

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
FRANK J. BERTALAN  
Communications Officer, United States Navy, WWII  
1996

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**Bertalan, Frank J.**, (1914-2007). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recordings: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **Abstract**

The Edwardsville (Illinois) native discusses his World War II service with the Navy in communications and cryptography, working as an instructor and aboard the U.S.S. Hamul (AD-20). He talks about trying to attain an appointment to the Naval Academy while in high school, his reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor, volunteering to join the Navy as a math instructor, and learning Morse code and encryption at New London (Connecticut). Assigned to Smith College (Massachusetts), he describes teaching codes and cipher to members of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) and the dedication of the women. Assigned to the U.S.S. Hamul (AD-20), he touches upon training communications officers. After suggesting improvement to the communications system, he was transferred to Washington D.C. Bertalan mentions transfer to London (Great Britain), working for Commander, U.S. Naval Forces in Europe (COMNAVEU), living under buzz bomb attacks, developing new codes when others were broken by the Germans, and a V-1 rocket attack where the majority of his staff was killed. After the war, he mentions staying in the Reserves and serving on both active and inactive duty for twenty years.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Bertalan (1914-2007) served as a cryptographer with the Navy during World War II. After the war, Bertalan earned a doctorate in library science from the Catholic University of America (Washington D.C.) and, after nineteen years working for the US Office of Education Library, he served as director of the library schools at the University of Oklahoma and the Texas Woman's University. He eventually retired and settled in California.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by Mary Lou Condon, Court Reporter, 2004.

**Interview Transcript:**

Mark: The date is October the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Frank J. Bertalan, originally from Urbana, Illinois, and a veteran of the Second World War, U.S. Navy.

Good morning and thanks for taking some time out of your day.

Bertalan: You're welcome.

Mark: I absolutely appreciate it. Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised.

Bertalan: In Edwardsville, Illinois.

Mark: That's in the southern part of the state somewhere?

Bertalan: Yes, near St. Louis. On September 18, 1914. And I lived there until I was ten years old, when my family moved up to Chicago. And then I resided there until I was able to leave home and go to Illinois State University in 1935.

Mark: And you went into library studies, apparently.

Bertalan: No, I majored in math. I was qualified to teach mathematics in high school, but while so engaged, while going to school I worked part time in the university library. And this appealed to me very much. I learned more about the intricacies of professional librarianship and then, upon graduation, I transferred over to the University of Illinois at Urbana and majored in library science.

Mark: Now, many of these years you were growing up were part of the Depression. Did you have trouble finding work during that time?

Bertalan: Oh, in 1929 I was, let's see, a junior in high school. And I worked after school hours as a part-time Western Union messenger near the Loop in Chicago. And, although the Depression was on, it didn't affect us. People still had to communicate. And back in those days, long-distance telephone was a rarity, and people relied heavily upon telegrams. So the 10-word telegram generally during the day, and then the 50-word night letter. Obviously the 50-word limitation. And that night letter was delivered the following morning. But in those days, first-class mail went by train or by surface. Special airmail was reserved for airmail use only. It was much more expensive.

So, at any rate, to answer your question, the Depression did not affect us because, as I say, I was in high school and working part time, and people were communicating by wire.

Mark: So, when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred you were working at the University of Illinois?

Bertalan: Yes. I was in the graduate library school and taking graduate courses and working part time in the library.

Mark: And if you'd just describe your memories of that particular day, for anecdotal purposes.

Bertalan: Oh yes, indeed. We were amazed. The four of us students were living together, renting an apartment in order to conserve funds and reduce expenses. So, while we were there, the four of us, we were amazed when we read the newspaper. I guess we hadn't yet turned on the radio. Then we saw in the Urbana newspaper that Pearl Harbor was attacked. Then, of course, we right away turned on the radio. But we were already primed, expecting to be entering the Service.

Mark: That was going to be my very next question. Before Pearl Harbor, had you given much thought to entering the Service? Describe your sort of thinking in that area.

