

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RUSSELL R. GONNERING
Photographer, Navy, World War II.

2006

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Gonnering, Russell R., (1925-2007). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Russell R. Gonnering, a West Allis, Wisconsin native, discusses his service as a Navy photographer in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Gonnering talks about enlisting right after high school, at age seventeen. He describes boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes (Illinois) and befriending a recruit from Cleveland. Assigned to the USS Hornet, he details getting in trouble for refusing to skip church to do the bosun's laundry, setting the record straight with the chaplain and executive officer, and requesting to be transferred. Sent to a photographic squadron at Norfolk Naval Air Station, Gonnering talks about jumping at the chance to go to photographic school and motion picture school at Pensacola (Florida). He describes assignment to the USS Bunker Hill in Task Force 58 and his duties on the flight deck making motion pictures of planes taking off from and landing on the aircraft carrier. Gonnering speaks of taking aerial photos of installations on small Pacific islands and processing them in the shipboard photo lab. He addresses living quarters, food, a typical day, and trading photographs for extra food. Gonnering describes his cameras and photographic equipment, and he reflects on watching live action through a viewfinder. After the war, he recalls the ship's homecoming to San Francisco and taking a picture of the sailors spelling out "Bunker Hill" on the ship. Gonnering mentions being offered a promotion in exchange for service at Bikini Atoll, which he turned down, and later discovering the job would have involved filming nuclear bomb experiments. He speaks of assignment to Santa Ana (California) filming air-sea rescue movies. Gonnering addresses working on blimps and PT boats, cooperating with 20th Century Fox Studios and Pathé News, and the new use of sonar buoys in rescues. He describes filming different types of ships attempting different turning maneuvers side by side. Gonnering talks about having fun in the blimps: observing sunbathing actresses through field glasses, dropping sandbags on cows, getting in trouble for dropping fuel on orange groves, using landing lights to confuse train engineers, and photographing the Rose Bowl. He tells of almost freezing his leg while taking aerial mapping photos at high altitude. He comments on some of his photographs and photo albums. Gonnering details landing in a blimp and recalls an accident that resulted in two deaths. He comments on being allowed to roam 20th Century Fox buildings and see movies being made. Gonnering speaks of his civilian career in lithography, keeping in touch with a few Navy photographers, and joining the American Legion and the Knights of Columbus.

Biographical Sketch:

Gonnering (1925-2007) served as a photographer in the Navy from 1943 to 1946. After the war, he did photolithography at Mueller Color Plate in Milwaukee for thirty-two years. He eventually settled in Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2006

Transcribed by Michelle Kreidler, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2008

Format fixed by Katy Marty, 2008

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

Terry: This is an interview with Russell G. [i.e. R.] Gonnering, who served in the United States Navy during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 10 a.m. at the following address of 4385 Glidden Drive, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of July 6th, 2006, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald. Russ, can you give us a little background before you went into the military as to the year you were born and where you were born?

Russell: All right. I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1925. I lived in West Allis. I grew up in West Allis as a young boy and went to grade school in West Allis and then Nathan Hale High School, and after graduation in '43, I enlisted into the Navy.

Terry: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Russell: Yes. I have a brother and a sister. I was the youngest. My sister was the oldest, and then I had a brother older than I, and he tried to enlist but he wasn't able to. He had a kind of a breathing problem, so he never got in. He wanted to go in the Navy too.

Terry: So when you got out of high school, were you close to being drafted?

Russell: No, no. I was only seventeen.

Terry: Okay.

Russell: And, in fact, I went down to, at that time—I'm trying to think of the name of that building down there in Milwaukee, it's no longer there, where the Navy recruiting office was. I went down there to enlist and first thing the man asked me how old I was, and I told him I was seventeen, and he says, "Well," he said, "you can't enlist unless you take this paper home and have your dad sign it." So I took it home and had my dad sign it and took it in the next day. Oh, it was in the Plankinton Building in Milwaukee. And the next day I was sworn in and whisked off to Great Lakes, Illinois to boot camp.

Terry: What made you join the Navy?

Russell: Well, my dad always [laughs]—it's funny. He said he always wanted to be in the Navy, but in World War I he applied, but he had heart trouble, and they didn't take him. And it sounded so interesting, the Navy, that I thought, boy, if I ever get a chance, I want to try to join the Navy [laughs].

