

**A Veterans Oral History**  
**Orville Ritchie**  
[2007]

**Heritage Education Commission**  
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**Moorhead, MN**

In 2000, Bev Paulson, Heritage Education Commission member, developed a plan to record Veterans' oral histories, starting with WW II Veterans. Bev made a significant personal donation to start our Veterans' oral history project which was supplemented by other concerned individuals, we have recorded 65 oral histories of WWII veterans plus a few Korean War and Vietnam War Veteran. The project is ongoing.

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Interviewee: Orville Ritchie (OR)

Interviewer: Linda Jenson (LJ)

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**Transcript**

LJ: Could you state your name please?

**OR: Orville L. Ritchie.**

LJ: Orville, where were you born?

**OR: Kidder, South Dakota.**

LJ: And whereabouts is Kidder?

**OR: Kidder is north of Britain, South Dakota, about 12 miles south of the North Dakota border.**

LJ: How big a town is it or was it when you were there?

**OR: I don't think it's a town anymore. I think that's been dissolved. I would imagine it was, at one time 150 people.**

LJ: Okay. Did you go to school there?

**OR: I went to the first grade there.**

LJ: Where did you go after that?

**OR: I moved to Lidgerwood, North Dakota, and went through school in Lidgerwood graduating in 1939.**

LJ: Okay. Who were your parents?

**OR: Excuse me. My mother and dad, James Lee Ritchie and Mabel R. Ritchie.**

LJ: What did your father do?

**OR: My father was a salesman.**

LJ: Your mother, a home –

**OR: An implement dealer.**

LJ: And you graduated from Lidgerwood High School and did you go on to high school, did you go on to college after that?

**OR: No. I went in the Navy, graduated in May and went in the Navy in September.**

LJ: So you freely enlisted?

**OR: What?**

LJ: Did you freely enlist or were you drafted?

**OR: Oh. I enlisted.**

LJ: Oh. Okay.

**OR: Yeah.**

LJ: Where did you go to train?

**OR: Training, Great Lakes, Illinois.**

LJ: How long was your training?

**OR: It was about three months.**

LJ: And you said you were in the Navy?

**OR: Yeah.**

LJ: What was the naval training like in Illinois?

**OR: It was the, what was it again?**

LJ: What was the naval training like?

**OR: Oh, that was, you know, it was something different. You were under pretty close watch.**

LJ: Watch your every move?

**OR: Yeah, right.**

LJ: Did you meet any buddies, lifetime buddies at training?

**OR: No.**

LJ: You didn't?

**OR:** Well, yeah, I guess, one of the fellows that was, went through training with me, did go with me to the carrier, (USS) Yorktown; otherwise, that was all that would be.

LJ: After your training was completed, where did you go?

**OR:** I went to Bremerton, Washington, and caught the USS Yorktown carrier and that was in December 1939.

LJ: How, where did you go from there, from the carrier?

**OR:** From there we went to San Diego and then from there we went to Hawaii, and I spent a, we spent a year in Hawaii. You want me to continue?

LJ: Yes. Go on, please.

**OR:** After the year in Hawaii, and I'm not sure about these dates, but April of 1941, we left Hawaii, went through the Canal Zone into the Atlantic, and with a stop at Bermuda. And then on up to the North Atlantic and we were kind of the watch persons for the ships going over to England with supplies, 'cause England was at war with Germany at the time. We didn't take them in, as escorts; we took them to within a certain number of miles of England 'cause we weren't part of the war at the time.

LJ: What ship were you on?

**OR:** The USS Yorktown, the carrier.

LJ: Yorktown. Okay. That's right, you said that. How big a ship was that?

**OR:** About 1,000 foot long.

LJ: Good size.

**OR:** It's a big, it's a carrier where they landed planes on and we had – oh had, I s'pose, 90 planes on there.

LJ: Wow. How many crew on the ship?

**OR:** Twenty, just roughly 2,500.

LJ: Um hum, a lot of people. So what did you do during the time that you were on the ship?

