

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**EDWIN F. BOETTGER**

Engineer, Merchant Marine, Army Transportation Corps, World War II

1997

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**Boettger, Edwin F.** (1917-2011). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User: 3 audio cassettes (ca. 165 min); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono

Master: 2 audio cassettes (ca.165 min); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono

**Abstract:**

Edwin Boettger, a Two Rivers, Wisconsin native discusses his World War II service as an engineer with the Merchant Marine Army Transportation Corps; time aboard the USATs *Oneida* and *James Parker* and voyages in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean and to the Mideast; participation in the invasion of southern France in August 1944; and postwar work in the Merchant Marine before returning home and working on the Great Lakes. Locale, and family history, stoked Boettger's lifelong ambition to be a seaman. He provides a brief overview of the state of the prewar Merchant Marine. Leaving factory work, Boettger entered maritime service in May 1943. He explains his draft status and the mechanism for getting into the Merchant Marine and covers his training at the "equivalent of boot camp" in New York state. Boettger delineates the options he had as a merchant seaman, and how he came to choose the engine room as his department. Hitler's "Roll of Drums" U-Boat program made convoying perilous, and Boettger relates the story of the torpedoing of the *Oneida* in the North Atlantic, his rescue, hospitalization, and recuperation in the States on shore and ship. His next assignment, given at the New York Port of Embarkation, was to a refitted Panama liner—Boettger explains how the newly named *James Parker* fit President Franklin Roosevelt's goal of a modern merchant marine and task force leader. The ship supported General George Patton in the Mediterranean. He reflects on the balance of power the ships provided in their theatres of operation. He shares stories on the treatment of Italian prisoners of war aboard ship, and why safe passage to New York was granted his ship by the Germans. Boettger, a fireman and then an engine oiler, was promoted to a third assistant engineer. He relates the humorous story of transporting Patton's army under German threat, and personally meeting Patton (with General Omar Bradley). Boettger bore witness to the dawn of the jet age in the skies over London, where he went after the invasion of southern France. He states that the advent of the jet, the politics behind the Marshall Plan, the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and of the United Nations all led to the diminution of the Maritime Service. He covers attendance at Officers Candidate School, turbo electric school, and promotion. With peace Boettger transported war brides, occupation soldiers and returning GIs, displaced persons, art treasures, land mines, and coffins. Leaving the Merchant Marine after six years, he worked for fifteen years on the Great Lakes as an engineer. Boettger accepted the exclusion of the Merchant Marine from postwar benefits, but could not abide the American Legion's position on extension of benefits, and did not join it.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Edwin Boettger (1917-2011) served in the Merchant Marine as an engineer aboard ship during World War II. The ships on which he was stationed traversed the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. He participated in the invasion of Southern France in August 1944. After the war Boettger applied his skills as an engineer on the Great Lakes and returned to Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997  
Transcribed by Linda Weynand, 2012  
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2014  
Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2015

## Interview Transcript

Van Ells: Today's date is June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, with Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Edwin Boettger.

Boettger: Right.

Van Ells: Did I pronounce that correctly?

Boettger: Correct.

Van Ells: Veteran of the United States Maritime Service during World War II. Thanks for coming down, today.

Boettger: You're welcome.

Van Ells: Originally from Two Rivers, Wisconsin and still from Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

Boettger: Right.

Van Ells: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

Boettger: Well, specifically I was a native of Two Rivers, and the south side—12<sup>th</sup> Street. I was going along under a lifelong craving to go to sea and to be a seaman. In the period that we're talking about it was not an easily satisfied calling because the industry was swamped by veteran seamen unemployed since Depression years. These seamen were as a rule well-documented. The number of ships involved reached an all-time low in our history. Some ships had every position on deck and the deck officer roster covered by captains—people having a license to captain. The same thing was true in the engine room; every position was filled by people holding chief engineers licenses. At that point there was no openings at entrance level—probably ten seasoned, trained seamen for every entrance-level job that came up in this period.

Van Ells: It sounds like you investigated a career in the Maritime Service pretty well.

Boettger: Yes.

Van Ells: I'm interested in how you got interested in sea service in the first place. For example, having grown up in Two Rivers perhaps you had relatives or friends who worked in the fishing industry.

Boettger: Well, that's true. My oldest brother was a seaman, and I idolized him. In addition to that my father worked for the interurban streetcar line, and we had a free pass on the streetcar. I never missed a single great shipyard event such as the launching of the ships and the lay-up of the ships and the fitting out of the ships. I haunted the docks, and I listened to the stories and I imagined I wanted to be a seaman. At the inception of the Maritime Service program I attempted to get into the Cadet Midshipman Corps which was forming.

Van Ells: Was this before or after Pearl Harbor?

Boettger: This was before Pearl Harbor, dating back to about 1936. In 1936 we were then well into FDR's [Franklin Delano Roosevelt's] administration. FDR came to the job with a definite love of the sea and love of ships. He was in total support of battleship diplomacy. He had a history of having been undersecretary of the Navy in WWI. When he came to power he supported and backed every attempt to reconstruct the Navy, and that program was well underway. When he reached the determination that he would not commit our best to the far-off shores without they would be well-equipped and supplied, and I think that you understand that even the Navy ships on the battle line can only engage very temporarily at top speed and at top firepower before they're in complete need of support from the Merchant Marine. The Merchant Marine then would have to be speeded up in order to keep with the battleship diplomacy. Merchant ships up to that point were generally powered by reciprocating engines along with Scotch boilers. The new ships were equipped with steam turbines complete with water-tube boilers, which is completely new technology. The speed has to be increased from about eight knots to about sixteen. This speed is what they call the "fast convoy" in WWII: sixteen knots. It doesn't mean that there weren't ships that were capable of doing twenty-five. That was true. Also there were naval ships that could run up to forty knots but not for long. You understand that they could chase into battle and give their utmost, and then they would have to be completely supplied and provisioned for everything from soup to nuts. So he realized that when he would commit these forces to battle or to diplomacy, as they called it at that time, that he would not only have to have a merchant ship on station, but he would have to have a merchant ship en route and a merchant ship returning. This is then changing the whole picture from hundreds of ships to thousands of ships. He had this great hope that the worst scenario would not come to pass until we were well built-up. Unfortunately, it did come to pass, and this adversely affected the entire program. Now, as far as the expansion of the Merchant Marine, under the Merchant Marine Act of

1936 they were able to crew these ships by simply taking the reserve of unemployed seamen. Eventually they had to bring these seamen into training, update their skills, and they came up with the idea of creating a federal recruiting and training service. In time, as the war approached, they not only used up all the seamen, but they began to feel shortages and seamen were being recruited from scratch, as you say, like myself with no previous experience. I was on the list eligible for the Corps Cadets but I timed out at age twenty-three and a half. At that point I was offered a chance to enter the list for apprentice training.

Van Ells: This is about what year?

Boettger: Well, this would be about 1940, '41. This struck me as very interesting, but at that time the base training station was very small; it could accommodate about a thousand people. The sections were enrolled on a state's quota basis. The state's quota came out of a lottery, and out of that you found out what position your state was in. The State of Wisconsin was down the road some. In the meantime it was understood that if you could accomplish your enrollment before your draft number came up then you were automatically excused from the draft so that you could enroll in the Maritime Service. Of course, from time to time you even had to join the Naval Reserve in order to protect your—as the draft got desperate for men they began to trim off wherever they could and getting—they knew that the Maritime Service could attract people under draft age, and people over draft age, and also people who were exempt from military service by reason of minor physical defect. These minor physical defects often made it possible for a man to work a lifetime work career without problems at all, but as far as the military description of physical fitness it didn't quite make that. They went after those people, and they also went after the retirees. The retirees were a big pool of—I knew people that retired at sixty-five and came back before seventy and continued well into the seventies, especially in command positions. This worked out very well.

Van Ells: So when did you actually enter the Maritime Service?

Boettger: I was sworn in on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1942.

Van Ells: So this is just after Pearl Harbor.

Boettger: Yeah. This was at one time was called National Maritime Day. National Maritime Day and other national service days have been consolidated into one single day at the present time, and you never hear the term “National Maritime Day” anymore. So at the point where my number was coming up for the draft I got on the train in Manitowoc. In those days we had five trains a day, and it was easy to go down in the morning to Chicago and be back before midnight the same day. I did that. I went to the enrolling

officer and I said, “Well, unfortunately Wisconsin is not coming up prior to my induction into the draft.” “Well,” he said, “it just happens that we have a contingency plan for your type. We can make you first alternate on the next state quota coming up.” Which happened to be the State of Illinois quota, was due, and I said, “I’ll be happy to take that.” As a result I was sworn in on National Maritime Day. I went to New York to a place called Hoffman Island which was a Maritime Service training station located alongside Ambrose Channel in the Port of New York, off Staten Island.

Van Ells: I just want to go back a second. You said something about “your time.” What did you mean by that? You had a special status for “your time.” People who lived in the States who weren’t going to come up on the list for awhile? Or is that something to do with your age? I was just interested.

Boettger: Well, my type was probably more draft eligible, and so my type would have to act within a deadline. In other words I couldn’t trade on anything except being enrolled prior to the draft date.

Van Ells: So you were how old by this time?

Boettger: I was twenty-four years old.

Van Ells: About draft age. The draft age was twenty-one at that time (??)

Boettger: Yeah. See, I had timed out of that Midshipman Cadet Training program. That is now the equivalent of the National Merchant Marine Academy. See, at that time they didn’t have a campus. They had a basic training station, and once through that you were then assigned aboard ship, and your four-year schooling took place almost exclusively on a ship. Each port that you reached had a district instructor who checked your sea project and got you, kept you up to—that this is by the way, this is the reason why this academy is the only one in the whole country that contributed casualties to WWII. There were some 156 of these cadet midshipmen that paid with their life in the course of both studying and doing their sea time.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Boettger: Yeah.

