

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD FELLOWS
Merchant Marine, WWII
1995

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Fellows, Donald E., (1922 -). Oral History Interview, 1995

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (119 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (119 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Donald L. Fellows, a Madison, Wis. native, discusses his service with the Merchant Marines during World War II and the effects of this service on his life. Fellows joined the Merchant Marines against his parent's wishes, and describes joining the war as a way to distance himself from his parents. He provides a sketch of basic training at San Mateo (California) including strict discipline, abandon ship exercises, and his efforts to evade obstacle course training. He tells of attempts to sabotage shipping in San Francisco harbor and provides second-hand accounts of other attempted sabotage in New York harbor and abroad. Fellows details the mission of the Merchant Marines and shipboard life. Injured abroad, he spent time recovering in Madison, and describes the attitudes he encountered toward a young man perceived as not in the Armed Forces. He recounts VE-Day and VJ-Days, watch duty, and trade with Italians. He comments on experiences with Nazis in Uruguay, Mozambique, South Africa, and Argentina. Fellows mentions on his homecoming and comments on the unique status of Merchant Marines who were not allowed veterans' benefits. He recounts the recent recognition of Merchant Marines as World War II veterans and remarks upon the effects of his service and his injury on his acting career.

Biographical Sketch

Fellows (b. December 2, 1922) served with the Merchant Marines during World War II. He achieved the rank of Lieutenant and after the war began working as an actor.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

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

Interview Transcript

Mark: Today's date is August 22, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview with Mr. Donald Fellows, formerly of Madison, presently of London, England, a veteran of the Merchant Marine in World War II. Good morning.

Don: Good morning.

Mark: Thanks for stopping in over the pond and talking to me here.

Don: My pleasure.

Mark: Let's start from the top I guess. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Don: I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah on December 2, 1922. My parents were both from Salt Lake, my father was in the advertising business and they then opened a branch agency in Los Angeles and so they were there for a couple of years and then my father decided that wasn't really what he wanted to do and he got a job as an instructor at the University of Wisconsin.

Mark: Instructor in what?

Don: Business Administration, largely advertising. At that time, there were practically--well there were no courses in advertising per se. So he taught at the University of Wisconsin until about 1949 and he had a bad heart and so they said that they didn't think he could survive any more Wisconsin winters and so he then went to New Mexico and he lived for two years and then passed away. So I grew up in Madison, WI. I grew up across the street from Jim McIntosh. We were lifelong friends.

Mark: Where is this?

Don: 2249 Eton Ridge. He was a little further up in the next block. I went to Randall School and all through the grades leaving the 6th grade and going to West Side High where I did my junior high and my senior high and then I entered the University of Wisconsin.

Mark: In 39 or 40?

Don: No. Our slogan was "Be sporty, graduate in 40." So I entered in the fall of 1940. I did not want to go to college. I wanted to go to New York and be an actor and, of course, my family, my parents were absolutely dead set against it,

largely because I stuttered. It was kind of tricky being an actor who stuttered, but nevertheless, and so I managed to flunk out and I flunked and flunked and in the fall of '42, I had been told that I had to stay out for a semester by that time and then I reentered in the fall of '42 and quit after about a month and went on the road in one of the children's theater companies of Claire Tree Major. By that time my draft notice was beginning to appear at the door and Mrs. Major was having a tough time getting men so she would ignore it. Finally, I received a message that the FBI was going to find me. So I had my induction transferred to Stamford, Connecticut of all places. I remember going up on the train, I'd never even been there. At the same time, I had applied for the US Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point.

Mark: I'm interested in why you chose the Merchant Marine--

Don: I chose the Merchant Marine because my parents said--my mother had a great deal to do with initiating the USO's here and at Truax Field and she became friendly with the Commandant at Truax Field who said that if I would allow myself to be drafted, he would then pull strings and get me into some entertainment unit. I started--I delivered the Wisconsin State Journal when I was 11 and 12, saved my money, bought a bass and played in dance orchestras here. There was a band called Eddie Lawrence that was Larry Bornstein and Eddie Webb and Jerry Borsick and had a great time. So my mother envisioned me being lovely and safe, playing bass and singing in some camp and I wouldn't hear of it and so they said, "Well, we don't care what you do, but we don't want you to join the Merchant Marine. I didn't even know what the Merchant Marine was, we're what 1200 miles from the nearest ocean? But I figured if my parents said it wasn't any good it must be pretty damn attractive. So, I made an application and I was accepted. So they told me to ignore my induction and go back to Madison, get my act together, go to San Francisco and so on the train, which I did, and I went into the Navy Procurement Office there and I can still remember that people would step up to the desk and give their name and so I walked up and said, "Donald Fellows" and they guy looked at me and said, "Donald Fellows, so you're Donald Fellows" and he had an inch thick file and he said "raise your right hand" and I was in the Naval Reserve.

Mark: I want to back track a little bit. Just for anecdotal purposes, do you recall the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

Don: Yes. I was at home. My mother had met my father at Ft. Douglas, just outside of Salt Lake during World War I, and I heard it coming over the radio and I was in the living room at 2249 Eton Ridge and I said, "Wonderful, I hope it lasts long enough for me to be in it." My mother started to cry and said, "You don't know what you are talking about. You have no idea what war is." "Yes, I do!" I vividly remember it and I thought selfishly, "Whoopie! I can get away from home!"