**OR:** I was in the deck force, went from Seaman or Apprentice Seaman to Seaman Second Class, Seaman First Class to Coxswain or what they call Third Class Petty Officer. And then we made several trips over to England and back, and of course, watched the submarines shooting torpedoes at us. The Germans, 'cause they didn't like that idea of the supplies going to England.

LJ: That must have been very scary.

**OR:** It is, because you see those torpedo wakes headed toward you, why it – and then we ported in Portland, Maine, for a few times and then in Newfoundland we stopped, we anchored off of Newfoundland. And then we went to Norfolk, Virginia, for a refit and tied up to the dock. And I was going on 30 days leave on Monday. We docked on Friday. So I took the duty for the weekend, 'cause I was leaving Monday for a 30-day leave . . .

LJ: Counting down the days?

**OR: And the Japs hit Pearl Harbor on Sunday.**

LJ: Oh.

**OR: That went my leave.**

LJ: Oh. That's too bad, oh.

**OR: And then, after the Japs hit Pearl Harbor, we were outfitted with 20-mm guns on our catwalk. And we went back through the canal again and made a raid on the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. And then went into Pearl Harbor and then left Pearl Harbor and went to the Coral Sea, where we were out a hundred and some days at sea. And made several raids out in that area, like in New Guinea and Alandia, New Guinea, and then went into the Coral Sea Battle.**

LJ: What was that like?

**OR: Just, it's tough. You've got lots of planes coming at you and the carrier, the USS Lexington carrier was with us. And of course, we were not side-by-side but you could see each other; and they got hit hard. We got hit and were damaged. And the Lexington sunk.**

LJ: Oh.

**OR: I mean, they were damaged bad.**

LJ: Did you take on . . .

**OR: There were internal explosions on there and stuff. Most of our damage was a bomb down through the center of the ship and a, the near misses had blown holes in the side, so we had ruptured oil tanks. And we left there and went to Tongatabu to check our, the bottom of the ship to see what condition we were in. And then we were "\_\_\_" to the port side badly, so we went in to Pearl Harbor, went back to Pearl Harbor. They put us in dry dock. They welded some skins, as they call them, or metal on the, where the damage was. And in 72 hours, we were out of dry dock and on our way to Midway. And at Midway we got hit bad again, and that's where we sunk.**

LJ: What is Midway?

**OR: Midway Island.**

LJ: Okay.

**OR: And that's where we got hit on June 4<sup>th</sup>, and took a lot of damage and torpedoes hit us; and we abandoned ship on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June. And I did sign up to go back to try and salvage the ship, but I didn't get on that salvage team. And on June 7<sup>th</sup>, the ship got hit by a submarine torpedo and then sunk.**

LJ: When it got hit on, you said June 4<sup>th</sup>?

**OR: Yeah.**

LJ: Did you have boats standing that were able to . . .

**OR:** Yeah, I abandoned ship.

LJ: Abandoned ship into boats?

**OR:** No, we had life rafts.

LJ: Life rafts?

**OR:** And, of course, not all of us were on life rafts because there were too many men. And so I was in the water a few hours and we were covered with oil. And finally, a destroyer picked me up, I don't know, two, three, four hours later; and we were taken back to Pearl Harbor.

LJ: How many men on your ship were lost at sea?

**OR:** There's some sketchy amounts. They said 300 and some, and 500 and some; I'm not sure just which one. You know, you got 2,500 men and there were some men on the ship, I guess, that were in damage control that didn't ever did get out of that area. They couldn't get to them. And this is what I've been told, so I wasn't there when that, you know. It – I had a buddy of mine that went back as part of the salvage crew. And when the ship got hit again, he had to hit the water for the second time. But he did survive.

LJ: Oh, thank God.

**OR:** And the three of us, this other fellow that we used to pal around together, we all split up and this Ernie Boudreaux (sp?), I don't know just what he went on but he ended up in Australia. And they said he was jumping on a streetcar and slipped and went underneath the wheels and got killed there.

LJ: Oh.

**OR:** See, "\_\_\_\_\_" so . . .

LJ: So what did you do after you were rescued by that ship?