Terry: So when you went to boot camp, was there any other people that went along with you at the same time that you knew, any friends of yours?

Russell: Well, I met a fella. Nobody from—well, there were fellas from Milwaukee, but nobody that I knew, but when I got into boot camp, I met a fella by the name of

Bagio Forisi[?]. He was from Cleveland, and we were together for quite a while after boot camp. Wherever he would go, I seemed to go because his name ended with a— or started with an F and mine with a G, so, of course, in the military everything is alphabetically. So we went to the boot camp and finished it, and then I—

Terry: Can you tell us a little bit about boot camp? How was it?

Russell: [laughs] Oh, God. When I got into boot camp, I couldn't believe it. I heard this guy there hollering at us, and I was wondering why he was so mad. He was using words I never, ever heard before. [laughs] I thought, gee, what am I doing here. But I got through boot camp and became a very close friend of this Bagio Forisi. And then after boot camp we both got shipped to Norfolk, Virginia, and when we got to Norfolk, Virginia, they took us over to a place nearby called Newport News where there were two ships, two ships that were just commissioned, two aircraft carriers. You know, when they build one aircraft carrier, they build a second aircraft carrier, a sister ship. And one was named the *Hornet*, the *USS Hornet*, and the other one was named the *Franklin*. Well, we decided we were gonna try to get on the *Hornet* because, of course, you know, Doolittle flew off of the first *Hornet* that was sunk, and we thought that had a neat name, so we thought, boy, we want to be on the *Hornet*, so we did. We both got onto the *Hornet*, and I was put into a crew. I was just a Seaman First Class now, and I was with the anchor chain down in the fo'c'sle where they would bring the chain up. And Forisi—everybody is called by their last name—he was in another division, but at night we'd always get together, and I—it was December of '43, Christmas, and we were loading torpedoes aboard the carrier in Newport News in the rain, and I thought, boy, this is not the place to be. What am I doing here? So I got in a little trouble after I was on the ship. It—you know, they had a guy, a Bosun, I don't know if you know, a Bosun is kind of what a Sergeant is in the Army, and he was a tough guy, and one day he came up to me on a Sunday morning, and he [phone ringing]—all right, well, as I say, we were on the—I got into a little trouble. What happened was this Bosun one Sunday morning, he came along and dropped his sea bag in front of me. He says, "I want you to do my laundry." Well, I thought, who the heck does he think he is? I said, "I'm not going to do your laundry. I'm going to church services." And, of course, I was Catholic, and, you know, you go to mass on Sunday. I didn't do it and I came back, and he saw that I disobeyed his order, so he says, "The Lieutenant's going to have a talk with you." So the Lieutenant came down, and he said, "I understand that you disobeyed an order that was given you, and we're gonna give you a captain's mask." I didn't know what a captain's mask was, but I found out that it was going to be a little program set up with me and the Captain and for disobeying an order; there probably would be some sort of a punishment. And I thought, well, this isn't gonna work out, so I went to the Chaplain aboard the ship, and I explained the story to the Chaplain, and the Chaplain happened to be a close friend to the Executive Officer. Now, of course, in the Navy the Executive Officer runs the ship. Here we are on a carrier with five thousand men, and the Executive Officer, he's got full say. The Captain is more of a figurehead. The Captain lets the Executive Officer, who is a

commander, do everything. He's in complete control. So the Chaplain called the Executive Officer down, and I didn't know, but the Executive Officer and the Chaplain were real close buddies, so the Chaplain had told him the story, and the Executive Officer said, "Just a minute," and he went to the phone and he called in my Lieutenant, Lieutenant Boots, I remember his name. And he brought in the Bosun, and the Exec said, "What seems to be the trouble here?" And they said, "Well, this Gonnering here wouldn't obey an order." And of course, the Lieutenant didn't know that already the Executive Officer knew what the order was, and he says, "Well, what was the order?" And he said, "Well, you'll have to ask the Bosun." So the Bosun said, "Well, I demanded him to do something, and he wouldn't do it." And the Executive Officer said, "What did you demand?" "Well," he said, "I gave him an order." He said, "What was the order?" "Well," he said, "I gave him my laundry and he said he was going to church instead." Well, when the Executive Officer heard that, he was just irate. He said, "How dare you in peacetime, on shore, that you denied this man of going to church?" He said, "You know, I've got the right to bust you, Lieutenant, and the Bosun down to Seamen First Class." And he said, "If this ever happens again," he said, "look out." And they saluted him and walked out. I said to the Executive Officer, I said, "I can't stay on this ship." I said, "You know, some night I'm gonna be thrown overboard," I said, "because no way am I gonna—this is gonna spread through the whole department." He said, "Don't worry about it." So the Executive Officer said, "What would you like to do?" I said, "Well," I said, "I like photography." I said, "I had it as a hobby, I had my little darkroom in the basement, and I was the photographer for the high school paper." And he said, "All right," he says, "I'll work out something for you." So the next day they told me they are going to send me to Norfolk Naval Air Station to SB Squadron 2, which was the photographic squadron for the North Atlantic. That's where they did all this photographic work. Well when I got there, I thought, my God, I died and went to heaven. [both laugh] I had never seen so many cameras, cameramen, enlargers, aerial cameras, ground cameras, motion picture cameras, so I just—I just loved it there, and they were teaching me all about photography—about photography.