Bertalan: Well, of course it was in the back of our minds. We were hoping to complete graduate school because I was so near to it all that I had left was the master's thesis. And so, a very major thought was to complete that because completion was so near.

And then, also, we were married in April of 1942, and this was two months before I volunteered, and I'll come to that, before I volunteered for the U.S. Navy Service.

Mark: And you selected the Navy out of several branches of Service. I was just wondering if you'd describe your thought process as to why you chose the Navy specifically.

Bertalan: I had an older brother who was always extolling the virtues of the U.S. Navy. And also, I had, when a senior in high school, written a letter seeking an appointment to the Naval Academy upon graduation from my school in 1931. But one of the results of the Depression there was that 60 of us, Congressman Shinbloom, was wanting to select his candidate for appointment to the Naval Academy. And I still have the letter that I wrote to him in 1931 hoping for requesting an appointment to the Naval Academy. He answered. Sixty of us took a competitive examination.

Some of these were freshmen and sophomores from Northwestern University. So that was, I guess, one effect of the Depression. Funds for general high education were limited. And, needless to say, with that competition and not yet graduated from Nicholas \_\_\_\_ high school in Chicago, I was not the fortunate candidate. So my interest in the Navy began at an early age.

Mark: So, I entered the Service about 40 years after you did in the U.S. Air Force, and I was enlisted, so it was a very different experience for me personally. But, entering the Service, there are some very distinct memories. And I was just going to have you sort of walk me through your induction process. Where did you go to actually volunteer? Was there training that you had to undergo, etc., etc.?

Bertalan: Yes.

Mark: Just walk me through that entry into the military.

Bertalan: Yes. When living in Chicago, we had been married about two months when I learned from a friend that the Navy was seeking mathematics instructors at the Academy. And so I moved, I went off to Washington to investigate. And while in Washington, D.C., I volunteered. I went to the Navy. I did have a notice from the Army for induction into the Army, but prior to that I preferred the Navy. I volunteered and was accepted provisionally as an ensign and was assigned to the communications school at New London(??), Connecticut, a Naval—that was a preliminary provisional appointment as an ensign. And then I was accepted and, upon induction, I guess we don't use the word induction, I was sworn in or whatever it was—

Mark: For an officer. Right.

Bertalan: Yes. I was scooted off to the communications school as a student at New London, Connecticut. So there I was, having volunteered to be a math instructor, instead I was shunted off to New London, Connecticut and spent several months there in communications school. Shall I go on?

Mark: Yes. I'm interested in the communications school and what your instruction was in, precisely.

Bertalan: What instruction?

Mark: Yeah. Was it equipment or what was it?

Bertalan: We worked with the procedure and the routine of communication at sea. This was a matter of flag hoist and we had to learn the Morse Code. And

then we had to study codes and ciphers, the manner of enciphering messages at sea, which had to be in code because all forces at sea and on land all around the world were intercepting each other's traffic. And so this had to be a high degree of sophisticated codes that were used.

And so we learned this and then a shipmate, a colleague of mine, we worked hard because we wanted to be assigned to a battleship like the U.S.S. Texas. So, in order to qualify, we bore down and we really applied ourselves with the result that we had good records. But, when we finished that communications school, the reward for our efforts and application, we were both assigned to the Smith College to teach women Naval volunteers.

Mark: I was going to say, Smith College, I'm familiar with that area and that's an all-girls' school.

Bertalan: Yes. The WAVES. The Women Accepted for Voluntary Enlistment, WAVE. We were assigned there to teach. And so that was rather a boomerang, a backfiring of our efforts. We wanted to go to sea at that age. But then we were teaching.

Mark: What did you teach there?

Bertalan: The same things that we had learned in school. These women were also provisional ensigns, and there was a communications school, and they went into the deciphering. The electric coding machine, ECM, was a very, very top secret item. In fact, if we had mentioned that on the sidewalk we feared court martial. We never could mention ECM, electronic coding machine.

Anyway, they learned those procedures and, although then they did not go to sea, they learned what they needed to know in the shore establishment in order to encipher and decipher coded messages.