Van Ells: Why don’t you tell me a little bit about your training? You went to New York. What sort of training did you do? Now, you were, as you mentioned, if I recall correctly, you hadn’t had sea experience.

Boettger: No, no previous experience.

Van Ells: So you're starting from scratch.

Boettger: I'm leaving the factory—as a matter of fact I was leaving Hamilton's in Two Rivers. Hamilton's, which had been heavily committed to civilian production, was now being cut off of their source of material, and the position that I was in—I was inspector of the press department—I was practically, totally idle with no local claim for draft deferment. You can understand that. Consequently I was going with that kind of experience to the Maritime Service and had no previous experience. This Hoffman Island station was equivalent to what's called a boot camp or basic training—very basic. It starts out with about five weeks of—you have internment for medical reasons. I forget the term that's—quarantined, that's what it is, the exact term. You're quarantined there for the first five weeks on account of the shots series and the waiting of development of medical problems that might not have been detected up to that point. And in the meantime you attended both classroom and practical work experience. Stress was on boats and gunnery was a basic subject also. A lot of people didn't understand that these enrollees were trained in everything up to 5-inch broadside gunnery.

Van Ells: So, if you go up to Army boot camp they shave your head, they put a uniform on you, and treat you very strictly for this period. In the Maritime Service, what was your boot camp like? Did they do those similar types of things, what was the discipline like—

Boettger: No, they—

Van Ells: The wearing of uniforms, and this type of thing?

Boettger: They informed us that large groups of people would have to subscribe to military-style movement which includes inspections and marching routines and all of that. We generally understood that. But they did not—our section leader was a U.S. Marine Corps DI [drill instructor] but he did not apply the movie-style training methods that you—however, it was a little shocking to have the reveille go off at six in the morning and him pop through the door at the same instant I don't have to tell you what he hollered out, do I?

Van Ells: You don't have to. I won't be shocked. I presume they were four letter words.

Boettger: Well, exactly, exactly. He would holler, "All right now, drop your cocks and grab your socks!" [Van Ells laughs] That's exactly what his greeting was every morning, and it fits the [laughs] movie DI that we all know about.



Van Ells: Now this sort of language, was this—I presume you didn't talk like that at home.

Boettger: No.

Van Ells: Maybe with your friends or something.

Boettger: No, no.

Van Ells: Did you find that sort of language difficult to get used to or did you find it funny or offensive or [unintelligible].

Boettger: Well, it was easy for me because it was the same thing as shoptalk. But for the young kids that were just out of high school or even not out of high school, ah, shocking. [laughs]

Van Ells: Well, that brings me to my next question, and that involves the people who were going into the Maritime Service during this period. I went off to the Air Force basic training, years afterward, and it brought together people from all different parts of country.

Boettger: Sure.

Van Ells: I'd imagine that would be the same with the Maritime Service, although I wonder perhaps if there were more people who had maritime background. If you could just comment briefly on who was going into the service, where did they come from, what sort of backgrounds did they have—

Boettger: Well, this would be typical, but on the other hand like I said there were the unemployed seamen that were coming in. Some of them came in right at entry level; in other words they had possibly been deck—aboard ship previously. Now they wanted to be involved in the engine department, and if they were not documented high up they would all be entrance level, and they would all have to take the basic training. But others that were already documented as seamen they entered in what they called upgrade schools. Also others entered officer candidate school. If you had the basic requirement of the required sea time you could be admitted to officer candidate school. All right, now, in the beginning the apprentice seamen basic training was one year, sea time requirement was three years, and the officer candidate course was one year. That put you then as a licensed officer aboard ship. At the same time the Maritime Service gave you a commission to ensign, at that time. Of course the Naval Reserve would be only too happy to also grant you the commission of ensign, U.S. Naval Reserve. So I was in the course of this apprentice training when FDR in his manner—he had the most wonderful manner of giving one-line

solutions and descriptions to everything, and, at that point he stood up and said, “We will build ‘em faster than they can sink ‘em.” That was the executive order for wide-open ship construction. At the same time he now had the force that he needed to get the economics of it through Congress, and they of course yielded to his every demand. It was almost practically rule by executive decree in this point of the game. They would have to now make real drastic measures. While I was in the course of this program the twelve month requirement was reduced to three months. The sea time requirement was reduced from three years to two years, and the officer candidate school was reduced to four months. Now, you can see what an awful difference this is. So, at the point where I finished at Hoffman Island strangely there were no entrance level assignments available. Now why was this? Well, you have to think in terms of pullback. Pullback was a disastrous period in our history. [coughs] Excuse me. This incident was a lot like Pearl Harbor. Roll of Drums [also known as Operation Paukenschlag, the targeting of shipping along the U.S. East Coast by German submarines], the convoy battles of the North Atlantic, Pearl Harbor, Vietnam: all of these were defeat. We don’t tell this in stories; we don’t sing about that. And about the only thing you could say about it was that it laid the ground work for final victory. But, unfortunately, it left us with a rapidly expanding number of ships, but right at this point we were involved in pullback. Now, pullback is what—it’s exactly what it implies. All over the world we were loading and scrambling, getting off the scene. We were trying to pull our diplomatic corps and our basic military units connected to them and all our peoples from all over the world and bring them back to a line of safety. As fast as these ships got back to the United States they were then impounded into the national pool of ships and as many as possible were sent into the shipyards immediately for conversion. That would be conversion to—combination ships were converted to troopships, ocean liners or passenger service was converted to troopships, and the regular freight hauling type of ship had to be armed and equipped in various ways with what they call defense feature, and that took a lot of work in what shipyards, you know, had space available. The consequence was that we had very few ships at sea, very few ships being crewed up entrance level, leaving us looking for an assignment. Most of us were quite desperate to have an assignment immediately because we had this kind of fear that the war would be over and we wouldn’t see anything, you know. It didn’t happen, but in the meantime it worked out that when the new training stations were opened—for instance, Sheepshead Bay was a training station which was prepared to receive 10,000 enrollees. The station was just opening, and they were desperate for staff. So they used this as an excuse to put all the enrollees that were leaving Hoffman Island and a couple other stations similar to that into the big station as staff. This is where we went while waiting for the ships to be made ready and then ultimately to be assigned at entrance level to these various ships.

Van Ells: How long were you there in limbo at this station?

Boettger: Well, I was there till oh, probably another four or five months. So, yeah.

Van Ells: What did you do?

Boettger: Well, I was in the maintenance department at Sheepshead Bay. Specifically, we maintained the equipment. For instance, they had a bakery there which served not only Sheepshead Bay but also served Manhattan Beach which was a Coast Guard station, and it had a combined population maybe of 15,000 people, see. They had the kind of equipment that could produce 600 dozen doughnuts an hour. Yeah. Bread-slicing machines. All of this was riding on newly created steam powerhouse. They had a steam plant which was quite remarkable, and it had about six marine boilers in it. It had three propulsion engines: one was a Liberty ship engine, the other one was the Victory ship engine—turbine now, and one was a Nordberg monster—marine type Nordberg diesel engine. This powerhouse was the training school for enrollees after they got by the time where they chose their department. You went into these training schools and worked in all three departments. The basic three departments on board ship are deck, engine and steward. **[End Tape 1, Side A]** They have in addition radio and radar which is handled at another school. In the course of going through these early experiences you were able to train in whatever field you thought you would like. You gotta make your choice. Once in—suppose you chose the engine department you would then use this powerhouse for your actual training. These engines were in operation. They were running against a dynamometer to simulate load. You mothered these engines same as you would aboard ship. So by the time you got aboard ship you were rather well trained for your job aboard ship.

Van Ells: So this is where you select a specialty?

Boettger: Yeah.

Van Ells: What did you select?

Boettger: Well, I was aboard a training ship in sail followed by a training ship in steam. The ship was the SS *New York* of the Eastern Steamship Lines. It was quite a big, powerful ship. At that point I wasn't in the engine room, but I was doing my deck, steward, and engine exposure. While in the deck part of it a bunch of us were chaining the handrails. Now, on a ship like that it not only had the conventional handrails but they had sub-rails divided on six-inch centers which is a method they keep little children from falling overboard See, it's a safety method. These ships, some of them were pretty well up in years already: twenty, thirty years old, maybe had twenty, thirty coats of paint [laughs]. In order to get the paint off these

hand rails—we were slowly in the process of converting it from a white ocean liner into a grey wartime type of ship. We were chaining these handrails down to bare metal. That's a very simple operation. You simply have a length of chain which you wind around the handrail and then you have six men pulling on one side and six pulling on the other, and you saw back and forth, and that knocks the paint all the way down to bare metal, but I don't have to tell you that this is a monotonous way to [laughs] get experience. At that point, you finish your day and retire to your room and get cleaned up for dinner and lounging about the deck when a certain training officer appears from out of nowhere, and he asks you, seriously, if you really intend to spend the rest of your life in this kind of employment [laughs]. We, of course, we answer, "Not if we can help it." So he says, "Well, I'm going to take a few of the boys down below and show you what really interesting work is all about." He would take you down into this impressive engine room. This engine room was spotless, it was just beautiful. He would make it [laughs] known that there's plenty of openings in the engine departments aboard these ships. This would be the place to go to work. Of course, he said, "Don't quote me because I'm not supposed to be here recruiting in this manner. I'm supposed to do that all in the classroom, but I find this manner very effective." We not only found it effective, but we knew definitely when we got through our three experiences that we would choose the engine room, which I did. Anyway, in the galley I had a rather bad experience. I dropped the cover to a soup tureen. This cover was downright beautiful: it was encrusted over with small people and roses and all this beautiful stuff: indescribable. I dropped it and broke it and the next day the chief steward came out into our gathered midst [laughs]—we were formed in a circle, and he was carrying the bowl part of the soup tureen. When he got to the middle he dropped it on the floor. He says, "That's how much this bowl is worth without the cover." [laughs] Of course everybody enjoyed a good laugh on me, but I already knew that I didn't have the talents for the steward department, and I was definitely heading for the engine room as soon as I got through my week in the stewards department.

