

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KELLY CLIFTON
U. S. Coast Guard, World War II

2006

OH
951

OH
951

Clifton, Kelly, (b.1927). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 70 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 70 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Kelly Clifton, a Spokane, Washington native, describes his experiences as a radar operator for the Coast Guard in the Hawaiian Islands during and after World War II. Clifton talks about his family, many of whom were servicemen: his brother was with the 77th Seabees, one brother-in-law survived a kamikaze attack on his destroyer, and another brother-in-law was killed in a P-38 crash. He speaks of dropping out of high school to sign up with a group of friends and claims at least ten percent of the males in his class signed up with the Coast Guard. He mentions choosing to be a radar operator and having boot camp at Government Island Coast Guard Base (California). Clifton touches upon a party held after the first bomb was dropped. He describes his assignment to the CGC *Walnut*, a buoy tender, and characterizes a couple of his skippers and executive officers. He provides a sketch of the bridge, built from a classy ship's salvage, and the ship's teeter-totter movements over the waves. Clifton describes helmsman duties, dungaree liberty, and the main Loran station, and he talks about deciding to be a geneticist. He portrays his experience on the first ship to arrive at Hilo Harbor after the 1946 tsunami and bringing in floaters. Clifton tells of an accident on Niihau Island involving landing craft and oil drums, which resulted in his feet getting pounded by barrels and his legs getting second degree burns from the sun. He speaks of an officer who tried to court-martial him because Clifton stopped working due to his injuries. He describes drinking whiskey with an officer who was lonely because of not fraternizing with the enlisted men and going to the Naval Hospital at Pearl Harbor. Clifton mentions his ship had a complete turnover while he was gone and he returned to find his locker broken into, and he talks about having to buy a set of blues from a new guy to wear home. He touches upon being applauded for showing his Ruptured Duck on the bus ride home and tells of picking up his high school diploma, attending the University of Montana and the University of Wisconsin using the GI Bill, and marrying. Clifton expresses opinions about the current situation in Iraq saying it was wrong to send soldiers without proper equipment.

Biographical Sketch:

Kelly Clifton (1927-) served in the Coast Guard in Hawaii during and after World War II. Honorably discharged in 1946, Clifton is a professor emeritus of human oncology at the University of Wisconsin Medical School and currently resides in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcript edited and abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2008.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and today is April 19, 2006. And this is an oral history interview with Kelly Clifton, a veteran of the United States Coast Guard, and we are at the Veterans Museum, in Madison, in the Conference Room. And, Kelly, thank you so much for agreeing to the interview and for coming down. Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Kelly: Spokane, Washington.

John: Spokane. When?

Kelly: 1927.

John: Okay.

Kelly: July 22, 1927.

John: Early family life?

Kelly: Yeah. I was the sixth of six children. And my mother claimed the only one that was planned.

John: That was what?

Kelly: Planned. We were stretched out over eighteen years. My oldest sister was eighteen years older than I was. My one brother was sixteen years older than I. Then another sister, then three more sisters. One nine years older, six years older, and three years older. Sounds very much like they were planned.

John: Spaced well, anyway.

Kelly: But, the reason for the planning was that about the time the fourth sister was born, my father lost a leg. He was a big man. And had been an athlete. And it was a significant blow.

John: I'll bet.

Kelly: As a result of, actually, as it was the result of a football injury. You won't believe this. He was born and raised in Oberlin, Ohio. He was born outside of that, but his mother moved to Oberlin. She was widowed when he was about five or six. And I think she moved, well, I know she did, to Oberlin in order to get him into Oberlin College, ultimately. And that's where he met my mother. And my mother was a --

my mother's father had been born in upper New York, but had grown up in a large part in Madison. And he had gone west, and ultimately became an officer in the Anaconda Copper Mining Company.

John: Okay.

Kelly: In Montana. Her mother had gone west a good deal earlier in a wagon train captained by her father.