Mark: I read, I think it was Lee Kenneth, historian who wrote that actors were probably the most vulnerable profession in America to the draft. That they were drafted in droves.

Don: No skills whatsoever.

Mark: Did you have a sense of this at the time?

Don: No, no, none whatsoever. You were unattached and male and reasonably healthy and 18 or 19 and I was ripe.

Mark: Before the attack on Pearl Harbor and then afterwards, as America starts to go to war and being a single, young, 20-year-old person did you consider the impact that war might have on your life?

Don: No. The only impact was I could get out of here. I had sent away for papers in Canada as to how to join the Royal Canadian Air Force and so even that was an avenue of escape. My father, being a professor, was terribly strict about grades, I being the person I am was rebellious about the grades so that after the war, after graduating from Kings Point and seeing what the usual person on the street is like, I went back and entered Wisconsin for, I think, the fifth time as an unpromoted freshman and got straight A's. I lied and said that I was slightly hard of hearing from the guns going off and that I had to sit right down in front so I couldn't be distracted by coeds and I discovered college was a breeze, all you had to do was never cut a class and keep your ears open.

Mark: We'll come back to that. I'm interested in your actual induction into the service and the beginning of your training. We started that and talked about how your reputation had preceded you even then. Describe the Merchant Marine Academy and the training and how--I went to the Air Force basic training and I remember screaming and yelling four letter words and insults and those sorts of things. Was that your experience in the Merchant Marine?

Don: No. In the first place, they were sending out so many cadets. We were the only service academy that can have our battle flag. Because so many people were getting killed. The public didn't realize that. We had 147 underclassmen killed. Then they still said that we weren't on active duty. God, I got side tracked. What was your question again? Oh, ya, okay. So that we did not go to the academy, many of us, immediately. There were so many, I mean they were getting as many as they could because the Merchant Marine was a shambles. They were trying to inject an element of the Navy into it. I had no idea what people were like until I began to run into some Merchant Marine crews and I'm ashamed to say they would pay off with \$5.00 go ashore and get drunk, get rolled, be back Monday morning flat broke. That's the way a lot of them were.

So they had what they called “Basic Schools.” One basic school was at the academy at Kings Point, New York, another one at Pass Christian, Mississippi and the one that I was assigned to was San Mateo, California just out of San Francisco. All the cadets were college boys. There was practically nobody that wasn’t. There was no swearing. We were the discipline was extremely strict, I remember that. You were completely regimented. You followed rules. You had a white glove dress inspection every Saturday morning or you couldn’t go ashore for the afternoon. You were never allowed out overnight. The one thing that they had, I remember two things that you had to do, one was that you had to jump 30 feet in the water with a life jacket on to simulate having to jump off a ship and you sank into the muck in San Francisco Bay up to your knees and you had to kick it free and we wore the old cork jackets that were white and had big squares of cork and it tore off an inch or so of skin under each arm when you hit the water and then the next thing they would do was to try and train you for being in a life boat since there was quite a prospect of ending up doing that. So, on Friday afternoons, they would suddenly blow “abandon ship” and one section, which was about 25 guys, you had to fall to on the dock immediately. If you were in the shower or whatever you were doing in order to have it like a ship, you got into a life boat, you went out into San Francisco Bay until Monday morning. Invariably, everybody that went through this said, “I would rather die.” I can never remember an experience, if you can imagine this metal boat, we’re out there it’s rough water, you have to take care of life’s necessities, people were sick, you were lying in bilge that had feces and everything else floating back and forth on top of you, and you just wanted out. I’m very serious. You just thought, “I hope I die, if it’s going to be like that I don’t want that.”

Mark: So this was no cushy alternative to ground pounders.

Don: Certainly not! They kept stressing the obstacle course and you climbed and you went down and you had to climb ropes and run and jump and except that by the time I got back to Kings Point, I pulled the smartest thing I ever did. They had us all lined up in this huge gymnasium, O’Hare Gym and there’d be like 500 coming in and you were all lined up and they’d say, “All the non-swimmers take one step forward.” There was a great stigma if you were a nonswimmer if you were a nonswimmer and somebody had tipped me off and said, “Say you’re a nonswimmer, say you’re a nonswimmer.” So, I thought well, okay and there was a mere handful of us and everybody else had heaped scorn on us, “What you can’t swim? You’re a sissy!” Well, we soon discovered that every time they went on the obstacle course, three times a week, we were in this gorgeous pool supposedly learning how to swim. So that was one of the perks.

Mark: I assume you did know how to swim.

Don: Reasonably well, yes. There was one guy who had grown up in Hawaii who swam like a fish and we would be in there practicing and the warrant officer

came walking by and he stood there at the edge of the pool and this guy was swimming under water and he finally came up for air and the warrant officer said, "What are you doing here? You can swim." I remember he said, "Oh, Sir, I can only swim under water. I can't swim on the surface."

Mark: So this training lasted how long? A couple of weeks?

