the place. They just switched you as they needed you. I hope I'm answering your question.

Well, you are except that I was under the impression that you went straight from boot camp to Hoffman Island.

That is correct, I did.

But you said that you had some other ship assignments before Hoffman Island or did you not say that?

At Sheepshead Bay they were assigning us to some of these old busted down ships for part of our training.

Oh, just for training. Now, you mentioned the Islands and you said Ulithi?

Inuitak.

Inuitak and did you say Ulithi?

Ulithi, Saipan, Tinion, that was a whole chain of island in, in that area there. Then sent to the Philippines.

Do you know how to spell Ulithi?

U - l - i - t - h - i, I believe it was.

What type of ships were you on when you were there?

Oh, Merchant Ships.

Merchant?

Yes.

What type of freight or cargo were you hauling?

Ammunition, high octane gasoline in fifty-five gallon drums, all kinds of military hardware, anything that would shoot.

So that would make you a very lucrative target for Japanese.

And the first thing they always came after was the Radio Officers because they wanted to hit us quick so we couldn't get the word out as to where we were at and what was happening. I have been... had a gun tub right over the top of me on the SS Mary A. Livermore and the Murray Blum and they were shooting 20 millimeter cannon right over the top of my head, not three feet, four feet away.

When you made these trips, were you part of a convoy?

Yes, always.

Generally, how many ships would be in a convoy, how many Merchant Marine ships would be in a convoy?

Oh, I've seen maybe as high as fifty ships in a convoy.

Fifty Merchant Marine ships and how many escorts?

Rarely any, very rarely any. They had a commodore ship who was supposed to lead the parade.

So the only defense you had was the armament on your ships?

And the Marines used to raise hell because we were shooting so hard and so fast that the shrapnel was falling on them on the islands.

Part 5: Combat

Was your ship ever attacked?

Yeah, the Mary A. Livermore. I'm trying to remember, it seems to me there were seven that were killed or wounded on that one. And the Radio Officer on the SS Mary A. Livermore fell over on top of a young Radio Operator that was on watch at the time. You have to remember, some of our men we got from the Navy because we were so short handed and when they were short handed they would come and tap us. So we were passing people back and forth that's why there was so much confusion as to where you were and when.

So you were definitely in convoys that were attacked?

Oh, yes.

And in one instance, your particular ship was the target?

The Japanese Zero came out of the sun, very early morning hours and came down through the super structure and sheared the legs off the Captain who was laying in his bunk asleep. From the flash of the gasoline they let the young Radio Officer off ship after they dug him out from under all the debris off the ship as a blind man.

Bob, this is a time I should mention that you brought a great amount of material here, photographs, for want of a better word, I'll call them memoirs, individual episodes. The one you just related with the Captain dying with his legs sheared off and the Radio Operator blinded.

We went off record for a moment. Before we did, Bob was telling me about a couple of incidents I recognized from some of the memoirs he has here. Different little binders, each one having an episode or topic of his career. We will be adding some of those to the body of the interview as attachments.

Bob, you said that you were hauling war materials to the Far East. Where did your trips originate?

Well, out of the Pacific. In French Indochina, which was the ??? of the Middle East there was the French Foreign Legion were in there assisting and the Americans were pulled into this thing about 1946, '47 as back up and training processes with the French trying to stabilize the country.

Before we get to that point though, do you have anything else to talk about from your World War II experience? How many voyages would you say you made during World War II hauling war materials?

Oh, probably five or six.

Five or six. Where were they originating? Where were you picking up your cargoes?

It would be military supply, some of it came out of Marseilles, France and was brought into French Indochina.

During World War II?

Yes. And at the close of World War II.

Were any of your trips originating out of the United States?

Many of them were originating, when they put the war materials of high octane gasoline in fifty-five gallon drums, they had tanks on the decks of the ship anything and all kinds of guns, anything that would shoot and ammunition, you were a prime target for Japanese and maybe even with the Vichy French because they were collaborating very closely the Germans and the French and you just never knew who you were going to have to deal with, you know.

When did you normally consider that you were in a danger zone?

It was a gray area. Go ahead.

At what point on a trip to French Indochina or the Philippines did you come into what was considered a danger zone?

We would have what we called Area Bonus Zones. Many of these people who were helping to man these ships were people who were right out of the prison systems. The chain gang, one of my very best friends was a former member of the Georgia Chain Gang. His name was Reb Kunkle and he was out of Columbus, Georgia and he would sing onto these ships. These were extremely dangerous voyages and you could get killed any second, any time, anywhere in the world.

What was the motivation for those people to join the Merchant Marines? Did they get any sort of early parole if they did that?

That part was never made known to me but I can remember some of the names and some of the things that happened that were rather funny. We had a fella by the name of Points a Lot. Points a Lot was out of a prison system and placed on board ship and was in Indochina and he claimed that he had gonorrhea nine times and got over it every one except the first one. (Laughing) We had people who were with chain gangs who were

really poor white people and they would take any kind of an assignment because it was a way to get away from where they were at. It was a hostile environment that they were enduring and they were paid Area Bonuses and the more dangerous it was, the more money they were paid. And when you signed on, you were signed on every time for a year, minimum.

So you say the bonus would kick in when you got to a certain geographic location?

Right.

Did you work closely with these people that you were just describing?

Oh, yes.

What was it like to work with them?

