

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MATTHEW J. DIKER
Hospital Corpsman, Navy, the Cold War
2003

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Matthew J. Diker (b. 1938). Oral History Interview, 2003.

Master: 1 audio cassette (ca. 44 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Matthew J. Diker, a Brooklyn, New York native, discusses his US Naval service as a hospital corpsman from 1957 to 1962. He discusses his first assignment as a hospital corpsman at a hospital in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) where he eventually became a surgical assistant. Diker was then transferred to Naples (Italy) when the Berlin Wall was built. He details learning the Italian language and customs, as well as the political climate in Italy. He also discusses hospital shift rotations, other policies, and treating Vietnam War casualties brought to Italy in 1962. Diker mentions having Iranian classmates in corpsman training and seeing Vice President Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy.

Biographical Sketch:

Matthew J. Diker (b. 1938) served as a US Navy hospital corpsman from 1957-1962, first in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), and then transferred to Naples (Italy) in 1959. After being discharged he settled in Milwaukee (Wisconsin), his wife's hometown.

Interviewed by Laurie Arendt, 2003.

Transcribed by Christina Zipper, 2010.

Corrected by Channing Welch, 2012.

Corrections typed in by Brian Beckley, 2012 and Kelsey Burnham, 2013.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

Arendt: Okay. This is an interview with Matt Diker who served in what branch of the military?

Diker: United States Navy.

Arendt: The Navy. And what years did you serve?

Diker: 1957 to 1962.

Arendt: Okay. And the interview is being conducted at his home at the following address.

Diker: 214 South Claremont Road, Saukville.

Arendt: And today is April—

Diker: April 10th—today's April 11th.

Arendt: April 11th, 2003, and the interviewer is Laurie Arendt for the Ozaukee County Veterans Book Project. So the first question that they want me to ask you is a little bit about your background before going into the Navy. Did you enlist, were you drafted, why did you, what were you doing at that time?

Diker: Ah. graduated from high school in June of 1957. Enlisted in October of 1957. I was working for a book distributor in New York City on 33rd and 10th.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: [Laughs] [unintelligible]

Arendt: And you're from, are you from New York City?

Diker: I'm from New York City. Born and raised in New York City, born in Brooklyn, raised in Staten Island, graduated from a religious boys school.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Typical [Unintelligible] [laughs]

Arendt: I love going to New York.

Diker: Nice place to visit.

Arendt: [Laughs] We were there once before the terrorist attack so—

Diker: My daughter had a office in the building.

Arendt: Ah

Diker: The company she worked for had an office, 11th floor. She was actually based in Houston. She lived in Houston. She was flying to New York twice a month.

Arendt: Wow.

Diker: And they had office [??] periods of four to eight days, four to five days at a time. And the day it happened they--it took them two days to find the group, you know, to make sure they were all right.

Arendt: Wow.

Diker: That's quite a thing [unintelligible]. She's got a husband that's a CIA agent. So that's a little more, a little more difficult you know to, she had ways of getting information, but she--and they still really saw nothing so--

Arendt: Wow okay. Why did you decide to enlist?

Diker: Oh, for the challenge.

Arendt: Okay. Have there been other Navy veterans in your family?

Diker: I had in the, I had uncles in the Navy, and in the Second World War, I had uncles and cousins in the Air Force, Army and Navy. Direct family, nothing.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Until my sister was married to a career Navy man. [laughs]

Arendt: Okay. Why did you pick the Navy over the other branches?

Diker: Ah, I guess more or less to--ah ,that's a good question. Probably for the simple reason that it seemed to be that I would get more—I'd get more out of it. I would do things more and go places more, you know. There was a chance that I could get out of the country and see some of the world.

Arendt: Okay. All right. Did you have any expectations at that point? About what you wanted to do or see?

Diker: Not really—I had-- my father had passed away while I was in high school, I'd worked for—I was going to high school—with the hospital, and — generally I was a kid of the 50's. You know Friday night dances, Saturday night dances. Work three or four nights a week, pay for education, that stuff myself when my father passed away. Educations was we had to pay for ourselves. So it wa just more or less, and at the time it [phone rings]. Okay continue.

Arendt: You said you did Friday night. Fridays are—

Diker: Well, Friday night was just the regular you know, dances. We were the kids of the 50's--Rock n' roll was a big thing with us. We went to the shows in Brooklyn, Alan Freed, and—we traveled around the city in New York with no problem at all.