Don: About eight weeks and then we went to--then we were assigned to ships. The interesting part of it is I was assigned to a ship and here was this old German sea captain named Alfred Preen and of course I walked in and saluted and said, "Cadet Midshipman Fellows reporting for service" and he looked at me like I was out of my mind, 'cause they weren't used to people like this. I was stowing my stuff away and he suddenly came down to my cabin and he said, "Have you ever steered a ship before?" I said, "No, Sir." He said that I was going to steer now and to come up on the bridge. What had happened was, and they hushed it up because it was really kind of interesting, somebody had spread gasoline on the water at night and there must have been thirty ships lined up cheek by jowl and Saturday morning when most of the personnel had gone ashore it went up in flames. It was sabotage. I remember seeing the Chief Officer in his dress whites running forward, clouds of smoke, and he had a fire ax and he chopped the lines and we drifted out into San Francisco Bay. They didn't even have steam up. Then tugs came along and everything else and they took us to Oakland. Then we loaded, among other things, a lot of ammunition and when we got down to Espirito Santo, actually we had kind of an interesting thing to do because we had to rendezvous north of New Caledonia and supposedly a couple of Navy vessels would escort us out. Well, we circled around, there were three of us nervously and the PBY came by and they blinked us and everything and they said there was a lot of action up north which of course Guadalcanal was going on and so they said we weren't going to be under escort and that one ship would go taking one route and another one would go and then the third one would go and when we got up there we discovered all three of us didn't make it. One of them got sunk on the way. So that was part of the sea training and then, as I said before, which I won't recap, coming back from Espiritu Santo that's when I went over backwards down the fore peak and went to Chile, went to Fort Lauderdale, went to New Orleans, went home, went to Milwaukee, went to New York, sailed in convoys into Glasgow and then I went back to Kings Point. It's strange, I have a hazy memory and I can't remember exactly when we went into Cherbourg, but I know we went down to Portsmouth because I remember there were so many ships and everything else and I think that was before D-Day. I did not go to Normandy. Later on we were supposed to go up to Antwerp, but it was being bombed and everything and so we didn't go to Antwerp. We went back down to Cherbourg I think and whatever.

Mark: I want to go back to this sabotage. I am not familiar with this.

Don: They kept it quiet. Oh, another thing that was very interesting. When they opened up one of the hatches, you have a ladder that goes up. They discovered a bottle of gasoline hanging on a rope and we had had unusually calm weather all the way down and if we'd had any rough weather that would have swung against the side of the ship and burst and presumably started a fire.

Mark: Weren't there suspicions at the time? Do you have any knowledge as to who was doing that?

Don: None.

Mark: Strange.

Don: But they certainly hushed it up. It's like the Nazi's sank some ships with the lines on the dock in New Jersey and they didn't tell the public because they thought they'd panic. Why not?

Mark: Interesting. Now I was going to ask you to describe your first voyage over seas. I assume this is the first time you'd--

Don: Well that was it, ya. The first time on a ship and I was semi-officer being a midshipman and I remember standing there with the ground swell going like this and a member of the crew calmly coming up to me and saying, "Oh, Sir, how long does this last, Sir?" And here I was all of 19 or 20 and saying, "Well, it's all right just hang on." In the meantime I'm trying to keep from going (vomiting) in front of him. No, you conquer it and there were sea captains that got seasick every time they arrived in port because the ground swell is an unusual motion. We'd been at sea three or four or five months and for some reason I was usually on the bridge and for some reason I went back aft in a moderate sea and the stern was rising up and down like an elevator and all of a sudden I became sea sick and I ran forward and as soon as I got to the motion that I was used to, I was all right. A couple of years ago, we went over on the ferry and my wife and two kids were prostrate and it ended up being a force 8 or a force 9, everybody was down and I was walking around and I was happy as could be after 35 years it still didn't bother me, because you know how to stand so that you're always upright. If you go with it, then you're in major trouble.

Mark: So describe for me, briefly if you would, the mission of the Merchant Marine in wartime.

Don: Just to get goods over.

Mark: So these are nonmilitary ships, these are privately owned ships?

Don: Yes. They were leased by a shipping company. We had a Navy gun crew. We had a number of gun tubs, about eight or so with, I can't remember, I mean it was a small pop gun, 3" or something, I don't know. Then we had, I can't remember the name of them, that you were assigned to as loaders. We had gun practice. The funny part of it is that when you had a rehearsed general quarters, they always announced that there will be a general quarters, because what always happened was they'd blow general quarters and people would be so frantic they'd walk into doors and fall down and hurt themselves and everything. So, you had casualties without a shot being fired. So they said that it had to be rehearsed. See there was a wonderful, casual kind of thing. I remember when I was on Espiritu Santo, there was a Japanese reconnaissance plane that used to go over and it must have been a Piper Cub or something and they called him "Washing Machine Charlie" and he was like a good luck charm. Well, here he was, supposedly photographing and the funny part of it was when I got back to New York and I was in my first house outside of Pelham and the refrigerator broke down and the repairman came and he said, "What does it sound like?" I said, "I don't know it's like Washing Machine Charlie." He said, "You were down in the South Pacific!" It turned out we'd been down in the same area at the same time. It would literally go "putt putt putt putt." There was always a wonderful sense of humor. I remember going down in the Mediterranean along the north coast of Africa and there was a pinnacle rock, God it had to be 75 feet high and the top of it about the size of this table and here was an American jeep. The engineers or somebody had figured out a joke so that even when it was a scary time, they still had time for humor. But you were talking about the stuff that we shipped. The thing that was funny was that we would unload all this stuff that included ammunition and booze and beer for the Officer's Club and everything else and we had on deck, huge steel floats that would be as big as those two shelves and those two shelves so we'll say they're about 10x10 or 8x8 and about eight high. They had built the floating docks at Espiritu and they were completed and there weren't going to be any more. So somebody hadn't stopped them back in Washington, D.C. and these kept coming and kept coming and they'd pile them up out in the jungle. There were huge stacks of this stuff. So that many times the waste was unbelievable. I also know that Army trucks would line up and they would drive off, supposedly, and here it was on an island and every once in a while a truck would get lost and a whole load of beer or booze or something else would disappear. Now where it disappeared on an island, I have no idea. It's like the train that disappeared in France that was loaded with everything.