Van Ells: So how long was it before you actually got the ship that got to sea? It had to have been [unintelligible].

Boettger: I would say it happened about nine months after I enrolled.

Van Ells: Which had to be early '43 sometime?

Boettger: Yeah, early '43, yeah. In the meantime Roll of Drums was taking its toll. The facts connected to Roll of Drums is that Hitler personally assigned Admiral Dönitz to command Roll of Drums. It was called Roll of Drums because if you're in a submarine and you've scored a hit the sounds that come back to you are not unlike the kettle drums in a symphonic orchestra

rolling. So they called their campaign Roll of Drums. Hitler allotted him 1,000 torpedoes; it wasn't near as to what he wanted, but conditions being what they were this would have to be his limit. He went out with that thousand and scored over 700 hits. The first two years of Roll of Drums resulted in over 700 of our ships going to the bottom—that was with all the material, and a lot of the people went also. This was very carefully covered by one-liners, but it was for the most part concealed, privileged information, and nobody in the country knew the extent of this defeat. It was so devastating that it was almost unbelievable and insufferable. But it resulted in the final victory. They often say that it resulted in the final victory. For myself, personally, I was aboard the *Oneida* USAT—U.S. Army Transport *Oneida*. By the way, I was assigned to the Army Transportation Corps where I served for the duration plus six years, so this was my total involvement during World War II. The first ship was the USAT *Oneida*. It was a small supply ship and under the command of a Captain Flagger [?]. Flagger was one of these guys that returned from retirement to take command of this ship, and he was seventy-two years at the point where he returned.

Van Ells: He was at sea at age seventy-two?

Boettger: And, he was a thoroughly experienced captain. We went out loaded with supplies and we rendezvoused with naval ships that were practically fugitives out there at that point in time. He had an uncanny way of locating these ships with no communications of any sort. I don't understand what the system was used at that time. There was radio silence and running black and all of that, but somehow it happened. When we would meet up with these ships we would offload battleplate, ammunition, toilet paper, fans, room fans—you know the type that you use to try to get a little comfort—and supplies of every description. We were doing that very successfully, and we were doing it alone, running alone.

Van Ells: This is in the Atlantic?

Boettger: Yeah, Atlantic, yeah. Ultimately we were ordered to join a convoy, which we didn't particularly like because we had great success and great luck with sailing alone. We were probably not considered worth pursuit and tracking in the fashion that they tracked their targets, but now we were in a southbound convoy.

Van Ells: Going from where to where? Just out of curiosity.

Boettger: Well, we joined them at sea, and I didn't know our destination and never found it out.

Van Ells: Out there somewhere.

Boettger: Never found it out, yeah. While we were en route I was at my job, entrance level. I was in the engine room in a job called engine wiper. There was another day worker there called the day fireman; he was a fireman, but he worked days rather than working on shift or on watch. The two of us were given emergency stations on the top deck. Well, while we were in southern waters this worked out real well. We simply went up to our stations. His station was a settling tank shut-off valves, and my station was the vacuum breaker, to be operated on orders. But as we began working into northern waters this got to be a kind of a lousy station. So one day he said, "Ed, I'm going to see the first, and I wish you'd come along." I said, "Well, I don't want to see the first. I just want to be doing my job quiet. I don't want no static of any kind, but I'll come along, and you be the spokesman." So we round up the first assistant engineer. So he says to the first, "First, why is it that we have deck stations where everybody else has engine stations?" He answered by saying that it was traditional and customary for entrance level people. He says, "I'm not saying that you don't know nothing, [laughs] but I'm simply saying that these two stations are vital, and they have to be filled by entrance level people. Everybody on station below is qualified and that's the way it is." But he says, I'll tell you what happened. "I got the issue of the first two overboard suits to be used at my discretion. We don't have one for every member of the crew, but we have two of them. You two can take these suits. Put 'em on, but don't pull up on the drawstrings—that would be ankle, wrist and neck—don't pull up. Leave them slack because it ain't meant that you be restricted that way indefinitely." But that was alright. That was great protection. It fitted over your life preserver, too. That you had to put on when the emergency bell rang. So, we put on the life jackets and overboard suits over that, and we went up to where our station was, and sat down [laughs], leaned against the stack, and just as long as we were on emergency stations until the bell rang and we were committed to that kind of work and not our regular work. That would be anytime night or day. So, the first night in this series of actions, the first night they took off the coffin corner [position in a convoy most likely to be attacked] portside—which would be the outboard side, two columns of ships. The following night they took off, and as they filled the two solid lines again they then took off the coffin corner again. At that point we slid into the position of coffin corner.

Van Ells: Now, during these attacks you were outside on the deck of the ship?

Boettger: Yeah, on the open deck.

Van Ells: I'm interested in what you were able to see and hear and what it must have been like.

Boettger: Nothin’.

Van Ells: You couldn’t see a thing?

Boettger: Absolutely nothing, no. The damage that we got in those days was of seeing spreads of torpedoes is— did not happen at this stage of the campaign. At this stage of the campaign all of it was done with single, deadly accurate shot torpedoes which found their marks. You didn’t see ‘em or hear ‘em.

Van Ells: Until they went “boom,” I suppose.

Boettger: Until they went off. And often in the process it took ammunition with it and also the ammunition which we had in cargo and the ammunition which you had in the ready hold for your own guns. So at that point we were at the coffin corner, and we got hit, and there was a first type of explosion that you got from a torpedo, which is one thing, and then we got a second explosion which was the whole ship upward. The forces were upward, and we were both blown off the deck and into the water. The odd part about this story is that not a single other person survived the engine room—just the two of us that happened to be on the deck stations. Of the total crew of sixty-four, thirty-three were killed, and thirty-one of us survived. Those of us that survived, we stayed on three life rafts which finally when the loads were divided resulted in nine on each of three life rafts. Then off on the horizon one of the lifeboats had been—the force of the explosion had flattened the inboard side, and so this lifeboat was floating out there with four people in it at a tipped angle due to the one side being flat. It was on its flotation. It was apparently surviving okay, but it was out of our reach. We couldn’t join it or catch up. We were all going with the Gulf Stream at that point at the same spacing, and the three rafts were finally lashed together. There was one surviving officer, a second mate, was a man of unusual ability and skill. He was the one that was responsible for dividing the load onto these three rafts and lashing them together and attending to what had to be done. What had to be done when daylight came was to open the water casks. The water casks in those days consisted of a larger cask, possibly ten gallons, and a smaller cask, possibly two gallons. He refused for anybody to see those casks except himself. We found out why, because when he opened the boards that led to that compartment where the casks were stored he reached in and took the casks out and lifted them up and what drained out of them was not fresh water but seawater. You see, these casks had sprung like in the fashion of the way a barrel is built; these slats opened up and admitted seawater which displaced, and he didn’t want to take a chance that anybody would drink any of that seawater. One drink of seawater and you’re finished. So this was meant that all six of the casks were useless and had to be thrown off before someone thought they were freshwater

and would drink them. Ultimately this problem was solved by having canned water aboard. That system worked much better. You could smash and distort these cans into all kinds of shapes, and they stayed together and preserved the contents. We went drifting along. The two of those that had overboard suits on were ordered to make shelter for the captain. The captain unfortunately had both his legs broke at the thigh level, and in these seas that resulted his legs were flopping around, and they had to be restrained. So the two of us lay one on each side of the captain. We took our other leg and threw that between his two legs, and that way we hung on with all our might and immobilized him. He was unconscious at that point already, but that's the way we spent the nineteen hours that we were on these rafts.

Van Ells: Now, if you're part of a convoy, I'm sort of curious as to why it took nineteen hours to rescue you. Was it drifting away in the current or something?

Boettger: Well, this was a convoy: two columns and unknown number of ships—we couldn't see the other end. The other end was escorted by a couple light escort ships, not destroyer class or nothing like that. They were small vessels which had been requisitioned and armed lightly, and they acted as your—and when the ships were torpedoed nothing changed. The convoy proceeded. No one came back for rescue or anything like that. Impossible. This was what the enemy was hoping would happen, and it could not, they could not do that. Just impossible. All seamen understood that. There was no expectation that a ship or an escort—there were two escorts for a possible forty ships—they couldn't fall back. There was a certain station routine that they had to maintain balance. Simply it (??)

Van Ells: So who finally came and got you?

Boettger: Oh well, our plight was unknown, but there was a destroyer which was inbound from the West Indies, and he accidentally stumbled on us. Now, when he approached us he took a wide sweep all around us, and he did no rescue at all, but he simply swept around us. He was listening at that point, see, because these floating rafts and lifeboats and people in the water like that were the setup that this submarine would use to catch another one, see: easy target, standing in the water. Say a destroyer would pull up and stand in the water, he didn't have a chance. So after he apparently was satisfied then he made a long, sweeping turn in which he brushed first the lifeboat and then the rafts up tight against the side. Of course they threw down all of the lifelines, and people actually jumped down onto the rafts and assisted in the tying up of ones that had to be lifted then. He made a real remarkable rescue. This rescue sticks in my mind as being almost impossible, but it was done without any further loss of life. So we were on this destroyer, and then we went to Philadelphia. We were then admitted



to the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia, and that was the last we saw the captain. He was quite a case; he survived it. As a matter of fact, I was rather surprised when three years later I was in San Francisco and I bumped into him on the street, and he was still commanding a ship. That was remarkable. We went from the hospital; twenty-one of us were ordered back to the New York Port of Embarkation. When we got there we entered via Pennsylvania Railroad Station. I don't know if you have any appreciation for New York. The Pennsylvania Station, five o'clock in the afternoon was wall to wall with people. There was no standing room, no sitting room. When we exited the train the stationmaster had to make a plea to make way for the survivors of a ship. The people pressed, you know, into a little narrow passageway and we passed through there single file. [Approx. 15 sec. pause]. Yeah, we got to the street, and then we got put in a bus and hauled out to Brooklyn. Pennsylvania Station is in Manhattan of course, and the port is in Brooklyn. I went there. Then we were put aboard a ship called the *Sandy Hook* which was what they call a receiving ship. A receiving ship is like a dormitory ship or a place where people can live while being in close proximity to a hospital or reassignment station. Of course, everybody that was aboard that ship—that was hundreds of seamen—they were all in quarantine. You weren't restricted, but they were reluctant to let you on the street. If you were in some kind of bad looking condition they wouldn't allow you out. You were in quarantine for a month. At their discretion they could either let you out if you—especially like a lot of facial scuffs and awful looking bruises which were not hospital case but were given daily attention on that ship. They wanted the level of these visible to be down to the point.