Arendt: Okay. All right. So when you enlisted, was it for three years?

Diker: It was a four year enlistment with a chance to go to school, a class A school. I guess that's the thing really applies. I could go to school while I was in the service, you know, learn something. And I did go to school; I want to class A school at Great Lakes [unintelligible}. Boot camp let's see—let's see, oh boy, okay, boot camp from October of '57 until January of '58. And then I spent some time in a temporary duty course a school, a C [??] school.

Arendt: Was that just because school hadn't started yet?

Diker: To make it to class. It was at--I went to the Navy Hospital Corpsmen school in Great Lakes, Illinois from 3/17/58 to 7/3/58. And I was transferred to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital.

Arendt: Were you glad to be back on the East Coast?

Diker: Yeah, it was nice because I could go home on weekends, and maybe because I could go home, just take a-- ride a subway down to the station, the railway station in Philadelphia and just take a Pennsylvania 5 o'clock train back home to New York on Friday nights and come back on Sunday nights.

Arendt: Oh, wow. Okay.

Diker: So it was kind of-- well when we had off, it was kinda nice but we didn't have off but once, once a month when I was at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital.

Arendt: Okay. So what were you trained to do? What was your training?

Diker: I was a Navy corpsman, hospital corpsman.

Arendt: And what, what does that mean?

Diker: Well, I was a ward corpsman. I uh, I did some--basically I did what a nurse did at a regular hospital in the United States. We'd be at discharge [??], you gave the medication, tended to your patients.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: I worked the surgical ward, but most of my stuff was post surgery.

Arendt: Okay. Was medicine an area you were interested in?

Diker: Well, I had done it. I worked in a hospital when I was in high school. So the Navy took me and put me in where they thought was best. Didn't really think I had any future right out of the service, because I thought it was something they wanted me to do. And you're told what to do, you do it. It's that simple. [unintelligible].—thought I was a boatswain's mate or something like that [both laugh]. I spent from 7/3/58 to 4/6 of '59 as a ward corpsman. And then in 4/6/59 I was placed in my class B school which was an operating room technician school, at the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia. That basically taught us how to work in an operating room. In the service you're a Navy corpsman, take the place of assisting doctors when it comes to surgery. You do the pullin' of all the—

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Retractors and stuff like that you. You do basic--basic types of sew ups, you know, suturing and stuff like that.

Arendt: Were you squeamish at all?

Diker: No, not at all.

Arendt: No?

Diker: I had seen deaths before that so it didn't bother me that much.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Bothers me now, but it didn't bother me then. I don't know why.

Arendt: I think it's cause you were young.

Diker: Probably too [??] old now.

Arendt: [laughs] Okay. Now when you were—is this what you continued to do your whole time in the service--

Diker: The whole career in the Navy, yeah. I went to uh, I was transferred to Naples, Italy.

Arendt: Oh, wow okay.

Diker: And started in Naples, Italy on ten—the tenth month of 1959 I arrived in Naples.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And I stayed in Naples til the, tenth of 1962. While I was in Naples they put the wall up in Berlin, and we were automatically extended for—we were--our service obligation was extended for one year.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: So about the forth year that's when I went to a five year enlistment.

Arendt: Did you—was that an automatic transfer, or did you put in for it?

Diker: No, that was an automatic transfer. That was a transfer to a naval station hospital in Naples, Italy, that was in need of an upgrade in technicians and there were two of us that went.

Arendt: Okay. Were you pleased with the transfer?

Diker: Uh, it was different 'cause it was going overseas. It was--I was looking for a--something of interest, and that was of interest.

Arendt: Okay. Because so many people that I've interviewed, so many guys said, "I joined the Army, the Navy to see the world," you know and they ended up in like—Kansas. [laughs]

Diker: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, I was--had gone up into school withneralgia [??]. I know that I would probably be transferred to overseas or some place like that, and I did that. Oh, I guess you might say that I was looking for something different, adventure or something like that, get away from the United States. See what the world was all about.

Arendt: So when the Berlin wall went up, um was that a time of increased security where you were?

Diker: Ah, yes it was. I had at that time--I had a wife and two children over there.

Arendt: Oh, wow, Okay.

Diker: I got married the day before I left for Naples. My wife arrived the February after that— lived on the economy—and had two children while we were over there.

Arendt: So are—are your children dual citizens or—

Diker: Yeah.