You best be on your good behavior and try to go out of your way to get along with people or you may not live very long. I rarely had problems with anyone. As a matter of fact, whenever I had a chance I used to sell a carton of cigarettes for the equivalent of sixty dollars in their money and used to go down and gamble the Chinese Mahjong with some of the crew. The skipper used to holler at me because I would go without any insignias on me and I would be wearing a pair of dungarees and a old shirt and they never let me out of a gambling Mahjong deal until they had all my money and I used to hide it in my socks. I could gain a wealth of information from them and occasionally I could slip them a few crackers and a few cookies and things. They were most of all of them were very friendly to me. As a matter of fact, one night I was on river patrol, assigned for river patrol and a couple of the guys came and put their hand on my arm and said, "Bob, don't go, Bob, don't go." Who knows, they probably saved my life, you know.

When you say river patrol, was this still World II or was that later?

This would be in about nineteen forty.... Let me think a minute. Probably '45, '46 someplace in there.

Probably right after the war. Well, we're going to talk about that in some detail. But as far as you World War II experience, was there anything else you can think of that happened during that World War II period that we should be talking about?

I married a very, very beautiful young French girl, seventeen, eighteen years old that I wanted to marry.

If it's worth talking about it, it's worth me listening to it.

And her brother acted as an intermediary with Jeanine.

Jeanine was her name?

Her name was Jeanine Faure, F – A – U – R – E, and her brother's name was George. George came to me and fooled around until late in the afternoon before he told me what he wanted. He said his mother wanted I should marry Jeanine but that never happened.

How long had you been dating when George told you this?

Oh, not too long, I was just sailing in and out, sailing back and forth and in and out. The amusing part of it was they wanted me to go to a Roman Catholic Mass down on Rue Continuant by the old Palace Hotel at, on Christmas Eve services. I had to explain to them...

Is this World War II or is this after?

This was just the tail end.

O.K. still World War II.

I had to explain to them that I did not go because I was a Protestant. And you know, the French had what was called the Huguenots. So, I fit like a sore thumb, you know. The thing was all over very quickly thereafter.

What language did you speak with Jeanine?

Always English, spoke both English and French and I just picked up a few words here and there, that's all.

And she spoke enough English that you could....?

She learned it mostly in school.

I see. While you were on ship during World War II, how did you stay in touch with your family?

They had what they called V mail. But a lot of times wherever you were, there were no stamps available and you would write in the corner of the letter up there, "No stamps available in this part of the world." We were with a lot of English as well as French that were run in there, trying to stabilize the area, you know. It was, you never knew if it would get through or not. You would pass it over to an Englishman and he would tell you he'd pass it on so it would get out State wise.

So, it was really that informal? There was no formal system for you just to take it to the purser or somebody on the ship and go through official channels?

The purser was the biggest screw-off in the whole world and worthless as boobs on a goose. (Laughter) The less I had to do with him, the better I liked it.

I was going to ask you, how many sailors would normally be on a vessel of your size?

How many people?

People, yes.

About, a full complement would be about forty-two when we were at peak performance, you know, with Okinawa and the Philippines and so forth. They would reduce the crew later. In '45-'46 I really do not know but I think that they probably didn't have more than twelve, fifteen people.

Oh, my. But during the war, when you were subject to attack, and you had these big guns on the ship, who manned those guns? Were they Navy or Merchant Marines personnel?

Well, you see, the Merchant Marines did not have enough personnel. We were doing both the commerce, you know, the commercial end of it, as well as the military end of it. We were doing both ends. So they assigned us Navy gun crew people and usually the Navy gun crew people were the low lives of the Navy that they didn't want. They decided to put them on the Merchant ships to get them out of the way. But I never had any trouble with these guys. These guys were super and they did a hell of a nice job.

Who was responsible for discipline, maintaining discipline on the ship?

I've seen the Navy take over some of their people, otherwise you were Merchant Marines, you better learn how to take care of yourself pretty fast. I often carried a gun, both legal and illegal.

So, you had a military issued weapon and your own personal weapon?

I grew up in Central Illinois, down in the swamp lands of Central Illinois, hunting, fishing, shooting from the time I was a kid. I still got a scar on my back from a thirty-two slug. I remember a buddy of mine shot me by accident when I was high school age. So using military hardware was nothing new to me, I grew up that way.

The only other question I can think to ask you before we move on past World War II experiences is entertainment. I think you girlfriend Jeanine falls under that category. Did you have any other experiences?

We used to go swimming together once in a great while. There was a place called the Circle Sportee and it was a French Colonial empire goodie, you know.

This was in Saigon?

Yeah.

O.K.

And they objected to my being there, even as an officer.

Why was that?

And I'd usually tell them to go to hell.

Why did they object to you being there?

Oh, the French are crazy. You just never knew what the hell to expect out of them. You had the elite French and then you had the rest that were the bottom scum.

So as far as entertainment goes, did you have any other shore leave or anything that was of interest?

No. One time, one time only, I remember being given an invitation to the BOR Club, the British Officers Club. Because we had, we called them "Lime Juicers." We had a lot of Limey Juicers there. They would invite you to come over and invariably they could be, some of them, could be pretty insulting. I usually show up and then I'd leave right away because I didn't want to get tangled up with them. Then they'd get into a big fight with the French. You just never knew what the hell to expect except for the fact you'd better keep your gun handy and get out of there; get done what you have to do and get the hell out of there.