John: Oh, wow. Oh. (laughs)

Kelly: In 1865, from Illinois. And she was born in a little mining town in northern Idaho. When she was six weeks old, she was taken in a stage coach to the rail head. My dad and mother were born in 1883. And, so. That's the -- my dad was, when he went west, he became a highway and railroad contractor. And he had his company, a partnership. He worked in four of the northwest states. Oregon, Montana, Idaho, and Washington.

John: Okay.

Kelly: And this is how we wound up in Spokane. It was kind of the hub of that area. I went to the public schools in Spokane, and in my house, there was a picture of mother's four brothers in the uniforms of the First World War.

John: Okay.

Kelly: I knew one of them had died in an automobile accident in the early twenties. But I knew the other three uncles rather well. There were about eight first cousins from five different sib groups that were all my mother's relatives because my dad didn't have any brothers or sisters. And of the eight men, all of them were in service, except me. Because, well except me and one other who was younger than me by a few months. So, and my brother was ultimately taken in the roster of the 77th Seabees. They built an airport on Guam. They went in with the third wave, under fire. And they built it. Within a short period of time, just weeks, they had more freight on that airport than any other airport in the world. Isn't that fantastic?

John: (laughs) Yeah. They did such a great job.

Kelly: Yeah. And we were not a military oriented family. (John laughs) I mean, it was a gut feeling that this is something you had to do. And my, one of my sister's husband was on a tin can, that is, a destroyer that got a kamikaze down the stack.

John: Oh, wow.

Kelly: But they got it back to Pearl Harbor, amazingly enough. I don't know how they did it. And another one, unfortunately, another brother-in-law was in the first group that were given P-38s to fly, and they were flying coffins. He cracked up. You couldn't get out of them.

John: Yeah, that's right. I remember hearing that.

Kelly: And it was before they had the thing that shoots you up in the air with -- on your seat, and he was in the first squadron that had them and it took him up and it was a bad thing. Well, in any event, I was with a group of friends, a couple of friends, and we decided to go, we were thinking of the Marines, of all things. And, but we happened to walk by the office of the U.S. Coast Guard. And, as you know, the Coast Guard is taken over by the Navy during war.

John: Okay.

Kelly: From the Treasury Department. Well, they had a very good recruiting office.

John: Where was this?

Kelly: This was in Spokane.

John: Spokane. Okay.

Kelly: And I was a senior in high school. So we went in and we talked to him. And it appealed to me that they used predominately small ships, so you weren't on a ship with three thousand crew. And I liked that idea. And they did all, they were the first to be in landing craft, because they were the small ship people. And they also became, I guess, did a lot of preliminary work for getting landings in. As to where people were going to land, and all this stuff. I don't know why they didn't use the Coast Guard more. Why they didn't turn over the handling of harbors to somebody that knows what they're doing. (both laugh) It would be nice to have somebody who knew what they were doing in catastrophic circumstances. And they really do know. The upshot was that the Coast Guard got, I think it was at least ten percent of the males in my senior class, enlisted in the Coast Guard. And up from other high schools in the town, too.

John: Spokane isn't on the coast, is it?

Kelly: No, (laughs) there is a mountain range and a desert between Spokane and the coast. It's fifteen miles from the Idaho border. And so, anyway, a bunch of us went in. I quit high school to do so. I tell everybody at my high school to drop out.

'Cause I was. But I had taken all the required courses, and so I went in the spring of '45. I went into the Coast Guard. And I got separated from the rest of them because they came in, they had some areas that they wanted to give more training to a small number of people. And I chose to, one of them was to become a radar operator.

John: Okay.

Kelly: And I chose to do that because it was the shortest school. And I wanted to get to sea. That was why I joined the darned service. So I went to radar operators school in San Diego, which was the Navy school. And there were about, oh, four or five of us in that class of about thirty or forty, that were Coast Guards.

John: Where did you do your basic?

Kelly: In Sand Island [meant Government Island], in the Oakland-Alameda Estuary.

John: Is that a Coast Guard base?

Kelly: Yeah. It's an island that, at that time, was surrounded by sewage.

John: Oh, wow. (both laugh)

Kelly: And it was about this far, six or eight inches above the sea level at high tide. I was in boot camp for, I don't know, six weeks or so.