Terry: Now, was this a big school, a lot of men there?

Russell: Well, it was a big building, yeah. It was all photographic. In fact, they mapped the whole coastline of Greenland. Anything that would come in that wanted to be released for the movies was all done there, and it was just a learning experience. And I just picked it up so fast because, you know, if you're in something you like, you are going to be good at it. So one day the Chief came up to me and he said, "Gonnering," he said, "there's an opening to send you to school in Pensacola, Florida, to photographic school. How would you like it?" And I said, "I'd love it." So they sent me down there, and, oh, now I'm in a place where it's even more. I said, I never seen so many darkrooms and so many studios, and it was about a three—two and a half month course. It was really tough because we studied every day. We had classes every day, and at the end of the week we'd have a test, and if you graduated from there, you then would become a Third Class Photographer.

Terry: And how many people were in the school?

Russell: Oh, there must have been—

Terry: Going through a class?

Russell: In a class, might have been about sixty of us in a class, but there were different classes. There would be one in motion picture class. There would be a class of camera repair. There would be a class of still camera, aerial camera, motion picture, the whole bit. So after I finish—I graduated from the general photographic school, I had an opportunity to go to motion picture school down there in Pensacola, so naturally I took that because I was really interested in it. I've got some pictures here if I could just show you, if you want to just stop it.

Terry: Russ is showing me a picture that appeared in the Milwaukee Journal in the Green Sheet, and it was dated May 26th, 1945, and the picture shows Russ at a motion picture camera school in Pensacola, Florida, that he was just talking about. And it made the front page of the Green Sheet in the Milwaukee Journal.

Russell: Okay. And so it was great, the motion picture school. They taught us everything that you could learn about motion picture. So after graduating from motion picture school, I was shipped to San Diego, North Island Naval Air Station, and waiting for an assignment, and I was there for maybe about two weeks and a call came in. They wanted a motion picture cameraman on an aircraft carrier that was up in Puget Sound, Washington, D.C. So I went up there, and it was the *USS Bunker Hill*, and there were about maybe fifteen of us cameramen aboard, and I was one of the motion picture cameramen, and my job was to take pictures. The ship had just come in from repairs. It got hit south of Okinawa May 11th, and it was just finishing its repairs in dry dock and we went back out into the South Pacific. And my job was to take pictures of landing planes, coming in, landing, and planes taking off. And I was up in the deck there where I had a big Mitchell movie camera, and at first I was taking pictures, I didn't know if the planes were gonna land or not, but after taking so many of them, you can tell the ones that are gonna make it and not because some would come in and their wings would be busted up pretty bad, or else a wheel wouldn't come down, or they were shot up bad, and so you would start photographing these, and they wanted records of the planes coming in.

Terry: So where were you located on the ship? Were you on the flight deck?

Russell: Oh, yeah, no, above the flight deck, a deck above the flight deck in the island structure, and I had a beautiful view with a telephoto lens that I could photograph right up as the plane is coming in catching the cables. You know, in those days—nowadays they come in electronically or on a radio beam; in those days they had a landing signal officer that would flag them in. And if you'd see the landing signal

officer waving his hands for a flag off, sometimes they couldn't make it off because they were losing their air speed and they would crash, and they wanted pictures of that. And then forward I had a job at times taking pictures of the planes taking off, and then at times we would go up in a squadron and take installation of some of the islands where maybe they'd want to have a landing with some of the Marines and they'd want installation of bridges and towers, and so we'd make a dive, and then we didn't do the movie camera, we were just still with aerial cameras.