At the close of World War II were you actually in French Indochina?

Yes.

Where were you on, say, VJ Day?

The Mary A. Livermore was one of the ships that was hit that I told you about. They towed it back to the Richmond Ship Yard in Richmond, California and it was a Kaiser

Ship Yard. The ship was built in twenty-nine days and it took forty-three days to repair her. He tapped me on the shoulder, this was '45 already, '45, '46. And he said, "Bob, we need you." They were very... It happened by coincidence. I had been down in Central Illinois to visit my grandparents who were rather aged. The telephone rang while I was there and the people were looking for me, including of all things, a draft board.

This was in 1946?

63rd and Halsted Street in Chicago.

What year was this, Bob?

It had to be '45, '46.

The war was over?

Supposedly, but if you may remember, I showed you the paper work where you got out on a point system?

Right.

So, they had really no business to be tapping me but they did, they would. Just like in Iraq now. They'll just keep recycling you until they get you, that's all.

Did you have DD214 already?

Oh, yeah, I had them, one of the few people who had it. Not only a DD214 but a DD215.

I don't know what that is?

It's specialty.

On VJ Day, where were you exactly? Were you back in the States or were you still over in the Far East?

Well, as I started to tell you, I got this phone call and I told my Grandparents, tell them they didn't know where I was at and tell them they thought I'd gone back to sea. So, what I did, I got on the first train I could to get into Chicago and from Chicago, I checked in at San Francisco and they said, "Bob, they're looking for you." I said, "God damnit, come on guys."

Was the war over?

Yeah, supposedly it was over but they ... and I had a few swear words for them, you know. And they said, "No, Bob, you're going to go to San Pedro and you're going to go to Long Beach." And it was a French Lieutenant, French Paratrooper in full dress uniform and he had paperwork and he had been to see the skipper of the ship. They told me I had to take the ship out on its maiden voyage after having been hit; that was the Mary A. Livermore.

Bob, I'm a little confused. Was this the first time you were on the Mary A. Livermore?

This is the second time.

Were you on it when it was hit?

No, I was on it right afterwards. They transferred me off on to another ship. I think it was the Murray Blum, I don't remember anymore for sure. They just towed it back.

They towed it back and then they wanted you to go out there ...?

After repairs. They were cannibalizing other ships in the area, taking guns, ammo, anything they could use and they were shifting it off into French Indochina. What they wanted was, they wanted me to be there with the cargo security officer and with these fellas with sealed orders. We got to the Philippines and I got radio traffic from the French radio station, Victor Victor Radio on 500 kilocycles and telling me they had traffic for me. They said, "Head for Saigon." And about four hours go by and they changed their mind again and they sent me the East China Sea, another four hours and they sent me to the South China Sea and another four hours go by and more radio traffic because I'm the radio code specialist, you see. I know both commercial codes as well as military, you see.

Just so I understand. This was still a U.S. flagged ship in the U.S. Merchant Marines?

And they still were tapping you.

And what size ship was this?

Just a merchant ship, just a standard liberty ship.

What would the tonnage of something like that be?

I have these numbers for you but I do not have them with me today.

But this was the one that would be like a complement of about thirty crew members?

Yeah, top of the line, you know. But they didn't have that many people on it though. When all the shooting was going on would be '42 and then they took the ship in for repairs and I don't think they ever put it back to that level again.

So they didn't put armament back on it?

No. As a matter of fact, I got sent in to French Indochina. The skipper met me and he was carrying a 45 caliber sub machine gun, with a French pilot, a French pilot took me out to the ship. I said, "What the hell you want?" He said, "Just come and we'll tell you." In the meantime, I said, "Hey, I don't even have a gun, I don't have anything, I have a little pocket knife." And he said, "We'll take care of that." So they had a Frenchman bring me an Army Colt 1911, 45 and some ammo and so forth. You had to know something was up or they wouldn't be doing that. So what they would do is they would send you back into these tributaries into the French jungles, these rivers. Sometimes there was hardly enough water to even float these things. It was dependent upon the time of the year as to how much water there was. Because they didn't want to get stuck back there in the mud flats with all this ammunition and everything else on there and with them shooting at us. Because the French, Viet Cong would shoot at you very frequently.

You already had cargo on board.

Most of it was food stuffs that had to go into Saigon because the French were starving and the English didn't have much food either and they were waiting for us to bring it in and then there would be an exchange of some military hardware and food and lots of wine, French wine.

You're hauling French wines, too?

They had some huge drums; I never saw so large, big wooden vats. The skipper made them get all that stuff off that ship because if the crew got drunk, there would be one hell of a shoot out real quick.

You were carrying war materials as well?

Yeah. Anything that would shoot.

Who were they fighting then?

They were trying to stabilize the area there.

The Japanese had surrendered so there weren't ...

I showed you some of the photographs there, where they were marching the Japs in. I don't know if you noticed them or not but they were marching...

This is after the war?

Yeah, the war was supposed to be over but, damn, they were still bringing them in out of the jungles. I was right there when they were bringing them in and I took some of those photographs that you saw. Because it was a hodge podge of everything. One time you were a civilian and the next time you were in the military.

I switched that tape over; we're back on record again. Bob, when we did run out of tape you were telling me about service after World War II, immediately after World War II. This was in French Indochina which we call Viet Nam. You were describing to me or about to describe to me what the situation was there in '46 and what's your participation. Would you continue, please.