Arendt: Oh, how neat!

Diker: Two of them are, both of them, the oldest, son Florida, but once they did certain things in [??] the United States. First time my son went down to register the draft the intention would be to declare to be an American citizen. And he lost the Italian part of it, and so did the day my oldest girl voted. She gave up the Italian.

Arendt: Okay. And which children are we—

Diker: That'd be Matt--Matthew John and Elizabeth Anne.

Arendt: Okay. All right. Oh, that's interesting. So did you live on post--

Diker: On the economy.

Arendt: What is that?

Diker: We lived actually in an apartment.

Arendt: Oh, Okay.

Diker: In Naples I even got a picture of the place.

Arendt: Oh, Okay.

Diker: This is where we lived in Naples.

Arendt: Oh, wow!

Diker: And this was the—

Arendt: Sure doesn't look like Saukville.

Diker: This was the view; this is the view from our house to the bay in Naples.

Arendt: Oh, how terrific.

Diker: It was actually, actually two views, took it from actually three different views. [Unintelligible]

Arendt: Wow.

Diker: And that was amusing. That was, the courtyard was a big part there, and that was, there was three different buildings. They were called scalas, S-C-A-L-A. They were apartment houses, and we lived in an [scraping sound] [Unintelligible] scala.

Arendt: Was this--were there a lot of Navy—

Diker: We had military—we were—we lived with the military people and also Italian nationals.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: That's why it's known as "living on the economy" [living off base].

Arendt: Okay. Was it difficult to, to assimilate in the culture? Did you speak any—

Diker: No, we were asked to take classes in the language, Italian language. In fact, we went through sixteen [??] weeks of classes when we first arrived over there. For three hours a day for twice a week.

Arendt: Did you find Italian hard to pick up?

Diker: Not—to a certain degree because a lot of the words, you say a word, it could be taken a different way. The same word could mean different things. You had to watch how you use the language, and then there were different dialects for the country. We had Neapolitan which was the language, the dialect we spoke. When we went up to Rome or Pisa or any of the other places, Livorno, they knew right away what part of the country we were from because they could tell by the dialect we spoke.

Arendt: Because I have a friend who—he's of Slovenian decent, and his grandma taught him how to speak the language so when he goes over there and he

goes into a pub he speaks like an old woman and all the people laugh at him because he has that formal way of speaking--

- Diker: Right, they do have—like I say, it's the dialects of different countries. Like in America we have dialects also. We have the east coast, the Midwest, we got the South and the West. So people knew where you're from, from the dialects.
- Arendt: Okay, good. And when you worked, did you work a normal shift? Or—
- Diker: Oh, we worked--we worked different shifts. We worked usually odd, what we called, port and starboard shifts. Worked every other day, and every six months you took a turn at night duty which lasted thirty days, and you worked at 9:00 at night till 7:00 in the morning for thirty days straight.
- Arendt: So, every six months you said?
- Diker: Yeah, every six months it was a night tour.
- Arendt: Night tour, thirty days—
- Diker: Straight.
- Arendt: Straight, okay.
- Diker: 7:00—9:00 o'clock at night till seven in the morning. And basically the operating room in Naples, we were a seventy-two bed hospital. We had dependent services, and we were a transfer point for anything that was difficult. We had an air-vac that ran out of Naples, and we used the Army hospitals in Germany as bases for anything that was bad.
- Arendt: Okay. So, at that time were you—so early '60s—was--there weren't any conflicts—
- Diker: Yeah, the conflict--it was startin'.
- Arendt: It was starting, so were you starting to—
- Diker: We were gettin', uh, last year or so in Naples we were getting-- guys were comin', shippin' in who had been in 'Nam. And we were hearing stories about 'Nam and guys who were shippin' out to go to 'Nam. In the Naval Corps., in the Hospital Corp. you were also trained out there with the Marine Corps.
- Arendt: Okay.

Diker: The Marine Corp, they operate [??]—the hospital corpsmen goes with the Marine Corps. They're part of it, attached to the Marine Corps.

Arendt: Did you ever have to do that?

Diker: We had to—I never did, but I did have a billet with the Marines that were based in Naples. And I had a uniform and all that stuff. Never got to use it but the reason I didn't was because I ended up being the senior operating room technician, and I was in charge of an operating room, a central supplying room, and maternity, nursery and delivery room.

Arendt: Oh, wow.

