

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Robert G. Beckstrand
Radioman, U.S.S. Maryland, U.S. Navy, Pacific Theater in WWII
1995

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Beckstrand, Robert. (1925-). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (c.a. 87 min.), analog, ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (c.a. 87 min.), analog, ips, mono.

Abstract

Beckstrand, a Stoughton, Wis. resident, discusses his World War II Navy service as a radioman aboard the USS Maryland and his experiences in the Pacific Theater. Beckstrand relates his civilian attitudes towards the war and war effort including patriotism and negative perception of conscientious objectors. He talks about boot camp and radio school experiences at Farragut (Idaho) including washing dishes, learning Morse Code, and the types of people being trained as radiomen. Beckstrand details life aboard a combat ship providing insight into relations between officers and enlisted men, living conditions, medical issues, leisure time activities, combat memories, casualties religion, and kamikaze attacks. While aboard the Maryland, Beckstrand mentions his role in several engagements including Leyte Gulf and the Philippine invasion. He remarks upon a decline in morale as those aboard the ship were forced to remain in the Navy while accumulating enough points to be discharged. After his discharge, Beckstrand comments on using the GI Bill to attend college and seminary school, and mentions the large population of veterans on campus.

Biographical Sketch

Beckstrand (b. January 12, 1925) was drafted into the United States Navy in 1943 and served as a radioman aboard the USS Maryland. He was honorably discharged in 1946 and eventually settled in Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, December, 2001-2002.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Today's date is April 28, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Robert Beckstrand of Stoughton, Wisconsin, veteran of the U.S. Navy in World War II.

Mark: Good afternoon. Thanks for coming in on a Friday afternoon!

Beckstrand: That's good with me. I'm retired so I got lots of time.

Mark: Let's start the interview by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Beckstrand: I was born in Rockford, IL and lived all my life there until I was drafted in July of 1943. We graduated from high school in June and the draft papers were there a few weeks later. I was third of five children of a Lutheran pastor of a large Lutheran church in Rockford. I lived a very sheltered life and my folks were very refined people. My mother was a singer and professional voice teacher. So I was with a lot of cultural background. I grew up with a lot of that.

Mark: As for the Depression,

Beckstrand: Yes. I really felt that when we were growing up. I got my older brother's cast down clothes and we lived very simply. Dad was a pastor, he was only an associate pastor who had to wait until the senior pastor got his money first and then if there wasn't enough for the other one, he had to wait. So, things were touch and go for those years when I was just a kid.

Mark: I see. If I may skip ahead a little bit, eventually, you became a reverend as well.

Beckstrand: Yes.

Mark: I'd be interested in your reflections on the war in terms of how you viewed it spiritually. I suspect that you were 18 but you had some ideas.

Beckstrand: I think we had just assumed in World War II that it was a just war. The idea of an unjust war never occurred to us. Years later as a pastor, I have seen the just war theory which Lutherans subscribe to, and the Supreme Court does not give conscientious objector status to. But that was nonexistent when I was in high school. I just assumed that when they lowered the draft

to 18, that I would be in the service and everybody was going. We felt it was the right thing to do. I remember Pearl Harbor, Sunday night we were listening to the radio and that broke in on us. Never thinking that I would be involved in it.

Mark: I was going to ask if you perhaps perceived some sort of personal effect of all this.

Beckstrand: No, I didn't. Everybody thought the war was going to be over soon. In '42 things were going badly and so we began to wonder. I remember writing a theme in English class my senior year about going into the service. I don't have a copy of it anymore, but it was a patriotic essay. I was the only one in the family; my younger brother went in the Navy about a year after me. We two were in the service during the war.

Mark: When you got your greeting from the Selective Service, you didn't have any thoughts of "I'm not going to go."

Beckstrand: None whatever. Not at all. In fact, my younger brother got permission to enlist when he just turned 16 and my father gave him permission to stop high school and go. It was a very patriotic thing to do. Any *conscientious objectors* at that time were looked upon as *real* odd balls. There was a great sense of community. Community in this whole war effort. I distinctly remember that. I've not seen anything quite like it since. So, there wasn't a hint of objection or murmur. Part of this might have been also that the head of the Draft Board was my father's dearest friend. He was worried about it until--having to draft me--but when he saw my theme that I wrote for English class, I passed it along to him once, and I'm sure that encouraged him. People thought I was going to be a pastor and I would want to get exempt status, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. All I knew was when I got out of high school I didn't want to go to more school for a while. I was quite willing to go into the service.