Terry: This was prior to an invasion?

Russell: Yeah, yeah, of some of the small islands. They weren't sure if they were going to invade them, but at least they wanted to have pictures of the installation. So they would take a plane, an SB2C Dauntless, and they'd strip it down. They'd take everything off it so it would be light, and you'd go up with the squadron and then you'd make maybe two dives down and get your picture and out again because the Japs were on those islands.

Terry: And did you see anti-aircraft?

Russell: Oh, yeah, they would, but, see, you would come in from the sun, and they wouldn't see you. By the time you came down, you were out of there. You don't make a second run, you just make a pass at it. So we'd bring those pictures all back and then we'd process them on the ship in the photo lab. Let me think now. What did I—this is sixty years ago. I'm trying to think. After—all right. Toward the end when the war ended, they said, "Now, you know, you are not going to get discharged right away. It's going to take months because we got to process everybody out." They said, "We got a program that's going on if any of you want to join up. It's a two-year program, and we'll give you a second rank or a rank above what you have now if you sign up for it," and it was called Operation Crossroads. And I thought, gee, I don't even know what the heck is Operation Crossroads. Well, we found out later that it was going to be taking—they were going to do experiments on a small little island called Bikini Atoll, and they were going to experiment with the atomic bomb.

Terry: Okay. Before we get into that part of it, Russ, can we just go back to *Bunker Hill* again?

Russell: Yeah.

Terry: Was it ever attacked by the Japanese?

Russell: Oh yeah, yeah, we were, but it was kind of toward the end of the war, and there wasn't much of the Jap, you know, Navy or the Air Force left.

Terry: Okay.

Russell: But we were in Task Force 58. We were the command ship, and we had an Admiral. There must have been maybe forty of us ships all in one big Task Force 58, maybe seven carriers, three Essex type. Those were the big ones like we were on, you know, the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Enterprise*, and we were there, but we were the command ship, and we were pretty isolated because we were right in the middle.

Terry: Do you recall who the Admiral was?

Russell: I am trying to think of now the Admiral. It wasn't Halsey. You know, last night while I was laying awake, I was trying to think of all these names. You know, I just—it will maybe come to me.

Terry: What was your job when the—during general quarters?

Russell: Oh, mine was to run and get a movie camera and get up to the flight deck, or above the flight deck into—everybody, everyone had a special place to go. Nobody was allowed on the flight deck unless you had, you had a jacket on. Ours was green with a green cap, and that means anyone—and then it said photography on the back. There were the ones that took care of the planes, taxiing the planes up. And there were all different colors, and you had to have a color on, otherwise you weren't allowed in that area. But each of us had a different section that we had to go on for general quarters, so mine was to get up there with the movie camera. And most of the time it wouldn't be the big Mitchell, it would just be a handheld, small, what they call an Eyemo-M or an Eyemo-Q camera to take pictures.

Terry: Now, can you tell us just a little bit about the living conditions aboard ship? You said there was about five thousand guys on board?

Russell: Yeah, yeah, there were five thousand of us.

Terry: How was the living quarters? Pretty—

Russell: Well, yeah, it—surprisingly, the ship really looked almost empty because it was so huge. It was—at that time it was the largest ship in the fleet, eight hundred sixty-five feet long, forty-five thousand ton, the Essex class, and you had—we had a—maybe an attachment of about one hundred Marines. We had close to one hundred planes. We carried the Corsair with a fighter plane and the Grumman, the Wildcat, and then, of course, the SB2C Helldiver, and the torpedo bombers. Those were the four different type of planes that we had, and most of the time we would fly in the SB2Cs or sometimes the TBF torpedo bombers. The others were the fighter planes.

Terry: What was your sleeping quarters like?

Russell: Well, it was—they were nice. My sleeping quarters were, well, maybe about two decks down below the hangar deck, and we had access to get—you know, the photographers always had fast access like the medics did, to get to their certain areas

because as soon as general quarters, a lot of the compartments would be closed and locked, and you had to make sure that you got to your station where you were going to be by the time general quarters ended. But we slept about four high. We liked to get on the top, and you'd be crawling over another guy getting—and all the bunks folded back up. But there was a lot of room. We had a great big galley, and, of course, the hangar deck was huge. I mean, that was like a ballpark it was so big.

