

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Peter J. Eagan (Jack)

Conducted by Donald Burque

March 29, 2008

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Good morning. This interview is being conducted on March 29, 2008, at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. Our interviewee is Mr. Jack Eagan. Mr. Eagan was born in Malden, Massachusetts on November 1, 1920. He joined the Navy in 1942, and was discharged in 1946. Mr. Eagan's wife, Jeanne, is also with us. Deb Barrett is well us as well, and she's with the Veterans History Project. Mr. Eagan is currently retired. He worked in retail sales for both department stores and as a manufacturer's rep in the textile industry, and also sold real estate. Mr. Eagan has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. This is his story.

Although I use the name "Jack," my official name is "Peter J."

Ms. Barrett: Jack is your middle name?

John.

Shall we call you Jack?

Yes.

Enlistment, Induction and Basic Training

Tell us what your life was like and where you were living when you first entered the armed services.

I lived with my mother and sister on 67th Street in Chicago. I was the sole support. Even though I was going to college, I was working 56 hours a week to keep the family going.

Ms. Barrett: What type of work?

On the railroad – the IC – first in the towers to raise and lower the gates for the trains to go by, then later in the big towers. They had towers where you controlled a whole section of track with levers and electric things. And I worked as a brakeman on the ground – always during the winter (everyone chuckles) – and that was about it.

Ms. Barrett: So you did that while you were in high school?

College.

Where were you going to college?

Chicago Teachers'. Fifty-six hours a week, seven days a week, eight hours a day I was working and going full time to school. I just worked nights. I never slept.

Full time school during the day and working at night.

Ms. Barrett: You were 18, 19? How old were you?

I was 20 and 21.

Any brothers and sisters at home?

One sister.

And then, this was 1942, and how did you go about getting into the service?

They had a program called “V7,” and I thought I probably wouldn’t have to go, with two dependents. But a friend of mine was going down for a physical. I passed and he passed. So it just seemed like I should go. We were all at war. As an officer I would have made enough to support my mother and sister because I would get an extra allowance for them.

And you were about 22?

21.

Did you finish school before you joined?

Yes.

Where were you inducted?

In Chicago.

And after your induction, where did you go for your training?

I was inducted in March, 1942. And they did not call me up until August, during which time I took some more classes – seamanship and so forth – at Teachers’ College. And in August I went to New York City to Columbia University for Midshipman School.

How long were you there at Midshipman School?

Ninety days (chuckles) – I was a “90-day wonder.” [A popular phrase for wartime officer training.]

Ms. Barrett: What was your day like at Midshipman School? What was your introduction to Midshipman School, first of all?

Well, I got there the night before and stayed at the Taft Hotel, because I had stayed there with a singing group that went east on a tour from college. And in the morning I went down to the subway, and there were about eight other guys going where I was going. And you get in there and immediately you never walk anymore, you run everywhere (all chuckle). And everything’s got to be nautical – the walls are bulkheads, and the decks

and the overhead and the quarter deck. (Mrs. Eagan: The ladder.) The stairways are ladders – everything nautical to get you acclimated to the lingo and the life. Anyway, there were all kinds of academic studies and marching, and a lot of physical exercise. They enlisted professional football players as specialists, and they'd get out there and take turns putting us through these motions until people were passing out and throwing up while the football players took turns (everyone chuckles). At one point they told us we were getting up at 5:00 to run in the dark. Of course it was winter. We ran around in our skivvies – shorts – and scared little old ladies (everyone chuckles) just coming home from work. And they told us if we didn't behave ourselves they'd take away the "privilege" (everyone laughs).

Ms. Barrett: When you were first inducted – what was that first day like? What did you do when you got there?

It's a blur. Mostly line up and were given clothing and everything we needed; books. It was a dorm – real nice facility, two to a room, double-deck bunks. And I got in with a real nice fellow. It was very enjoyable, except for the military business.

Ms. Barrett: What did you do with your civilian clothes? Were you able to keep them with you?

Once you're in – it was war time – we had to wear uniforms wherever we went.

Even on your free time?

Yes.

Did you correspond with your family a lot while you were there for ninety days?

Letters.

Did they come out to see you at all? Were you able to go back to Chicago during the ninety days?

No. We didn't have any money, for one thing.

And did you have a lot of classroom instruction as well the marching and running and so forth?

Oh, yes. I was in the crack platoon, speaking of marching. We did the exhibition marches – the parade, silent drill. And I was in the glee club. So I was busy.

Ms. Barrett: What did you do on your free time – what little you had?

I'd go into New York City and sightsee. On weekends wealthy people from north of New York City would put up a list of how many midshipmen they could take over a

weekend. One house might take twenty guys, they were so big. And we would sign up, and they would tell us what train to take up to Mamaroneck, or Rye, or Larchmount – all those in Westchester County. And we'd go up there at the assigned time. And they would meet us with gorgeous debutantes, big convertibles. And gas was rationed. I mean, these people were using all their [ration] stamps on us. And then they'd take us [to their homes] – we were assigned to a particular house with anywhere from two to thirty guys in a house – mansions and estates. And we'd go to the beach and play touch football at the beach club, and at night we'd go to the country club and dance. This is war! This is tough! (Everyone chuckles)

Ms. Barrett: What about people just on the street when they saw you in uniform?

Of course, in New York City during wartime it was jammed with uniforms. We didn't get any extra looks. I was able to go to the Stage Door Canteen one time, and was told they only let ... [enlisted men] in there. We were in the middle – midshipmen.

So after – that was ninety days – where did you go after that?