Diker: As a senior corpsmen for those activities. So we actually ran the delivery rooms. I have some paper—can't remember where I put it thought. Ah, participated in over—was it—300 operations—300 surgical procedures in the time I was in Italy.

Arendt: Oh, wow, Okay. Well, you'll get a chance to proofread and correct so if you can find it you can put the exact number in. Was there any type of surgery or that you enjoyed more--

Diker: I uh, I scrubbed, as a scrub nurse I scrubbed general surgery, neural surgery, and dental surgery. Each corpsman had a different service they took care of, and then you worked with whoever the doctor was in that thing. Also, I scrubbed GYN, OB/GYN. On caesarean sections, I was a scrub nurse for caesarean sections.

Arendt: See, I think it would just be fascinating to do those. Just anything to do with birth—

Diker: Well, I came in one weekend in '61 on Labor Day. We delivered three babies caesarean and two natural births in a weekend.

Arendt: Wow.

Diker: And we uh, were at a picnic, and they called us all back to duty, and we spent the next three days at the hospital without leavin' it. Which would happen [??]. I guess the greatest [i.e., most painful] thing over there was losin' somebody you knew.

Arendt: Yeah, that was my next question. Did you—

Diker: And we did—there was a personnel man—we were part of the Naval support activity over there so we had all different ranks and rates that we

worked with, and we had a personnel man who got—who got shot in the belly.

Arendt: In Italy?

Diker: Yeah

Arendt: Accident?

Diker: Well, somethin' [unintelligible]. I never did find out why, but we pumped—we had no fresh blood over there, and all the blood we had to use was blood that you took out and you gave right away, and it was all fresh blood was what it was. You never kept anything in storage.

Arendt: Oh, okay—

Diker: You wanted—you had an operating and you needed ten pints of blood ten corpsmen went down there, and you'd take [unintelligible] ten pints of blood, and they'd turn around and use the blood, and this guy, we'd pump sixty pints of blood into him [??].

Arendt: Sixty pints?

Diker: And we lost him.

Arendt: Aw.

Diker: He just, he was so tore up on the inside that we just couldn't repair [unintelligible]. We worked on him for—I had him on the table three times, three days.

Arendt: So why did they do that if they needed blood? Were you on call? If you—

Diker: No, they just—we had—we put a call out. Well, we would all call in. We had duty lists, and all corpsman would—they knew where you were at any given time. You never left the—the duty officer knew where everybody in his division was at a given time. They knew where I lived. They knew I—we had a call down list if they need you to get to your home. They could bring you back to duty right away.

Arendt: Okay. How often did they call on you to give blood? I mean, were you limited?

Diker: I gave, in the three years I lived over there I gave ten pints.

Arendt: Okay. So it wasn't extensive?

Diker: No, no it wasn't extensive over there. We had, you know, we had—the hospital bed was a seventy-two bed hospital, and we had I think ten guys assigned to it including the doctors and nurses and corpsmen and personnel man and a cook. A supply officer. It was a little, we had our own little world. The hospital sat up on top of the hill overlookin' the bay in Naples, and it was a pink building. It was owned by an Italian national, was rented by the Navy, and it was a tiny building. [Unintelligible] Across the street was the school, the elementary school for servicemen's children.

Arendt: Did you have time to do any traveling in Italy?

Diker: Yeah, we did. We attended the Olympics of 1960.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And stayed with a—at a villa up in Rome with some friends we knew. We spent a week, a week and a half up there, uh two weeks up there in Rome. Got to see the Olympic—most of em' were swimming events. Ah, was in the city of Rome three different times, down in St. Peter's. So spent time in Livorno, Pisa, Capri, Isca, Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii.

Arendt: Wow.

Diker: And then also coming home--then spent time in Barcelona, Spain and Rota, Spain.

Arendt: What did you think of Europe?

Diker: Ah, it was a different culture. I came from New York City which was a very fast paced life. The subways, ferryboats, buses—the Neapolitan it seemed to be a little—the culture was completely different. You had open—guys who walked around with buckets of fish on their heads and sellin' 'em. The cattle and the sheep were herded right down the middle of the street in broad daylight. They stopped traffic for that. Ah, I don't know how to say it, but the Italian government at that time was—there were a lot of Communists. It was a—we lived next door to Communists, Communistic people, believed in communism. They were, but we never had—we were—we didn't risk. We did not wear Navy clothes in Naples. We wore civilian clothes.

Arendt: Oh, Okay.