I haven't said too much about... You have to remember what I was going through way back into the jungles which were all heavily infested with mosquitoes and I came out with malaria very badly. I came on back home and tried to make the best of things and went back to school at Illinois Institute of Technology for a time.

Bob, before we get you back to the United States, if you don't mind, I'm going to keep you over there for a little bit and ask you some specific questions. You were back up in the jungles. What part of Viet Nam was this? I think you said the Mekong Delta?

Yes. The river tributaries at various times of the year they would have big floods and other times the water level would be rather low. Mosquitoes were everywhere, because you have to remember this was the rice bowl of all China or the Middle East, I should say. Always found a market for food someplace. This is what kept us back there along with the Vichy French trying to get huge stock piles of rubber.

So you're both dropping off cargo that you'd brought over and taking on cargo that would be going back?

Right.

Once you sailed up a tributary, was it possible that the water level would drop back down and you'd be trapped back up there until the next rainy season?

That's what they were concerned about so they were always checking to see what the water level was so as to try to get us in. But the more rubber that we took on, the more

we would get closer to the bottom. Then they would try to get us in and out of these places before we got stuck on a mud flat someplace.

When you contracted malaria, were you living on board your ship?

Oh, yes, there was no place else to live.

Were there any towns or cities, the names of which you recall today?

There was a place called Shellon which was a Chinese enclave.

Near Saigon?

Yes. It was a good place to go if you want to get killed real quick.

Why is that?

It was just shooting and wild just like a wild wooly western, all the shootings, day and night. And if you went over there in the Chinese area it was always full of the whore houses and of course, this was a big attraction especially to a merchant crew. But believe it or not, I never had any part of that. I had a very beautiful young French girl and Mama was talking marriage through her son and she mentioned me.

This is the one you mentioned earlier in this interview with Jeanine?

Yeah and she wasn't about to have any monkey business. So I had to be on the straight up and up. When she found out I was a Protestant and she being Roman Catholic, it was all over with real fast. (Laughter)

At least, at that time, you were off the ship for periods of time. But then, are you saying that you went up into some more remote areas where there were just small villages?

Yes, but I couldn't give you the names of those anymore. I do remember a fella by the name of Bob Andrews who was and OSS person with US Maritime and he went to the same training school with me. We were classmates. He was in Marseilles, France and he could feed me most any information I needed and while he was there there was a big flap between the United States government and American Merchant crew and also military personnel that were stuck in Marseilles, France and they wanted out of there and wanted to come home.

Did you know the nature of the flap?

Yeah, it went all the way to Washington, I know that. Bob Andrews was radio officer and worked along side of me many times. He was from ..., he went to school at Ol' Miss, I remember that. He was a red hot rebel with a tremendous temper so you best not fool around too much.

Did you serve on a ship with him?

We came to the port in Seattle and then they split us apart and I don't know... I didn't know where he went but he went around the world in one direction from the East going West and I was coming ... I did the same thing then we split and then we came back out the other way again.

So you weren't reunited in Indochina?

Yes, we were because he met me at the gangplank on the SS Mary A. Livermore.

Oh, I see.

He was questioning me about where to go and when because there was almost no electricity there after dark and you'd get yourself killed real quick.

In 1946, you inferred the danger of being killed, was that killed for political reasons or just because of criminal activity?

Both.

Both.

Liabile to get it from anywhere.

What was the political situation at that time? I think you already said that there were Japanese that hadn't surrendered yet.

Yes. You have photographs of it here.

Yeah, there's a photograph of ...

Them coming in out of the jungles, marching them in.

Those were Japanese prisoners?

Yes.

You told me off record about prisoners being tied to a bamboo pole. Were those Viet men or were those Japanese?

No. Those prisoners were taken by the French Elite; they were Frenchmen took them as prisoners and tied them with leather thongs very tight at wrist level on about a three or four inch bamboo pole about thirty, forty feet long and tied opposite each other and about three feet apart. They would march them right down the street right under a submachine gun guard.

What nationality were those prisoners?

They were all Viet Cong. But you're liable to find anything; you're liable to find Tonkinese, Japanese; you're liable to find most anything. They took anything and everything for prisoners; they didn't care. They would shoot and kill you in a split second.

And who were these?

The French, French Elite. They were very well armed and they didn't fool for one minute. And the French Foreign Legionnaires were in there with them also. I have probably been as close to those people as I am to you right now and they would see me, maybe, in slate grays, occasionally, you know, so they knew I was military. They would never talk, they'd never speak to you. They would say hi, or something like that or wave to you a little bit. Most of those fellows were carrying German P-38's.

You said you were wearing, did you say slight grays?

I could wear either khakis or slate grays as an officer.

I don't understand that term, slate gray or slight gray?

Slate.

Slate, like the color of slate. Now I understand.

Yeah, light blue-gray. No real light. The old man used to yell at me not to wear them because it gave too many people something to shoot at. So a lot of times I ran around stripped to the waist.

This was on ship?

Oh, yeah, even on shore, I would sometimes do that too, usually carrying a army 45 and a lot of ammo on me. One thing that they were always afraid of was a guy carrying a

marine knife. In fact, the further I could keep them away from me, the better I liked it. One thing that they did have was the carbines.

???? carbines?

Yeah, I think they were M-14's if I remember right.

M-14's came later.