Mark: On Espiritu Santo how much time did you spend there?

Don: Well, it was brief, probably a couple of weeks and I remember there was an air raid and they blacked out the island and I was standing there and said, "Somebody help me!" Somebody grabbed me in the dark and my God, I went into a trench and everything and finally there was an all clear, but it was scary.

The main amusement, I guess, we used to stand down on the pier and watch commanders and above with their dates and they would have a brown paper bag that had a bottle and you'd see them in the launch and they'd go out to somebody's gig or something and then the lights would go out. But, it was only commanders and above.

Mark: Who were they dating?

Don: Nurses.

Mark: I was going to ask you to describe the incident when you were injured.

Don: All I was, I went up forward for something or other, because the weather was kind of bad, I think I went up with the Chief Officer to secure something.

Mark: That's on the way back from Espiritu Santo right?

Don: Ya. And, it was a storm, but not a major storm, and I slipped and went over backwards and I put my arm to protect my back as I fell, 'cause it was quite a fall and then I stood up and the arm just flopped and that was it. It was kind of touch because--oh, this is kind of interesting--I couldn't sleep and I was delirious and they said I jumped out of my bunk and walk out on the deck and say "Hey, come on! Let's go to that bar on the corner." Of course, I was bananas. So in one of my lucid moments, I begged the captain for a sleeping pill or something. I couldn't sleep because the pain was bad. So he said, "No, I can't because if we are hit, you'll endanger somebody else by having to look after you and you have to be as alert as you can. So I was having a worse time and a worse time and finally he said, "All right. I'll give you some special pills that I have." I remember that he gave me these two pills and I took them and then I also got some warm cotton and stuck those on your eyes 'cause that was supposed to help, or somebody did it for me and I went out like a light and I slept 12 or 14 hours and he came in the next day to see how I was and I said, "Oh, Gosh, thanks very much 'cause they really made a difference. I know how much you didn't want me to have them." He said, "No, you can have a couple of Aspirin any time you want." So it was strictly psychology but he'd given me two Aspirin and I believed that I was finally going to be able to sleep and I went out. Then we got to Chile and you could really hardly designate it a hospital. There was like a shambled house and he, the doctor there, **[END SIDE A, TAPE 1]** had me lie on his desk and they tied me down with clothes line and the only thing they had to knock me out was a tin thing that was like an hour glass and it had cotton in the top and the bottom fit over your nose and they would pour in ether and you would breath it and it would run into your eyes and you would come to and pass out and come to and pass out and so he put me in a cast from the waist up and of course it was the summertime and he said to keep it on for two weeks and then take it off and it was very hot, it was very tight. I think

he put it on too tight because if I climbed the ladders or something, I'd pant and I couldn't get my breath. I developed prickly heat from waist to neck and I had a stick and I would try and scratch and then finally, north of Peru almost up in the Canal Zone, we finally cut it off. I had another interesting thing happen. The other cadet had been an Eagle Scout and had had first aide and so they had bound it up with a splint and my hand started to turn blue and I lost all sensation. I said to the captain that it had to come off because even I know that you're going to end up with gangrene and the captain said, "No, no. I've done what I was supposed to do and everything else and I talked it over with Bill Schumey and Bill said he thought we ought to take it off and so I took it off and from the wrist up to above the elbow was a huge blister and he said, we've got to drain that and so he took a double-edged razor blade and made a slit and it drained and fortunately it did not become infected and then we bound it again but not as tight and the feeling came back in my hand and everything else. The end result was that about--well let's see, about 25 years ago I went over to London to do a show called Promises, Promises and I noticed it when I sat at my dressing table and if I didn't keep moving my left arm, it would fall asleep. So when I got back to New York I asked some questions around and they said the best man did all the operating and everything for the Mets and the Jets and everything else. So I was telling Jim about him, you'd go into his palatial office and he had one certificate that said Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, Dartmouth and he had no other certificate but he moved my nerve, moved the ulner nerve and so then I got the feeling back in my hand again. He said I had bone chips that were floating around and they were cutting the nerve and that it would not regenerate. So that's I guess traceable to wartime.

Mark: We'll come back to that. After your initial injury you went back to Wisconsin for a while.

Don: Right. And, I carried a flat iron around. Jim remembers that--to try and straighten--ya, a big heavy old flat iron because I had worked at Carston's Clothing Store. As a matter of fact when I was on sick leave, I worked at Carston's and it was kind of fun because people would come in and be very disdainful--why aren't you in the Army? And, I remember one woman that came in and said she wanted to buy a gift for my son. "He's in the South Pacific". She asked me what I recommended and I said a sewing kit. She said "Certainly one of his men will do his sewing." I said, "Madam, I've just come back from there and I can assure you sew on your own buttons unless you're Admiral King." So then she said, "What are you doing here?" And, there was an attractive girl there too, that really wouldn't even ask me for the time and once I was going out on a date so I wore my uniform 'cause I couldn't wear a uniform waiting on customers, so I had a couple of ribbons and she--my God, her eyes lit up, all of a sudden I was attractive--I really had to laugh at that.