**OR:** Well, after we came back to Pearl Harbor I was sent back to San Francisco. Went on what they call a "15-day survivor's leave." And I went back to San Francisco. I should say Alameda area. No, San Francisco it would have been, I guess. And then I was shipped to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to put a minesweeper in service. And while I was there at this receiving station waiting for the minesweeper to get ready, I started, was having problems with my stomach at the time, and ended up in the hospital for 20 days in the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia. But then we put that minesweeper in commission and after a few trial runs, we went up to New London, Connecticut, which is a submarine base. And we trained with the submarines up there. We would sweep mines; they would use us as a target. And during that time, one of the submarines dove, acting as a torpedo, didn't dive deep enough, and went through our, bottom of our hull.

LJ: Oh, my gosh.

**OR:** We almost sank right there.

LJ: Oh.

**OR:** And, but we got back to shore and got repaired.

LJ: That was in the Atlantic?

**OR: Huh?**

LJ: That was in the Atlantic?

**OR: In the Atlantic, yes.**

LJ: Wow. That's the cold ocean.

**OR: Yeah. And then they decided they had enough minesweepers after all the training we went through, so they sent us to Norfolk, decided to make a patrol vessel out of us. So they decommissioned the minesweeper and commissioned the patrol craft. And they put equipment on us and some extra guns, and then they sent us back to the Pacific. So we went on back to, through the canal again, and into the Pacific and we became a control ship for the waves hitting the beaches.**

**And our first encounter was at Leyte, the invasion of Leyte, where we were the control ship, where the boats would line up on each side of us and then to go in from there. And then from there, we went down into New Guinea, again, for some training exercises again. And then went to Luzon in the Philippines for the invasion up there. And we were back-up control ship at Luzon. So we were up in Luzon, or what they call Lingayen Gulf. We were up there for a while. Then we went back down to Leyte, prepared for another landing at Okinawa. And then, we went in as a, 10 days prior to the invasion of Okinawa, just take the islands, little islands that were around there and stuff. And then we were still back-up again on the main invasion of Okinawa. And so, we got in the fighting, too, so it wasn't back-up, really. And then after that, after the main invasion, we had a collision with one of our destroyers, so we had to get repaired again.**

LJ: Where did you go for repairs?

**OR: Right there they had repair bases set up. Yeah. And then we went over to the east side of Okinawa. You know, if I could go to a book and give you harbors and stuff – and went over there to watch for the Japs bringing in supplies. And two suicides hit us over there. And we burnt up. Didn't sink, but it burnt. We abandoned ship onto another ship; and then I went back and salvaged the ship the next day and took it to another base down farther south in Okinawa; and there it was decommissioned. And then we were sent back to the States. So . . .**

LJ: Home looked real good, no doubt.

**OR: Oh you bet!**

LJ: How long had it been from the time you first went out to the South Pacific to this time that you got sent home?

**OR: Well, I'd only been home, well let's see (8 sec pause) I don't even, home on that 15-day survivor's leave once in the, little better than six years that I had been in the service. So it . . .**

LJ: How long did you get to stay home?

**OR: The second time?**

LJ: Um hum.

**OR: I was home 33 days.**

LJ: Oh, good for you.

**OR: Then I went back to Minneapolis, reported back into Minneapolis and I was over my enlistment; and they sent me on to Camp Elliott in San Diego. And I took a bunch of Naval recruits, in charge of them getting to San Diego. And then I went back to Camp, into Camp Elliott.**

LJ: What was that like after all that you had been through, having the charge over the Naval recruits.

**OR: It isn't much of a thing. It's, they needed somebody that was a chief. I was chief then. I was a Chief Petty Officer at the time. They needed somebody on the train to just keep track of things. Then at Camp Elliott, I first was put up, was set up to go Japan with the Shore Patrol. And then I was over my enlistment, so I got out of that. And then . . .**

LJ: What do you mean when, "You're over your enlistment." What does that mean?

**OR: Well, in other words I enlisted September 5 of 1939. When September 5<sup>th</sup> came of '45, that was at the end of my enlistment.**

LJ: Oh. Okay.