O.K., well anyhow, they'd have them with clips with eight and then they had some long clips and I think they were staggered, no banana clips, they were all straight clips and I think there were 22 in clip, if I remember right. Is that right? I think there were 22 in a clip.

I've never seen one with 22 but I'm sure they have.

I used to have a big problem walking down the street, I had so much ammunition on me that about every two blocks I had to stop and pull my pant back up. (Both laugh.)

When you mentioned the Marine knife, did it have a particular nomenclature, like a K Bar?

What ever the French gave you, you know.

Oh, a French knife not a US?

See, the American GI's were battling in Germany, you know and in France and what have you and the gun they brought to me looked like it hadn't been fired in a long time and was just filthy. They used to have little bottles of Vaseline Hair Tonic, they were about that high and they used to get them out of a little PX kit and it was a real fine hair oil. When I got a chance, I cleaned up the gun as best I could and I'd use Vaseline Hair Tonic so I got the slide mechanism working again.

Very clever.

Oh, yeah, you had to by God, you didn't know when you were gonna get killed. (Laughter) It's your own fault if you do. Unfortunately, I do remember having pulled a 45 on a guy, a native, one time. They had a big bolo a big sugar cane knife, he had killed a limey Major, it was before I got there, just a week or so.

Where was this, Bob?

I beg your pardon.

Where was this?

It was in French Indochina.

Still French Indochina and this native started to attack you?

He killed an Englishman.

Right.

An English Major.

But then you said you had to pull a gun on him.

Well, he was just in a crouch; I saw him in plenty of time; and I just pulled it out and pulled the hammer back and he heard the click and he took off. I got hell for not shooting him. It would be my first time having to be one on one. A lot of things run through your mind when that happens.

So he killed this English Major.

With a bolo knife.

With a bolo knife. Did you ever hear why he did that?

Oh, it was a sugar cane knife, you know.

Uh, huh.

Oh, anybody was, any white man was fair game. They didn't care who they killed, they'd kill anybody.

Then, why did he come back around?

He took off and I never saw him again; that was it. He just took off on a run and there was a lot of foliage, jungle; he's gone. I should have shot a few times but I didn't. I remember a young French kid came, same young French kid came at me and I had a 45 slug, it was caught in a chamber; one came in ready to go to fire and it was already one in there and I had to, he helped me because I didn't know whether the damn thing was going to fire or not and he hit the button to drop the clip then work at it until you get that extra one out. If you end up with two in there at one time and you're gonna have one helluva mess.

Now this French kid, I don't know who you're talking about.

He was a young French kid that used to run... He was a messenger, French messenger. He used to often come down to see me because he knew if he came down to see me, he could get something to eat. He used to take me up and down the streets on the back of the motorcycle; he had a Harley Davidson, 4 cylinder.

Oh, American.

American made, you know. It was a GI motorcycle. I probably came out of France most likely. There was one thing that I did see. Two things that I saw that was of real interest. I once saw a French Paratrooper with a very tiny motor cycle and it was hinged. I suppose they used it for drops most likely and they you could lock it. And used to get a couple, we called them, frogs sitting on the back of one of the little motor cycles and it would get hot and it would stall. (Laughing) I saw that and Armond, the young French kid that would come see me begging for food once in a while, I would get a ride with him. He had ... The OSS had some very large Indian four cylinder motorcycles. They used them back in the jungles where the Manyards were way the hell back up in the jungles. They might have to be, go back up in the jungles five, six hundred miles, you know, through heavy jungle territory with big tires on everything. They would go ripping around. They only had two speeds: wide open or nothin'. It used to scare the hell out of me to ride with Armond, because one thumb on the motorcycle throttle and one on the horn. It was a thrill to get off, boy, I'll tell you. And you wanted to get off as fast as you can. I asked him why are you running so fast and so hard, he'd just tell me so they couldn't get a good shot at you.

Don't want to be a good target.

I never had anything. If I was two miles or ten miles it would be a long ways from the docks because most of the time I was only two, three, four miles from the docks and I purposely wanted to keep it that way because then I knew where my safety net was at.

You started to tell me a little while ago about coming back to the States. Is there anything else you wanted to tell me about in that period in Indochina before we move on to the next part of your interview?

I went back to school at IIT.

I mean is there anything else to talk about in the French Indochina before you moved back, coming back?

No I was. I had malaria real bad.

You mentioned the malaria. Also, you've mentioned a couple of times, OSS. Anything about your dealings with OSS that you want to relate or have we pretty much covered that?

Radio traffic, mostly radio traffic. Because I used to work radio stations like NPN and NPEM, NPO was out of the Philippines and NPM was in Guam. I used to work stations up in Okinawa also. But usually when you were back in the jungle area you couldn't hold a circuit very long, all that foliage and all those trees and everything. They would fade in and out so fast that if you got ten words off you probably were luck. If you got thirty, you were real lucky. I was handling traffic going both ways but... We had these summer storms, lightening bolts poppin' and crackin' and heat lightening, you know, all this stuff. It was pretty tough.

It was pretty humid there, I imagine that caused you lot of equipment problems.

It did, it did. And I just had to do the best I could. You saw that photograph of me where I was cleaning the insulators, this is why I would clean those insulators off because they had salt spray on them and it would arc and you might pull an arc like this.

In case that picture doesn't get attached to the report, I should describe it. He's shirtless and in trousers apparently standing on the outside of the ship. All you can see is open water and him working on these insulators. I asked him if there was any kind of safety net underneath and I believe that Bob laughed and said no, there wasn't.