Diker: All traveling in Europe, by that time we were in service was we had to wear civilian clothes.

Arendt: Why was that?

Diker: Ah they didn't want you to get into the--

Arendt: [unintelligible]

Diker: Political—

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Political things with the nationals.

Arendt: So at that time, how did they view America and Americans? Were—

Diker: Ah, they tolerated us. We were bringing money into their country is what we were doin'. We were providing jobs to bring money into their country so, you know, we didn't own anything there. We rented everything. The [unintelligible] were all rented, and everything we did was rented. A lot of nationals worked with us. At the hospital they had ten nationals workin' with us, and they said [unintelligible] hospital. They were like drivers, some kitchen help.

Arendt: Okay. Good. Do you have more pictures of Italy?

Diker: Well, this is Roma, that's Rome. That's downtown Naples.

Arendt: Look at the car. [laughs]

Diker: This is Pisa.

Arendt: Oh, hey!

Diker: This is uh-- and this is fleet when it came to—There's a date on the back [unintelligible].

Arendt: “On our way to Capri, 1962.”

Diker: Yeah, that was the fleet that was in there. We were on our way over to Capri, to visit Capri that day, with some other couples, and the fleet was in, and, see, our main activity in Naples was we were a support activity for the 6th Fleet.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And we had a very, very large NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] base there. Called AFSouth, A-F-South.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And we had the military commander for south, southern, southern Europe. His office was there, in Naples.

Arendt: Were you ever—were you pleased or disappointed that you were on land as opposed to on a ship, or were you indifferent?

Diker: I was indifferent to it. I just—I was doin' what I was told to do, and it was just you know, wherever they put me, they put me.

Arendt: Okay. All right. When your five years were up then, did you serve that extra year?

Diker: Ah, I did the five years.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And so I came back to Great Lakes, I mean came back to Brooklyn Navy Station that discharged me in Brooklyn. Uh, had a job waiting in Milwaukee for me.

Arendt: Really?

Diker: Yeah, and it turned out to be not the job I wanted. I had been an operating room corpsman and worked in the operating room and had a certain amount of responsibilities and duties. They wanted me to do bedpans when I got back, and I told them very nicely that I didn't do bedpans, that I did more--

Arendt: You had more skill than that.

Diker: More skill than that, so I went back to school at night at MATC, became a printer. And I spent twelve years at a printing business, and I went slowly to facilities management.

Arendt: Okay. So there was no chance that you would stay in?

Diker: Ah, at that time I had two children. Nam' was, Nam' was goin' real big. I had friends who were in Nam', had gotten letters back from people who were in Nam' and what was happening over there, and I had—I was lucky I had had two children so the service saw fit to let me discharge.

Arendt: Okay. Could they have forced you to stay in?

Diker: They could have if they wanted to. But once you have children and you're in the service at that time back then they preferred people who were single 'cause then they can move them more, and it was less responsibility for the person. When he had a family you had responsibility for your family, and they preferred to have you, you know, a single person. It was easier to move around—

Arendt: Yeah, you're much more mobile.

Diker: Yeah much more mobile.

Arendt: Okay. Good. And you're also cheaper too because you don't have dependents. Well, all right. Oh, did you have any particular—do you have a favorite story you'd like to tell or experience?

Diker: Well, I guess the funniest, one of the funniest was that when I enlisted in New York City and got sworn in we took a train to Chicago, and then at Chicago we got on the North Shore railroad, and I went to sit back in that thing, and man they had a wood burnin' stove. And I was just astonished by it, that you know this was a modern, comin' out of the subway in New York City comin' onto this thing that was above ground so I was, it had a wood burnin' stove, and I just [Arendt laughs], I just, I just totally, you know, and I had had no sleep for two days to start with, and it was just an amazing type of thing you know. It kinda struck me funny, and then comin' into Great Lakes itself, and the vastness of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center was just—it was quite a big place, and I never did get to see—I tried like dickens to go back years later on.

Arendt: Uh huh.