Mark: How'd you wind up in the Navy? Can you describe from the greeting to--

Beckstrand: We had to show up at a place in Chicago on the 20th of July in '43. So, a bunch of us--we had to show up at the Illinois Central Railway station and be taken to this place in Chicago and at the end of a long physical inspection that day, we went by a desk and there was our papers and some Sgt. asked us if we wanted Army or Navy. I said 'Navy' and he picked up the right rubber stamp and I got what I asked.

Mark: Why Navy?

Beckstrand: I am not a foot soldier and I don't know if I could take a gun and shoot a guy. I really don't think I could. I'd let him shoot me first. It isn't the lack of courage, I'm sure. It's just I don't want to see anybody dead and I had been in ROTC in high school. The Sergeant, when I got my last grades, graduating, he said to me, "Beckstrand, you're just not military minded." I didn't play a band instrument. ROTC marched with the bands and I thought "Well, that's better than these stupid gym classes where they don't have much going on in there." There wasn't much opportunity to learn any real sports unless you went out for it big. I was not a sportsman, I was very klutzy. I thought at least the Navy sounds interesting and I liked the idea of the sea, being aboard ship.

Mark: So after your physical--

Beckstrand: We were given a week off and then a week later we had to report in Chicago at that same place. Folks were hoping I'd go to Great Lakes Naval Training Station.

Mark: Did it happen?

Beckstrand: No. We were sent to Farragut, Idaho. I liked the view of the mountains; I'd never been outside the Middle West. This was kind of exciting, but boot camp I hated for the simple reason that they never told you what was going to happen from one minute to the next. Evidently, they didn't want us to know. We were just to fall in and go where they told us and do what we were told. The only predictable things were the meal times and lights out.

Mark: You had described yourself as coming from a refined background. I went to basic training 40 years after that and I remember a lot of four-letter words and words of descriptive--

Beckstrand: I remember going to bed with a headache and sick every night for the first few nights--just sick from recoiling at all the foul language, not realizing that the guys use that talk when they're scared. When they're insecure and that's supposed to bolster up their courage apparently. I just got so I could block it out after a while. No kidding, the first few days was kind of sickening.

Mark: What about the military discipline. Was it--

Beckstrand: Well I'd seen something of that in ROTC and so I'd been yelled at and that sort of thing by the officers and that wasn't new to me. I think most of the stuff we learned in boot camp was applicable and useful for a sailor.

Mark: In the military sense. So you think your training prepared you as adequately as it could perhaps.

Beckstrand: Yeah. Then we got a leave to go home for two weeks after boot camp and then I was assigned to radio school at Farragut. The first week back there at Farragut, I was assigned to scullery duty.

Mark: I was in the Air Force. I don't know what scullery duty is.

Beckstrand: That's washing these trays and silverware and cups. It's a steamy hot room with an inch or two of water sloshing around on the floor and all these dirty, filthy food trays coming by to go to the dishwasher. I'd work there three meals, eat early and then report in and then go across the grinder, that's the big drill field to the barracks I stayed at and in that cold, northern Idaho November I came down with Rheumatic Fever and so I spent six weeks in the hospital and I was kind of impatient because at that time they kept us down until our sed rates went down to normal. That indicates evidentially your infection. You can feel just fine and look fine but you still have a disease so when they went down we were permitted to go back. Then I started radio school, 20 weeks.

Mark: Describe this radio training.

Beckstrand: Well, it was some classes in electronics for understanding transmitters and then there was the mainly typing Morse Code. We learned up to 25 words a minute on Morse Code and also how to take down by pencil voice messages and your various codes, how to transmit by voice and receive and that sort of thing.

Mark: Now did you select this or was this selected for you?