I can remember they started moving the ship and they didn't have the antennas up yet. As a matter of fact, they had one of the antennas caught in an air vent that went around with a big bull gear and so forth. It was transmission cable about like your little finger nail and you'd have to untangle it and they were already moving the ship. That's a thrill, boy, to be up there, to climb clear up to the top of that crows nest and the damn thing swinging back and forth and you're up there trying to work a little bit. I tell you, when I grabbed a hold of those half inch steel rods on that ladder, I think I squeezed them 'til they were a quarter inch. (Both laugh.)

Part 6: Life After the Service

If you're ready then, we will... made your voyage back home and then what happened next?

Oh, I came home and got married and it didn't work out. I had been through an awful lot, a lot of flash backs, you know and so forth. I would be trying to sleep and I'd wake up in the night perspiring very heavily, yelling and screaming.

Was this all flashbacks or the residual effects of the malaria?

I think it was both.

This was in what year, 1947?

'46 and '47.

'46 and '47. The woman you married was it somebody you had known before?

Oh, yes. It was a story in itself. I got to my Old Maid Aunt's house where I'd been before I left home. She said, "Bob, you cousin, Bud Summerfield, is marrying this gal and wanted you to come to the wedding. This was a little after lunch and I had no car and I tried to call for a cab and there was nothing available. She said why don't you just go to the lunch. They're going to have a big feed at about five or six o'clock. So, I did and while I was there, I met her niece and the two families shoved us together. Because I'd been out of commission for a long time, you know. All together I had about four or four and a half years, pretty close to four, four and a half years in this thing, you know.

This day you're telling me about now, were you still in the Merchant Marines?

I held... When I signed up it was duration plus six, that meant six years. So some of this would have still have been effective yet. I've had the Navy come after me twice and want me to come back in and I wouldn't do it.

The reason I ask if you were still in the Merchant Marine is: early, late '46, early '46 there's still that military hero kind of thing. I was wondering if that's what attracted her to you.

About \$2500 maybe \$3000 I had saved to go back to school.

All the money you made while you were out to sea.

Oh yeah. When she ... When we got married, she came to me with ten cents in her purse. No shit, ten cents. I'd get mad at her and give her a buck and tell her to go back home.

How long were you married?

Oh, about four, four and a half years.

Oh really?

It was a mistake that I've regretted all my life. I never liked it. When I came back to try to go to school, I was just too much on edge. I would go, right after class, over by White Sox Park and a couple of taverns we would go to. Once while I was at school over at IIT, we called it 33rd and the Tracks, I got an attack of malaria, right during class. I'm perspiring and shaking like hell. I had... crazy bastards were laughing they thought it was just funny as hell to see Bob with a malaria attack. You've got to remember a lot of these people never really saw very much. They hid out in Europe, England, wherever, you know. Flyboys, whatever. They never really saw very much or else they were just replacements and they never really went through anything like I saw, nothing. They very rarely ever saw any of that kind of service ... So I was never very sympathetic to them at any time and then have them laugh and think it was just hilarious to see me trembling and sweat running off of me in the middle of the summer. It was almost a hundred degrees out. I remember, I went to a doctor, Doctor Cooperschmidt, at 69th and Wentworth. He saw me; he was an old Army man. As soon as he saw me, he told me, "Bob, you gotta get home quick." I came on a street car. I didn't have hardly any money to speak off, you know. That first wife took everything, you know; she grabbed it and ran, you know. Anyhow, I go home and I pile everything on me, blankets, whatever I could find, to stop shaking, you know. It was not very funny to have to endure this and most, few people had to endure anything like that.

They didn't give you any medical attention? I mean other than... no quinine, nothing to ...?

They had quinine but I wouldn't say it was of any effective, it had no effective use at all. We used to take Adabrin, it used to turn your skin kind of brown. Maybe Adabrin, I think it was a derivative of quinine, I believe. It was very bitter, I remember that.

Was there any other service that you had that you want to talk about?

Well, there was one thing I did not mention. I told you about Harry Goring and so forth and ???

Yes, we selected a photograph...

I was on an old ship. I had the name of it here. I want to say it was the Mary A. Livermore, I think.

So, Harry was your shipmate?

Yeah. He was one of several.

I mean, but he was a shipmate.

Anyhow, I was on this old ship run by the Calmar line, the one with the concrete in the bottom, you know.

Just for the record, one of the episodes that Bob showed me in these other documents is a ship that they poured concrete down into the hold to seal some of the leaks.

Yeah, five or six feet of concrete in the bottom of it. And they welded in reinforcing rods and they were afraid to let us shoot the guns because the damn ship would go down, blub, blub, blub. Anyhow, we were being chased by a German U boat once. It was down off of Cape Hatteras, down in around Norfolk. This old German U boat... I didn't even know it, I was down in the shaft alley or some place working and a Navy plane flew over. It was blinking down and telling them that if you give them the location of a German U boat that was tailing us from behind. On the surface he could probably do seven or eight knots. This was an old low pressure turbine and we had it to just to the point where the boilers were almost ready to explode. It had a feed water pump to the boilers going out. There was a spare; people were doing things that they wouldn't normally do. When you're young and you're scared you can do things that you know, with just a minute or two to live, you can do things you never would do otherwise. I remember, I picked up a whole steam end off of a big twin reciprocating cast iron pump and I lifted the damn thing and threw it up on the deck and got another one down to put in its place, you know. When I did that, I ruptured the varicose veins in my rectum. I still have trouble with that.