I came home on leave for I think a week. And then I was assigned (tape stops momentarily) at Charleston, South Carolina, on the YP-24 ship, ... a 75-foot patrol ship.

If I could just back up. You were on leave for a week. And that was the first time you had seen your family in 90 days or so? What did you do while you were on leave? Did you just catch up with things and go to some sports games here?

I'm not a sports fan, but with all the girls, I went out a lot (everyone chuckles).

Caught up with some old flames.

Several. (Mrs. Eagan: Not me.)

Ms. Barrett: Enough of those debutantes.

I was spoiled by them.

Additional Schooling and Concurrent Duty Assignments

So it was a nice leave for a week. And then you headed from there, from Chicago, to Charleston?

Yes.

Tell us about that – when you arrived in Charleston, how long you were there?

This one other guy and I landed by train very late at night. We didn't know where to go. Some Coast Guard SP was going by, and he said to go over to their office and we could stay there for a night – they had a couple of cots. So we stayed there. And the next day we went apartment hunting. We found a nice home where we got a room, and then we'd go out on our YP and stay out for three or four days. It was very rough, the water, most of the time. We were just in and out. We thought we had a sub one time, and we ... [dropped] the depth charges, and bumped our fan tail up in the air, we were so close. We couldn't go fast enough to get away from them. And there was no sub. It might have been a big school of fish or something.

Ms. Barrett: Now you were saying before, when we weren't on tape yet, that there were German subs all up and down the coast. How close did they normally get?

To the horizon.

To the horizon? So you could see them from the shore?

Yes. At the sub-chaser training center in Miami, which I went to later, you heard the stories of those [earlier] days ... , before I was there, that there'd be a call and all the students would just leave the classrooms, jump in these small boats and go out after them. It was wild.

Tell us about the YP – the origin on YP and what was its mission.

Well, "Yard Patrol" is what the YP was. It was just local shore operations guarding things. They had some mine sweepers there and things like that.

How many men – I know we covered this before – but how many men were aboard a YP?

There were three officers and about five or six enlisted.

And you'd go out and come back in the same day, or you'd be out for a few days?

Out for usually three days.

And how far off-shore, how far out were you?

Not terribly far; past the horizon.

And you had said you got an apartment in Charleston, so you did not live on base at all.

No. They did not have space at all. We lived in a family's upper room – mother and daughter; the only pretty girl in Charleston (everybody chuckles).

Ms. Barrett: Was the housing approved by the Navy, or you just found your own?

We found our own. Yes.

And how long were you there in Charleston?

A few months.

And all that time you were assigned to the YP craft, and you'd go out for a few days and come back in for a few days, then go out again?

Usually we'd go out for three and come back for one.

Ms. Barrett: And what was the area that you patrolled?

Just outside of Charleston harbor.

So the same area – you'd just stay out for a few days.

Yes. Just back and forth. It was our type of ship and [there were] minesweepers that were guarding the Charleston area.

Ms. Barrett: Other than the time you thought you saw a sub and detonated a school of fish or something, did you come across anything more serious?

No.

Ms. Barrett: So you could see them on the horizon, but never anything close enough.

We didn't see them.

Ms. Barrett: You knew they were there.

Yes. They were sinking ships, so we knew they were there.

So, you were in Charleston, like you said, for two or three months on the YP.

It was a little longer.

And you were communicating home with your family through letters and so forth. Did you get time off during that two or three months to ...?

No.

No leaves at all, other than just a weekend leave, no extended period of time?

No.

How did you enjoy Charleston?

I enjoyed it very much. We went back there since then, and I could not remember it. We found where I had lived, which is converted now to several condos or something. But I could not remember going to the Navy yard. It's one of those blanks. I can't remember how I got there – whether there were street cars or whatever. But Charleston was a wonderful town. Everybody was friendly – unless they were mad about the War Between the States, as they call it.

So after Charleston, where did you go?

We went into the Charleston Navy yard, and we were tied ... [outboard of] the Moonstone [which] actually was in ... [between us and the dock]. It had come in for repairs on the engine, and when they were about to go one of the crew threw sand in the engine so they wouldn't have to go anywhere (everyone chuckles). They were just finishing up that and were about to go, and they needed an officer. It was a gorgeous ship.

Ms. Barrett: What type of ship was it?

It was a converted yacht – 175 footer. It had teakwood rails, eiderdown sofas in the ward room. Every officer had his own stateroom with a bathtub.

Ms. Barrett: A real luxury!

It was real luxury. So I just jumped at the chance. One of the officers was going to Washington, and he knew one of the detail officers who assigned people. So he made it happen.

Pulled a few strings. How many men were aboard the Moonstone?

The Moonstone was probably 100.

What was its mission? I know it was a private boat that was commissioned in the Navy.

Right. And it had been given to the Navy by its owner, I'm not sure who. So when I went aboard they had just arrived from Ecuador, and had trained Ecuadorian Midshipmen on it, and they were going to give the ship to Ecuador on the lend-lease program. So they had brought back two officers and an enlisted Ecuadorian on it. That was a lot of fun, and we kind of learned Spanish from them. One of them later became the Chief of Naval Operations for Ecuador – Cesar Endara was his name. Anyway, we were ready to give the ship to Ecuador and we started south across the Gulf of Mexico. ... [But] there was a

German sub tailing us [which we got away from]. We tried to go fast, and the cylinder block cracked on the Moonstone. Ecuador would not have had the funds to repair it, so we changed our mind and decided to give them a PC instead, which was from the Navy – a warship about the same size. And so we had gotten to Panama, and we stayed there a few days. And they turned us back and told us to go home to the States where we could get repaired. We went to Key West for a while. Our captain was the senior officer [in port]. He didn't know what he was doing (everyone chuckles), so we patrolled outside of Key West for a while. And then finally we were transferred to Cape May in New Jersey. We went up the coast. I went home on leave. The ship was out on patrol duty in the middle of the night, and a US destroyer thought they were a German sub because the shape and ... [size] were right, and they didn't get an answer when they challenged them, and so they rammed them and sank the Moonstone in three minutes. One fellow was killed and one injured. Everyone was in the water and lost everything. I was home on leave – lost all my gear and clothes. I had to go back and start refurbishing. And ... [they] all went up to New York City to await assignment. I went to Louis Auchincloss' parents' home on East Central Park – butlers and maids tripping over each other. They dressed for dinner every night – black tie and all – it was fantastic!