Diker: And it was just the vastness of the place and then goin' up to live in a barracks with sixty other guys in one room. It was quite a change when you, you know, you used to when you were a child growing up you had your own room, you know, and things like that. All the sudden you were put in [Arendt laughs] this size of space. I mean you sat on a pillow in a wall around ya, things like that. You know, it was quite a, quite a culture shock to go to that kind of environment. And then also to me, mixed in with people from all over the United States, and we had from down south, from out west and anything else, and it was a learning experience. I thought it was great to learn to get along with these people and to come together as a team. We had a pretty good drill instructor who worked us real good got us to do what we needed to do, got us through basic training, and we ended up being a member of an honor company.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: Which is a pretty big deal at boot camp. And my class A school I was in a honor company also. Class A school usually had ten classes going at the same—ten, ten groups of people going to school at the same time. And they were thirty man groups. And the very ironic thing is that I had, I had a gentleman from the Iraqi Navy in my class.

Arendt: The Iraqi Navy?

Diker: In my class at school, to go to corpsmen school.

Arendt: I wonder whatever happened to—

Diker: Iraqi or Iranians. No, Iranians, they were Iranians, Iranians going to my class at the hospital corps school.

Arendt: How did they get in—

Diker: It was, it was a trans—it was a training program. This is way back when, the Iraqis, we didn't have all those problems with those people.

Arendt: Right.

Diker: And they came—they went to their training programs. Ah, what do you call it? A lease program, not a lease program, an exchange program.

Arendt: Oh okay.

Diker: Exchange program, and they were training, they were training hospital corpsmen at that time.

Arendt: But who would want to go and train in Iran? You know?

Diker: No, they came to us.

Arendt: Oh, okay. We didn't send people over there?

Diker: No, we didn't send people—

Arendt: Okay [laughs].

Diker: We do send people over there for language.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Diker: For language, but they came to us for, to go to all of our schools.

Arendt: Okay, good.

Diker: At hospital corpsmen school. They received the same training. They had to come with an understanding in English in order to come.

Arendt: Uh huh. Otherwise it'd be pointless.

Diker: No, I mean, we wouldn't have even—but that was, that was, that and then I guess a visit by then Vice President Johnson to Naples when I was stationed there. It was—

Arendt: Oh, really!

Diker: Quite a big thing. We got to be within two feet of him. He talked about [unintelligible]. And it was with—he came to the NATO base and we had off-duty so we went down and watched him.

Arendt: Okay. Did he talk to you?

Diker: He did talk to us.

Arendt: Was he pleasant, was he—

Diker: He was very nice. Very, very nice, and then I also met the secret service that were in charge of Mrs. Kennedy's group. Because she was vacationing over there, and definitely at one time had a secret service person come over to the hospital to get some medications for them, cough medications that were there.

Arendt: Cough medication for her or her children?

Diker: Nah, totally [unintelligible]. I don't know whether it was the children or herself, but they came on here on vacation anyway.

Arendt: Medication, okay. So was that after her husband had been killed?

Diker: No, that was before.

Arendt: Before, okay.

Diker: President Kennedy got killed—

Arendt: '62, '61?

Diker: '63. '63, I was out of the service the year when he got killed, and I worked for the—

Arendt: Did you ever see—

Diker: I got out of the service when Cuba, when they had the Cuban crisis Bay of Pigs.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: That was happening as I was getting out of the service. And then ‘Nam was going on, too.

Arendt: Okay. Oh, that’s interesting because Charlie Watry talked about the Cuban missile crisis when he was in—

Diker: Yeah, I was on my way out of the door. I was—we were at that time when we were in Naples waiting to be, I mean, hopin’ we were goin’ to be discharged. It was on our minds whether we’d be pulled back to for that reason right there.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: The Bay of Pigs was the big thing going on then. And like I said, ‘Nam was startin’ already.

Arendt: So it—

Diker: You gotta remember ‘Nam was, when I was in the service ‘Nam was still part of the French. The French government was right over there, and they were playing games over there.

Arendt: At that time did you guys have any, I don’t—not premonition, but any idea that it would be so bad?

Diker: We had heard, corpsmen that I knew that had gone to, once one thing when you’re in the corps, in the Naval corps, hospital corps, when you-- **[End of Tape One, Side A]** and usually you went out for lunch or instead it was [unintelligible] a little partying around, enjoyed ourself. I had some friends that were on the Enterprise. And that was the first nuclear aircraft carrier, and I had some friends—in fact there’s one we still to this day get together with them every year, go gamble with them, and my wife, my wife’s girlfriend married him, and we got to know them real good. He was from Kentucky, and he used to come north to Naples, and we would always get together.