Terry: You mentioned the galley. What was the food like?

Russell: Oh, the food was great. Yeah, the food, we could smell those cookies. And, you know, the photographer had it made because in the photo lab we had a little electric stove, and we'd go down into the galley there and ask the cooks to give us some—we even had a little refrigerator—some butter and some eggs and some bread. Well, then after a while they said, "Look, we're sick of giving you all this." And we said, "All right, we'll come down, we'll take pictures you can—you know, take a picture, you can send it home to your folks." So the photographer really had it made because any time he wanted anything, all he had to do was take a camera with him, take a picture of a guy, and, oh, God, they'd give you anything because they—or maybe you had a picture of the ship, and I have some that's in the book I can show you after a while that I took, aerial shots.

Terry: Did you have to pull any watches, or was your—how was your day—what was your typical day?

Russell: Well, no, not watches, we didn't. Most of the seamen had to do things like that. We had a lot of—you have to remember these fighter planes had gun cameras, and we had to process. When they'd come back, we'd have to take all that film out, process it, and some of them had movie film on it, on the gun cameras, so it was a big job of processing all of the film that was taken from the planes. And then, of course, the film that we were taking ourself, our movie film, that had to all be processed.

Terry: So you actually got to see the first line of what was actually happening in combat then?

Russell: Oh, yeah, yeah, through a viewfinder, [laughs] which is a little kind of hard watching it while you're trying to be—or especially if the planes are up there fighting, you know, you're trying to keep the scope on the planes. And the equipment we had was absolutely fantastic. We had the big Mitchell 35 millimeter movie camera, sound like they use in Hollywood, and the aerial cameras, the K-19 and the K-16s and the K-10s, they were huge cameras. When we'd go up, they'd always say, you know, if you—don't drop the camera because if you do, you are going to be responsible for it, as long as you bring back the handles. You know, if you brought the handles back, which you couldn't take off, they figured if you lost the camera, it wasn't your fault, you had a hold of the handles. And the picture size on the still cameras were nine by nine, and it was a roll of film, and we could take maybe about a hundred pictures on the big aerial cameras. Used them a lot for

mapping. They were a little heavy to hold, so if they wanted some good shots, we'd take that camera up, but most of the time we'd take the smaller K-20 cameras, aerial cameras, because they were lighter. You know, you had to open the greenhouse, and as soon as you do that, you're getting the wind, and the plane is diving, and you're getting caught with all this wind, so you can't really carry a very heavy camera. And, besides, you had to also be a gunner because it had the two 50 calibers. When you weren't shooting, you had to—you know, pictures, you had to operate the 50-millimeters—or, yeah, .50 calibers.

Terry: So overall the living conditions and things on board the ship were pretty good?

Russell: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. The food was great. We always had fresh. The only thing is, to this day I don't eat apricot pie because we had that every day for dessert. I don't know who set up the—you knew a week—one thing in the service, you always knew what you were going to have the next day or the next week because it kept repeating itself. It was always—but we had a lot of times the powdered eggs, but when we'd get new shipments, we'd have the fresh eggs and fresh fruit, and we'd stop off in Hawaii there, we'd get a lot of pineapple, so that was good. But for the most part, the food was very good. Nobody starved on the ship. There was all you could eat. They had a good bakery on there. The cookies were great. And coffee was on all the time, so you always had a cup of coffee.

Terry: So did—you were mentioning before about this operation where you could go up in rank. What was your rank at the present time?

Russell: Third Class Photographer.

Terry: Third Class.

Russell: Yeah.

Terry: So did you take advantage when the war ended?

Russell: Well, yeah. Now, when the war ended, I was back on the *Bunker Hill*, and we came into San Francisco, and I got transferred off the ship back down to San Diego Naval Air Station, North Island.

Terry: Can we just—what was that like when you come back into port? Was—

Russell: Well, I didn't think we were going to get under the Golden Gate because it looked like our superstructure was higher than what the bridge was, but we got under it. And there wasn't a lot of space under it because the ship was pretty high.

Terry: Now, was there any type of greetings when you came into the harbor?