Ms. Barrett: Going back to the ship, you said our own Coast Guard rammed it.

The Navy rammed it.

Ms. Barrett: The Navy – because they thought it was a German sub. You said they had ...

It was called, “identification: friend or foe” radar. They challenged us and we didn't have it [available to answer the challenge].

Ms. Barrett: You had no way to respond. Did you even know they were trying to ...

No.

So you were a private ship that wasn't equipped to respond to Naval ships, and so the Naval ship thought you were a sub and rammed you. How many men were aboard when that happened?

There were about 100.

And only one life was lost.

Yes. The destroyer immediately put the searchlights on the water and rescued everybody. It was not too bad.

And you were on leave when this happened. Were you back in Chicago?

Back in Chicago for a week.

Ms. Barrett: How did you get the news of what had happened to your ship?

From [an article in] the *Tribune*!

Ms. Barrett: So you didn't get any official word; you just saw it in the newspaper?

My mother brought me that paper, and I couldn't believe it. I called them, of course, immediately. I got in touch with somebody, and they said just take your leave and come and join us in New York City. Oh, I had to go to Charleston and pick up a group of enlisted and take them up to New York City.

Ms. Barrett: By train?

By train.

So a train to Charleston from Chicago after your leave was over, and then back up to New York to get reassigned? So 100 men had to be reassigned. What happened next? Where did you go after that?

They gave me "survivor's leave" – thirty days! (Everyone chuckles)

Ms. Barrett: Even though you hadn't been on the ship?

Yes. And I took it! I went home for thirty days' survivor's leave. And then I went to Miami to that sub-chaser training center and finished there.

Ms. Barrett: How long was the sub-chaser school?

I think six weeks. No, it was longer than that. It was December to April – perfect Florida weather (everyone chuckles). I got lucky enough.

Ms. Barrett: What types of things did you do in that training?

It was strictly classroom.

Ms. Barrett: All classroom?

Yes. Well, we went out on ships and showed them what we had learned.

What type of ships?

Mostly PC's – patrol craft.

Ms. Barrett: What types of things did they teach you?

Well, they put a buoy in the water and take a ship out and say you're going to dock this and pull up next to this buoy, and you'd have to ... [do it]. I was pretty good. Got it every time. It was delightful. You just couldn't beat it.

Were you anxious, or were some of the men anxious, at that point to get into combat, or leave to get to where the action was?

We thought we were learning how to do it better.

And we're talking, this is 1943 when you were in Miami? And you were there for about eight weeks or so?

Three or four months – I mentioned December to April, so it was four months.

Were you on a base there or did you live off base?

We lived in something just like a dorm.

Ms. Barrett: Was it a dorm that was part of the school or part of a college?

I don't know what it had been before, but it was strictly all Navy then.

Any men with you for a lot of this period of time that you were together with anyone for a long period of time from Columbia through Charleston to ...?

No.

So you got reassigned which meant meeting a whole bunch of new people, new officers and enlisted men. And after Miami, which you said was about December through April, where did you go? What happened next?

They sent me to another school – fire control school. That's not fire as in flames, that's fire like a gun fires. The trains ... moved the gun mounts around, and that sort of thing. That was at the Naval Gun Factory in Washington, D.C. And so I lived in a room in this lady's house all that time. And that was maybe six weeks in the gun factory, which was a giant expanse where they were making the big Navy guns – 12-inch, 16-inch, and so forth.

Was that mostly classroom instruction there or hands-on?

Hands-on stuff.

And how long was your day there?

Typical day, nine to five.

Any leave at all during that period in Washington?

No.

Shipping Out

So you were there for about six weeks and just there. After that, where did you go after that?

From there I was assigned to the destroyer. It was in the Pacific, with the fleet. I guess I flew to San Francisco and then how did I get out there ...

You flew from Washington to San Francisco?

Right. I guess I got a little leave. I must have – along the way to San Francisco. I don't remember how I got out ... oh, I know: in San Francisco I got on ... [an Army] transport [ship]. There were 3,000 enlisted, 300 officers and 32 Army nurses (everyone chuckles). And Richard Ney, the movie star, with Greer Garson – Mrs. Miniver; he is her son in the movie – taking him down to the dock to see him off. He hung around with us [on board]. He was an officer. I was a "JG" at the time – Lieutenant JG, junior grade. They took the first 19 in the alphabet and made us company commanders. We each had a company of enlisted men to be in charge of going overseas. I was lucky – I had mostly chiefs and first-class petty officers. So when we went across the "Line," most of my guys were already shellbacks and beat the liver out of me (everybody chuckles), which was a lot of fun and not trouble.

Ms. Barrett: Explain for people who don't know what the "shellback" is and what the "crossing" is.