Beckstrand: It was selected for me. We took various tests and apparently if you have a sense of rhythm they give you this radio test if you can tell the difference and you score high on that. Of course, at the time I didn't drive a car and so I didn't know how to drive yet. Gas was rationed and tires were rationed and there was just no opportunity to teach kids how to drive until the war was over. Then I could type, I had typing in high school and that was they put me into the radio program for that reason. Then after that we got another two weeks of leave and then I reported to Bremerton, Washington, where we were stayed around for two days until we got aboard a troop transport ship going to Hawaii.

Mark: This was when you went overseas. I'll interrupt here for a second. I'm interested in who was in the Navy at the time. Can you comment a little bit on what kinds of people were in the basic training class? How did they

differ from the people who were in radio school? How did people from all different parts of the country sort of get along?

Beckstrand: I remember being happier in radio school because I think the guys there were a little bit more gifted and showed evidently just a little bit--it was a different spirit than boot camp. They were some good buddies. I made some good friends. Radiomen are not your big, active, husky, macho types. They save them for boatswain mates, coxswains and top deck, I mean deck crews. We were typists. But I was with the, most of the guys were from the Middle West.

Mark: So there won't too many southerners re-fighting the civil war.

Beckstrand: I never met a southerner even once. When I got aboard ship they were all from either New York, a lot of Brooklyn guys in our Division with their Brooklyn accents. Some were from the west coast and the Middle West.

Mark: What about religious differences? This might be something that you paid attention to where some people wouldn't.

Beckstrand: Well I went to Protestant services while I was in the Navy and they were vague, kind of, I didn't enjoy them particularly. When I was aboard ship I used to play the little foot pump organ for both the Catholic and the Protestant services. We had only a Catholic chaplain. I noticed the same sermon pretty much most times. There would be a few very specific directions to the Catholics on certain aspects of their particular fasting and things like that but other than that, why it was pretty much the same. I used to play some good Lutheran Bach chorales for his prelude and postludes. He didn't know.

Mark: Was church well attended?

Beckstrand: Yes. Surprisingly so. I always remember a full house. I always remember going to church with a full house. Aboard ship of course, only 1/3 of your crews had liberty to go to church on a Sunday. It was set up with a good bunch of men.

Mark: Were there any Jews?

Beckstrand: Yes. We had one in our company aboard ship but we never got into religious discussions.

Mark: I was just wondering what they did for worship. Did they have any sort of option at all?

Beckstrand: I think they went without. I think they stuck pretty much by themselves. There was only one in our Communications Radio Division. If there were Jews in the Radio School I wouldn't have recognized them as such. I wouldn't have known.

Mark: So you were on a ship bound for Hawaii.

Beckstrand: "Carl Surles" a liberty ship and we got outside the gates of Juan Bsuca there, the straits, the ground swells were really moving that ship.

Mark: Now this is your first time on a ship ever.

Beckstrand: Yes. I was assigned to the steward who was in charge - and it was to clean his big chill box, fruits and vegetables and keep that cleaned every day. Report each morning. I reported that first morning and by that time we were out in the open sea and the ground swells were pretty bad and we had an abandon ship drill. Everybody had to find their Mae West and then get topside. Well I went topside sicker than sick and I knew I was going to 'chonk' up so I made a beeline over the rail to throw up by breakfast. I didn't notice the direction of the wind and the force of it. It was coming that way and it carried my reflux way out and way down the forward part of the ship. Smearred a whole bunch of guys and they stood there on the rail wondering what in the world was happening to them. I beat a quick retreat back and then I just sacked out. I didn't report to duty at all. I just stayed in my sack where I was just fine as long as you're lying down.

Mark: So you got used to the motion.

Beckstrand: No. As soon as we got into San Francisco harbor, it's calm and I'm just fine. I guess I'm over it by now. Then we took on some more troops going to Hawaii and the next morning set out again. I'm sitting there in the stewards' office, sitting on the floor with a couple of other guys and we're out of the harbor and here are these ground swells again. I was probably looking green around the gills. The steward looked at me and he looked at me and said, "You're not getting sick this time!" Scared it right out of me. I was sick before he said it and afterward I wasn't. I was cured.

Mark: I take it you weren't alone though.