Russell: Yeah, when we came back into—that was Seattle, we formed the words "Bunker Hill" with the men on the ship, and I went way up into the—way up in the radar area and took pictures of it, and I gave them to the Seattle newspaper, and they printed it, and all the men spelled out "Bunker Hill." And they were cheering, and you know how it is when a ship comes back. There were people all there. It was—it was great. But after, like I say, after—we had a few months before we were going to get discharged, I was sent down to San Diego again, and I was down there, and a call came in. Well, like we refused going on this Bikini Atoll because we found out later that most of the guys that were on that died from radiation exposure. So, but anyway, I was down there, and a call came in. They needed a motion picture cameraman to do air-sea rescue movies in Santa Ana, California, at a lighter-than-air base, and this was all blimps. They had two great big hangars there in Santa Ana, and I thought, gee, this sounds great. I never flew in a blimp before. So I went up there, and it was very exciting because making these air-sea rescue movies, we worked with 20th Century, what do you call it, Studios and Pathé. I don't know if you remember Pathé. When you'd go to the movies during the war, you'd—they'd show a movie, and then all of a sudden you would see the newsreel and there would be a rooster coming out, and it would say Pathé News. Well, Pathé did all of our processing film on the air-sea rescue movies that we made in Santa Ana, California, out of blimps. They had a new technology that had come out called a sonar buoy, and this was a cylinder about two and a half feet long and about four inches in diameter with an aerial, and if a pilot had to abandon ship or was shot down, he'd jump out, and under his parachute he had a one-man life raft, and they would throw out one of these sonar buoys, and it would land in the water where he was. Well, he would inflate his one-man life raft, and this sonar buoy sent out a radio beam for a hundred miles in every direction. And in the South Pacific [phone ringing]—and what happened was if the fella was in the water unconscious, there were certain planes that flew with—set up with this radio beam, and they could spot them right away, and that's how they could find so many of the pilots downed at the end. Of course, now the war is over, but when they came—but it would have been a great, you know, something they could have used before that. I have pictures of it. I've got movies that I can show you.

Terry: Okay. All right. Okay.—[**End of Tape 1, Side A**] —Side B, Russell Gonnering. And Russ is describing when he was assigned to an air base where—air-sea rescue, and he was a motion picture and cameraman with that unit.

Russell: Yeah. Yeah. And we—it was very interesting because we worked with a lot of 20th Century engineers, and they wrote a lot of our script. In fact, it was a big movie. They would show where—like I say, they'd have this sonar buoy, and we'd have to take pictures and movies, and we worked off—making this particular movie, we worked off of PT boats, we worked off of the Mike and K blimp ships, and we worked near this island right off of San Diego. What is that island called?

Terry: Catalina?

Russell: Catalina Island, right. And it was—it was a great movie. It was—it was made for the Navy.

Terry: Were you working with any actors that you knew?

Russell: No, no, we didn't. The Navy had all of its own men. They had exposure to actors if they wanted them. We also made ship document subjects. In other words, what they did was we would fly in two blimps, one maybe at around six hundred feet, and the other one at about one thousand feet, and we flew formation in these two blimps, and we would—we'd make movies. They wanted to—they'd get two destroyers, and they wanted to see if full two destroyers side by side going full speed, if they were going to encounter a crash or something that was, would obstruct them in the water, could they turn to the right faster than if they could back down from this procedure. And it was unique. I can show you pictures after while that we took. They would—they would both be going full speed, and they would drop a smudge pot when they'd executed, and the one destroyer to the right would turn as far as he could to the right to make a right turn, and at the same time the destroyer on the left would back down as fast as he could, and then, of course, with our movie film we could see which one advanced farther. It was surprising. The smaller ships could make the turn faster than backing down. So we did it with destroyers, we did it with light cruisers, heavy cruisers, battleships, and aircraft carriers, and the carriers and the battleships could not turn out of the way fast enough; they could back down. And it was really interesting. It took—it took us weeks to make these movies, so you can imagine to try to get two full-fledged battleships together to do this in the Pacific, off of San Diego it really was, and then to line up two aircraft carriers, so, you know, it took weeks before you could line all this up, and then we had to be all ready with these—with our blimps.

Terry: What was it like flying in a blimp?