Well, until you cross the equator, you're a "pollywog." And you have to go through – King Neptune comes aboard, supposedly. It's a chief with a big tummy. And they have his court and all his helpers, and anybody who is still a pollywog [runs the gamut through the lined-up shellbacks] and they all have bats to beat your rear-end raw, and when you get to the royal area they have a chair. They put water with an electric wire in there, and you sit in it and get jolted. And they shave your hair wherever they feel like. And you have to kiss the baby's tummy, and he's another big fat chief. And they throw you in a vat of water, and they throw in everything they could possibly think of that's disgusting. And then you're out. And then you're a "shellback." You get a certificate, supposedly forever.

And this is what you get when you cross the equator for the first time.

Right.

Interesting.

It's called "crossing the line." They have the same type of thing for crossing the international dateline, the Arctic Circle and everything else. But I never did those.

So, from San Francisco, then, you sailed over ...

Someplace in the Pacific, to wait for our ship ...

To wait for your destroyer.

To wait for it to come back. They put us on a tanker – a US tanker. They made us stay outside in the rain. There was another officer and myself waiting for the ship. [The captain was a Mustang (former enlisted man).] He was sadistic. Anyway, the destroyer came in. They had just come back from quite a battle where a cruiser had been disabled and they had to escort it quite a distance. So it took a while. So we went aboard and we were fine from there on.

How long were you on the transport?

Maybe a week or two.

Waiting for the destroyer to come in?

Yes. And they just came alongside and we just stepped over.

And where was this?

I think it was Ulithi -- in the Caroline Islands. Then we immediately went out to sea. The way they did it, it was a taskforce. And [included] ... were five task groups – four or five, depending on ... [how] they did it. And there'd be a circle ... of destroyers – maybe thirty – all on the outside. On the inner circle are battleships and cruisers. And in the middle, of course, are the carriers. And we zigzagged – the whole thing would be zigzagging all the time. It took quite a bit of seamanship to keep five of those going.

Ms. Barrett: And the zigzagging was to avoid being a sitting target.

What was the name of your destroyer?

The Knapp – DD653.

And how many men aboard?

330, about, and 35 officers.

And you were gunnery officer on that?

Yes.

And how many were in your command?

Gunners mates, fire control men, torpedo men, a few others – it was almost 100.

And mostly non-com's, the ones that you had?

Yes. Well, there was everything from Seaman to Chief.

You said you had a lot of non-commissioned officers in your group?

No. That was on the transport. Of course we had other duties. We had to stand watch – deck watch – when we were underway. Lights out at night, and all these ships zigzagging without any lights, doing it all by radar. There was a little radar repeater on ... [the bridge], and you sat watching that where all the ... [ships] were, and give orders to the engine room – number of turns on the ... [engine], or tell the helmsman to change course, and call the captain if something bad happens.

Ms. Barrett: What did you do with any free time you might have had on this ship? Did you play card games? Reading?

Didn't have a whole lot of free time. There was always maintenance and things to do. Check the mail so there's nothing in it before it goes out.

Censor it?

Yes.

Ms. Barrett: So you had to censor the mail from your men.

Yes.

Ms. Barrett: What sort of things did you look for when you were censoring?

Location – where we were, mostly. “Loose lips sink ships” was the slogan.

Ms. Barrett: Did you have to do a lot of censoring, or were the men pretty good?

No, not a lot. And of course, we ate very well. The cooks were sailors and had been through cooks' school. And we had stewards in the officers' mess, and they were pretty good.

Ms. Barrett: What were some of the meals you might have had?

Just like Thanksgiving! We had turkey, we made our own ice cream – just regular meals.

Ms. Barrett: The food was well-prepared.

Yes. And, of course, you never knew when the ship was going to heel over, because if a plane was going to take off from a carrier, they were launching planes. They just put up a flag hoist saying they were going to do so, they'd turn into the wind, and the two or three destroyers in front of them in the circle had to just immediately get out in front of them to protect them. You might be at dinner, and all of a sudden the whole ship goes over like this – and the food's on the deck and you're on the deck (everyone chuckles). We put fiddle boards on the tables to hold things from sliding off. And you'd go up to flank speed as fast as you could go in front of these carriers. So that was always fun.

What was your typical day like? What time did you start in the morning?

Well, sometimes you had the mid-watch at night or anytime during a 24-hour day -- ... Just on and off watch. ... By the time I [left the ship] I was fourth in ... [rank], so I was in charge of one of the watch sections that assigned the officers. And then there were engineering officers who never stood watch; their duties were in the engine room. The captain was a lieutenant commander when we went aboard, and he made commander while we were out there. He had his hat with "scrambled eggs" on it in his safe, and when he made commander he put that hat on (everyone chuckles). But he was a terrible captain. Academy graduate.

How so? Didn't take care of his men?

He didn't know what to do.

Ms. Barrett: So it was like he had book learning but didn't know how to apply it.

Yes. But we had awfully good ... officers coming from civilian life who took over and did the work while he was the figurehead. He had the medals because he was the captain.

And you were fourth in command on the ship? What was your rank then?

I was a lieutenant – two stripes.

Not junior grade anymore. How long were you on the Knapp?

Just a little over a year.

You weren't out at sea for a year. Did you come back in?

We came back in. There was ammunition and supplies we had to get. We'd get mail out at sea – someone would come out and send it over to us on a line. But we'd go back just long enough to refuel – we did refuel at sea, too, but that was a very dangerous operation, if you can imagine two great big ships side-by-side with these hoses going over and the waves ...

Ms. Barrett: Fuel spewing all over.

Yes. And sometimes we'd fuel – they'd send out tankers, or sometimes from cruisers or battleships or carriers. We'd have to go pretty close and send a fuel line over, and keep pulling bigger lines until they [would] get the fuel hose and stick it in the deck [opening].