Mark: So when did you go back over seas?

Don: Then I heard from the Navy and my mother thought I had been lost, happily, and they said to go to the Navy office in Milwaukee. I went to Milwaukee and I was afraid that I would be out of it so I told them--I belittled the injury as much as I could and I said, "All I will be doing is navigating and there is no reason why I can't go." Of course, they were building up to the landing and so they were grabbing everybody they could. So I went back to sea and went to New York and then they assigned me to a convoy that was going to Glasgow and we went to Glasgow and then came back. Then I went to Kings Point and graduated from Kings Point and graduated from Kings Point in January 1945, went into a convoy again. Had an interesting happen too, coming back because Roosevelt had died and we were in a heavy fog and there were about 80 ships and in a fog you can't show lights, you can't blow horns or you're going to get sunk and as a matter of fact I have vivid recollections of being asleep and suddenly hearing "Vrooom!" and they you had to--the escorts--how those Corvettes ever survived--I loved the movie The Cruel Sea and they come down the column going "[he makes a noise, can't put into words]" and throwing off ash cans and the fish would come to the surface by the thousands by the tens of thousands and you'd count about ten and out of nowhere would come sea gulls. You were a thousand miles off any coast and here were sea gulls, but we were coming back in a fog and everybody was getting all jumbled up and everything and suddenly the British escorts, the Corvettes began to blink us and they said we join you in your loss and everybody thought "What are they talking about?" At that moment the fog lifted and we all lined up and they said, "Your President has died." and everything else and blah, blah and I mean, the fog was up for 20-30 seconds, everybody could line up again and then we went back into fog until we hit New York harbor. But, it was very moving. It was Roosevelt's death and I don't know what it means, but it was uncanny.

Mark: As for these U.S. to Britain convoys, how many of them did you do?

Don: I think it was at least two if not three because then we went again, we made a run to Cherbourg and came back and then it was whenever VE day was, I think we even went out initially in convoy and it broke up because it was VE day. The only thing--they called us back to the ship 48 hours early--which was kind of odd and they kept us on the ship and then we left and by that time I was sailing Third Office 'cause I'd graduated and the whistles were going off and the fire hoses and everything and I turned to the pilot and I said, "What's all this for?" He said "Haven't you heard? The war is over in Europe." I guess they figured if they told anybody nobody would report to the ship. Yes. We were in convoy then until the Mediterranean because even though it was VE Day, there were still renegades and we were warned against, in the Indian Ocean for instance, we were warned against Italian saboteurs off Port Said because they would dive in the water at night and wrap chains around the propeller and they would start up in the morning and tear the guts out of the ship and so you had to

keep--you couldn't shoot then because the war was supposedly over, but you kept the fire hoses ready on deck so that if you saw a bum boat or something, you could turn it over. It brings to mind a slightly risqué story that I would want on tape but it's a wartime--

Mark: That's your decision.

Don: Well, it's not too bad. There were about eight ships off Port Said waiting to go down through the canal into the Red Sea and we were warned about these Italian saboteurs and everything and I was making my first trip as an officer and I had the watch and so I was kind of nervous about it and they said, "If you see anything suspicious, ask for pressure on deck and turn them over." So, during the course of the evening, I had the night watch and boats would come alongside and we had megaphones then, and you'd throw a lamp on them and yell, "Stand off. Stand off, what are you selling?" And a guy would say, "I got bead, I got basket, I got--" and he would throw up a line and we'd trade back and forth. As a matter of fact in Aden, Arabia I got a gorgeous pair of hand carved spoons that I use for salads that I bought with an empty peanut butter jar and he thought he was getting by far the best of the deal because it had a lid. So anyway we watched these boats and it got to be midnight and it was about 1:30 in the morning and there hadn't been any boats for quite a while. I'm sorry I got into this, but I guess it's all right. It's local color and wartime. So suddenly one of the lookouts said, "Mr. Fellows, there is a boat coming around the stern and there is three men on it." So I took a look through the binoculars and I called the engine room, "Stand by with water on deck" and in the boat there were two men sitting down and a man standing up rowing the way they do. He was passing and I said, "Throw the light on" and I said, "Stand off. Stand off. What are you selling?" This guy blinked at the light and he put down the oars and he said, "Pussy, Msr, pussy!" and he was taken idiots off these other ships and rowing them to a Port Said waterfront at 2:00 in the morning, but I did have to laugh. I burst out laughing it was such a relief because I thought, "Oh, my God, I've got one, I've got some saboteurs here", blah, blah, blah. But they warned us against raiders in the Indian Ocean. We didn't see any. We had one thing happen that was funny, but scared us half to death. The British battleship The Nelson that they called the half Nelson because of the Versailles Treaty they had to cut off part of the fantail to make it short enough for the new international agreements. It was enormous. It was like a block wide and we suddenly saw, because we'd been warned and everything in the Indian Ocean and suddenly the lookout said, "Starboard quarters--something. Ship." We saw this thing rise out of the water. As it comes toward you it looks like it widens out because the horizon is 13 miles away so you'd see the superstructure first and then it would rise out. We didn't know who it was and they sounded General Quarters and everybody ran to the guns and it would have been ludicrous and they blinked and we blinked back and suddenly there was a puff of smoke and here came a shell across our bow. Pow! They said something to the effect of "Be more

careful Yank, you used yesterday's recognition signal." So they were having fun, but it was not the kind of fun that we relished, even though they intentionally missed us by a mile, we just still saw the pump and we heard the plop.