John: Okay.

Kelly: Anyway, the day that I graduated from radar operators school, and was assigned to an attack transport.

John: Okay. An APA.

Kelly: That was the day the first bomb was dropped.

John: Oh, okay. That was my birthday, August 6th.

Kelly: August 6th. That's right. And it was incredible. We had, the Coast Guardsmen, when they graduated, or finished, were sent for a weekend, to the air-sea rescue Coast Guard base in San Diego, to then go back up to the San Francisco area, to go to their, be sent to their assignments. And the commander of the base called everybody together, and he said what had happened, and he said, he figured it was going to be the end. And he said, "I've arranged for a party this afternoon. And I

am going to leave you. Just don't tear up the base." (both laugh) And this was a little tiny base. Now, this wasn't just happening on the Navy base, but it happened on the Coast Guard base. And [one second gap on tape] we had a party. And we were hung over when we were put on the train the next morning. And traveled up to San Francisco.

John: You would have been slated for the invasion of the home islands then.

Kelly: That's right. That was the only place to go.

John: Tremendous relief. Wow.

Kelly: It was. It didn't dawn on me what it really was. So then I was in a manning base, so called, waiting for assignment. Because they changed the orders. And was on Treasure Island for about a week. And then we went out as replacements for long-term guys, and we were sent to Honolulu. And I got onto a buoy tender, which was -- its job was to handle all of the buoys, reset all the buoy in all the little—big, little, intermediate—harbors in the Hawaiian Islands. It was a terrible thing to have to do. (laughs) And because I, it turns out I was the second person or the third person on the ship that could run their radar. They didn't have an opening for a radar operator. But they said, come on up to the bridge after I had done a couple weeks peeling spuds (laughs) in the galley. I went up to the bridge and because I could, I was one of a couple or three guys who could run the radar machine, and this then made me a quartermaster striker. Because the quartermaster being the assistant to the officer of the bridge.

John: Yup. Yup.

Kelly: And in times when we were laying buoys, and it was my watch, I was the helmsman. And whenever we were pulling into, doing anything other than holding a course, I took the ship in at the helm. And the skipper -- we had about twenty-three, we varied, but about twenty and twenty-five crew members. We had, our skipper was what was called a mustang, as he was commissioned from a chief petty officer, and he was an old seadog. He could stand, this ship was a hundred and thirty-five feet long, CGC *Walnut*. It was built in the 1940s, early '40s or '39, maybe, when they were short of parts and so on. So it was partly, it had the fanciest bridge on it that you have ever seen. Polished brass, and all of this stuff. And it had metal pointer, there was a thing that held the big wheel. The wheel was, anyway, these were pieces that were salvaged. And the bridge was salvaged from a pretty classy ship. And the wheel was four feet across. It was one of these big ones, like on a river boat, you know, in the old movies. And you literally spun the thing at times. And there was a pointer, a brass pointer, that told you when you were going straight ahead. But it didn't, it wasn't calibrated with actual reality

(both laugh), so there were scratches that said you were either full rudder left, or what. It was incredible. Anyway, this skipper was a very rational person, and he, after you'd got a little experience, he would just say, "Take her in." He didn't bother with any of the orders to the helmsman. His executive officer was, well, I'll be frank. His executive officer was a very mild, a rather large man but not very well constructed. And, in fact, the skipper was known to refer to him directly as "Bottle Ass."

John: (both laugh) Okay.

Kelly: And his major aim in life, when he finished his service, was to, and he was, I don't know if he was a ninety-day wonder or something of that nature. Anyway, he wanted to sing with, what was the name of the man who had a chorus that --?

John: Mitch Miller?

Kelly: No, it preceded Mitch Miller. Fred Waring.

John: Oh, Fred Waring. Okay. Wow.

Kelly: That is what he wanted to do in life. I don't know whether, I have no idea whether his voice was that good. And the third, the engineering officer, was actually, still was a chief. And a Hawaiian. A neat guy. And it was a petroleum fired steam boat, ship. And anyway, the hull was shaped like an egg. And when it was fully loaded, it drew only two fathoms.