I'd think also with two ships fueling it's probably a target for subs.

Absolutely. Of course we had an awful lot of people on the ships around us.

Ms. Barrett: So they were protecting you while you were fueling.

Yes. Once the fleet almost ran out of fuel. We had to fuel every morning at sunrise for a long time. And, as I said, guys fell over[board] because some of these lines would snake out and take a guy with them. It was a very tough job.

You said when you went back into port – it was back to that island again?

Sometimes. Sometimes the whole fleet would go in and another fleet would take over. We'd have liberty on these desert islands. They had taken all the natives off and there was nothing but coconuts and crabs, and so we'd go ashore and have 3.2 beer for the guys. But they ... couldn't really get stupid drunk. And then the officers' stewards would bring steaks and so forth [for a picnic]. And we played softball and fooled around ... [before] we'd all go back [to the ship].

Ms. Barrett: What happened when, you said they moved all the natives off the island. Did they just move them to another island and when you were gone they would bring them back?

No. They'd keep those for liberty islands. Mogmog was one.

This is in the Caroline Islands?

The Carolines. There were several – Admiralty was another one. But wherever we were [the fleet would try to provide a little R&R for the sailors].

Did the fleet see any actual combat at that time?

Oh, yes. Mostly by the time I got there – they'd had a lot of bad stuff before I went aboard. They called one the "Mariana's Turkey Shoot." They were shooting Jap. bombers that were coming in. We knocked down two of them, so we were able to put that on the side of the gun housing. But anyway, my part of the action up close was really just being aboard the ship. We ran out after submarines sometimes. We'd come upon floating mines and have to shoot those and blow them up. If the carrier was landing planes, we would plane guard behind them and off to the side. Not really – nobody was

shooting at us out there. It was mostly ... [aimed at getting our] planes close enough to do the damage.

Ms. Barrett: So let them do the damage, and also you kept the waterways clear and safe.

Yes. We actually were “in harms’ way” when we were at Okinawa. We ... [had left] the fleet – we were [on] a picket line going up and down Okinawa [during their battle]. And we were at general quarters sometimes a day and a half – out on deck, and they’d bring sandwiches out on deck in dishpans and so forth.

(Mr. Burke turns the tape over)

Okay, we’re back on tape with Mr. Jack Eagan.

I was talking about Okinawa.

There we were bombarding the shore. The battle was going on just like a movie. You could see those planes diving and the two armies at each other, and the suicide swimmers would come out on logs and try to get at us.

Ms. Barrett: Suicide swimmers? We’ve heard of the Kamikaze.

Yes. They’d come out on logs. These were just individual people.

Carrying explosives?

Yes. Then the Kamikazes, that was big-time then. That’s when they really were coming in all over the place.

Ms. Barrett: So these suicide swimmers were kind of like we hear about the suicide bombers in the news now – they were just swimming instead of driving a car.

Exactly.

Ms. Barrett: Okay. And was your ship attacked?

No. Well, we had to shoot some of them out of the water, but they didn’t get to us.

Did the Kamikaze ever attempt to get your ship?

Yes.

But you caught them before.

Yes. That, or they were trying to get the bigger ships behind us, and we’d shoot them as they went by.

In the fleet, how many ships were there altogether? You said there were 30 destroyers.

That was in one task group. There were five of those. So 150 destroyers, there were maybe cruisers and battleships, five times ten equals 50, and five or six carriers, one or two in the middle of each task force. And later we were joined by a British task group – the [Battleship] King George V. We had heard about the maritime reputation of the British Navy, you know. They didn't know what they were doing (everybody chuckles). They came in and we just had a scare. I mean it was really like the Keystone Cops. And the radio was crackling with "I say, do ... [come over for] some tea?" ... We finally got them settled where they were supposed to be. And they joined us as a task group.

Ms. Barrett: You had talked about the submarines before. Now you're in the Pacific and you have the Kamikaze. What was the feeling that you had or the men on the ship had the first time they experienced these Kamikaze. What was the general reaction?

Hoping they wouldn't hit us (everyone chuckles)! It's very frightening because these guys are suicide flyers. They're going to ram into anything they can.

Did they hit a lot of the ships in your task force?

Oh, yes. We used up a lot of our ammunition for sure.

Ms. Barrett: Did you capture anyone?

... [The Knapp had], before I was aboard, [from a Jap.,] a submarine [that had been hit by shellfire] and they picked up survivors. They interrogated them and transferred them to some big ship, probably a battleship [or carrier].

Ms. Barrett: Did you capture any of the Kamikaze or suicide swimmers that you foiled?

No.

You pretty much shot them. How long did this task force take place in terms of time off Okinawa?

Off Okinawa it wasn't a task force. They called it a picket line. Destroyers were assigned to go back and forth doing shore bombardment and whatever had to be done – usually about twice, ... [but] we had to go nine times on picket station. That went on for a couple of weeks, maybe.

Ms. Barrett: And the picket line was mainly to set up a barrier.

Yes.

Then after that back to the task force?

Yes.

How long did that task force ...

For ... [the rest of] the war.

So from 1944 and into 1945?

Yes.

Were you serving out there when the war ended?

Yes. We went into Tokyo Bay. We were the ninth ship in. [Before that,] we were all going to attack the mainland. We would have lost so many people. They had 18-inch guns in rock caves. They would have wiped out many hundreds of thousands of us, and we would have wiped out hundreds of thousands of Japanese. People who complain about the atom bombs being dropped are ridiculous. It saved a lot of lives.

Ms. Barrett: That's what we hear from a lot of veterans. They're glad it was dropped. It saved more lives than it cost.