Beckstrand: Oh, no. And, I used to snitch some lemons to take some to these guys who were sacking out, miserable and they would cut them in half and just chew on the lemon and it made them feel better, I guess. No, I felt fine I could go topside and enjoy the winds and waves from that point on I never was sick again.

Mark: That's interesting.

Beckstrand: Yeah. Scared it out of me.

Mark: So what happened in Hawaii?

Beckstrand: We were put in a camp, living in tents in Pearl Harbor and the red, dusty ground; everything turned red, clothes and everything, waiting for assignment. We were there for about five days and then a bunch of us got assigned to the U.S.S. Maryland, which had pulled in. It had just gotten repaired from a torpedo it had gotten in the battle for Saipan, in the bow. It was ready to go back out. So I was assigned along with a bunch of other new guys and from there we went to a staging area, I think it was north of New Guinea. A big anchorage area off Manis Island. From there we went up to Peleliu and did pre-invasion bombardment. Stood by for more bombardment as requested by the Marines and then we retreated back again to the anchorage at Manis and then got ready to go to Leyte Gulf for the next invasion.

Mark: So as a radioman, where are you on the ship and what are you doing while these bombardments are going on?

Beckstrand: My battle station was in the main battery firing room.

Mark: Where is that on the ship?

Beckstrand: Well, it's right in the very heart of the ship about five decks down. Way down. It was a room about 12x18 and a lot of fancy equipment and two radiomen were placed there. One to be on these radio voice circuit with the spotter plane. You see we had a plane on the back of the battleship that catapulted off, that would fly over these while we were bombarding and give directions, "up 100, right 50" or "right on" and things like that. Then we would talk and relay the information on to them. The main battery was fired right there. Just a few feet away from us. The other one was on the circuit with the Admirals ship, getting the main orders and then reporting in. "Hello Napoleon, this is Buccaneer, how do you hear me?" "This is Napoleon, I hear you fine, how do you hear me?" And so on. Then we would hear them getting the message and I'd grade it down and of course, the Captain has a radioman and is getting it up there too on the bridge and getting directions from the Admiral's ship in the fleet we all was with and then when I--there was a lot of waiting time, we were at our battle stations long before we started our bombardment.

Mark: So before bombardment are you--I would imagine the invasion would take place early in the morning so they get you up at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning?

Beckstrand: Oh, yes. Da-da-da-dah, da-da-dahh, that's the buglers tune. We lived by the bugle aboard ship. The battle station, air raid, that was a scary thing. Daa-da-dahh-da, Daa-da-dahhh, Chow call, mail call, church call--we had a wonderful bugler, boy could he tap revelry out.

Mark: That was actually a guy playing a bugle--it wasn't a recording.

Beckstrand: Oh no, it was a bugler. He played taps at funerals at sea, and that was very moving. During air raid of course, some radiomen were just to keep to the quarters because they were not needed in the superstructure. Otherwise, you went to your battle stations in air raids. So you went there just to get out of the way and stay out of the way. We had, at Leyte Gulf, these kamikaze air raids and they would come at dawn and at dusk, flying low over the waters so that radar couldn't pick them up and then usually coming right from the setting of the sun at the ship so that you couldn't see them visually until they are just about on you. So, I remember this one time, persuading one of my dear buddies, who was stationed normally in the crow's nest, and he was told never to bother--to clog the ways to get there in an air raid--just stay in his own quarters. So I told him, why don't you come on down with us? I said we're two decks below the armored deck. "Oh, I don't give a hoot" he said. "I'm too tired." We were all very tired, emotionally tired and physically. I said, "Well, I'm going" and I scurried down just as they closed the hatch behind me. I just got in there in time, just sat down and the place went "BOOM!" Little bits of hot steel come down the vents and we knew we got hit and the Lieutenant, he was maybe more than a Lieutenant, more senior grade than that, in charge of the main battery firing, he relayed the information on to us that we had were hit between the two forward turrets and that a bomb had gone down through and had actually dented and pierced the armored deck which is about five inches thick right near where I was, so that the guy I was talking to a minute before was blown to smithereens, along with about 30 others. That's what kamikazes did, they made you sent to hiding out and then the cooks didn't have time to prepare meals adequately and so we'd get K-rations. These little boxes with canned Spam, cheese and some awful crackers and tropical Hershey's.