Mark: Right. Now, back in World War II, the idea of women being in the military was a pretty radical idea.

Bertalan: Yes.

Mark: And you were in a position of instructing these women coming into the military.

Bertalan: Right.

Mark: If you could recall some of the attitudes towards women in the military, in the Navy in particular.

- Bertalan: Well, of course remember it was far different from women being accepted at the Naval Academy or the various military academies. It wasn't that extreme. And we didn't look upon it—these women were dedicated. They worked hard. They really wanted to be in the Service. And everybody was enthusiastic about doing our job. And we did, too, as instructors. It was not as radical, not as extreme as later women as fighter pilots as they are now on active shipboard duty. But it was an auxiliary, looked upon as temporary and, in addition, expanding the forces so males, the men, could go to see and get foreign assignments while the women took care of things that could be done domestically.
- Mark: And you were apparently struck by their enthusiasm.
- Bertalan: Oh, very much so. Well, we all were. I'm curious. When did you enter the Air Force?
- Mark: 1982.
- Bertalan: Oh, so you're very recent.
- Mark: Yeah. Well, it seems like a long time for me. [Both laughing.] Twenty years now almost, but—
- Bertalan: Time flies. Even two and 20 is 2002. You're jumping. I don't quite jump that far, though.
- Mark: Now, you did some specialized training in various locations around the U.S. I wonder if you can comment on sort of life off the base during World War II. Sort of the war-time boom and the university towns and around the military bases and that sort of thing. And, of course, rationing was starting to kick in by that time, I would imagine.
- Bertalan: Oh yes, indeed.
- Mark: So, if you'd just talk a little bit about life off the base and what it was like and how it was different from the civilian life you had known previously, if it was different at all.
- Bertalan: Well, I had very little of that because, upon finishing the assignment at Smith College, I was assigned to the U.S.S. Hamul AD-20, A like in able, D like in dog—2-0.
- Mark: And what kind of ship was that?
- Bertalan: A destroyer tender. And I guess in a few minutes you may be having me answer questions upon the active duty at sea and abroad. But, while there

was about six months I was a civilian—no, no. I was with the civilians at Smith College, and while attached to the U.S.S. Hamul in Norfolk, Virginia, awaiting sailing orders when we sailed to Bermuda, the Great Sound of Bermuda, but until that time, yes.

The gasoline, a very few of us had automobiles, and we had to, from our quarters in Norfolk, Virginia, down to the Naval base, we sort of carpooled. The gasoline and tires were very difficult to get. We had to have points. I was living with my wife as a newlywed, and we had to use points to get meat at the butcher shop. We had shooter(??). There was coupons, and coupons for gasoline. And tires were very difficult to get for those that needed them. So, the gasoline consumption was, I guess, curtailed mainly in order to conserve lumber(??). Tires, usually the way to spread the use of tires was by controlling gasoline. So that was what was done in order to conserve rubber. Synthetic rubber was used a lot for the tires.

So, there was a certain amount of privation there with food and the gasoline coupons and food stamps that were issued.

Mark: As you mentioned, your wife came with you. And I was wondering if you had trouble finding a place to live off the base.

Bertalan: Oh no. We had to go to Willoughby-Smith(??), which must have been five or six miles from the Naval operating base. The base facilities were all filled, so we had to live out with the civilians.

Mark: That's in New London, Connecticut?

Bertalan: Oh no. No, no, no, no. I never was in New London. This was Norfolk; Norfolk, Virginia. And Willoughby-Smith, I don't know if I should go into that much detail, was a location out on the beach at Norfolk. I never was in Connecticut because my ship, the U.S.S. Hamul, was stationed in Norfolk before we sailed in April, 1942, to Bermuda.

Mark: I see. And in Northampton when you were at Smith, did you have trouble finding a place to live?

Bertalan: Well, we searched around. I don't know whether everything was exhausted, but no, I wouldn't say—there was not an overly-ample supply of quarters, but we did find a location. We had to live with a family. I guess it was reasonably scarce.

Mark: So you went to Bermuda. And what were your duties there?