John: Oh.

Kelly: The result being that it was too short to go over the tops of the waves and not long enough to go through 'em. So it went up on the wave, teeter-tottered like this, and then went bam!

John: Okay. Yeah.

Kelly: It was one of the roughest riding things. (both laugh) Oh, God, I got sick. Well, but, it was an extraordinary experience in many respects. I had left all my friends behind when I went on the ship. I had a lot of time to think. And I did a lot of thinking. And I must say that I had met the girl that I ultimately married when she was sixteen and I was seventeen.

John: Oh, great.

Kelly: And I knew that, I figured that I wanted to marry her. I decided that I thought I

wanted, I had wanted from the time before I went to high school, to be a biologist. I was not interested in going into medicine. I was interested in doing research. And I thought at the time that I wanted to be a geneticist. And one of the interesting things to me, a remarkable thing, I read that – Someone had got hold of a Reader's Digest that had—onboard the ship—that had an article about a geneticist who had worked on ivory corn with Henry Wallace's family that were pioneers in the corn business. And I wrote him a letter and said, "How do you become a geneticist?" And I'll be darned if he didn't write back.

John: Wonderful.

Kelly: Yeah. I thought it was a wonderful thing. Well, he told me to go get a bachelor's degree in biology and then you chose a good place to do graduate work in genetics. Well, he thought Iowa was probably the place. Iowa State. But, anyway, that was kind of an interesting thing. Well, did anything other than -- oh, when we went to the little towns throughout the little bays, of which there are a zillion, you know, in the Hawaiian Islands. It was very casual. We could go on what we called dungaree liberty. You didn't have to get all dressed up. It was close enough after the war that there were reasons to do this. So we got used to this kind of operation. And we saw a lot of really neat places. There were two incidents that were of considerable experiences. One was that I was on -- we were the first ship to go into Hilo after the tsunami of May, I think it was May, 1946.

John: Oh, wow. Oh.

Kelly: And there had been a ship unloading, or loading, I don't know which, in Hilo Harbor at the time, and it had pulled out just as soon as it could just after the tsunami. They -- Hilo Harbor is not a very good harbor at all. It's a kind of an open, curved little spot, and it has a northwest, or northeast exposure. And to make it into a better harbor, they had built a breakwater from the south end of it, out, that was big boulders, and concrete, and there had been an asphalt road that went on the top of this thing. And when we entered, when we came down there, we discovered, at the time of the tsunami, we were in harbor at Honolulu. Our base harbor was Honolulu Harbor, and there was a Coast Guard base on Sand Island, which protects that harbor. But it's on the south side of the island that it is on. And Hilo is exposed to the northeast. Well, the tsunami hit it head-on, and it just absolutely destroyed that breakwater.

John: Wow.

Kelly: And it killed I don't know how many longshoremen who were loading the ship. And so we got there just in time to spend a day, which I took part in for about three or four hours, bringing in floaters.

John: Oh, wow. Okay.

Kelly: Which, we went out in small boats and roped them, and brought them to shore, or to a little pier that survived. A small boat pier. And there was the coroner who was an undertaker, and families, waiting to identify.

John: Oh, wow. That must have been rough.

Kelly: And that was the first experience of that type I shall always remember, certainly. So that was one experience that was --

John: Let me flip this thing over.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

John: Okay, go ahead.

Kelly: So, the other one, the experience, someone in the naval office, I should say this, Sand Island, which I said was an island that really shelters much of Honolulu Harbor, that it is well named. In that it is just above sea level. And it was a storage area for heavy equipment from all over, and a lot of which they were taking out and dumping into the ocean. And some person in the Fourteenth Naval District thought it would be a real neat idea to find a use for the landing craft. Well, we had to service the Loran stations, the main Loran station in the Hawaiian Islands were on an island that was wholly owned by a private family.

John: Oh, wow.