Van Ells: So this is just so as not to scare, to make uncomfortable, the civilian population, I suppose?

Boettger: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Of course that ship, it was the *Sandy Hook* which was a Long Island Sound Steamer at that time. It was like an overnight boat which had accommodations and nice quarters and a dining room. It had a smoking room and a reading room and all those nice spaces where you could relax. When I was in that process I managed to get out after three weeks and was able then to go to town. **[End Tape 1, Side B]** 'Course I had lost all of my possessions, all of my clothing, with the exception for some items which I had stored at the Seamen's Church Institute in Manhattan. That was a place where seamen left their possessions that they didn't necessarily need aboard ship or didn't have space for aboard ship, and they were left in trust. So I had a large suitcase with some clothing and items in there which then I could fall back on that. And I also had—at one Chinese laundry I had a large pack of laundry which was done and ready, but we had left the port before I could pick it up. So I was able to fall back on that also. The Army and the Salvation Army saw to it that we had some sort of clothes that we could wear—

Van Ells: Yeah, I was going to say if you were [unintelligible].

Boettger: Wear ashore, yeah. So then while I was waiting in hopes of getting an assignment then I was okayed for a trip home. I took a trip home, visited home, and back again in a course of about a week; that was about day on the train each way and about five days at home. When I got back there was an order for me to report to the port engineer of the New York Port of Embarkation. When I went up there he took me over to the window on the upper floor of that building that always reminded me of another Pentagon [laughs] Monstrous building: high floors overlooking the Port of Embarkation. The Port of Embarkation consisted of four or five class A piers which could accommodate, you know, the largest troopships that had to tie up in there. He took me over by the window, and he said, "I'm going to send you aboard a ship here." I looked out the window and I said [approx. 15 sec. pause in interview] I think we were talking about the port engineer of the New York Port of Embarkation. At the height of the conflict they were operating over 400 ships out of the New York Port of Embarkation so you can understand the complexity and the size of his job. His job was principally to supply engine room crews for all these ships. He said that he wanted to give special attention to my case. He was pointing out a ship down below among a number of them that were docked. So I said, "Gee, that's the *Panama*." He was quite surprised because it was generally not known as to what name or number was applied to each one of these ships. I told him that I had followed the Panama Line ships all through their conception and their designing and their construction and their service between New York and Panama prior to their involvement in the war. "Well," he said, "that's the ship." I couldn't imagine how I could get assignment on a ship like that because the three Panama Line ships were easily the most coveted and sought-after assignments in the whole industry and the whole public service sector. He said, "However, I have to send you along with a group of candidates for this job." So I looked at the other fellows, and they were typical high school heroes, all six foot or more in height. I was diminutive alongside of them; I weighed about 125 pounds at that time, and I couldn't understand what this was all about. When we arrived at the ship the chief engineer and the first assistant engineer were waiting and very quickly they dismissed the other five candidates and selected me to get the job. Now, this was an entrance-level job; it was simply engine wiper, and that was in the lowest category, and it was definitely entrance level and caused confusion in my mind as to why they wouldn't have picked some of these younger people that were much bigger and apparently more equal to the work than I was. But it turned out that I was exactly the type they were looking for. The ship happened to be equipped with super heaters and condenser access boxes that were very limited in size and they needed a diminutive type of person, small in stature. So I was elected, and as I

started into this work the first job was to clear the main condensers of some type of natural marine growth and also a particular type of eel which in certain season of the year was in plentiful supply in the harbor waters. These eels were less than a half-inch in diameter, and they would enter into the tubes of the condenser. They would die almost immediately, and they would expand to plug off these tubes. You needed someone that could not only get inside these water boxes but could effectively do the work that was in there. So I got in, and I was doing the work, and the first reported to the chief, "He not only can get in but he seems to know what to do with the tools when he gets in there." So I was elected, and I also functioned in the same manner in the boiler super heaters, crawling into them under emergency conditions and solving what problem was there and then crawling out, roll on the floor and on the deck and be sprayed with water to cool me [laughs] off and bring me back to life again.

Van Ells: It's not very glamorous work.

Boettger: No, but the story about the three Panama liners goes back to the very earliest dreams that the administration had in obtaining ships of a certain description with certain requirements which in the event that we would ever get into the worst part of a war, such a world war situation, that there was a definite need for three ships of this specific type. Besides that, all ship construction had to have war capability and be easily convertible to the requirements. The special requirements that are connected with the Panama Line ships are the fact that they were of such modern design at that time. This by the way is a book outlining those three ships and some part of the story of their involvement in World War II. They turned out to be a class of ship which would function as what they called a task force leader. They would lead in all quarters of the world in the advancement of our presence, especially in the seaports that were newly captured and newly reopened to Allied efforts. When a ship of that type would enter they would have to be Geneva Convention correct ships. The particular one that I was on was specifically and definitely a Geneva-correct ship. This is another story and quite an involved story, and I won't go on with at the present time, but they were prized ships, and they were manned by the Merchant Marine in the matter of the crew. The crew departments were engine, deck, stewards, radio, and radar. Now, other departments like the hospital was operated by the Army, and of course the defense of, protection of the ship was crewed up by Navy gunners. We had an allocation of seventy-five gunners on that particular ship.

Van Ells: That's a big ship.

Boettger: Yes. So this ship was not only able to accomplish a function as a troopship, but it has specific requirements as a task force leader, and consequently the types of voyages it engaged in were most interesting

from a crewman's point of view. Rarely ever that it duplicated—just simply always had new missions of great interest, and they were accomplished in a manner which was in compliance with Geneva Convention. We were religious in that respect, and it turned out to be very advantageous for me. I lingered in that position only long enough until they found another candidate [laughs] who had the same dimensions and could enter into these confined, difficult spaces and perform the functions. I have another interesting story of contact with a certain intellectual type of person who was writing a paper that was leading to his doctorate. He was admitted to the port, and specifically he was admitted to this particular ship. The guy dealt with facts concerning the Brooklyn main sewer system. He was most interested in this problem that we had of the eels getting into the condensers. He was specifically interested in the problem of the whitefish getting into the condensers, and the source of the whitefish, and as it applied to the ethnic makeup of the population of Brooklyn. Since we were fitting out for the next big cruise of the Mediterranean area and all that we had a couple of weeks of fit out time remaining. He was specifically interested in obtaining my services in my off-duty hours. I did rejoin him and help him with this survey, and this survey led on through the main sewers of Brooklyn, which you understand are rather large pipes and you walk through 'em. Then you take the branch lines, and you can get into definite neighborhoods, and you can report what you see. But this has nothing to do with the main subject, but it was an interesting sideline and the confusion that resulted from the publication of his paper [laughs]—the story is incredible. It's unbelievable. It always comes back to me as an interesting part of this association with the *James Parker*. The *Panama* bore the wartime name of *James Parker*. We were eventually ready for sea, and then we departed for the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and we performed important function of supporting Patton's movements in the Mediterranean. We were the first ship to enter ports like Mers-el-Kébir [Algeria], Oran [Algeria], Palermo [Sicily], Naples [Italy], Marseille [France], Toulon [France], and the Bay of Cavalaire [France]. This was a situation where after the ports were secured all entry was held back until one of these three ships could enter as the leader and to represent the power and the might of the United States and to represent the style and beauty and strength of our ships. We operated in these waters for six months, and then we returned to the States in October. Then we would get busy and fit out for the six winter months which we spent in the North Atlantic. The North Atlantic represented the battlefield involved in the convoy battles of the North Atlantic. Roll of Drums ended sort of like on the continental shelf. The other battle involved the deep waters between, say, Nantucket Lightship and Land's End, England. And so as we entered that theater each winter we would get exposed to not just submarines, but we would get exposed to the surface raiders as well. These convoys were not now freight convoys, but they were principally troop convoys. Included also were aircraft carriers of the baby type at that

time. These aircraft carriers were huddled in the center of the convoy and quite well protected. We were the head of the task force leader. We'd have to have a battleship, and the battleships were of the class like the Texas and the Nevada.

Van Ells: They're old ones.