Bertalan: All right, I'll get into this. I was assigned to the staff of the Atlantic Fleet Training Command, Hotland(??) commanding officer, Atlantic Fleet Training, Training Command. And this ship was a destroyer tender, so we were anchored in Great Sound in Bermuda. And all of the newly-commissioned destroyers and destroyer escorts, as they left the shipbuilding yards in the States, they reported to us in Bermuda for what was known as shrink-down training. See, these were brand new ships with, for the most part, over half of their complement had never been to sea before. So it was really a training and qualifications period for them.

And my job there, having been in communications, was to go aboard each newly-arriving destroyer and destroyer escort and train the communication officer in his duties. They had to be familiar with flying hoists, the signals, radio communications, and mainly they had a special safe on board with the communication codes and ciphers. And these had to be carefully inventoried periodically and corrected. Corrections were always coming in from the director of Naval communications in Washington. So they had a pretty vigorous jobs because their ships at sea relied upon communications, not only when they were in company with other ships, but with the base stations and with Washington. So their communications were a very critical link part of their work.

So my job was to go aboard each ship to discuss the responsibilities the communication officer had, and then they had to practice sending and receiving signals; radio traffic. So that was our job.

And while I was there, we were there about a year—when I say “we,” the whole, several hundred who were aboard the U.S.S. Hamul—and while there, in studying the whole communication publications procedures, some ideas occurred to me that would improve the, because this is all fairly new and just breaking out in all directions of what communications had to be done. So the idea occurred to me that here would be some ideas that I thought would improve the program and the system and the procedures. And I wrote a letter to the director of Naval communications. And here I was a little ensign. Well, not little, but pretty fresh. So the letter, of course, had to go through my commanding officer. Everything through the chain of command.

Mark: Oh, I remember.

Bertalan: So the letter went to Washington and almost immediately a cable came back, a radio signal. Send Ensign Bertalan to Washington. Well, fine. I was kind of hoping that would happen. But, you know, you think Bermuda is a heavenly place, and I guess it is if you're there for two weeks. But after a year, oh we were getting on each other's nerves. We really were limited, although Bermuda, here we were aboard ship every

day all day. We would get shore leave once in a while because Bermuda is a nice place. But people got sort of on each other's nerves.

Mark: Yeah. There was a term they used in the Pacific called "rock happy." That sounds like that's what—

Bertalan: Right. Well, after my letter produced such results, others had the same idea of doing something. And Captain Denebry(??) issued a directive: No more requests that would lead to transfer. There I was, I shouldn't [eight-second blank spot] I didn't because this was a responsible thing.

So, then I was transferred to Washington. And lo and behold, here I was, by that time I guess I made JG, the first promotion, lieutenant junior grade. Boy, I found that here I was rubbing shoulders with more experienced and older people. And it didn't work out the way I would hoped it would.

Mark: In what sense?

Bertalan: For me to be on the deciding board in the hierarchy to determine new communication procedures and policies. What I had, with the publications that would simplify some of the complex procedures, but the brass all buzzing around like they would in war time, I found I was just a little voice in the wilderness. So, when the notice came around they needed communication specialists in London with the commander of Naval Forces in Europe, I put my name in and there I was. I was transferred to the commander of Naval Forces in Europe, to his staff at that time, in London.

Mark: And this was about what year now? Are we talking '44 or something like that?

Bertalan: This was in 1943, in the winter of '43. I'd been in the Service a little over a year. So here I was, then, assigned there in London. And it was a little bit hectic there. The day before I arrived in my quarters, all the windows were blasted out by a buzz bomb. The buzz bombs were coming over several thousand were sent over by Adolf and landed all over southern England.

But at any rate, my job there, then, we were getting ready for all of the preparations needed for communication during D-Day.

Mark: Which were what?

Bertalan: Pardon me?

Mark: Which were what, the preparations for D-Day?