Kelly: It's unique. I don't know what its situation is now. But it was the owner family of this, it was one of the five families that owned the Hawaiian Islands that moved in early. Mostly with, of course, converting the heathens. And this particular family, I think it's Robertson. Anyway, they allowed no one but pure blood Polynesians on the island. And they were, quote, "protecting the race." There was one person who was not Polynesian that was allowed to come on the island because he, and he was of Japanese background, and he ran, the reason he was, that he ran a sampan back and forth between, the island is Niihau, yeah. And it is shaped like a bean, and it is closest to Kauai.

John: Okay.

Kelly: And he ran back and forth, bringing supplies. And he had married a Polynesian woman who lived on the island. And then there was the base, and the base had

about, I think, about twenty guys, and one officer. Part of this is really funny. Well, so, back to the landing craft. They thought it would be neat to try to find a use for these landing craft. And it was an absolute dumb idea. (both laugh) We had, in previous services to the station, we had taken the oil drums and lashed them together and floated them in. Into a protected area, and then they were pulled out, and taken to the camp. Well, this guy said, "Why don't we have our landing craft load up with these oil drums and take them into the beach?" What no one had considered was the fact that the surf on that beach was, it was a west-facing, that's where you get the big surf. And it was a white, beautiful sand beach, coral sand. And the surf was breaking at fifteen feet.

John: Okay.

Kelly: The coxswain's nest on the back of the landing craft was maybe eight feet above the surf. We were in there, about eight of us were in this, including the executive officer. I should back up.

John: That's all right.

Kelly: Okay, our original skipper and his executive officer had been reassigned from our ship, and we had a new pair. The skipper being another mustang, and the executive officer being a fresh graduate of the Coast Guard Academy.

John: Okay.

Kelly: And they were, the skipper (laughs) was okay, but the executive officer was not conversant with the culture of the ship. And with dungaree liberty, and things of this nature. And the senior quartermasters had accumulated umpteen zillion points and were sent home, for discharge. So I had been standing four on, four off, four on, eight off, on trips. 'Cause there was one other quartermaster, and he never learned how to run the radar. And so when he was on duty, he always had to wake me up (laughs) and show him how to do it. Anyway, I had made the mistake one day when I was being given orders to the helm by the young executive officer. I had, there was a very long, twisty bay that we were going into that I had done three or four times. And I said, after he had given me orders to the helm, formal, why, I said. "Would you like me to take it in, sir?" And he exploded, and got very angry, and he said, "You will do what I tell you to do, exactly." And our blood was not very good. Our relationship was not very good. Because I tended to be kind of wise. And that was followed about a week later by us going into Pearl Harbor and, where we were going to moor next to another ship. And I followed his orders to the, right? And it was a disaster. And I kept a straight face. And we had to make about three or four runs. And by then all the crew of the other ship we were mooring with (laughs) were standing there giggling. So we were buddies

after that experience. Well, I should also say that after the trip that we were taking to supply the Loran station, I knew that we were all going to be, most of the crew was going to be sent back to the States for discharge. Because the Coast Guard, as soon as possible, the Navy unloaded them back to the Treasury Department.

John: Back to the Treasury Department.

Kelly: And when they did that, the Treasury Department had had a twelve thousand man group man before the war, and they got a hundred and thirty-five thousand back from the Navy, and it essentially decommissioned whole bases, and discharged virtually everybody except the few regulars that were on it. And so we were just going to be shoved off. Well, it didn't turn out that I went with the group back because we had this thing that was built for unloading men and people and maybe something like a Jeep.

John: Yeah.

Kelly: And we came in and hit this beach and I remember looking over my shoulder and seeing this thing coming up over the coxswain's nest, and crashing into the front. Of course, he had put the front down. And most everybody had run out when they saw what was obviously going to happen. I was one of the last guys. I was kind of slow. And I went out and the barrels came out on top of me. And one guy tried to reach me, and he didn't. And I wasn't swimming, I was crawling through the sand and holding my breath. And suddenly the water went out and it dropped barrels on my feet. But I got clear of it, and was able to get a few steps ahead on the beach. The result was that then they had all these damned barrels on the beach, they had this landing craft, that may still be there, as far as I know. Anyway, I got up on the beach, and everybody was trying to get control of the barrels. And including the executive officer. Well, I had no shoes or socks, at this point. I am very susceptible to sunburn. I was a red head, and generally speaking—

John: Yeah.