Boettger: Yes, they were older ships. They were able to maintain fast convoy pace, and they were gunned heavy enough so that they supposedly were equal to the biggest of their surface raiders—we talking about the *Gneisenau* and the *Bismarck* and that type. Fortunately as far as I know we never met with a surface raider, but the surface raiders that were operated by Germany at that time were having a field day. They almost couldn't handle all the ships that were available, and now we're talking about the end of 1943. At the end of 1943 the enemy had averaged a ship a day in the first 365 days. In the second 365 days they averaged 0.8 ship a day. Little hard to take, but that's the way it was, and that was the grim truth of it. We had, in addition to ships like the Panama Liners—these were by the way conceived with a certain task in mind, and we had other ships that had specific tasks. Like, for instance, the Seatrain ships functioned normally as carriers of railroad equipment hauled all around the world. They had the capability of offloading without the need of a dock or unloading equipment. They had their own ability to offload. Their wartime function was specifically to haul in heavy tanks and offload 'em. The desert war in Africa seesawed back and forth. It was in great balance; either side, given the breaks, could have won, and the victors could have lost. There was one thing that happened—it would be our Seatrain ships. They would arrive as they did at Bizerte [Tunisia] with a full load of heavy tanks crewed up by fresh, young soldiers—well-fed, well-equipped—and the balance was tipped. If we had been a Central Power it would have tipped against the Allies, but we were on the Allied side and the offloading of these tanks at such a strategic moment resulted in the final collapse of the Germans. They were well-trained, very loyal, very skillful, but totally exhausted. We had severed their sea connections, and we had established our own sea connections, and at the critical moment we offloaded the critical balance—the balance of power. Then at the same time we then got engaged in the prisoner of war moment. I mentioned once that it all started with the pullback. When we pulled back we sometimes sailed right into the Antarctic [possibly meant Arctic], right into the ice, where we knew that submarines could not operate at that time. Submarines today can operate in arctic conditions. At that time it was practically impossible for a submarine to follow you into the ice packs, and our ships did indeed take shelter in these ice packs until they were free to proceed. This was all part of the pullback, and the pullback was a sad moment for us to be sneaking around the ocean on the defensive completely and running before the might of the enemy.

Van Ells: Now, I've got some questions about some of the specific voyages you were on. For example, transporting troops?

Boettger: Troops.

Van Ells: Now, you were down in the engine room, and you didn't get any contact with troops, no?

Boettger: No.

Van Ells: You didn't see 'em at all?

Boettger: Well, I saw them on deck and you know, all that. But I didn't have anything to do with the management. We would take 1,500 at a time. We took the Afrika Korps. The Afrika Korps, you gotta remember, was members of Germany's finest families represented in this. I have a story connected with that; I don't know if you're interested—

Van Ells: Absolutely.

Boettger: In that part. Well, it happens when we finally got into Naples. Naples was a thoroughly bombed-out harbor—so much so that there was no space or dock available for most ships. The type of ship that I'm talking about, the Panama Liners, were great in dimension and in power and maneuverability to be able to come in and use a shattered dock or parts of a shattered dock. They stood in to do the job. They were beautiful to see and impressive. This must have been very impressive to the people that saw and witnessed this. At that point we were trying to impress the Italians of our unlimited power and presence. In the attempt we would switch them over from enemy to ally. This was very important by the way. We're talking about the balance of power being tipped one way or the other by a single ship well loaded with exactly the right thing you needed at the moment. Now, we're talking about the Italian surrender and we're talking about the balance of power again. Had the Italian Navy ended up in the hands of the Germans, or the French Navy ended in the hands of the Germans, then the balance of power would have been tipped in a disastrous way. So we had to get the Italians as allies. The methods that we used were in strict compliance with the Geneva Convention. When we finally did come slowly steaming into Naples it was unbelievable to them that anyone could have survived and that anybody could have made a safe landing there and that we could proceed with our mission. Our mission at this point was to take aboard 1,500 of Italy's top officers and petty officers who were responsible for the surrender of Italy at that time. These 1,500 people came aboard with 500 of our military police for security, and being Geneva Conventioned, the two top people in their group were the

commanding general of all Italy and the principal ambassador of all Italy. When they were admitted aboard ship convention called for a change of mattresses. You can understand that these rooms were all somewhat one class. These were, by the way, one class liners. They were amazingly nice and comfortable and everything, but—[End of Tape 2, Side A]. These people could not sleep on somebody else's mattress, so one of the requirements was that we greet them with two brand new mattresses, and these were, as I remember, three-quarter size mattresses: Simmons Beautyrest. They were wrapped in brown wrapping paper, and they stood leaning against the bulkhead of the inside passage. When these people arrived they saw the mattresses, and they stood aside while their aides walked up, and they grabbed the pull strip, and they pulled the pull strip from the top to the bottom and then opened the paper so that the general and the ambassador could look inside and assure themselves that these were indeed new mattresses. Then that fulfilled one of the many requirements that you had to fulfill if you were indeed a Geneva Convention ship. Another incident that happened was the same day the commanding general set out twelve pair of boots in the passageway. Now, it's customary on passenger ships to put your boots or shoes out in the passageway, and then the room stewards would polish them all up and have them ready for you by morning, see. But when this happened it brought the transport commander into play. Now, the transport commander is not the captain and master of the ship, but he is simply the highest ranking military officer commanding the military people aboard ship, see. The passengers in this case happened to be prisoners of war. So he had to explain not only to the prisoners but to the steward people as well that no American will polish the boots of the late enemy. This is a very important thing to maintain at least until these people have been solidly installed into our camp as allies and elevated to a position of honor. Then we will polish their boots for them, but not at this point. That's quite interesting, too. So then, the *James Parker* was announced over the German radio as being "a pain". Patton was "a pain," and the *Parker* was "a pain". They would now take care of the pain called the *James Parker*, and at the same time they would give the proper reward to the traitors who had surrendered the southern part of Italy—the lower half. The battle was still going strong above Naples at that point of the game. So, we finished our loading and we pulled out under favorable weather conditions—that would mean that the weather was so bad that the [laughs]—there was nothing operational either by us or by the enemy, and we proceeded south in the direction of Sicily. When we got under the cover of the Air Force that was now operating out of Sicily we were doing all right, but it became apparent that the forces opposing our movement toward Gibraltar were too massive. We could never make that, see. So instead the ship was diverted to Mers-el-Kébir in northern Africa. The load was discharged into Africa to the disappointment of the Italians. The Italians had already communicated to New York, and specifically to Mayor LaGuardia

[laughs], about their arrival, and we had confirmed this officially and all that. He was to be the official welcoming committee for all these Italians. But now they were discharged into northern Africa, and in their place we loaded the 1,500 of the Afrika Korps, newly surrendered Afrika Korps. A different set of 500 military police came aboard, and the group we had went ashore with the Italian prisoners. As we were embarking these German prisoners then a message went out on the airways for safe passage. Now this is the first, last, and only incident that I ever witnessed firsthand of safe passage. In that situation the Germans would not only avoid action against this ship, but they would actually cordon it and protect it all the way because, like I said, the best families of Germany were represented in these 1,500 people. It was critically important that we retain these people as prisoners because they were a great bargaining chip as the war went on. We were sailing alone but with four destroyers for protection. It turned into be a holiday cruise because there was no danger, and we felt it and sensed it and heard it on German radio that this ship was getting' safe passage to its destination in New York. When we got to New York we come in on the inside passage. That would be instead of coming up Ambrose Channel we came in on the other end of Long Island. We came into Long Island Sound. That was another advantage of these ships. They were able to work in the Sound where a lot of the bigger ships were not. As we came up to meet where the Sound joins the East River there's a blind spot there and the river traffic is heavy, and the Sound traffic is heavy. The ship was in the command of a channel pilot at that time; that would not be the master. These ships were unique in another respect that they had both what they called town and country horns. I can testify about this town and country thing being the rage at that time because I had a new Chev [?] which had both town and country horns on it [laughs].

Van Ells: [Laughs]

Boettger: That was a wonderful thing when we were young [laughs]. These brand new ultra-modern ships had town and country horns. The country horn was designed so that when you were functioning as task force leader with one signal you could blow a fifty ship message to all these ships in one instant. But as far as that horn in New York City—New York City had a permanent injunction against these ships against the use of their country horn in the waters adjacent to New York because in the early days some of the skyscrapers gave up their glass, and the glass fell out to the streets when those horns were blown. It was a monstrous, monstrous thing. Well anyway, the channel pilot was well warned about the trouble in confined waters, and he was told, "Don't push that button; use the town horn which is a much lower thing." But in the confusion of coming out of the Sound and into the East River he pushed the wrong button, and then thinking that by pushing the right button he would cancel the first one—it didn't happen that way. Instead the second horn joined the first horn [laughs], and we



were steering right on Gracie Mansion [official residence of the mayor of the City of New York] at that time. Of course the whole front of Gracie Mansion dissolved and fell to the ground. Meanwhile, LaGuardia still had the message that the Italians were coming to New York. See, no one had changed him to he was on the dock waiting. As we were pulling in the heaving lines went out, and one of the heaving lines fell on his shoulder, and the captain leaned over the end of the bridge, and he says, “Fiorello, will you belay [secure or make fast] that line? [laughs] I’ll be right with you,” he said. So he passed the heaving line on to the docking crew, and they hauled in the docking line. Then he came back up about a hundred feet to right below where the bridge wing was, and the captain said, “I’ll see you on Staten Island.” See, we were going to pause at this dock a while and then go on down to Staten Island where they had another port of embarkation, [un?]load it there. That was the traditional unloading spot for prisoners. By the time we got down there then LaGuardia was waiting on the dock. Of course he had freedom of the port, you know. He didn’t have to apologize to anybody. They knew him, and he got free gangway to anything that was going on. But by that time he knew that the Italians hadn’t arrived then, but the Germans had arrived. That was a kind of a disaster as far as that community was concerned because, well, the message had a way of getting around even though it was top secret and all. Everybody, I guess, by that time knew that there was a load of Italians arriving. But this load of Italians never did arrive. They were still in Africa the last time I heard of them. When we would get back on the North Atlantic run then we would be on the buildup of the—I said there was pullback, and then the next event was buildup. Once we got past the point where all of our nationals had been pulled out of dangerous parts of the world and brought home then we started on the buildup process. The buildup process not only involved troops for England but aircraft was a big, big priority. And I said we had these aircraft carriers in the center of the convoy, and one day one of the mates handed me a glass and he says, “Take a look at those aircraft carriers.” They were really a source of great comfort to us to think of that protection. But with a pair of glasses you could look over and see the deck, and the flight deck had a snow fence across [laughs]. That would be the first quarter of the deck, bare of planes. Nothing on there at all ‘cause the seas had a way of coming over green and going right on that deck so they couldn’t afford to use that front end. But three-quarters of the deck was covered with airplanes, and these airplanes were all tightly packed, and none of them had propellers on them [laughs]. They were simply weather covered and protected, and they were simply being transported to buck up the forces. The Air Force was operating big in England at that point, and they had needed constant replacement of high pointers who went home and new replacements coming in and including lots of aircraft. In those days there wasn’t much of this flying the oceans. If you went anywhere, including the Air Force, you went by ship. Your planes went by ship, and your people went by