How did you hear about the dropping of the two atom bombs.

We felt it! We were 500 miles off the mainland, and all of a sudden boom! It was kind of like when planes are going back to the carriers and they haven't got rid of all their bombs. Sometimes they'd drop them in the water so they wouldn't land with them. They'd explode. And they'd try to get them close to us for fun, for laughs. ... [Then we would] feel them a little bit.

Ms. Barrett: Were you able to see anything, or you just felt it.

We just felt it.

Ms. Barrett: And that was the first one.

Yes.

Ms. Barrett: So that was the one on Hiroshima.

And the second one on Nagasaki, was that a week later or a few days later? I don't remember my history here.

I can't remember.

And you found out after that that the Japanese had surrendered.

Ms. Barrett: How did you receive that news?

By radio.

Ms. Barrett: From the Navy?

Yes.

Ms. Barrett: What was the response on the ship?

Oh, cheers! Unbelievable – it was over. It was a long time. Anyway, we ... [would have been among the first to attack] Tokyo They hated our Captain. It wasn't just me who thought he was an idiot.

Ms. Barrett: You mean everybody on board ship thought that.

No. The big ... [Navy brass].

Ms. Barrett: This man had no friends!

So they were going to send us in. We had already been assigned [to] the first wave to attack the mainland. We wouldn't have made it.

Ms. Barrett: You would have been in the first wave. Wow!

So, anyway, the war was over. Time to go in. And so we all sailed into Tokyo Bay. And we all got in there. Finally, they'd had a terrible ... typhoon before the end of the war on the South China Sea, where we lost three destroyers sunk with [over] 700 ... men. They were ... [with] us. Two were ships [the same as the Knapp] ... – Fletcher, destroyers. We picked up a couple of survivors. The waves were, in my estimation, 100 feet high. There's a book called *Typhoon* which is worth reading. And here's this giant wave and this 300-foot ship would go right through the wave, slap down on the other side and go through another one. It was a nightmare. And as I say, you couldn't stay upright, you started rolling, and we actually recorded 73 degrees over ... [from the upright position].

Ms. Barrett: 73-degree tilt. Wow! From upright.

Yes. And the other ships along with us, they rolled over all the way and the guys were in the water going up and down, ... [masts] hitting and killing them in the water.

And this was right before you were going into Tokyo Bay? When you went in, did you get off the ship and what was the reaction of the people there?

People acted like nothing ever happened. It was amazing. The Emperor said the war's over, don't do another thing. It was really unbelievable.

Ms. Barrett: Did they approach you at all, or did they stay in their houses?

Just out in the street – life as usual.

Ms. Barrett: And if you came out, and when you were walking among them?

No problem. As a matter of fact ...

No hostility or anything?

You could ... [sell them] American cigarettes, I think they ... [would pay] \$20 a pack because they could never get such good cigarettes. All you had to do was have a carton full and stop in the middle of the street and a crowd would come over immediately. But of course the Navy said we couldn't do that anymore. So every time we went ashore after that they patted us down and they'd take all the cigarettes. There were mountains of them.

Ms. Barrett: Why didn't they want you to do that?

They didn't feel it was right to do, selling them for a higher price than we paid for them.

Ms. Barrett: So they were going ashore and selling them?

Oh, yeah.

Ms. Barrett: So they weren't giving them, they were selling them.

Yes.

A black market.

It was out in the open, but the Navy said they didn't appreciate that at all.

Basically, the Japanese people were kind of indifferent – the war was over and they just went on with their lives. There was no open hostility towards you?

No. I couldn't believe it.

Ms. Barrett: During the war – we heard stories of people willing to die for the Emperor. That's what the kamikaze and suicide swimmers were all about. But as soon as the war was over it was like someone turned a switch and it's done.

The Emperor said the war was over. That was it. There were three or four instances of suicide swimmers coming out and ... [climbed] to get aboard ships, and [they] shot some of our people before they were killed. But only that. The war was over.

Were there skirmishes still going on even after the war? Because we found out from other interviews, in Europe when the war was over there were still little pockets of resistance.

On the islands when the ... [Japanese] didn't know the war was over.

Ms. Barrett: They hadn't gotten the word yet.

No. And years later they'd find Japs living on those islands ... [who] had been there from the war. As a matter of fact – another story coming up – but in Tokyo Bay the ship of the signing of the surrender – the USS Missouri I think it was – we were right near it. We could see them doing it. That was a thrill. But while we were in Tokyo Bay they had another typhoon. And some of the commercial ships didn't have enough sense to get their engines going so that if anything happened they could be moved. And so their anchor would pull out of the bottom and they'd start to drift- these enormous ... [oilers] and freighters. ... We had our engines going. We were tied up with another destroyer out in the Bay. The wind was howling ... and would ... [move] these gigantic ships with no control, and they'd come right at us. So we were on and off at general quarters. The wind was unbelievable, and the waves [high]. We had a big wind before and lost all our boats. They'd been torn off. So people went out looking for them on the islands. They couldn't find ours, but they found a Japanese boat which ... [had] a regular cabin and the whole thing. So we commandeered that and tied it between [the] two destroyers. ... This typhoon was smashing, and my station during general quarters was on the fantail – back end – and we have a ... [talker] there. And a big wave came ... and pushed our ships together and smashed this Japanese thing to kindling. So I said – this is a phrase that has gone down in history – I told the ... [talker] to call the bridge and ask, “Does anyone want to buy a tall thin boat.” (Everyone chuckles.) ... That was the worst thing that happened to us. But there were [many] collisions and everything. It was bad news.

Going Home

Ms. Barrett: How long were you in Tokyo Bay.