Kelly: That's not a good thing, to be in the sun. But I took off my dungarees because they were rubbing my legs raw in the salt water. So I did that. Which nobody in their right mind would have done. The result was that by noon, my feet were about twice the size of normal and I had second degree burns on my legs. And there was a Jeep from the Loran station above the beach and a guy sitting, watching, waiting to see what was going to happen. And I went up to him, and was sitting with this guy. And I had been working until this point, but it was to the point where I couldn't walk. So the exec came up and said, "Clifton, why aren't you working?" And I said, "I can't walk, sir." I said, "Because I can't walk." And he said, "Are you refusing an order?" And I said, "Yes, sir. I can't walk. Look at my feet." And

he said, "I am sending you back for a court-martial in the Fourteenth Naval District Headquarters." I said, "Yes, sir."

John: Fine by me. (laughs)

Kelly: So I was then taken to the Loran station base and somebody found a huge pair of shoes and I cut them down so that I could have something on my feet. And just tied them onto my feet. This is kind of, anyway, there was one officer in this Loran station. And he came and talked to me, and pretty soon – it was by then evening, and I'd had dinner. And he started pouring out, because I was the only person, it seemed that he had decided that he had to be more serious about being an officer, and that meant that he could not fraternize with the enlisted men. That is a no-no in the officer's rule book. And he was the only officer. On this Loran station.

John: Oh, wow. What a lonely existence.

Kelly: Yeah. And, so, nobody would talk to him. And pretty soon (laughs), he located a fifth of whiskey for medicinal purposes.

John: That's right.

Kelly: And the next thing I know (laughs), I am sitting, practically patting him on the back and saying, "Now, now, now, poor thing." And doing a pretty good job. Here I am, an eighteen year old enlisted man and he's not supposed to fraternize with the enlisted people. And we did a pretty good job, the two of us, on his fifth. Well, so the next morning, the sampan was coming over, and I was just turned loose to go back to the Fourteenth Naval District and so I was taken to the sampan that unloaded in a protected harbor. Not on the beach with the fifteen foot surf. And it was up at the other end of the island from the Loran station, which is probably fifteen, I don't know, ten or fifteen miles. And so I rode on the sampan when it left to Kauai and there was an Air Force camp. And there was a doc, a radiologist, who was closing down, they were closing down that base. And he was closing down the x-ray equipment, most of which he had already sent away. So he had nothing to do, he had no x-ray equipment. He looked me over and said, he asked me where I was supposed to be going. I told him. And he said, "The hell you are gonna there. I am sending you to the Naval Hospital at Pearl. If we can get you there." So I slept on a cot in the sick bay that was being closed down for another night. And the next day I got a ride on a plane, an Air Force plane, that took me to Hickam [Air Force Base] where I got a ride then in the late afternoon, of the, well, I don't know how you count. It's either two days of three days after the accident. To the Naval Hospital at Pearl. And I went into the admissions office, or check in, or whatever it was called. And there wasn't anybody there. I just went into the

door and there was a little office by the door, and I went in, and there was nobody there. And I sat down. And then I heard click-click-click-click high heels, and I'm not a great admirer of a lot of perfumes. They kind of make me nauseous. But this didn't. It was very nice that I smelled. And I said, to somebody behind me, "My gosh, you smell nice." And I turned around and there was a lieutenant commander (laughs), and she did smell nice. And she blushed, and said, "Thank you." (laughs) Anyway, when I got to a doc, why, it was in a big ward, maybe thirty, forty guys. And by then, actually, I was better than I had been when I started out. But the first question the doc asked me was, "How did you get a hold of mustard gas?" For the burns. And I said, "That's sunburn." And anyway, I had the top of each foot was one big blister. Then I blistered all the way up my legs, both legs. And they were swollen so that my toes were getting in my way. Anyway, amazingly, to me, there were no bones broken. The damage was all soft tissue damage, crushed kind of stuff. And so he caught me the next day going to the bathroom without a wheel chair or anything. And he said, "You could lose both feet." So I went back to bed. And stayed there, and I was there for three weeks. And, fortunately, during that time, the ship had a complete turnover, virtually complete, of the enlisted crew. And fortunately they weren't off doing something. They were in Honolulu Harbor when I got discharged from the hospital. And I went back to the ship and -- oh, and I'll say this. When I was in the hospital, the executive officer came in and, I give him a lot of credit, he came in and apologized.