ship. It wasn't until near the end of the war that we began to span the oceans greater distances. Spanning of the oceans has become an important factor in the work of the Merchant Marine. Let's say in the Desert War just past, the buildup involvement of the Merchant Marine went on for two years before and continued for two years after. They didn't have the opportunity to do all of it as they did in World War II, but it was thought that they did something like eighty-seven percent of all the hauling, and there was another percentage that went by air. This is the trend of the future, of course, to fly the troops over, and light equipment will be flown over. Otherwise you need a ship of this description; and our buildup of ships for World War II involved something like a dozen class ships, and these class ships were listed as the C Class: C1, 2, 3, 4 and on. When these ships were fully operational they could function as troopships by conversion, and they could function as refrigerated food ships and all these highly specialized requirements of people out there. When we got back from that first Mediterranean cruise the chief had a letter ordering him to prepare three people for advancement at sea, or in the field as they called it. So the chief calls up three of us. At this point, by the way, I had been functioning as a fireman and then later on I became an engine oiler or like a PO [petty officer] advancing up the ladder a bit. He had orders to prepare three of the type in the classification that I was in for promotion to fill the ranks of officer. So when we got back to New York we were looking forward to our unlimited evening ashore. An unlimited evening ashore—in, say, a five day port stand you had one night that was called unlimited because you finished your duties at four in the afternoon, and you weren't due until four the next afternoon. That meant you had an unlimited evening with enough time the next day to sober up or whatever you want to call it. Instead of that he had word for three of us that we would have to use that day to go downtown and get examined and certified for a possible promotion [laughs]. We didn't know if it was worth it because we really needed a day off from the grind. So we reluctantly went downtown to 42 Broadway, and we got, all three of us, got certified for possible duty as third assistant engineer.

Van Ells: What eventually happened?

Boettger: Well, eventually, we all three of us got on the next tour into the Mediterranean. Three of the officers were killed, you know. Then we went into the position of junior third assistant engineer, see. This was a promotion without certification, but as long as we stuck with that setup and performed the job was ours. But should we break the continuity then we had to reenter at our previous other level, see. This was a little gimmick that they had for keeping these positions filled. The same time that he did this he required that we sign up for officer candidate school, see, and all of this would be in the future. So we did another six month cruise. During the process of this six month cruise we moved Patton again,

moving him this time to Sicily. There was a story involved with that, too, which is unique in this respect that we had the opportunity to meet him personally. The way it came about was in a manner which surprised us. In other words, being now the first ship into Palermo we're laying at— before we approached that dock, by the way, we had to wait for a ship to be blown into sections or pieces that were removable by means of our marine crane. We had a marine crane over there at that time that could lift 200 ton. That today is peanuts, but in those days that was record-breaking lift. So these ships that were in the way had to be blown into pieces within the 200 ton range. As they were getting ready to blow, to dynamite, another ship—TNT or whatever they used—somehow or other they overlooked an inside hold. It's called an orlop deck hold—which happened to be full of 500 tons of TNT, and this was missed somehow or other. So when they set off the blast that was to section the ship up the hold full of it blew, and it blew a hole in the seawall wide enough so you could drive a ship right on through [laughs]. And much of Palermo what wasn't already on the ground began rocking and tottering, and it fell down, and in the process there was raised up such a cloud of dust, possibly 500 feet in the air. So they sought to capitalize on this cloud of dust by taking an ammunition train out of Palermo. As they left they circled a mountain and came into a valley, and when they were in the confinements of the valley [laughs] the Germans had 'em pinpointed and they bombed this ammunition train and further blew that up. Then another part of Palermo which was still standing at that point now came rumbling down to the ground. So this cloud of dust hung over the harbor into the next day. So we slowly brought the ship up to the only available dock that had been cleared for our purpose. As we tied up there we started to load Patton's Army aboard our ship. Of course we couldn't take more than two to three thousand of them at one time, but all the other ships were waiting to enter and continue the loading. So the Germans came on the radio again commenting about the pesky Parker and that pest Patton: now we have 'em on one ship, we have 'em bottled up. The way that happened was Patton was expected to board the ship, and on the day that he was to arrive the gangway watch was mounted. These soldiers were stationed in a cross alleyway, and they were at attention, oh, I don't know how many times, pending his arrival, but he didn't arrive all day. Finally late afternoon came, and dinner time come, and now the soldiers were quite exhausted, and they were beginning to recline on the laundry bags which were piled in the cross alleyway. Some of them were relieved to go to get supper. In the midst of this disarray Patton and Bradley pulled up with their vehicle [laughs], and they leaped up and raced up the gangway, and they were right in the midst of these soldiers honor guard, but they didn't make anything of that. There was no—I guess there was an understanding on his part of just how this works. So he was led ceremoniously up the grand stairway, and he emerged on what is called the sport deck. We got the signal for the ship's officers not on duty to assemble for inspection, which

we did on the port side. The military assembled for inspection on the starboard side. Patton with great show came marching down these decks, and he— there wasn't too many of us, a small group of maybe six or eight people that's all, the rest all being at vital work stations and couldn't get away. But he wanted to pass the message along that wherever the Mediterranean war had taken him he had always found our ships ready for the next movement and how much he appreciated this. He went on to say that in the history of the Mediterranean area there the great conquerors that swept the area always were at a loss when they reached the ocean. They couldn't understand the sea, the Mediterranean sea. They couldn't understand a body of water that could defy their movement across continent. But he said in the case of one of the conquerors of that area, he said, one wise person had anticipated his coming, and he had gone up and gotten down most of the Cedars of Lebanon, and he had built ships—a lot of ships—so when the conqueror reached the ocean and wondered what he was in he said, “Master, I will take you anywhere you want to go.” And he said he thought that as a student of history he thought there was a great similarity in our availability that every time he had to do a jump—and this was a lot of jump warfare—we were always ready there, and we had the ships and we moved them and moved them safely and everything had gone off. But now the German radio was protesting that they would take care of both the pest of the *James Parker* and the pest of Patton. “We will let you have it every day in every way,” this is the exact words that this Axis Sally used over the radio, and she was quite understandable. She talked with a clarion, clear voice. She didn't speak English, either; she spoke American, you know, just exactly understood what she was trying to tell us. So at this point Patton and Bradley were very public and for a reason, see. They knew that they were under scrutiny from ashore, see. After all, these people were half enemy and half friend—mostly enemy and part friend. She knew the whole setup. So Patton went up the sport deck, and then he crossed over and to come down the starboard side to inspect the military detachment. At that point he went down a ladder and to the other end of that cross alleyway where he had come in—to the other end though. But now back of all those laundry bags there was a six month accumulation of dining room linen in those laundry bags. They were bags that stood about six feet tall when they stood up, and then laid down they made a hell of a—back of that he came down in back of the guard of honor who was clustered all around there, and then so nobody really saw what he did. He spun open the starboard side port—the door, see. **[End of Tape 2, Side B]** Spun that open, and he slipped out along with Bradley. He dropped on to a small boat—top of the roof of the house of that small boat that come up to receive him. Of course, this whole area was still heavily covered with the dust caused by these previously mentioned explosions. It came off perfect. Nobody saw him. They went to the airfield. Nobody would believe this anyway. They flew to Scotland, see. This was the very first time that this had ever been done. In those days you

did not fly over water distances like that. Besides that, the Germans had command of the air in the western Mediterranean and down that way. They controlled the eastern, and the center was more or less Allied control. So nobody actually believed it then, and it was assumed that he was aboard. That night as part of my duties I went up here to this smokestack. See, the smokestack was what you call a stack housing—the two smokestacks within that housing. There was three deck levels in that housing: one was the radio room, the second one was the boiler/blower room, and the third was the whistle room, see. So I'd have to go up to the blower room and inspect those blowers, and induce draft, and the operation of these huge motors was critical to the operation of the ship; you couldn't get along with out 'em. So we had a every two hour inspection of these big motors, and it was my turn. First trip was done by the oiler of the watch, and the second trip was done by the junior engineer of the watch. So I'm making the 11:00 o'clock trip, and I go up there. We got orders not to use the outside passage but to use the inside passage. Well, the inside passage took you past the captain's lounge. The captain had a six foot tea table in a circle lounge. On this six foot table all of the Allied command had placed their hats in a circle, right around this big table, see. All these hats rested on the edge of this tea table, including Patton and Bradley's hats were there. That way the aides of these high-ranking people could glance in the open doorway, and they could tell at a glance that he was in quarters. Even though Patton and Bradley were off and halfway to Scotland their hats were left on that table, see. So as I went by that open doorway I greeted the guard that was standing outside, and then I give her one glance. At one glance I saw the full circle of hats which we expected to see. So when I come back to the engine room I told the senior engineer on watch there, I says, "Well, everything good up there." I says, "I felt all the bearings, I listened for any looseness, vibrations, anything that might give us bad trouble later on." He says, "To hell with all that! What about the hats?" [laughs] I said, "Well, the hats are all there." So he says, "So that means Patton is aboard." "Well," I said, "That's the way we know it; Patton's aboard." That's all we did know. We didn't know that he had taken exit, you know. So that's how he [laughs] got to Scotland, and we were heading for Scotland, too. Through some kind of a miracle—things like this do happen. I think we left with something like a 500 ship movement there at that time. We had 500 barrage balloons aloft. That's one for every ship. But we no sooner cleared the break wall than we were into weather such as you've never seen. The Mediterranean is much the same as Lake Michigan: you can get into some of the worst damn weather that you've ever seen. You've got your winds that can roll the length and accumulate this force, you know, the same way as it does on Lake Michigan; winds coming from the due north will roll waves of incredible size crashing into Chicago at the end of the lake. All of these barrage balloons save one—that was ours, [laughs] we saw the storm coming, and the old man was a wise old bastard so he ordered the