Arendt: So they were telling you that it—

Diker: They, we knew—well, the guys stopped the corpsmen comin' in. They were rotating in, and we were rotatin' out. We had—every month you'd rotate maybe one or two in and one or two out, you know, it was part of rotation. And you got to—you heard what was going on. The word of mouth got to you. There was a good grapevine going on, and if somebody transferred out you'd get the airwaves going, and we would keep—maybe send one from another [unintelligible] to let you know what was happening. The guys rotating comin' in—the day I left, the guy that I had gone to hospital corpsmen school with rotated in. He was gonna be career manager second class. He rotated in, and he had just come out of 'Nam, and he brought his wife over. But he had, he had left St. Albans Hospital in New York City to go to 'Nam, and he spent a year in 'Nam, and he came back. He was a x-ray technician. So we'd get to hear about that over air free. You did an awful lot of diversification when you were in there, initially were in there, like I say, the operating room, the nursery, delivery room, the central supply room, worked in the emergency room and did things like that. I had—I remember one night coming off a shift at 9:00 o'clock at night and having to fly up to Costra because there was a guy comin' in off the fleet that was havin' a problem with his [unintelligible], and we would walk in, do surgery on him that night. He got lucky 'cause the time we got into—the airports were closed at night so we had to we had to open the airport for him. We flew in a little two engine Navy plane. And by the time we got there he had the surgery all ready and the guy said just plopped us down put a [unintelligible]. We don't communicate with anyone from Naples anymore. We still communicate with the guy from [unintelligible].

Arendt: Have you ever gone back to Italy?

Diker: No, don't really—there's too much of the other parts of the United States to see that I realize now that I ever want to see. We spent four or three weeks out in Colorado a couple years ago. Things like that. There's so much to see. We got to see a lot of Italy, and the economy, like I said the economy is different. I mean they just, they live different ways of life. Uh, they always seemed to be on the go. Their business's are like New York City, always go, go, go, go, go. One thing that I find kind of hilarious now. Every year they take all the old and throw it out.

Arendt: Really?

Diker: They dumped the garbage out in the streets, right out their windows onto the courtyard, and into the alleys, and then they had—they set off fireworks like you wouldn't believe.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Diker: It goes on like two hours. And it's just unbelievable the amount of fireworks that they set off. The whole bay in Naples would light up, but the people just took the garbage and throw it out the back window. The first of year they, everything went out, the old went out, and the new came in. See, you gotta remember now they, their celebrations of the Christian holidays are different from Christians in the United States.

Arendt: Oh, really?

Diker: One of the biggest feasts they have is the Feast of the Epiphany.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And that's a real big, week feast. That's when all the gifts are given. Christmas they don't give gifts that—at the Epiphany give the gifts cause that's when my wife and children would give gifts to the Lord Jesus.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: And that's when they do that so we got to see celebration of the baptism, and the celebration of that was just beautiful, really pretty and everything else. Here's something. A picture of my wedding day.

Arendt: Oh, look at you two!

Diker: That was a long time ago.

Arendt: [laughs] Is that your grandma? Or your great grandma? Or—

Diker: Let me see that a second. That would be, my wife's aunt.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Diker: Yeah, I got married in Milwaukee. My mother didn't attend. For the simple reason the day before I got married my grandmother passed away from cancer.

Arendt: Oh, wow.

Diker: And that's—I was told to go and get married. They said “Go, go get married, and create your own family you know you have a life to lead you better get going [unintelligible] you know do what you—

Arendt: My grandmother died three days before my daughter was born, and my dad had to choose between going to her funeral and coming down for the birth, and it caused problems in the family because he would have gone up

to Wisconsin Rapids and leave my mom at home and we lived in Burlington, and he said, “No, I’m gonna—she’s dead, she’s not coming back.”

Diker: Yeah, it’s—there a lot of actions you take in your life that you wonder why you take ’em, but you have to take ’em. You know, you just do what you gotta do.

Arendt: So now what’s the connection with Milwaukee? Did you have family here?

Diker: I was stationed at Great Lakes.

Arendt: Oh, okay.

Diker: My wife was USO.

Arendt: Oh, really? Okay.

Diker: Yeah, my wife was a USO girl in the Navy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Arendt: Is she—

Diker: And the funny part about it, believe it or not, there’s still another girl from that, two girls from that group that my wife still gets together with once or twice a year.

Arendt: Really?

Diker: And this is back, what? Thirty-gosh, forty years?

Arendt: Okay. So did you meet her at a USO event or?