John: Well, that says something for him.

Kelly: That says something for him. And I thought that was just really unusually good. And, anyway, I got back to the ship, and I discovered that my ship mates had broken into my locker (both laugh) and I had no blues. And I knew I had to have blues in San Francisco. Anyway, they left the picture of my wife. That was nice.

John: That was thoughtful of them.

Kelly: Yeah, it was. But they had taken anything that was worth taking. And the -- so, here I was with no blues, but a kid that, when they shipped these new kids out to Honolulu, they had not had their pay checks. They were lost. Not lost, but they didn't have any money. And they wanted to go on liberty in Honolulu. And so one of them sold me a full set of blues for five bucks. And so I came home in somebody else's blues, which made it very difficult for my dog to identify me, because I didn't smell right when I got home. Anyway, I came back on a ship to San Francisco, got a train to Seattle, and hitchhiked on a truck, because I had worked in a service station when I was in high school that serviced trucks. And I knew a lot of the guys that were produce haulers.

John: Oh, okay. Sure.

Kelly: They were an interesting group of people. Gypsies. They would buy loads and haul them to where they could sell them for a profit. Anyway, that is how I got home. It was not because I didn't have any money. I had mustering out pay. But for some reason I thought it would be nice. I would feel a little more comfortable. When I got on the bus to go to where I knew the trucks would be, why, the bus driver said something about "Welcome, sailor." And I said, "Ex-sailor," and opened my P-coat to the Ruptured Duck sewed on my uniform. And the whole bus clapped. And I felt very good. But that is the story.

John: That is remarkable.

Kelly: And it was a coming of age.

John: You were eighteen, eighteen plus?

Kelly: I was eighteen when I got out. And I had made, well, what I did when I got home. I got out in June and we had a home in the wilderness in western Montana that I had gone to every summer of my life.

John: Okay. Where?

Kelly: Northeast of Missoula. If you are familiar with that country, there was a mountain range between us and the Flathead Valley and my mother's sister had a ranch about five miles from our place at the lake. And then she sold that. And had another ranch, more of a, much bigger and better place, on the Blackfoot River and the valley. Anyway, a friend of mine and I went, the place had been all closed down during the war, we went there and spent my mustering out pay playing there. In the local bar, and doing that kind of activity. And I had thought that I wanted to go to the University of Idaho, or Washington State College, when I got out. After that experience, for about a month, I thought differently. Suddenly, on the way back through Missoula to go back to Spokane, I stopped off at the University of Montana and signed up to go into the class that fall. Because I wanted, I knew that if I went back --

John: Let me --

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

John: Give this a second. Okay, go ahead.

Kelly: So, anyway, I went in and signed up at the University of Montana because I knew

that if I went back, I had been a fairly wild card kid when I was in high school. And I knew that I would fall back into the group, because many of them went to one or the other of the two schools. They are only about seven miles apart. And that was not designed, or would not be designed, to do what I knew I had to do if I was going to go. And I knew that I had to go to graduate school, not just undergraduate, and do well. So I made the decision that I would go to the University of Montana.

John: Okay. Had you had any college at the time?

Kelly: No. I -- my high school graduation --

John: That's right. You dropped out.

Kelly: I dropped out. It turns out that I had taken all the required courses. I knew that when I quit high school. And the secretary in the principal's office was the nastiest little lady you ever did run across. And my graduation ceremony was that I went in and asked her if she had, they gave you points for being in the service.

John: Okay.