Mark: So how frequently did the kamikaze's attack?

Beckstrand: Every day, every single day. They were relentless. Once we got hit, then we had to get out of there. That wasn't, however, until after that big battle of Siragau Straits which we were in. That was quite exciting. We were told that we were going to be engaged in a Naval battle and so they were firing. I wasn't going to be on the circuit, the other radioman next to me was on the Admiral's circuit, I was on the spotter plane and they weren't going to be used during the naval battle. So, the spotter planes, I think, had flown off to

shore for that. I remember waiting and waiting and waiting and trolling back and forth, back and forth in this Strait. So when they would come it was a perfect set up for a naval battle. Every great naval academician dream to be at the top of a "T" knocking them off. They use for that armor piercing salvo's, you know those salvo's are that high off the ground when they're standing on their bottoms there, 16 inchers. The first cone is pretty heavy brass and then they use twice the power charge and these big brushed aluminum cans of powder, that was for just one ordinary charge, but they used twice that much so when four of those guns go off, the whole ship just bounces and bounces in the water. You really feel it, I was glad I was way down below. We never saw the enemy, I never saw a Jap. I never saw action, I was always down inside.

Mark: So taken together, the battles in the Philippine Sea were the largest naval engagement in the history of the planet.

Beckstrand: Yes, with three different fleets involved.

Mark: And your perspective. Did you have idea how the battle was progressing over the radio?

Beckstrand: No. Enlisted men were in the dark. I'm sure they passed the word along to others amongst the officers, but we didn't know until they announced it afterwards. Then we went back to Leyte Gulf, and that's where we got the kamikaze and then from there we went back to Seattle, Pier 51 to get refitted and repaired. They put bunks in them.

Mark: What did you sleep in before?

Beckstrand: Well, these open places; the upper petty officers had cots, like canvas Army cots. They had to collapse them every morning and put them down every night. Us lower grade, when I first got on, were to sleep in hammocks overhead. String them from these hooks. We all had our hammocks and our mattresses. We all slept in the hammocks the first night. I kept grabbing that beam ahead thinking I was going to fall out. 'Cause you're held on just two points there and it comes around you so but the heat was terrible. It was--

Mark: Inside the ship you mean.

Beckstrand: No. In the hammock. They were just little sweatboxes. So we decided never to use them. We had the guy in charge of our area, just simply store them away. Then we'd take a--we were going to use our mattresses, we couldn't find room for the mattresses, all we could find was a long--sixty foot long bench. We'd find six feet to stretch out on it and just put our

mattress cover on it. Roll it a Turkish towel for a pillow and, of course, I never slept on the benches. I just looked for some iron deck space here and there between the cots that were on the edge of a passageway and our mattress covers with the sweat in the South Pacific and the iron deck underneath, turned reddish iron and no washing would clear them out and make them white, but we just used them anyhow. Spread out the old brown mattress cover, roll up the towel and sleep like a rock. The deck was always cool and we liked that. Some of us guys got--when you're fair skinned Scandinavian backgrounds or light haired, got a lot of what they called Spick edge--heat rash that itched from constant sweating. So, when we'd had enough of it, fellows, we talked the others into going with us, about half a dozen of us would go to the sick bay and get treated. The doctor would tell us "Strip down." We'd stand there like a police line-up, stark naked and he'd take his barn sprayer filled with calamine lotion and menthol and spray us up and down. We'd put our clothes back on and feel great for an hour. That's all the good it did, but it brought us a little temporary relief.

Mark: It sounds like the South Pacific is not the place for Norwegians.

Beckstrand: No. The sea is gray; the sky is gray in equatorial areas of the Pacific. When you get the latitudes beyond that line, it's beautiful! Blue skies and sunny and windy and breezy and very comfortable, but when you get in these equatorial sections, I guess they used to call them the horse latitudes, no wind blowing and they used to have to throw the horses in the sailing ships overseas, overboard. Well, after we got fitted out in Seattle

Mark: Which took about how long?