Bertalan: For invading the continent. This, again, was very intricately planned. Again, whenever military Naval, whatever Army actions take place, communications are always the most critical thing. And the reason Sir Francis Drake beat the Spanish Armada, of course he learned how to hoist flag signals. And he had his ships—again, it was a matter of communications is what determined the Spanish Armada invasion of England, the communications. He developed the means of communicating at sea, which were ahead of what the Spanish—I shouldn't mention that. But I only have those afterthought that how critical communications are.

And so, that was our job there with preparing and the backlog. Always communications documents were being compromised. We would learn how the enemy was deciphering some of our highly-classified materials, so there had to be reserve publications when this happened to put into force a new set of codes and ciphers. And, you see, these had to be ready and in reserve at any time that a compromise happened. And, in ciphering, because all Forces copy each other's radio traffic, and all traffic has to go radio, very little can go by ground wire. It has to go by radio. So this had to be done.

And so, while one of the things while there in London I had, it was after D-Day at this point, I had to accompany some secret classified documents to France and go Italy. And while I was gone, this was about a week or so, some of my staff were in a pub on Oxford Street. And while they were there, V-1, these were the second family, the rockets that went 60 miles up in the air—

Mark: Right.

Bertalan: The buzz bombs were only about 3,000 or 4,000 feet in altitude, and they could easily be shot down. Well, relatively easily shot down while they were wending their way from the continent to England. These V-1s hit this building that some of my staff were in. It was a three-story brick building, and made a direct hit. The building collapsed into its own crater. And then, when I returned from the continent, I had the responsibility of going to their funeral at Cambridge. And I guess if I hadn't been on the continent it might have been a different story. And I had to represent the Navy at the funeral services. The U.S. had a military cemetery at Cambridge.

Well, then, upon the conclusion of hostilities I was transferred back to Washington and was granted, I don't know, an honorable separation. We didn't get a discharge separation. But I remained in the organized Naval Reserve for the next 18 years. And during that time I alternated from being a student, a Naval Reserve officer student, to being an instructor in

officer courses. So, part of the time I was an instructor myself and part of the time I was a student. But, after 22 years of total service, counting four years of active duty, I retired then with the rank of commander.

Mark: Which is the 06?

Bertalan: No, 05. It's a lieutenant colonel.

Mark: I see. Again, I've always found Naval ranks baffling.

Bertalan: Well, a good thing we're talking. Well, quickly, there's ensign; lieutenant JG; full lieutenant, just called lieutenant; then lieutenant commander; and commander; captain—

Mark: Then the admiral rank starts.

Bertalan: Then there's a commodore, but that's only at wartime. The commodore would be equivalent to a brigadier, a brigadier general.

Mark: I see.

Bertalan: Then a rear admiral is the same as major. Brigadier, than major, isn't it? Major general. Brigadier general, isn't the next major general?

Mark: Yeah, I've forgotten now.

Bertalan: And then lieutenant general.

Mark: I think it's brigadier general, major general, lieutenant general, general.

Bertalan: The lieutenant general was just below the full general.

Mark: See, you got me on that one too.

Bertalan: I don't know anybody tomorrow will ask you to compare the ranks. But lieutenant colonel and commander. A full colonel is the same as a captain.

Mark: I see. I've got some questions about the post-war years. After the war was over—

Bertalan: Oh yes. Well, not much later came the Korean.

Mark: Did you take part in that as well?

Bertalan: No, but I had to make myself available. By that time I had several children. But, because these children could have been claimed as

dependents and excused—there's a better word, would not be required to military, I had to sign a statement because I was in the organized Reserve, and I had to sign a statement that I would not claim any dependency as a reason for not reporting for active duty. But it just so happened that, although I was ready, willing, and available, I was not called.

Mark: In the years immediately after World War II, when you first got out of the Service, what did you want to do to get your life back on track? A lot of guys, for example, use the G.I. Bill. Now you were a little farther along in your educational—

Bertalan: By that time I had completed my master's. As a matter of fact, while I was on duty in London I added to the final copy of my master's thesis, mailed it to the University of Illinois, and it was granted. So I guess people wonder, how could my master's degree be dated 1945 when I was on active duty in England?

Mark: That's why.