Mark: The adrenaline was flowing.

Don: Yes. No kidding. So that was then and then we went into the east coast of India, a place called Cochin, the west coast which was Madras down to Colombo, sail on down to what was then Mozambique, South Africa where they are now having a civil war and then the radio kicked out and we went across the South Atlantic to Montevideo and when we got to Montevideo learned that VJ Day had happened and there were a lot of Nazi's there because they'd scuttled what the Schornhorst outside of the harbor and it was unbelievable because you'd walk down the street in an American uniform and they would come toward you and they'd give you the Hitler salute and say "Heil Hitler." It was kind of odd. In Mozambique we met a local man who said "Oh, you gotta have German beer, but he said don't talk because they will know that you are not German." He said, "We'll just go in and have one and then leave." We went in and by God there was a picture of Hitler over the bar and everything and so we were drinking and some guy that he knew came up and started to talk German to him and he'd turn and look and we'd say, "Ja, Ja, Ja" and keep our mouths shut and finally got out of there.

Mark: So where did these Germans come from?

Don: They were sympathizers, do you know in South America, the reason why they loved the German, the British and the Americans, I mean it was interesting traveling around the world, because you suddenly saw that other people had a point of view, not just yours. The Germans went to South America and married South Americans girls and bought houses and stayed there. The Americans largely went down with their American wife or waited until they got home. They were down there strictly temporarily; they let everybody know they didn't want to live there, as did the British. So, they were very friendly. I had a scary thing when my arm was in a cast because I was supposed to go up to Tokopilla from Antofagasta and something happened and I had to leave the hospital, I was checked out of this place because they only had about eight beds and the local British Counsel said, "You can come to my house for dinner." Also, we had an interesting thing, we were having dinner and then there was a shake and he said, "Catch the plates, catch the plates!" and we looked and the pictures would start to hang off the wall at about a 30 degree angle and it was an earthquake and the plates would start to slide and slide. He then said, "You can't stay here and the only hotel is owned by Japanese" so he said, "I'm sure you'll be all right." Nevertheless, here I was in a sling, I had a pocket knife that my father had given me years ago, and I didn't understand a word that they said, we went and here

were these Japanese and of course, they gave me the “Ha, ha, ha, ha” and I thought “Oh, my God!” This was 1943! It’s like my parents had a friend named Col. Dalton who was at Pearl Harbor when the attack came and they had a Japanese gardener and the gardener said, “Oh, they were supposed to come yesterday.” So they took me up so it was a ramshackle hotel that had a central open area and a balcony around it and then you’d climb stairs and there’d be another balcony. They put me in this room. There was a used chamber pot in the room that hadn’t been emptied, the bed was not made, the blankets were filthy, and so they said, somebody would come for me in the morning to fly me up to Tokopilla. So I lay down on the bed, even keeping my hat on because I didn’t take shoes off or anything else and there was one light with no shade and a chain, there was a window and a door onto the balcony. Now, knowing they were Japanese and everything, I was nervous and I was suddenly awakened in the pitch dark by the door handle being moved and so I yelled, “Get away!” and suddenly I heard footsteps running. So then I was kind of afraid to go to sleep, but then I dropped off to sleep again and again I heard a rattle at the door and I thought I’d see who it was because the door had a window in it and the window shade was pulled down. So, I got out of bed as quietly as I could and started across the floor and I heard the closet door open behind me, “Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee” I made a lunge for the light on the chain pulled the light on and when the light went on the person ran down the thing. I whipped around and had my knife in my hand and discovered that the floors were so old my weight on the floor had released the closet door so that it swung open of its own volition behind me. Then finally in the dark there was a knock on the door and here was a guy in a uniform with wings on the hat and he said something in Spanish which I didn’t understand and I went with him and we went out and got in a car and got in a Piper Cub and flew over the Pampas and landed in Tokopilla where we loaded nitrates for the manufacture of ammunition.

Mark: I was going to ask; you were going all around the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean and then over to Uruguay eventually. These are a lot of neutral; some of these are neutral countries.

Don: Well, you can call them neutral [laughter].

Mark: What sorts of goods were you shipping and how did you end up in these--

Don: That was strange. We took a certain amount of war material to India, then we went to Madras empty or with a few things. I know that then we took some kind of cargo to Mozambique, I don’t really remember what it was, but what I do remember was loading coal in Mozambique--loaded coal which we took to Uruguay. Then we went down the Rio de la Plata to Buenos Aires and I can’t remember what we loaded there. There was even a square-rigger sailing ship that I have photographs of that came into Buenos Aires--I mean an active square rigger. You asked about or reception in various countries. In India for instance,

we were told never to go out alone and I had an incident coming back, being pulled by a rickshaw and during the daytime they were very obsequious and say "Master" this and "Master" that and coming back they tried to pull me out of the rickshaw and spit on me and everything else. So they did not and the rickshaw guy, who spoke a little English, kept on saying, "American, not British."