Until I got enough points to go home. We figured months at sea and this and ... [that], until you got enough points to go home

Ms. Barrett: Was it a month a point? How were the points figured?

One point for each month at sea. A big tough formula. So most of the people felt they would “just sit and wait until they tell me.” And they would, and they'd tell them, and they'd have to go to a transport or something to take them back home. I thought, hey,

maybe I could go around the world. So I checked into it a little bit, and went over to a [U.S.] battleship where the British liaison officer was. He had an [office]. He had a big [Marine] guard outside. He was ... [a] Commander. ... I told him what I wanted, and he said, "Well, your [Lend-Lease Program is over, so the Brits along the way might say, 'Up You,] Yank.' I'd be happy to give you a ... [note. It said: 'I am forever in your debt, if you will] give this officer whatever [transportation] he wants.'" So I went back to my ship and checked around. ... They assigned me to an Egyptian tanker to go up to Singapore, and they canceled the trip. And they gave me orders to go ... [on] a Chinese frigate to go to Shanghai. So I'm thinking this is getting better all the time. Another one, I forget where it was going, but that was canceled. And ... [then] came ... [HMAS] Shropshire, an Australian cruiser, which was the biggest ship in their fleet[,] and it was going home to Sydney. ... [My] Captain growled. He thought it was a terrible idea. ... The squadron commander came over for lunch one day. He was a four-striper. And ... the squadron commander [said], "I think that's a capital idea." And the ... [captain] said, "So do I." (Everyone chuckles.) ... I [then] got aboard a New Zealand frigate. And they had a big party there – there were [U.S. Navy] nurses on-board from I don't know where. So finally they put me on board this cruiser – I don't know where it ... [had come] from – and we headed south. We stopped at New Guinea and picked up 600 Australian soldiers to take them home. They were handsome guys – Australians; men and women are handsome people – they were all in shorts, with purple and orange blotches, [remedies for] ... jungle rot. And the hats with the sides up. And they had just come out of the jungle – the Japs were still fighting. So we went straight down to Sydney. And of course the biggest ship in the fleet, they had fire boats with their hoses, they had planes going by, [many sailboats], and this and that. And of course Sydney harbor is gorgeous. And the dock where we were supposed to go had a band playing, of course, and all these women. And we get the binoculars out and they were gorgeous. So, anyway, we finally tie up. And I was in Sydney for 10 days and I wanted to go on. ... I met a British ... sub lieutenant, and he arranged for me to go on a ... [transport] to the Mediterranean and so forth from Sydney. The New Zealand guys on the frigate I was on said, "If you need an alibi, here's a girl's name. She's gorgeous and just tell them you're engaged to her. And if you have to marry her, she's worth it." (Everyone chuckles.) ... Anyway, somebody told me don't be a fool. You're going through the Red Sea on a British ship with no air conditioning – no nothing. It's dirty, it's hot, it's terrible. So I canceled out. So they put me on an American tanker, and I had to go to Brisbane ... to get on the tanker with seven other officers. And we headed straight east to Panama and spent a few days there. Then they were going to Cartagena, Columbia and picked up oil, and then we went up to Hoboken, New Jersey. My ship – the Knapp – had come into another New York port the same day! (Everyone chuckles.) ... I had two sea bags full of souvenirs I had left [aboard] – Japanese swords and pistol and so forth – and had UPS pick them up to take them home. I went home and worked at Great Lakes checking out guys who were going home.

Could you just backtrack a little bit? The Australian frigate from Tokyo down to Sydney, how long did that take?

The cruiser – quite a while!

Were you on as sort of an advisor?

No. I was a passenger. I had my own stateroom. Every morning at 7:30 a ... [steward] would bring in hot tea and serve it in bed. And that's when we ran across the equator again, and I hid all day – because those Aussies ... [might not accept my Shellback card and make me go through another ordeal].

Ms. Barrett: You didn't cross with them!

So you basically were a passenger on this ship, and you hooked up with another ship in Brisbane and that was your ...

I was a passenger on that.

And you were a passenger on that. Did the Navy – did you get paid while all this was going on?

Oh, sure.

(Mrs. Eagan: He was still with them.)

He was still with the Navy.

The trouble was, the Captain would have poker games every night, and everyone would get drunk but me. I was never much of a drinker. [I thought that] I'd clean up, [but all I did was] lose, and lose. So we got ... [to Panama], and I didn't have any money. I had to check in with the Navy to get some money. The Captain was a great big German guy. During that cruise he had been lecturing them on safety and how to be careful. On his way back to his stateroom he put his hand up and the door closed and cut off his thumb. And his comment was, "It was so embarrassing." (Everyone chuckles.) So I had a lot of experiences.

Transition from Active to Inactive Reserves and Civilian Life

Ms. Barrett: So you ended up sailing into Hoboken. And you were discharged?

No. I went to the Copacabana that night. But I went home to Great Lakes and worked for two or three weeks checking guys out. Then I was changed to inactive duty, and immediately joined the Reserve – or was in the Reserve, really. But I was a traveling salesman, so I couldn't go to all the meetings. ... I couldn't get paid – because you've got to go to all the meetings or you don't get paid. I went to every one I could – for 23 more years[, during which I was promoted twice, and retired as a Commander]. Thank the Lord, because I get a few bucks a month now [in pension].

So it was 1946 when you were decommissioned from the Navy into the Reserves.

Yes.

What did you do after that?