gunnery officer to bring the gunners back to the bridge from the forward stations. Bring 'em back to the bridge and to reel in the balloon. He got the balloon down. It was the only one that was saved. All the other ones were torn right off the ships and disappeared into the heavens. But it was a blessing for us. I don't know how in the hell people stood that kind of weather, especially down in the troop holds. It was terrible conditions, but it saved us because they weren't able to operate against us at all. Once we got clear of Gibraltar then we, you know, had a fighting chance, and we did then make it to Scotland. When we got to Greenock and Gourock there was Patton and Bradley waiting [laughs] to welcome us. That's quite a story. I was functioning along as a junior engineer then, and in that situation you go from what they call the fo'c'sle [forecastle or upper deck] to the quarters. That's quite a change aboard ship. And you go—[Approx. 5 sec. pause in interview]

Van Ells: Well, we can sort of get it wrapped up here. So when the war ended in 1945, in the summer of '45, where were you precisely?

Boettger: Well, I didn't participate in Normandy, but I participated in southern France. See, we took 850 ships just for that operation, and it was a minor thing compared to Normandy. Normandy kind of snowed it out of the picture. There was even barely any releases concerning southern France, but we went in there, and Marseille and Toulon were secured. We didn't get ashore in the first landing, but the second trip in—reinforcements and all that—then we did get ashore in Marseille. Toulon was the location of these underground submarine constructions that shocked us because there was submarines on the line, you know, ready—endless line production of submarines going on. They were not—we couldn't imagine how you could bomb a place so and then they would still be operational. That was hard to understand. By the way, when we made subsequent trips into Marseille—in the same fashion that I explained about this being a show operation which we had always pushed these ships in first. By the way, another of the ships, the *Cristobal*, was instrumental at Casablanca, Bizerte [Tunisia], Palermo, Naples, and Marseille as well, and the *Ancon* was the ship that led the combined Allied forces into Tokyo Bay when that surrender took place. So you can see that the function of that ship was something unique, something that was planned under the guise of the Panama Line. The Panama Line was a government owned steamship line. It lightly concealed the fact that we needed—we didn't need this type of ship to haul employees of the zone. See, the Canal Zone employees used this ship, 300 at a clip, for their vacation time. There was 10,000 Canal Zone employees, and there was three ships, and they were on a five-day turnaround. It would be five days in New York, and five days going down, and then five days in Panama, and five days coming back. The zone employees embarked and came home. The ship when it went down hauled down locomotives, tugboats—right on deck—and food supplies for the

canal. Returning they would load about 4,000 tons of bananas to fill the spaces. But the concealed motive was something different than that. By the fact that it was a government operated line, they did not have to explain or respond to anybody, and the guy that designed that ship, his name was George Sharp. I got to know him as well as that other great marine architect William Gibbs. I also got to know him in course of the re-conversion of that ship at the end of the war. I was assigned as resident aboard, and in the process I got to know these great marine architects.

Van Ells: One the things I'd—

Boettger: Then, by talking about the end of the war, we finished up after southern France by going to London. We were in the estuary of the Thames, laying there while the second V-2 bombing was in process. Now, what was different from the V-1s to the V-2s: the V-1s had a habit of taking out a whole building; the V-2s had a habit of taking out a whole square block. At the end of that business there were 90,000 buildings were flattened. The English were darn near desperate. They didn't know from day to day how it would stop or where it would stop. So we got orders to go in there, and we got orders to put out every mattress we owned: forty mattresses lined that inside passage, but we had no one else aboard. That was just the crew and the mattresses. Then as it wound down one morning there we got a message to put away thirty-nine mattresses and keep one mattress out [laughs] and sail for Peeremünde [Peenemünde, Germany]. They had finally broken through and captured Peeremünde. The one mattress would be for the top banana in the rocket world. They couldn't do this with any number of a hundred other ships. They have to always do it with this ship, see. Yeah. But when we looked out we saw the escort planes of these rockets—German planes—flying vertically faster than we could fly horizontally, we knew that we were on the threshold of a turning point which would not only affect the air forces of the world, but it would affect every ship of the world. There would no longer be use for ships like this. The people would not go from Panama to New York on a ship like this. And you wouldn't either. I wouldn't. I would jump on a jet plane and go. Of course that didn't happen overnight, but in the years following WWII they gradually caught up on jet production and got into passenger business, and these ships then fell into disuse. Something else happened though, too. You know, when you run a museum don't get religious and don't get political and don't talk about love. That's the cardinal rule, they tell me, in the museum business. But we were talking about battleship diplomacy, and we were talking about FDR. When he died Truman continued on with all of his policies and all of his dreams, and everything went on until there was a change of administration. When the change of administration came then all of this program including the Maritime Service, all of the ship subsidy construction, all of that was scratched overnight. The ships were ordered into the reserve fleet. Others, maybe

2,000, were ordered under foreign flag; that would be ships running still but not with American crews. And a couple thousand more were ordered into scrap. They became the bargaining chips for the Marshall Plan and for UN—United Nations. They—they were our surrender. In other words, they couldn't defeat us with war measures, but they defeated us with peace measures. They handed all of these scrap ships over to the enemy to rebuild the enemy. And the enemy did not come over easy as allies. They came with a price. One of the prices that we had to pay was to back off on the maritime competition. In other words, we would leave the maritime world to our allies, namely Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey. They would take care of the maritime involvement, and they would take care of some of our NATO ship involvement, too—armed ships, that is, war ships. We saw that as a small price to pay in order to get allies for NATO. We needed allies to anchor the northern end, and we needed Turkey and Greece, Italy to anchor the southern end. We conceded all of this to them, but I don't have to tell you where that left us standing. That left most of us standing on the dock without a job.

Van Ells: Yeah. So when the war ended, how long was it until you were out of the maritime support service?

Boettger: Oh, then it was another year. It was happening in another year with this involvement. Then we ended up by doing thirteen war bride runs in a row. The ship had to be symbolically painted white.

Van Ells: That was on purpose?

Boettger: Yes, and it had to be repainted every single trip so there were thirteen coats [laughs] of paint put on that boat.

Van Ells: Why was it painted every time?

Boettger: Well, because it left white and beautiful and very symbolic. By the time it got back that paint was half torn off, and the red rust was in the white, and it was the most awful looking sight you ever saw. Several days the ship would act as a hotel ship. In that few days then the painters would go over her all over.

Van Ells: So when the war ended, you wanted to stay in the Maritime Service I get the impression—

Boettger: Well, I did continue for six more years. I was resident for the conversion back to the Panama Railroad Line. When the Panama Railroad Line—it became apparent that three ships would now not be involved but only one—then I was going to be squeezed back to the fo'c'sle again, see: wait



your turn, you know. Which probably would have been well worth it, but I had friends that were in the Army Transport Service who were constantly asking me to join them continuing on as an officer. So that's what happened. When this thing was operational again, New York to Panama, and I got squeezed out then I went aboard the *George Goethals*—which is another troopship—and we sailed. By the way, did you know that the Coast Guard training ship, the *Eagle*, that that's a German ship?

Van Ells: No—

Boettger: Yes. Here it is right here: the *Horst Wessel*.

Van Ells: Oh, is that right?

Boettger: Yeah. When we would be over there in Bremerhaven we would use that for a playground, you know, scrambling around on that boat. It was so beautiful. They had four of 'em like that. We took the *Eagle* in as war reparations and brought her over to this country. She sails to this day as a training ship.

Van Ells: So after the war you stayed in the Maritime Service and transported GIs—

Boettger: Yeah.

Van Ells: Over for occupation—

Boettger: After, yes. Then there was a whole different—the war brides to dependents, high-pointers—that's military, you know, being relieved and sent home again—and displaced persons.

Van Ells: These would be like Holocaust—

Boettger: And I don't have to tell you what this business is here.

Van Ells: Oh, yeah.

Boettger: Go to Philadelphia and load up 4,600 coffins: body bags in coffins, coffins in shipping boxes.

Van Ells: So you're transporting—after a battle they'll bury the bodies temporarily.

Boettger: Yeah.

Van Ells: And then bring them back after the war, and that's what's going on here?

Boettger: Yeah, yeah, that's what's going on. They had a mortuary factory in Antwerp [Belgium]. They processed the bodies at a rate of 200 a day. It would take about three and half weeks to get all those coffins filled with bodies, and then we sailed them back to New York. When we got back to New York they would have a group burial. The upper deck of these piers would be—oh, now where we can see that, probably right here, see up here, see the upper deck would have a grandstand in there. There'd be about 15,000 mourners in those bleachers up there, and then a symbolic lift—a single lift—would be put up there on the podium. These families would come from a fifteen state area, more or less grouping, central grouping system. Then the bodies would be loaded and sent home. So that went on. And then the displaced persons, the war brides, the—oh yeah, and the art treasures of Europe. That was another. On one trip we took back \$80,000,000 worth of stolen art treasures—brought that back to the country.

Van Ells: So, you said you stayed in the Maritime Service about six years after?