Mark: I was going to say this couldn't have been any kind of profacism, this had to be anticolonial.

Don: Except that you see Boza who had an Indian Army, there were 50,000 Indians who were working with the Japanese because the Japanese said that they would free India and so there was quite a Japanese favoritism and in Buenos Aires it occurred to me that again you were told not to go out on the street there because you would be possibly shot in the anti-Peron thing. I remember you'd be in a restaurant and somebody would come racing in the door and hand out pamphlets or sheets at the tables and run out through the kitchen and you'd count about ten and the police would come running in and they'd grab up all these things. When we were leaving Buenos Aires, the harbor pilot, he kept saying, "Come on. Let's go. Can we go a little faster?" So, I finally asked what the hurry was. He pulled out a gun and he said, "We're having an anti-Peron demonstration." These are people that take their politics very seriously. He could have been dead before lunch. And so you weren't always welcomed by any manner or means.

Mark: It's a very different war than a lot of other men were in. I'm wondering as you watched the news over the course of the next thirty years, did you reflect back to your experience in India and--

Don: Well, ya because they had from what I know a similar thing in Vietnam when they really weren't welcomed to a great degree. It was like the Americans were there for their own good. We're doing this for your own good. A lot of times there was a good deal of animosity about it. One thing that was beautiful going on except it still relates to World War II, is a tremendous animosity between the British and the French. But, my wife and I went over to Normandy a few years ago and we went to some of the little cemeteries around Cannes and so forth. There'd be 1,000 graves and we happened to go on a Thursday afternoon and it was raining and we noticed some elderly couples putting flowers on certain graves. It turned out that they were French and they had a visitors book and you look for that day and they had brought flowers and said "Merci, Merci pro liberacion" after all these years they were still in there laying flowers and saying thank you, even though largely there were problems. It's like the problems now in England with the Germans and all this thing about the European community, but that's a whole other bag.

Mark: And complicated at that.

Don: Complicated!!!

Mark: So VJ Day you said you were in Uruguay.

Don: No. I was at sea. We didn't even know it. My celebration, do you want to know my celebration? I got back into New York harbor I think about the end of November and I thought I'm going to celebrate--the war is over and we anchored in the Hudson and the shore boat took me ashore and we went up to 125th Street and I had my uniform on and by that time I was a two-striper, a full Lt. because they had a thing in the Merchant Marine if you weren't killed every six months then you went up a grade. So I thought, boy, am I going to celebrate! **[END SIDE B, TAPE 1]** I walked up 125th Street in my brushed uniform and a door opened and this woman stepped out of the bar and she was drunk and she planted herself in front of me and said, "Oh, come on, Sonny, the war is over, take it off." That was my homecoming. Of course I came back here to Madison, because I had some fruit salad and stuff and my mother kept saying, "Wear your uniform, wear your uniform." I said, "No, it's over." So one of those crazy things where they hadn't wanted me to do it in the first place and then they ended up, because I survived, that they liked it. I had kind of a strange think too, it was my first manifestation of manhood that they drove me from Eton Ridge to the train station and when we got about half way to the train station, this was my initial trip to San Francisco, my father pulled over to the side and stopped the car. I said, "Why are you stopping?" He said, "Your mother and I have talked this over and we do not want you in the Merchant Marine. We do not want you to go and I said, "Well, it's my life and it's what I want to do and you can't watch me 24-hours a day so if I don't go today, I'll go tomorrow. Would you rather have me go with your permission or without it?" They looked at each other and they said they said they'd rather I go with their permission. But it was like my first instance of being an adult.

Mark: After the war you came back to Madison and went to college. We've already touched on this but let's talk about some of the post war things because in the ambiguous state of the Merchant Marine in terms of veteran hood, there might be some interesting things to talk about.

Don: I will say that I was not eligible for the GI Bill. I went back to college and I had--they (the War Shipping Administration) paid part of my fees as being a civilian injured in a war zone. That was the only way I got it and I don't think it was that much. I think it may have been \$25 a month or something--but it helped.

Mark: At the time did you have any sort of resentment over that? Did you accept it? The campus was flooded with GI's.

- Don: I was envious and I was ashamed at not being a veteran. I suddenly had a memory of a war veteran who was blinded and he used to beat his seeing-eye dog with a chain and nobody would stop him because he was a war veteran on campus, but you could tell he was taking out all his frustration at being blinded and everything else on that poor dog. God, I haven't thought of that for fifty years. No, I never felt a real part of it, oddly enough, even though I had gone all over the world and everything else. I never felt that I was really a veteran. But I suppose I am.
- Mark: Well, you are or you wouldn't be here. Now in terms of your grades you mentioned that your grades got much better after the war.
- Don: They sure did.
- Mark: Do you think your work had something to do with it?
- Don: Entirely.
- Mark: You don't think it was just that you'd grown older?
- Don: No. Part of it was King's Point because they graded on a curve and if you had a 3.8 and you were in the lower ten percent if everybody else had 3.9 but you, you flunked. So there was such a drive, talk about being motivated, they would play Taps and then you'd lie there, even if you were absolutely exhausted, you'd lie there until it was absolutely quiet and the night duty officer had gone by and then you'd stuff your bunk and go into the luggage locker with a flashlight and go in and there would be 15 guys saying "Turn off that light," and you would study until three or four o'clock in the morning because you had to make it. There was just nothing else.
- Mark: This gave you more discipline than your other studies.
- Don: Ya.
- Mark: I assume that you majored in theater or something like that. Is that correct?
- Don: Well, you didn't have any Theater here, you had Speech and so I took courses in Speech. At that point I still stuttered and that was it. I then went to New York and I worked in a Doubleday bookstore and I worked as an ambulance chaser in a lawyer's office for sea cases. I'd go down to the ships because I knew my way to find out if anybody had been injured so Silas, Blake, Axdell could represent them and get the cases.
- Mark: So in all these years, you were not eligible for standard GI Bill.