**OR: But this was war, so you still didn't get out, you know.**

LJ: Okay.

**OR: And then, I became one of the frozen personnel that couldn't get out. And so, I ended up in Camp Elliott and became part of the ship's company there.**

LJ: And that was in San Diego?

**OR: San Diego. Um hum. And then, toward the end of September, I finally got a release; and I should have stayed in. I already had over six in, I didn't have long to go to 20, you know. So it's – but I didn't. And that was the end of my naval career.**

LJ: You went through a lot.

**OR: Yeah.**

LJ: Many ships sank.

**OR: Yeah. No, just the one. The other one didn't sink.**

LJ: Oh, okay. But you had a lot of surviving . . .

**OR: Oh yeah, seen a lot of death.**

LJ: What was that like? When it first happened?

**OR: Well, it's hard to take. You know, especially seeing so many of them in, my first "\_\_\_\_\_" was on the Yorktown in the Coral Sea Battle; we took a bomb down in there, and get ready where a repair party was. And it looked pretty messy. So . . .**

LJ: Can you tell us, Orville, about some of the people you worked with while you were serving your country, any special buddies, any special memories?

**OR: Well, Dick Offner (sp?) from North Dakota, Woodworth, North Dakota, and this Ernie Boudreaux (sp?) from New Orleans. I forgot a lot of them now.**

LJ: Sure.

**OR: It's been too many years.**

LJ: Did you keep in contact with any of them throughout the years?

**OR: I did with Dick for a while but then, you know, it wears off. You don't . . . I was supposed to be best man at his wedding and I couldn't make it. I think he was still a little mad at me.**

LJ: Did you go to any reunions?

**OR: I have never been to a reunion as far as the Navy, no. I have – I belong to the Yorktown Association, which has reunions. As a matter of fact, they had one in Portland, Oregon, this summer. A year ago they had one in Denver. I had intentions of going but it's a long ways and it's a costly thing, you know, to go, so . . .**

LJ: So, how did you feel about leaving the military after those six long years?

**OR: There was a time I questioned, should I have stayed in? Should I have gone out, you know?**

LJ: Make it a career or leave?

**OR: Yeah. I had a chance to go back in at my rate within the 90 days, so I had a chance even after 90 days so, and I didn't take advantage of it. But I should have really did, joined the Naval Reserve and time would have counted, but I didn't.**

LJ: What did you do after you left the military?

**OR: I – well let's see, I've got to stop and think. I ended up in Madison, Wisconsin, doing frame and axle work. And from there I spent a year in Madison; and then I got arthritis in my hand so bad I went out west, ended up at Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I was there for, oh, a little better than three years. Then I left there and ended up in Minneapolis.**

LJ: Did it help for your arthritis going to New Mexico for three years?

**OR: Yeah. Where the weather was warmer and stuff and . . .**

LJ: What brought you to Minneapolis after three years in New Mexico?

**OR: Mexico never really intrigued me, you know. They said I'd be back. Nobody leaves Albuquerque and doesn't come back, you know. But . . .**

LJ: You proved them wrong.

**OR: And I went back into doing the same thing in Minneapolis, front and frame axle work; and then I developed thyroid problems and so I had to quit that. And then, I went on the road for a while selling, and then came back after that. Went out and sold cars out at River Lake Motor Company in Minneapolis. Then I came back up to**



**“\_\_\_\_\_” Pontiac, where I did the frame and axle work and ended up selling new cars out of there. And that’s when I came to Pelican, is what I was doing at that time.**

LJ: And when did you come to Pelican?

**OR: In 1957, May of 1957.**

LJ: And then you went to work for who?

**OR: I went to work for John Deere here. Which was Ebersvillers (sp?) Incorporated at that time; and then, of course, the Hagen boys bought it out.**

LJ: Uh huh.

**OR: I worked there for them 23 years. And then the fellow bought them out and I worked for him for two years, out at where Christianson (sp?), you know?**

LJ: South of town.

**OR: So, actually, I worked with John Deere for 25 years.**

LJ: Terrific.