Beckstrand: About two to three months.

Mark: Did you get to go home?

Beckstrand: Yes. Everybody got to go home. I got to be in my older brother's wedding and we had liberty to go see Mt. Rainier, see Seattle and the areas there. I always thought Bremerton ferry ride was so interesting. I used to love to go over to the workman's cafeteria 'cause the chow in the ship when it was in like that was so poor and I just skipped chow and went over to the cafeteria and get a crab Louie, Alaskan king crab salad for 85 cents. A half of a big head of lettuce hollowed out just filled with crab legs.

Mark: Sounds good.

Beckstrand: You couldn't get it for \$85 today. Then we set out again and the next time we went to Okinawa.

Mark: From Washington state.

Beckstrand: Yes. We went out and joined a fleet there in the staging area; I can't remember just where that was. Then went to Okinawa and what was always a great mystery to me was these pre-invasion gatherings of ships were amazing. You could look around as far as the eye could see in every direction and there's ships anchored all over the place. All kinds, every imaginable kind of ship. Suddenly one day with marvelous organization, certain ones set out and then some others set out and others followed and then you'd leave and you're on your way. That was quite amazing. Marvelous organization.

Mark: So the actual engagement in Okinawa was this any different than any of the other engagements you had been in?

Beckstrand: No. It was pre-invasion bombardment; we got some kamikaze's there too.

Mark: I'm not completely familiar with the history of all the different battle ships. It sounds like the Maryland was pretty hard hit by the kamikazes.

Beckstrand: We got hit twice, once in Saipan. It wasn't at the Philippines we got hit it was at Okinawa. At the Philippines we were dodging them or putting up with them all the time.

Mark: Keeping you on edge.

Beckstrand: Yes. It was after Okinawa that we went for repairs. That was the last engagement I was in. By that time when we got back out again, why it was-- the war was over in Germany and in the Japanese area it was over by August and after that they took some men off the ship, some of the crew, stripped down the crew to the bare necessities and used for a few times as a transport of soldiers home. Magic carpet duty they called it. During that time, after the war then, we could have cameras and my brother sent me his camera to take pictures, an Argosy III, I remember. I tried getting pictures of a typhoon with the ship bobbing around in 80 mph winds and waves that were I'm sure, 45-50 feet. But you can't get that third dimension. Seeing those terrible, terrible waves coming we'd go up and then come whacking down on the next one and then we'd get buried in there and shudder our way up to the surface and then go whacking down on the next. The top deck all sealed and stripped in advance from the weather notice, everybody's prepared and the ships forward guns turned back so as to take a little weight off the front end.

Mark: I'm interested about life at sea. You've described some of the accommodations, what do you do for fun?

Beckstrand: I used to read and I borrowed books from our radio division officer. He had everything from War and Peace to Winnie the Pooh books and I borrowed all of those and I would borrow a few and sometimes I'd sneak aboard some recordings that had just come out and I'd try and play them and they would be broadcast over to the officers general rec room. I think a lot of guys used to play cards; I never did much, just a little bit. But you see, the schedule we had was one shift on and two off and the shifts would be midnight to 7:00 AM and then 7:00 AM to twelve noon. Then noon to five and five to midnight. So every third day we had the midnight to 7:00 AM and have to sleep some during the day and then go on from 5:00 to midnight that night. So we did a lot of sleeping.

Mark: I was going to ask about some of the psychological impact of being isolated on a ship. There is a term some of the Army infantry men used, those who were on the rock heads and every once in a while one of them would go bonkers. Did you notice any sort of

Beckstrand: Before I got on board the ship, the Maryland had spent about 18 months down at Fiji Islands as a chess piece and some of the crew members told me that there was a terrible lot of restlessness and in one area, a little bit of a mutiny. Not a mutiny, but I mean a breakdown of discipline and order of some kind. The ship was sent back, got a new Captain and that Captain was a stern, hard-as-nails guy. He'd have a Marine guard six feet away from him, armed with a pistol of course, and when he took a step, the Marine guard did. The Marine guard always kept him in view. If you were topside and the Captain was walking around, he would simply want to talk to somebody, an enlisted man, he'd talk to the Marine guard and the Marine would talk to the enlisted man and back again. It was real hierarchical. I had to go to Captain's Mast once because I lost my ID card. I was scared to death. I just was beached. We were in Hawaii at the time and I was beached until I could, I mean, not on liberty to go ashore, until I got a new card, which was about a week or ten days. I noticed no lack of morale much. When the war was over, that's when--

Mark: I want to come back to that. What about writing letters home and that sort of thing. Were you able to keep in contact with family?