Boettger: Well, yes, I continued in the Maritime Service. I made my commission in '44/'45. That would be November, December, January and February. Officers Candidate school was located in Fort Trumbull, New London, Connecticut. I was telling you about putting in—the same time that we went out I was certified for upgrading aboard ship we also threw in for two things: we threw in for simultaneously for vacation, and we also threw in for OCS [Officers Candidate School], see. Now, you couldn't get off of one of these ships by simply asking for vacation. The catch was to be relieved, see, and you couldn't get relieved at all. But the minute you put in for Officers Candidate School that was solved. While we were heading back to the States, it was late October, we pull in to a pier on the west side of New York—Pier 92, I think it was. I look over the side, and there's a minibus down there and on top of the minibus it said, "Howard Paul Edwin", see [laughs]. One-foot letters right on the top of that. So the chief says, "Quick." He says, "Pack your bags in your bag and jump on that bus." So we jumped on that bus and same evening we were up in New London, Connecticut and enrolled in that Officers Candidate School. At that point, now this was late '44, and at that point they were so desperate for officers, you know. So we went in, and when we came out then the big push was starting '45. We got out in time to join the big push.

Van Ells: So what prompted you to finally leave the Maritime Service?

Boettger: Well, I just said that the change of administration resulted in all of these programs being cancelled. We saw the end coming, and so I put in for what they called a turbo electric school, which I got admitted to, and simultaneously I got promoted from lieutenant JG [junior grade] to lieutenant senior grade in the training service see. Then following that I

was supposed to be signed as resident aboard the General *George Goethals* in the reconversion of that ship. It would stay as what they call now a dependent ship in which families, you know, went back and forth. So, on the strength of that—that conversion was to last nine months, and on the strength of that we got married, see [laughs]. About the only way a seaman can get the land and get some time while still having the benefits of payroll and all that. So we got married, and we were on our honeymoon in midtown Manhattan—five days—when one night this particular Army officer, a Colonel Litel, he comes to the hotel where I was staying and knocks on the door. We had a little two room suite there. I opened the door, and I greeted him and I said, “Gee, come on in.” He says, “No,” he says, “come on out.” So I grabbed my robe—this was about two in the morning, you know—grabbed my robe and put it on, and we went down to the end of the hall where there was a little lounge area at the end of the hall. He says, “Now, Eddie.” When the Colonel calls you “Ed” you gotta say to yourself, “Something is—.” [laughs]

Van Ells: Amiss.

Boettger: Amiss here. So he said, “Ed,” he said, I was ever so happy to get you into the turbo electric school. That gave you an opportunity to get married, and now you’ve had all the honeymoon you need and all that.” And he said, “By the way,” he said, “you’re the last engineer unassigned. Absolutely the last one,” he said. He says, “I don’t know how I was able to manage that, but I kept stalling your name down.” He says, “I figure five days was reasonable.” [laughs] I says, “But,” I says, “what about the *Goethals*? I’m supposed to be resident conversion engineer on the *Goethals*.” “Oh,” he said, “that’s all over with.” He said, “Wasn’t too long after you were in that school that we had to refloat the *Goethals*, load her with troops, and rush her over to Europe.” See, the Berlin crisis was in process at that time. **[End of Tape 3, Side A]** He says, “I’ll tell you what.” I got the—here it is right here, the *Oglethorpe* Victory. He says, “I’ve got the *Oglethorpe* coming down from the Reserve Fleet,” he said. “I want to shift you out of here and over to Red Bank, New Jersey.” Red Bank, of course as everybody knows, is the ammunition pier. There’s a pier sticking out into the ocean two miles in length. When you use that pier your ship is at the end of that pier, and from the hotel on the cliffs looking out the ship appears diminutive [laughs], almost like a toy thing, you know. So my wife says, “Well, why way out there? Why didn’t they just bring it up to this end of the pier?” I says, “Well, we’re loading pineapples.” She says, “Pineapples in February?” [momentary pause in recording] 7,200 tons of land mines, and these land mines were desperately needed in Germany. Cuxhaven was the port of debarkation there. When we got to Cuxhaven we pulled in, and the stevedores rushed aboard, and they threw off all the covers. There was an engine waiting on the dock with one single boxcar. As fast as they could they filled that one boxcar and rushed it off with one

engine toward the front, and up came—the next one that came up was an engine with two boxcars; they filled all of that and away. That continued until noon, see. Then at noon it started to rain, and so the head of the stevedore union over there he came aboard, and he had a meeting with the captain and the officer in charge of the port there. He announced that their contract forbids them to work ammunition in the rain. So the officer said, “Well, you’ll be back tomorrow morning?” “Well, no.” See, this was a Friday, and they wouldn’t be back on Saturday morning, and they wouldn’t be back on Sunday morning, and they wouldn’t be back on Monday morning, and they wouldn’t be back on Tuesday morning. Why? Because it was a church holiday, and the church holiday involved is called Whitsun. In northern Europe that’s a big, big church holiday. So we’re saying, “Well, what about these guys that were lately anti-American, anti-Christ, and anti-everything, why now was it so important for them to go to church?” Well, turns out that the holiday is the bigger thing than church so everybody at that point looks for that fourday holiday. They says, “You know, Germany has not declared a state of emergency, and as long as parliament has not declared a state of emergency then the contract rules apply.” “But,” they said, “don’t worry. [laughs] We’ve sent enough mines to the front so that your mine layers and our mine layers”—and the Germans and Americans were working together on that—“laying all they can lay will not use up the amount that we’ve already sent to the front.” See, so they won the point that we had no—on the other side of the front the Russians had 300 divisions, and we had our thirty-five divisions. The land mines would delay the route enough so that we could make an orderly retreat, see. That was the function of that. So as soon as they—when Wednesday morning arrived then they of course came back to work, and they worked around the clock and got all the land mines off. We sailed for more land mines. But before we got halfway across the ocean then we got ordered to stall, and the ship was sent to Bermuda. We were ordered to go into the bay there off Hamilton and drop anchor and wait, just wait. See they had at that point in the Berlin crisis, we had something like 4,000 ships at sea, and now these ships were all suddenly ordered back. We could not accommodate that many ships at coastal United States so those ships were diverted in order to stall and lay around wherever they could. But then the next order that came through would be to sail for Trinidad where we would break up an airfield. We would haul the airfield equipment to Germany where they desperately needed all that equipment to bolster the defenses.

Van Ells: So we’re getting down to about ten minutes worth of tape. We need to start wrapping it up, I think.

Boettger: Well, I think so. I might conclude to say that I continued on until there was almost a total collapse of job opportunities. At that point simultaneously we lost our apartment in Endicott, where we were living in

Endicott, New York. Then we packed up and moved to Two Rivers. We had about as far as we could go at that time. I was through with my allotted time Atlantic, and my next assignment, when it would come, would be Pacific, and we were newly married, and I was not quite up to Pacific. So then I continued here on the Great Lakes and I did another fifteen years of my career on the Great Lakes in the same capacity, working as an engineer. Then I—this is me here too, on a—this is another story, by the way, it has to do with the grounding of the *Queen Elizabeth*. At this point the *Queen Elizabeth* has been fully reconverted back to a North Atlantic circle liner.

Van Ells: So in the postwar years, now, a lot of Army or Navy veterans would get certain benefits. As a Merchant Mariner you weren't able to get such things like a GI Bill—

Boettger: No.

Van Ells: Or that sort of thing.

Boettger: No.

Van Ells: Did the thought occur to you after you got out of the service that you might want such a thing?

Boettger: No. I was resigned to the idea that I would not be entitled to it, and that was understood by all seamen. The seamen themselves did not apply for this at all, no. But it was the dependents of the seamen that pushed it through. You see, if you were the father and the mother or the family, of a disabled or dependent seaman the burden was on you, and with the closing of the Marine Hospitals there was no place for you to go. You would be either into a Veterans Hospital or would be into a local hospital at your own burden, your own expense. So that's how it come to pass.

Van Ells: So I was just wondering if there was some sort of resentment on your part. You served like anyone else at the time.

Boettger: No. I didn't resent anything because I understood the conditions perfectly when I went in, and I enjoyed and I appreciated so much what I got. I was surprised that ultimately the benefits were extended to the seamen. As for me, now, it simply means that I'm entitled to the flag and to the grave marker, yeah. That's about all that it means to us, yeah.

Van Ells: Now, in terms of organizations, are you eligible to join like the American Legion—

Boettger: You can join any of the veterans groups. I did not consider that—and especially I didn't consider joining the American Legion because by reason of their congressional lobbies they had defeated this idea for over forty years, and it would be ludicrous for me to join the American Legion.

Van Ells: You didn't feel welcome.

Boettger: Didn't feel that way, no. This is the *Panama*, or *James Parker*, on her maiden voyage and this is lower Manhattan in the background. This is another picture aboard the ship. Now, I furnished all the artifacts that I have left, you know, by way of papers and certificates and designations of rank. The end result was that most of this institution was terminated but they did get one concession: they did continue with the [Merchant Marine] Academy.

Van Ells: Yeah, it's in—

Boettger: And you can apply for the Merchant Marine Academy today. I have visited it in recent years: wonderful institution. They had a body of students, about 800, forty of which were women, girls. The particular girl that was assigned to our group at this reunion, she was really impressive and really admirable. I wouldn't have hesitated one minute to turn the watch over to her--almost unbelievable how dedicated. Now, you have to understand that in traditional maritime society, the great ship minded people of the East Coast and West Coast too have always given one son to the sea. Now they the option of being able to give the daughter if the sons are not available. I think that's a great thing, and these that have graduated and gone into the business are very much respected, and they have a definite place.

Van Ells: Well, thanks for your time.

Boettger: Yeah.

Van Ells: Your generous amount of time.

**[End of Interview]**