

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Narrator

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Interviewer

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JW: I guess I'm on. John Wentz, to a lot of people, John [unclear]. I was born in Woodrow, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1925. When my parents decided to move back to the United States and that was in February 1935. They moved to Enderlin. Just a little sequence of events, we lived there for three years, moved to Lisbon, lived there for three years, then back to Enderlin.

Now some things that I want to mention here, is the Merchant Marines, unfortunately they have gotten very little publicity. [unclear] the acknowledgement as far as I'm concerned. By 1944 I wrote exams for Naval officer and passed and was accepted physically and mentally but unfortunately I was 18 years old, six days after the [unclear] on May Day and what happens there is you have to volunteer for induction when you're 18 [unclear]. Well, I was planning on the Navy and they had to acknowledge [unclear] papers otherwise they could put you where they wanted. I had no concern. I'd just volunteer for induction and presented my Navy papers. Unfortunately, when I give the papers to the man at the barracks [unclear], he didn't see eye to eye. Sit there says this guy was [unclear] for the Navy -- "I'm sorry," rejection.

Well, I can see it was just sour potatoes [unclear] with the Army lieutenant. That's how I arrived in the Merchant Marines. I [unclear] to Fort Snelling and contacted the Merchant Marine office and signed immediate. Well the results [unclear] whole new world. I have to say this time [unclear], it was a different war, very secretive, [unclear] on the return for the [unclear].

Never been disappointed [unclear] and many times [unclear] strictly civilian and they turned -- any of the benefits, GI benefits [unclear] special deals, special house purchases, [unclear]. We didn't get to do any of that. We were strictly a civilian operation.

In fact I can remember the first shipwreck. They took back to San Francisco. I got on the train to go on to Enderlin for a couple of weeks. I paid full fare from the barracks so the long and short said [unclear].

I was born severely crippled. Two doctors thought that I would probably never walk. Ironically, [unclear] well I was physically fit [unclear] but [unclear]. I wound up going the first week in February and I was sent to boot camp, Merchant Marine for [unclear]. Following that I took a six-weeks course [unclear] basically [unclear] swim, high towers to the depths similar to the ocean. We got equipped to get off that ship [unclear]. Numbers wise [unclear] six weeks.

I was very lucky I got into radio school. Radio school was [unclear] competition was ideal, of course that time in [unclear] initially the radio officer [unclear] was a 15 months course [unclear] in a short nine months. When I went through shorten to five months and we were communication officers and of course as a result there was a shortage of manpower on the ground.

[unclear] then at that point I shipped out of San Francisco and ironically [unclear], I went to Enderlin. When I was in [unclear] went down to New York City and I was just fine [unclear] square and [unclear]. I told you earlier there was a secret war which is [unclear] a few months ago. [unclear] Ironically they did lost cruise ships [unclear] coast. They never told me about [unclear] until it was over.

[unclear] for all the merchant ships primarily deliveries, [unclear] being a delivery ship in five days. [unclear] We hit the trail with a Liberty ship – I think that was my first experience really and stopped to realize what I had gotten into.

The night that we shipped out [unclear] with a Navy liberty [unclear]. It had two destroyer escorts. We went all the way to New Guinea [unclear]. I respect the Navy and all the Merchant ships general artillery [unclear] four 20 millimeters and 5” and [unclear]. The Geneva Convention many years ago [unclear] was that civilians were not allowed to pick arms against the enemy but I was trained [unclear]. I was a trained as a loader by the way, officially. [unclear] given respect for exposure in the Merchant Marines.

[unclear] I liked to mention this [unclear] World War II had arrived in our [unclear] but when the final victory is ours and no other nation would share [unclear] more deservingly than the Merchant Marines.

Now on the North Atlantic, northern tier, there efforts lost more than 5,000 patrons, aboard 733 ships that were destroyed by Nazi submarines. The first six months before the war, December, January, February '41 to June, in that six-month period, Germany boats sunk 400 cruise ships. Now there has been no credit for forty some years, just in 1988 finally all the guys were [unclear]

during January and December of '41 to the tail end of 1985, now we given credit and acknowledge [unclear] honorable discharged from the Coast Guard. So I do enjoy [unclear] you qualify now for [unclear].

I have to give the [unclear]. I mention that my parents were told when I was born that I would be severely crippled and I would probably never walk, but thanks to the Shriners [unclear]. I walk today. [unclear]

One of the enjoyable moments, and there were several, [unclear] to see other parts of the country. [unclear] but during experiences we stopped six days in Hawaii, that was enjoyable [unclear]. Anyway our first stop was at New Guinea, it's called [unclear]. There was a kickoff there for convoys, that's when we [unclear] and spent the first Christmas of my life away from home that year. [unclear]

Another thing I kept a diary first ship out and this was [unclear]. I got in and they saw this diary when I came back into San Francisco and the first thing they did they took my diary. They tore off several pages [unclear]. The whole philosophy was don't let the enemy know where they score. Psychologically keep everybody else high [unclear]. But anyway they took off and [unclear] in this convoy [unclear] for the sea ship [unclear] and [unclear] four shots [unclear]. We parked there for two days, [unclear] we were heading for the [unclear]. We caught fire for two days and they wanted to drop us out of the convoy, because the smoke is [unclear] go ahead and tell them what to do, so we stayed in there and we got [unclear].

I think [unclear] there was a convoy of all the Naval ships to go right on by [unclear]. [unclear] of all material supplies, etc., all in support of the [unclear]. So [unclear] respect as I say it has been unfortunate for forty years [unclear].

The first ship I was on was the [unclear], that's the one where we tracked the Viet Cong. We got into Viet Cong and [unclear] got off the ship. [unclear]As a communications job you are in the [unclear].

[unclear] take off and head for home. [unclear] He brought our ship home and we went into dry dock for repairs. [unclear] the exposure there was a [unclear] version, Japan, where the war. They had a bang [unclear]. All the time [unclear], I think [unclear] harbor [unclear]. I was too young to have a sense of fear. Except for one thing, all of the ships [unclear] were in my possession. [unclear] life boat, [unclear] three guys [unclear]. I would be the last guy. [unclear] The armed guard deserved the respect [unclear].

One little incident, the kamikaze [unclear] my first ship, it caught fire. After the fire was out, [unclear]. We got down there and they all said this kamikaze [unclear]. We took this Jap's body – another kid and I – took this Jap's body [unclear] We took it out and sure enough this guy did have a parachute. [unclear] but ironically we took the parachute, cut it up into

strips to give to everybody aboard ship. I don't know whatever happened to mine, but [unclear]. Crazy thing this kids [unclear].

I have to remember one other incident, that's [unclear] of my time overseas. I have a cousin who was the commander of a [unclear] and I knew he was over there someplace. Well [unclear] keep your eye open for a 745 LSC (?). Well turns out that we were laying in [unclear] Harbor [unclear]. "Johnny saw a 745." I caught up and flashed him. Rich came over for dinner, he said, I said "We kept looking for ya on our trip from New Guinea." He says "Johnny." From the LSC (?), you couldn't see numbers or on the side, there was an LSC (?) immediately behind us. So he was right there behind me all this time, all the way up. By the way, ours was the only ship that [unclear]. But he said, "Where we you from [unclear]"

Another little aspect of marine work time spent, I really felt [unclear]. So we had [unclear]. Who worked on the Sioux Line Railway from St. Paul up to Enderlin, my hometown. [unclear]

I had the experience [unclear] to realize that this was all for real. The biggest thing is I loved this. I really appreciate this opportunity to put on my [unclear] to the deserving Merchant Marines and [unclear]. That's it.

[this tape was very poor quality]