Beckstrand: Oh, yes. I used to a lot of writing letters. That was a part of it. And, of course, our mail call, I always used to get a bunch of mail. I brought one letter along just to sample if you want to see it.

Mark: I'd be curious.

Beckstrand: After the war when we were back at Seattle and just scrapping down for the mothball fleet, that's when I noticed a break down of morale. Everybody was just wanting to get by with as little as possible and it was pretty much wine, women and song.

Mark: Now in the Navy you also had the point system where if you had a certain number of points you could be discharged.

Beckstrand: Yes.

Mark: So there were a lot of people waiting some time before they could go home.

Beckstrand: Yes. I did too. I had to serve until April of 1946; the war was over in August of '45 so I put in a good several months after the war.

Mark: How did you take to this?

Beckstrand: I was very restless. I just, you got worse and worse as time goes on. You could hardly stand it to get out, and others were getting processed out and every time somebody else got processed out, you counted how many points you got. So that was the hardest time of the service time.

Mark: But you finally did get out when?

Beckstrand: April of 1946.

Mark: You went back home to Rockford?

Beckstrand: Yes. Found a job stacking groceries on shelves in the super mart until I went to college in September.

Mark: I was going to ask, is it just discharged veterans--you were 21 by now? What were your priorities in life? What did you want to do to get your life back on track?

Beckstrand: I wanted to go to college. I was really ready to go back to school. I remember when I went to college; I just found homework interesting, delved into it--just eager to.

Mark: You went to Oberlin College?

Beckstrand: Yes.

Mark: And studied what?

Beckstrand: I intended to be an English teacher and I changed my sophomore year to History and graduated as a History major. It was either English, History or Psychology. They recommended for people going into the ministry, and by the time I was a junior, I had decided on that.

Mark: But you had decided to go into the ministry when you went to college.

Beckstrand: No. Not until I was about at the end of my sophomore year.

Mark: Did you use the GI Bill to finance your education?

Beckstrand: Yes. I sure did. I got all four years and most of the first year of seminary paid. My tuition's were paid and I got so much a month subsistence and then I got the books paid.

Mark: Was it adequate to cover your expenses at the time?

Beckstrand: Yep, completely. My transportation to and from home, Dad would have to send me money for that, and my train fare. It was 400 miles. Then of course, I'd work during the summers to get money to use during the school year, stash it away and have something to tide me over. We lived awfully simply at college in my day, compared to--

Mark: The way they do now?

Beckstrand: Well, I don't know. My own kids certainly have a lot more expenditures, personal expenditures than we did. We just, of course in those days I could send my laundry home in laundry boxes you see, get mother to do it and send it back.

Mark: On Oberlin campus, were there a lot of veterans such as yourself?

Beckstrand: Yes. In fact, some of us late admissions, cause most of that class had been admitted by the time we applied I think, we had to stay in the auditorium on bunks until they could find rooms for us. They doubled up on some larger rooms and put three in a room and finally got us dispersed. But, for a couple of weeks we were in bunks.

Mark: What about class size?

Beckstrand: They were big classes. The students were very eager to study. Boy, it was a grind factory if there ever was one. We all hit the books like crazy.

Mark: You say, "we all" do you mean veterans or all the students?

Beckstrand: Everybody. If you didn't you flunked.

Mark: I know it's a reputable institution. I'm wondering if the veterans do you think studied a little more hard or less hard?