**OR: And then, from then, I – even after I, out there, see he got – they closed him up out there. And after that then, I was over 62½, so I took my Social Security. And then they needed a janitor at Trinity, so I took that for a year. And then Truman Strand come along and said, “How about coming to work for me?” so I worked for them for 10 years at Ace Hardware.**

LJ: Oh, my gosh. After that initial retirement, you went back to for 10 years?

**OR: Then I retired from that. And I guess I’m not retired, I’m still working for the VFW.**

LJ: Good for you. That’s terrific. And you just turned 80?

**OR: I’m going to be 82.**

LJ: Eighty-two “\_\_\_\_\_”

**OR: My next birthday. Yeah.**

LJ: Great. Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through with the Navy, serving your country?

**OR: I get some reflections once in a while, I suppose. You know, of, especially if I’m watching TV and see something. For instance, a carrier and the planes taking off, which are different planes than what we had. ‘Cause when I went aboard the carrier at Bremerton, Washington, we had biplanes, double-wing, canvas-covered planes. You know, double wing. They were slow at that time, you know. Then when we went down to San Diego, why we got new planes with the folding wings and stuff.**

LJ: Yes.

**OR: So, it – and when I see something regarding the Navy, I’m interested.**

LJ: Definitely.

**OR:** That's about the only way I can put it, you know. I still wish I'd have did my 20. It would make a lot of difference in money.

LJ: Yeah. But, you did six years. That's terrific.

**OR:** And I still have my Chief's uniform. It doesn't fit anymore, but I still have it.

LJ: Great keepsake.

**OR:** Yeah.

LJ: Great keepsake. Any other stories you'd like to share, anything that comes to mind that you'd like to pass on to future generations?

**OR:** Not that I can think of, no.

LJ: Orville, how would you like to be remembered?

**OR:** As one of the participants in the Battle for Freedom, which was, I mean, World War II. That Midway was a turning point of World War II.

LJ: Um hum.

**OR:** And if it wouldn't – you know, we were out-classed. They had a lot more carriers than we did. And I suppose I should say, we were fortunate that we were able to do what we did with the small group that we had. And it turned the war around, the war around.

LJ: You made the country what it is today.

**OR:** Yeah. We still got wars.

LJ: Unfortunately.

**OR:** Yeah.

LJ: What do you think of the war we're fighting now?

**OR:** That's a tough one. It's just like Vietnam or Korea. You're not fighting to win, really. That's the trouble with Vietnam and Korea. We weren't fighting to win. We were just trying to stop somebody. That's about all. But . . .

LJ: Do you think we're doing the right thing, now with ground troops over in Afghanistan? Do you think it's what we have to do or what we should do?

**OR:** I think we have to stop this terrorism. If that's going to take that, then that's what we should do. I've got a grandson that's going to – excuse me – going to North Dakota State, first year, taking up an engineering course; and he's in the National Guard Reserve. He says, "I'll go over there," you know?

LJ: Is that Dave's son?

**OR:** Yeah. Yeah, that's the oldest boy.

LJ: Brett?

**OR:** Well, that's him right there.

LJ: Okay.

**OR:** **Sitting on the TV.**

LJ: Nice young man. He'd be willing to go, huh?

**OR:** **Yeah. I'm too old, but I would go too, you know?**

LJ: That's a scary war, scary war because it's . . .

**OR:** **Well, it's going to be a tough situation because those mountains are something. You know, there's so many hiding places. We ran into that in World War II, with the Japs in caves and stuff. You know, they'd come out and shoot awhile, then they'd go back in; and you could fire all the shells you wanted up there and . . .**

LJ: If we could only get into those caves.

**OR:** **Yeah. You know, the Japs did that same thing. They went underground when we would make the landings. They would be underground in the shore areas; and as we passed through then they came out, you know. You hear a lot of things that – but . . .**

LJ: Scary.

**OR:** **I don't think I'd want to go through it again, you know? It's something that you remember but that's all. It's . . .**

LJ: Thank you very much, Orville.

**OR:** **Oh, you're welcome.**