I don't know what that item was you mentioned. How much would it weight?

Two or three hundred pounds.

You lifted it by yourself?

Yeah, when you're scared, you'll do thing you wouldn't do ordinarily. I threw it up on the deck of the ship and we got it back in and we took off and I think we did about, oh, I want to say somewhere between eleven and thirteen knots wide open. We almost had the boilers tied down, safety valves, everything, trying to out run that...

Submarine?

Submarine. And we got into... We did, we out ran him. What happened was: the Navy came over and they would drop bombs on the U boat and they would drive him deep and when he was deep, he couldn't keep up with us and we just plain outran him, you know.

I was in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, they opened a submarine, Edison, and took us on over to San Juan, Puerto Rico, I was there. I showed you some of the photographs from San Juan.

Yes.

I can remember the girl; she used to come out and greet us and say, “Marina, where you go?” You’d get laid for four bucks. (Laughing.)

This was in Puerto Rico?

Oh, yeah. I didn’t go that route, but there were others who did.(Laughing.)

You just talked about your service with Harry Goring. I was going to ask you, Harry Goring, is his name spelled the same as the famous German general?

Yep, one and the same. When we were in Italy, down in the prisoner of war camps, he used to talk to some of the German POWs and Harry would talk to him from off the dock there. They were very friendly, especially with Harry because he spoke German fluent, as fluent as you and I speak English. He was born in this country; he was born here. But his parents spoke German at home and that’s where he had learned it.

Did he take a lot of ribbing over his name from his shipmates?

Always, always. We called him Harry Ass Goring. (Laughing) But he really had the hell pounded out of him. Oh, Jesus, he got it a lot worse than I did. He was, I remember, Halandria, New Guinea, you know, all down through the Pacific Islands.

This is Merchant Marines as well?

Yeah, yeah. He really got the hell pounded out of him. Then he came back to the States and it happened I was here at the same time and they needed a man as a radio officer on a merchant ship going to Europe and I got elected for that. Harry came in just at the same time and they were looking for an oiler, like a junior engineer, on a triple expansion steam engine, you know. Harry had his papers for his radio officer same as I did but just like the two of us, we could switch back and forth because we had all this training. It wasn’t intended to be that way but that’s the way it ended up. So I had to make arrangements to take Harry along and Harry would go down in the engine room and he’d work a four hour shift, he’d come off and he’d come up and the Skipper would say, “Bob, which one of you fellas’ are going to handle the Merchant Marine traffic?” And so I’d say, “Harry, you want to take it today?” That way we could always keep limber, you know, flexible, and that’s what we did.

And you said Harry is still alive.

Yes, he is.

And you have contact with him how often?

Oh, I talk to him once every six months to a year.

Do you think he'd be interested in telling his story for the Veterans History Project?

Oh, I wish he would. I've got his address at home. I think it was on Indian Yos Drive, I think. Where is that, Palos, I'm not sure; I think that's Palos, I believe.

Next time you talk, if you want to mention to him that you had this interview and see if he's interested, we'd love to interview him.

Oh, he's really mad at the Merchant Marines so I... I had to collect his ribbons for him, you know, 'cause they knew and so when I was in Washington I had to ask them, "Would you let me take the ribbons to Harry?" I have mine separate, you know. I did and I gave them to him. So he has the ribbons.

Those ribbons you mentioned, are they service?

They're medals. Medals and ribbons.

For meritorious service?

Medals and ribbons, I have mine and I know Harry has his also because I took them to him. And I have maybe a couple more. I had two or three that I never bothered to collect. We fellas were really abused and just used. We called it abuse and use, you know. It's just like these poor bastards in Iraq today. They don't care who gets killed, they just keep recycling you and that's what they did. They were just recycling us constantly, you know. And if you made it, fine and if you didn't, well, tough shit.

In your case, are you saying that they would not release you from duty even after your contract or your commitment was up?

In my case, they chased me back into Indochina. This was my third trip into the Philippines.

When did you finally get out?

I came out in '4... I want to say late '46 or very possibly, very early '47.

Then you were finally released all together?

You're never fully released because it's always duration plus six. They've always got an ace in the hole to ace you back in, you know.

Did you ever get called back in?

I told you how I went to see my Grandparents down in Central Illinois and the goddam draft board at 63rd & Halsted Street in Chicago was after me.

That was '46, right?

Yeah and you saw my paper work where I had all my time in.

So were you ever called back in after that time?

Of all things, the Navy had its stock, they used to call it “The Old Stock Yard Inns” on 42nd & Halsted, I think it was. They had a Marine Corps unit there and they wanted someone to do some training with some radio officers, code dispatchers and so forth. I was working for Coppers Company down in the Chicago Loop at that time. I think it was 109 South Wabash, if I remember right. They wanted me to go in, come back in. They came after me twice and I said, no, no, no, enough. They wanted me to go to Beirut, Lebanon. Remember they blew up a building there, it was a Holiday Inn where they had the guys quartered in there.

The Marine barracks, yeah.

Yeah. They wanted me to come and, “Well, you can work off the ship.” Yeah, uh-huh, uh-huh. And, I didn't go, didn't sign up again. Enough was enough.