Beckstrand: They thought the veterans were going to be some playboys and the faculties everywhere were amazed to see they were really eager to get to work and do well. So, I think the veterans raised the standards of expectations of students. Oberlin was always a dry community, only 3.2% beer could be had in town. There was a nightclub a couple of miles out of town for drinks. No liquor permitted in any of the dorms at any time. We had a - some of the veterans made a big flap about that, so they announced the student body president announced a special meeting in the chapel to decide on this issue, what they would recommend to the faculty. One student opposed changing the rules for drinking and donned Methodist preacher's garb and kind of put on a little humorous act. Quite fun. A lot of fun over it. The veteran said, "Well, I don't want the college telling me I can't have a martini when I want it and that sort of thing. I ought to have the freedom to do as I please." They took a vote and overwhelmingly dry. The students said, "Nuts to liquor". They aren't that way any more! They have had some strict rules. We couldn't have cars there either because it would be a traffic problem, so if we were caught driving a car without the Dean's written permission for that day, that time, that expedition, you were disciplined.

Mark: And the veteran students among the student body accepted these rules.

Beckstrand: Yes. I don't know why we were so docile compared to the modern generation. We just fell in line.

Mark: That's interesting. Some vets I've spoken to, most of them have been to the University here and some describe that they didn't put up with this in local practice they were married guys and weren't going to do that sort of thing. So that's an interesting response. What about social activities in school. Were there any sort of veterans groups active on the campus?

Beckstrand: No. Nothing. I was totally absorbed, I never--any veterans activities were certainly not group activities. We were just completely absorbed into the student body. No attention was taken to, at least I never noticed it. When I got out I was invited to join the VFW and American Legion, but I chose not to. I'm just not a joiner.

Mark: That's more of the question that I have. So we can go with this now. You're just not a joiner. Was that the only reason?

Beckstrand: I got such a busy life I don't have time for that kind of recreation. Cards and booze. I don't care for that. Parades, you couldn't get me to march in a parade unless I had a gun in my ribs. I don't like that. I don't care for fanfare. I've had enough. I'll stand by and watch some of the others.

Mark: So you went to seminary school where?

Beckstrand: The first year to Gettysburg, PA and then I decided I wanted the type of curriculum they were teaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul and so I changed for middle and senior year.

Mark: I think you mentioned before, I want to clarify this, did you use GI Bill benefits for this as well? For the first year I could and did. They didn't have tuitions. You were a guest of the church there, studying for the ministry. But I did get books and some subsistence each month. That lasted for almost a year.

Mark: Now there were other parts to the GI Bill as well. There were housing benefits and all sorts of banks. Did you eventually use any other parts?

Beckstrand: You see they would pay the tuition, I would get the--I don't remember if they sent it direct to the college or if they sent it to me, up to \$600 a year for tuition. Then books, I could just simply tell the book dealer.

Mark: There were five chapters of the GI Bill and one of them was a home loan.

Beckstrand: No, I never got in on that. I lived in parsonages for the first half of my ministry before I was able to buy a home. I never got any of the other benefits from the Veterans Administration.

Mark: To make this a good interview for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, when did you come to Wisconsin?

Beckstrand: I moved to Wisconsin in 1967 and was living at West Bend as pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church there. I've been in Wisconsin ever since. So I've been here about 23 years.

Mark: Before that you just went around the Midwest I take it.

Beckstrand: Yeah. Iowa for eight years, Minnesota for seven years and the rest of the time here in Wisconsin.

Mark: Among your colleagues in the ministry of your generation, are there many veterans?

Beckstrand: Oh yes. Quite a lot. We're all coming to retirement age. We are all retired about now. World War II veterans.

Mark: Yeah, that's what I mean.

Beckstrand: We get together some times and share stories. I'm now working two days a week calling on the aged, homebound, or the infirm and then the sick in the hospitals two days a week for a large parish. So I get to see everyone there at least once a month and sometimes with the men, they'll like to talk about their war experiences. Its interesting finding out somebody was just a few miles away in the other ship there in the same battle. That's been interesting. When I was in Cedarburg, my last parish, I used to go to the region fish fries a lot and got to visiting and meeting folks. We had some of them in our parish.

Mark: You've exhausted my line of questioning. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Beckstrand: No. I just want to show you a picture of the ship. And this is yours truly, out of boot camp.

Mark: You look great! Thanks for coming in.

[End of Interview]