Kelly: For experience. So I went into the office. She was the only one there. And I asked her as kindly as I could if she had a graduation diploma for me. And she said, "What's your name?" And so I told her. And she went to one of these big tin metal cabinets and opened it up, and she had a stack of these diplomas. And she thumbed threw them, and blew the dust off of mine, and came over and said, "That will be a dollar and a half." And I gave that to you. And I said, "Aren't you even going to say 'congratulations?'" And she turned on her heels and left, and so I turned on my heels and left, leaving her a dollar and a half.

John: Very short graduation ceremony.

Kelly: Yeah. Probably all I deserved. (laughs) So, that was graduation. So I started college in the fall of '46.

John: Okay.

Kelly: And my entering class was bigger than the previous total maximum enrollment of the University of Montana.

John: Well, all the vets coming back.

Kelly: Because of that. And the average age of my entering class was twenty-three.

John: Wow.

Kelly: That was all over the country. People that say, you know, a college education isn't going to do any good for the country, or anything. The experiment has been done, and it worked. And it was an extraordinary thing. I would have gone to college. I'll be frank. I was not from a poor family. I was from a family that had done very well.

John: Still. So, you had the GI Bill. Did you use it?

Kelly: Yeah. I did. I used it for a couple of years, and then I thought, well, I want to get married. So the best thing for me to do is drop the GI Bill for a while and wait until I got married. So I had the GI Bill again for my senior year in college. We were married in August, before my senior year. And I then had enough left over for a summer school and more than a half of the fall semester at Wisconsin. So we got a dip for that, for a while. Because I came here with an assistantship. And it was, and my wife, because of the war, we had been able to have jobs. She, in particular, with much more responsibility than high school kids ever have a chance to have now.

John: Sure. Sure.

Kelly: She had helped, for example, her first significant job, she had a job at a soda fountain. But by the time she was a senior in high school, she was a journalism major. I mean, in high school. They allowed that, in that particular high school. And she was helping, and did the set up and the books and the typing, for the, what do you call it when you are in a store. Inventory of the biggest book supplier in eastern Washington, They supplied books to all the schools. The state of Washington bought the books for grade schools and high schools, and she worked on that kind of job, with that kind of responsibility. So when she came here, most of the time when I was a graduate student, she worked in the office of A. W. Peterson and Mr. Clark, who was the, no, Clark Smith, who was the secretary of the Board of Regents. And she typed the minutes for the Board of Regents, when she had to make nine copies with a manual typewriter.

John: I had a great-aunt that would do PhD dissertations and that stuff, multiple copies. And never an error. She typed just like that.

Kelly: You know what, my wife couldn't type my thesis because she was so afraid of making a mistake. Here she did the Board of Regents stuff. But it meant too much to her. And so we had to hire. But you know what we hired her for? A nickle a page.

John: Wow. (both laugh)

Kelly: That hardly pays for the paper.

John: Well, what a remarkable story. Look, something I ask every vet when I am doing this. You had quite a time, but still, in the middle of your life, your whole life ahead of you and bang, you got pulled out and sent off to far places. What did you think of that?

Kelly: Well, I wanted to do it. It was, I felt, and clearly, as I say, every able-bodied male between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five in my family were in service. And I still believe that it's appropriate, it sure as hell was for the Second World War. I have personally have very strong anti-war feelings with the current conflict. I think it was wrong to do what we did, and I particularly think it was wrong to send in -- be half-baked. I believe, I don't know what you feel, but I think it is sinful to send our kids in there without body armor, without appropriate weapons and trucks, and the other equipment that would have some kind of protection for them. And there were perhaps one-third to half those that should have been there. And that was not done in the same way. But, of course, I was never in any danger. Nobody ever shot at me.

John: No, but you were there.

Kelly: And it was a coming of age thing, with me. So no, I don't, I certainly don't regret it. In fact, I am proud of it. To the extent that at least I thought it was the right thing to do, and I did it.

John: This is a remarkable story. You know, this is the type of story that you just don't find in the history books. We know Eisenhower invaded Normandy, but we don't know all the individual stories. This is great.

[End of Interview]