So by this time you had civilian employment?

Yeah, it didn't amount to much. I did, yes, that's true.

You've worked since then, right?

Oh, yeah, I worked in mechanical engineering so I could switch around and I did quite a bit of legal work for a time.

When did you finally retire, Bob?

Stop working?

Yes.

Believe it or not, I was working for a company called Jelsert in West Chicago right there off of Roosevelt Rd. in West Chicago and there's a company called Jelsert, J – E – L – S – E – R – T, awfully nice people, wonderful people. I did their engineering; I used to take... I've got drawings; I'd like to show them to you. They're big ones that I've made

on buildings that were over a hundred years old with all the piping and everything in them, because I had that background. I made them for them. I stopped working when I had the stroke, the third stroke. Let's see, I've got the dates but I can't bring them up quick. It must have been, well, just three years ago.

Really?

Yeah, three years, four years.

You worked up till three years ago.

Yeah, I was passed when I could have gotten Social Security by three or four years already. So, I took the money and I think I got \$29,000, Social Security. They asked me what I was going to do with it and I said, "I'm going to go pay bills."

We've talked about a lot of different experiences you've had.

These people at Jelsert were super nice people.

I hope we've covered all your war time experiences and you're service in '46 and '47.

You see, I had the ability to take and dole out this stuff. I can draw a lot of it from memory yet.

Yeah, oh sure.

Yeah and I did this and I pick it up fast. They even asked me if I would be interested in coming back to work over there at Jelsert but I just didn't feel up to it anymore.

Part 7: Conclusion

Bob, have you ever joined any Veterans organizations?

Let's see. I belonged to the American Legion at one time. And we got in this big flap about that Maritime wasn't going to permit the VFW or the Hospitals, like Hines Hospital, to take care of the Merchant Mariners. They finally were forced, not gladly do it, but forced to do it. I think Clinton was the guy at the bottom of that, I think. I never liked Clinton, but at the same time if he did a job ...

Oh, you think that Clinton was the force behind getting the Merchant Marines accepted as receiving Veterans benefits?

I cannot say absolutely with certainty, but I think that was probably one of the things behind it. Because we did... I still have copies of legislation and memos. You see, I made five trips to Washington myself. I called on Congressmen and Senators and US Maritime Service. I made personal calls on these. I spent

To get the recognition?

I spent \$5000 of my own money.

Really?

I had a daughter at that time. My wife and I had adopted. She was fourteen or fifteen. I would go to Washington and I used to take her with me. As a matter of fact, I used to let her drive. I had a little white Dodge pick up truck. I remember we drove, she had her driver's license from Glenbard South High School and I'd let her drive. I'd put her on the super slab and she drove several hundreds of miles and she had a lot of fun out of it. I'd take her to Washington.

Anything come of your efforts, your money and time spent trying to get this recognition?

I got nothing, zero.

But you do have the Veterans benefits...?

And you got this crazy damned Democrat that just bailed out. Oh, hell, I'll think of his name now. And his son just took over the Maritime end of it. I'll think of his name in a minute. He's a dud. He ...

Is he a congressman?

Yeah, he's a congressman.

What state?

He's just a figurehead, you know. You go down to Washington to see him and I made a personal trip to go there to see him. "Well, he's not here, he's in Chicago." You go to Chicago, "Oh, I don't know where he's at, but he's not in." "Oh, he's playing golf today." Or you'll get all kinds of shit, you know. I would go down and I wouldn't stop at that. I wouldn't stop at that, I would go to the US Maritime Service and the Department of Transportation and I'd keep massaging door bells. I did have one funny thing that happened. I got down to the Maritime office and I can still remember the name

of that gal, I got it at home yet, that I used to talk to. I'll think of it in a minute. Pat Thomas, there you go. At the US Maritime in Washington.

Was she helpful?

Oh, yes, very helpful. She was the one that got my ribbons for me.

I'm glad.

And she's the one that got them for Harry Goring, too. Anyhow, I would go down there, bugging the hell out of them. "Hey, you guys, goddmit, I got paper work here, right here, that says, that Truman and the rest of them said that we were to get these benefits." And they'd just run and hide, you know. It was typical military, typical politicians, you know. They'd just run and hide and you'd never get anywhere with them. But I would argue and fuss because I studied law. I know how to wrangle the hell out of them.

But you finally got some remedy but you think it wasn't due to your efforts? What finally caused them to give you the recognition and to give you the benefits?

Giving them enough shit. (Laughing)

And the medals?

And I really give it to them. You make me mad and goddamn you, I'll come after you.

So you did win?

I kept it up, kept it up, kept it up; writing letters all over and I did a lot of the typing myself on my own computer, on my Gateway. Then I got sick and I couldn't continue and a lot of us typed with one finger, you know. And little by little I got both hands working again and I just kept going; I never stopped.

Bob, we've covered quite a bit. Do you think we've covered everything you wanted to talk about today?

Yes.

Wonderful.

There was something I started to tell you that was so funny. I went down to see Pat Thomas there and they had guards out there and I came in and I had my jacket on, it wasn't this one, it as another jacket I had, you know.

Just for the record I should explain that the jacket Bob is wearing is a vest and it's got patches that identify him as an American Merchant Marine Veteran, a World War II Veteran.

The patches, I earned every damn one of them, boy, I'll tell you.

O.K. the, that's all, we'll go off record.