Bertalan: But I had mailed the copy back and had it typed. In fact, I typed it myself in London in off-duty hours, mailed it back, and then my degree was granted. But one of the difficulties, so many of us were entreated to stay in Service on active duty, and I happened to be one of them.

But I wanted to get on with my civilian life, so when I came out, I was in Washington, D.C., and I was interviewed at the U.S. Office of Education Library by the head librarian, a Dr. Longsdon, who himself had recently come out of the U.S. Naval Service. So, he almost drove spikes into me wanting me because here we had both been in the Navy. And my qualifications were good. And people were hard to get, that's the main thing. There was a shortage of personnel.

Mark: Especially that early at a time—more guys were being discharged that was the opposite of many people's experiences. But this is 1945, I take it.

Bertalan: '46. April of '46. So I was delighted. It was a good appointment, at a professional rank it had to be. So I joined the U.S. Office of Education Library.

Mark: There was veterans' preference for government jobs, but I get the impression that that didn't really factor into your decision to take this job.

Bertalan: No. No. I did have, we had five or ten points added to the grade we made in examination. There was, veterans were granted this. Also, we started in 1947 to build our own house in Alexandria. And building supplies were

very, very hard to get. And, by virtue of being a veteran, I was able to purchase about 30,000 bricks to build a little four-bedroom house.

Mark: That's interesting. Was that a federal program or something?

Bertalan: No. No, no, no. But the brick kiln where the bricks were produced, I told them I was a veteran. He says, okay, we'll help you out.

Mark: So it was very informal.

Bertalan: Very informal, oh sure. Sure.

Mark: I've got just one last area that I want to cover, and I'm not even sure if it applies to you or not. That involves veterans' organizations and reunions and that sort of thing. In the years just after the war, did you join any groups like the Legion or the VFW or anything? If why or why not?

Bertalan: No. A friend of mine was the commander of the local American Legion post in Alexandria, and he entreated me. I did join for a while, the American Legion, but that was—I stayed active in the Naval Reserve and I felt that that was, for me, a sufficient diet of military. I mean, I had joined it because it was all voluntary, and, of course, I'm happy now because this duty has given me an additional retirement bonus, having stayed in the Reserve military for 23 years.

Mark: Now, after you left the military and as you've gone on in your life, did you find yourself interested in these sorts of organizations or not?

Bertalan: You mean military?

Mark: No, I mean like the Legion or the VFW or perhaps some other veterans groups.

Bertalan: Oh, no. Just for a year or two I was with the American Legion, that was the only one.

Mark: I see. Well, those are about all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add? Is there anything you think we've skipped over or anything?

Bertalan: Oh, there's some minor reminiscences, but I don't think—oh, our training. In Bermuda when I was aboard the U.S.S. Hamul, all of this training was for anti-submarine warfare. That's what these destroyers and destroyer escorts, their mission. They were a screen for convoys. And, in fact, when I was en route to my duties in February from New York to Londonderry, England, this convoy, my ship was on the external flank,

and a destroyer that was just short and near us guarding us in that portion of the convoy one dark night, a German submarine surfaced on one side and, while they were—this was a decoy while the personnel were confronting the issue with this German submarine on this side, another sub surfaced on the other side, sank it with no survivors. We never learned about this until we docked at Southampton because convoys had to be very carefully guarded all the way. So, that was sort of distressing, but we didn't learn about it until we had arrived at our port in Londonderry.

Mark: That's probably a good thing, too.

Bertalan: Sure, for morale and whatever. Clever rouse on the part of these submarines. They did all sorts of things.

Mark: Well, it was a pleasure talking to you this morning.

Bertalan: Well, you're certainly welcome. I'm glad to do it. You do have any other questions, you have my telephone number.

Mark: I do, and I also know how to find your son, so that's not a problem.

Bertalan: Pardon me?

Mark: I also know where to find your son, Joe.

Bertalan: Oh yeah. He's a Naval Academy graduate.

Mark: Right. I know that.

Bertalan: You did know that?

Mark: Yeah.