The first job I had was Mandel Brothers Department Store – it isn't there anymore. The government was paying for training – not paying much. ... They had [a training] class for up-and-coming executives. And I ranked first in that. So within a very short time I was a buyer. I was the youngest buyer on State Street – 27. It was a terrible paying job. I used to go to New York on buying trips and this and that. It was so bad I got less as a buyer than I did as a trainee, which was about \$250 a month. So I [quit and] went to Montgomery Ward for their training program. What I should have done was go to school. I applied to the University of Chicago College of Physical Sciences. I was accepted. I thought, who's going to take care of my mother and sister – I didn't realize I could borrow money then like people do now. Nobody did that.

Ms. Barrett: Right – you paid cash.

So I backed off. I could have had a Master's, been a physicist and had a marvelous career[, maybe]. That's yesterday.

So all the time you were in the Navy your paycheck helped to support your mother and sister.

Yes. They gave me extra a month for dependents.

Ms. Barrett: So you got your pay plus support pay for your family.

Yes.

So tell me – how did you meet Jeanne?

(Mrs. Eagan: That's a story.)

Well, my best friend [and] I had been over visiting his cousin who lived downstairs. Who was that guy – they had somebody on TV: "Sergeant Dombrowski! You're home from the wars, what are you going to do now?" "I want ... woman!" (Everyone chuckles.) So we were looking for girls, and ...

Ms. Barrett: And you found one!

Yes. Jeanne ... [lived upstairs from the cousin]. She said, "Jeanne borrowed my iron. I'll have her come down and you can meet her." So we ... [found] two good girls. Out she came and it was love at first sight. ... We were finally married, and my best friend and ... [Jeanne's] sister were married a year later.

What year were you married?

(Mrs. Eagan: 1951. It will be our 57th anniversary next month.)

Congratulations!

(Mrs. Eagan: Who would have thought!) (Everyone chuckles.)

Ms. Barrett: All because of that iron!

Anything else, Jack, that you want to share with us? It's a great story. I loved hearing about it. Any people that you remember, or anything else that you want to share with us?

I still keep in touch with one of the officers who is retired from the Atomic Energy [Commission]. He still lives in Los Alamos. I introduced him to his wife. We were in San Diego during the war going for ammunition. And the Bank of America had a dance for servicemen. ... I went to it alone – I was pretty shy in those days. And I saw this blonde, and I thought I'd never asked anyone to dance before, but I'll do it. And she said she'd love ... to. So we danced. At the end of the night I asked if I could take her home. And she said, "Well, I came with another girl. Is it okay if she comes, too?" And I said, sure. So this gorgeous brunette came up, and the minute I saw her – it's kind of weird – but I thought about my best friend among the officers on the ship, and thought she'd be perfect for him. So we set up a date. Oh, we pulled up to where they lived. And ... [the cabbie] said, "Well here we are – the home of the virgins." I said, "What's that!" He said, "They all have a 10:00 curfew, so we call it the home of the virgins." So, anyway, we set up a four-way date with the two of them and two other gals. And I brought three other officers from the ship. And we had a scrimmage in the lobby (everyone chuckles). And I told him which one to grab. And long story short, ... [they fell in love]. He had to go back out to sea, and we ... [later] liberated a few Japanese parachutes – silk – in Japan. ... [He] sent her one and she had her wedding dress made from it.

Ms. Barrett: That's interesting!

When he got back they were married and lived happily ever after.

(Mrs. Eagan: We still see them.)

Yes. We still keep pretty close.

Ms. Barrett: Are you active in any veterans organizations?

... Military Officers Association of America. ... It's national – a big organization. They do have chapters and we went a few times, but it didn't appeal. I was in the

American Legion when I was with Mandel Brothers, because Colonel Leon Mandel was the boss. It was his American Legion Post.

Ms. Barrett: So it was a good idea to be in it (everyone chuckles)!

(Mrs. Eagan: Jack[’s ship] still ... has reunions ..., every other year. ... [We’ve] been to a few of those. The most recent was down in Peoria. The next one will be in Baton Rouge. Mostly now it’s Korean [War] veterans.)

Because the ship ... [went] back ... [into service for] Korea.

(Mrs. Eagan: Not many WW II boys are left.)

Ms. Barrett: So this is an annual reunion?

... Bi-annual – every two years. We [conducted one] ... in San Diego [a few years ago].

And this is from the ship you were on – the Knapp.

(Mrs. Eagan: They still meet, and you always get some sort of memento of it – a coaster with a picture of the Knapp, or a carrying bag.)

In San Diego we had 145 people come from all over the country – World War II guys and their wives; Korean ... vets and their wives.

Is there anybody local, Jack, that you keep in touch with who was aboard the ship or in the same time as you?

They’ve all died.

(Mrs. Eagan: There were. They used to meet here in Chicago.)

Is there a web site that you could go on?

Yes. The ship has a web site. It’s very well done. It’s got a history of the ship, pictures, news. I can’t remember the name of the website – probably the USS Knapp[.com].

(Mrs. Eagan: I think that’s right.)

Lasting Impressions

Is there anything else you want to share with us? How did your experiences in the war and aboard ship affect your thinking just in general as an adult?

Well, fortunately, as I say because of graduating when I did, I was able to get into the officers' training program and be an officer. And that made all the difference in the world. I was going to come back and be an executive of some kind. You don't want to be "a grunt" in any war.

Ms. Barrett: How did your time in war affect your thinking about war?

We've had some horrible mistakes down the road. Especially this one. The President sent us to war and he was wrong. There's got to be another way.

Is there anything we haven't covered, Jack, that you'd like to share with us?

I shot my wad, I think.

Both Deb and I thank you very much for your time, for your experiences and your wisdom. It's been great listening to it. And I hope we've helped prod some of the story along a little bit.

Thank you two.

We will go off record now.