Don: Nothing.

Mark: No home loans or

Don: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Mark: We discussed this previously but let's get it on tape. You described how you became an official veteran like five years ago. Describe the process of becoming recognized.

Don: Well it was actually done by Kings Point. They agitated for years until finally it came in stages. First we got a "You Are Recognized by Congress as having Participated." You weren't a veteran but you participated in World War II. Then we had another thing that was in those other things that was a Certificate of Service and then finally, they mailed us a discharge and when I saw it was the Coast Guard, I couldn't figure that out because we'd been in the Naval Reserve so I always felt like the Navy and yet I have letters from the Navy to Ensign Donald Fellows, USNR and stuff like that and the whole thing--we were something that they didn't know how to handle I guess.

Mark: So when you finally achieved the official veteran-ness or veteran-hood, how'd you feel? Did you feel good? Did you care by that point?

Don: Yes. I was--it was like I finally made it before I dropped dead. No I felt that--see in a way they had a point, we did get slightly more money than the average grunt, but our pay was like a Sergeant 3rd class. We weren't making that much more. I got \$45 a month and then in a war zone maybe they would double it, I don't know, so there was the feeling that these people in the Merchant Marine made a fortune. Not that I ever knew. Those that did certainly plowed it back into the economy. But there was a stigma, I was aware of the stigma but it may well have been self-induced, that I felt that I hadn't really been part of the team.

Mark: So as a veteran now, are you now eligible to go to a VA hospital?

Don: Yes. If I'm absolutely destitute. If you earn less than \$10,000 a year or something like that. I can also--

Mark: Of course, you live over seas too--but then there are hospitals over there.

Don: See in England, you have nationalized medicine and so you don't pay any. You can if you want to or if you have to.

Mark: I have just a couple more things I have to cover briefly. One involves post war medical problems. We discussed your surgery 30 years after the war.

Don: The Screen Actors Guild paid for that.

Mark: I'm wondering in the immediate post war years, if you had any manifestations of your shoulder problems. Did you have trouble getting around the campus?

Don: Oh, no. No. I just couldn't straighten my arm. I'm a little conscious of it when I see me in a movie I will suddenly see my arm being held oddly enough. I was in a Broadway show when my understudy kept carrying his briefcase like that and finally the director said, "Why are you doing that?" He said, "That's what Don does." He says, "Don does it because he's crippled." This kid thought that was an integral part of the character. I also tend to put my hand in my pockets. See the way he's standing now? Well, I will do that or go like that. I don't make a point of it if I have to reach for a prop, I don't go like that because then you can see there is a problem, I take it with the other hand.

Mark: Were there any sort of other medical problem? For example, some veterans will go through nightmares and those sorts of things. Now you weren't in any sort of combat but do you have any other

Don: The only thing is that for a long time I couldn't sleep without a light. I will admit to that.

Mark: Do you suspect that was war related?

Don: Yes. I'm quite sure because they were very strict in that you never closed a door because a door could jam so they had long hooks and all the doors were on hooks and so that--comparatively recently, I was doing a play with an actor named Vincent Gardenia who is now gone, and we were in Philadelphia and we finally said, "Let's share a room for the last half week." I can't remember what happened. I went back to the hotel room and I said, "Oh, my God this is embarrassing I have to have a light on, what will I do?" Well, I thought, I'll have the light on in the john and I'll have the door open just a little bit and if he says anything "You baby, what do you have to have the light on for?" I'll say, "I don't have to have the light on, I had it for you" because he said he was going to stay out. So anyway, about four o'clock in the morning I woke up and every light in the room was on. The overhead light, the lamps, the bathroom with the door open and everything else. In the morning I asked about it and asked if he was drunk. He became very embarrassed and said, "No. I'm sorry, I should have told you, I can't sleep until every light in the room is on." Then I felt vindicated. That was really the only fear. It's kind of strange if I suddenly hear low flying aircraft and I'm sound asleep, I can't help it--and then I realize this is ridiculous. That's all.

Mark: I just have one more question and that involves the war in your later professional career. One of the problems that some veterans have is that the war

interrupted their education or their professional well being. Do you think that the war hindered your--

Don: Leland Hayward told me, "Don, if they ever stop having wars, you'll never work again." Because I started off playing sailors, then young officers, then in Superman II I'm a general, so that you end up--so that it hasn't hurt at all.

Mark: In fact it may have given you insight into your characters?

Don: Right. It may have even helped.

Mark: Interesting. Thanks for stopping in.

[End of Interview]