Diker: Yes, at [unintelligible] in Milwaukee. Milwaukee was considered a very, very good liberty town when I was at Great Lakes ’cause we’d get out of class on Friday at twelve o’clock, and we’d catch the two o’clock train coming out of Waukegan to Milwaukee. And they had a high speed train that only made one stop, and then they had the old kettle burner as I called it, and it made a stop at every other corner. [Laughs].

Arendt: Okay. [Laughs] So she’s from Milwaukee?

Diker: Yeah, my wife’s from Milwaukee. She was born and raised in Milwaukee.

Arendt: 'Cause I remember even as a child we would go to downtown Milwaukee, and we'd see sailors all over the place.

Diker: Yeah, just like I say a very, very good liberty town. The people in Milwaukee, they still are this way, their friendliness, and their affection for the servicemen means a lot. They take great—we could come to Milwaukee, and we had lockers where we could take off our uniforms and go into civilian clothes at the USO, and they had—there was—they had—you could do anything you wanted. You went to ball games, you went to bet, you went to movies, you went to dances, you went to parties. It was just they had something for you to do all the whole time you were in, you know baseball games, I can remember going to County Stadium and watching [unintelligible] and you know it was all paid for by, you know the USO had that—well, going through what was then called 3-D movies, and they—the USO dances at the Eagles [Club]. Oh we enjoyed the dances on Saturday nights. We just had a great time over there. Those dances, it was fun. It was just, you know, it was a group of guys that pal led together from school, and we went—Chicago, had been to Chicago maybe a couple times. Chicago reminded me too much of New York City.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: It was just too much push, push, push, push, push. And when you were at school all week at ten hour days you wanted something in a way that was completely different.

Arendt: Okay. Cool. So—in retrospective are you glad you went in the Navy?

Diker: Yeah, I—the time I think was well spent, well spent time. You got to take your horizons and then broaden them out, you know, and see things and do things that I would never have done back in New York City. New York City was a bus, a ferryboat, and a subway, five days a week and on weekends, you know, there wasn't nothin' to do. You go up to the City to watch a baseball game or something like that, but it's the same thing, subway, bus, and ferry. You lived an island life. Although I was expected when I got out service to come back home to New York, but I had a job offer in Milwaukee so I had to turn to Milwaukee. My sis, the year after we got out of the service my—Kennedy died, my sister got married the day after he got killed. She married a Navy guy, and they were—[phone rings]

Arendt: At that point were they rebuilding or were they—

Diker: That was, you gotta figure it out because [unintelligible] that did it, they in the late '40s, and this was the '50s right here. So we're still rebuilding.

Arendt: Okay.

Diker: [unintelligible] the statues. I went up to the Fountain of Trivoli at night. That was just, I'll never forget that. That was just a beautiful place. You know you can just see these dancing waters at different places like this. Now, this was the Romans version of the—

Arendt: [laughs]

Diker: You know the Fountain of Trivoli, I mean, there's one section in the fountains where there's probably a thousand fountains in there that go to somebody. Then the lions, and tigers and maids and all kinds of stuff, and it's just—they light it up so nice. And the gardens themselves were just so beautiful. When you went from a downtown street into that it was just such a transformation that was unbelievable.

Arendt: Do your children remember anything of Italy? Or were they too young?

Diker: Too young. When they came home Matt was two, and—

Arendt: Oh so they were young then.

Diker: And Beth was one. So they really don't remember nothing of that. I think we do have, the kids each have something that we brought back from Italy, we have for them. We do have things in the house. We have some marble dishes that we had—marble candy dishes, and we have some brass kettles that we brought home with us. And then my wife's got some jewelry that was handmade over there in Italy. Other than that, nothing. I mean that was just a time in our life, you know, we were growing up. We were young, I mean you know, right in our 20s, and the world was changing so greatly at the time. I had a [unintelligible] cousin who was buried in 'Nam, you know, and things like that that sort of strike you.

Arendt: All right. So are you a member of the American Legion?

Diker: Yeah a member for from [unintelligible] I don't know how many years, eighteen. Tanya will check.

Arendt: Okay. You're a past commander?

Diker: Oh, I've held every—

Arendt: [laughs]

Diker: Every one of those [laughs] blasted boxes was left all at one time together
Let's see, how many years I've been in the Legion. I don't know how you
spend so many years. It's unbelievable. All kinds of junk. I know I've
got some [unintelligible] in here.

[End of Interview]