Russell: God, that is the best flying there is. I mean, we could stop and back up and go forward. It was kind of interesting because if you flew over Beverly Hills, we all got the field glasses out because a lot of these movie actresses were taking sun baths on their decks [laughs]. And, oh, God, we had more fun in those blimps. If we got too heavy, we'd have to throw sandbags down, otherwise we'd lose altitude, and we'd be flying over someplace where there would be a farm, and we'd open the bomb bay doors, and we'd try to hit the cows [laughs], and all of a sudden we would see these cows stampeding, and we'd—you know, all of a sudden one would hit them on the head, and they'd go four feet going out, they'd be knocked out. And if we got—you have to remember, Santa Ana at that time was—our air base was right in the middle of the orange groves, and if we dropped sandbags and still was too heavy, then we'd drop water, and if we dropped and had no more, we'd have to drop fuel. Well, we got in trouble because we dropped fuel and it killed a lot of the orange groves. But I remember one day there was a bridge or a tunnel, and we were coming around, and it was late in the afternoon, and we saw this train going in the tunnel at one end, so we went around the other end and came down real low and turned our landing lights

on, and it must have looked like to this train engineer a train was coming at him the other way [laughs], and it—you know, the things that you did was just—you know, they said there's two ways of doing it: the right way and the Navy way [laughs]. So we did. It was great because I can still remember it was in '45 in December, or the Rose Bowl, and we thought, gee, let's go up and take pictures of the Rose Bowl, so we took pictures of the Rose Bowl out of the blimps. You got a beautiful view of the Rose Parade.

Terry: Did you ever find out if any of your motion pictures were used on any of the newsreels?

Russell: They could have been, but, see, we're in the service, and we weren't—

Terry: You didn't see them.

Russell: Yeah, we didn't see them, but I'm sure a lot of it did go into the newsreels because we'd see other newsreel movies that we'd recognize that were done either by the Army or the Navy, you know. And I think that movie that—where you would see the battle, what was it in the Pacific, you know, you'd see they had different segments of it, of the fighting in the Pacific, a lot of that was shot by all Navy photographers, motion picture photographers. But if you want to just shut it off for a minute.

Terry: Russ has an album of photographs that he's showing me right now of when he was in Virginia at the school.

Russell: Norfolk, yeah.

Terry: And it's showing all the different sailors going through the—and the different—

Russell: The photo lab. The album is kind of—well, of course, then we went down to Virginia Beach and met some girls down there [laughs]. But, let's see. Here was a squadron picnic we had, which was great. Here, as you can see, this is all the pilots. This was graduation of the class of motion picture school.

Terry: I see you even had a couple women in the group too, huh?

Russell: Oh, yeah, yeah, there were WAVES in it. See, now there was that picture that you saw in the Green Sheet. And here is another one. This was—here was the building. This was the photo lab, and here was going through the still camera. Here is one of the big aerial cameras, the K-20s.

Terry: And the photo album also shows some of the other recreational things that they were doing at the time and quite an extensive album. Russ, can you tell us about the time that you almost froze your leg?

- Russell: Yeah. Well, we were up there flying. We were—it was in Virginia, and we were doing mapping, and we had to get up to about forty-five thousand feet, and of course, we had our heated suits on, and I had one element in my heated suit where the element wasn't working, and I was afraid to tell the pilot, and after a while I just had to tell him because it just got so numb, so he got mad, and he says, "Oh, we got to find an emergency field to come down," and we came down and landed, and I got out of the plane. We were in one of these Beechcraft two engine planes that we were doing the mapping in, and it was close to a farmer's field there, and the farmer came over to talk to us, and I'm there rubbing. He wanted to know what happened, and I said, "I froze my leg." And, of course, it was in August, and the farmer kind of looked puzzled, he didn't know how I could have froze my leg, but I guess he didn't know that it gets pretty cold, maybe about twenty or thirty below zero when you're up at that altitude. So it was—[laughs]
- Terry: Did you receive—was your leg, was it okay?
- Russell: Sure, after you rub it and circulate, you know. But it was just kind of funny because it must have been a hundred in the shade and here I'm freezing my leg [laughs].
- Terry: Russ is showing another photo album where he's at Santa Ana, California.
- Russell: This is out of a PT boat.
- Terry: And he is showing pictures, and it says with the ZP Squadron 31 is who he is serving with.
- Russell: Yeah. Now, this was on a destroyer, part of the movie was made. It was just a crew of five of us photographers that did the movie. Let me see. I might—let me see. I think I have—here's another picture. See, now this here's one of the engineers from 20th Century Fox, and this was a, what do you call it, a Hollywood director that they employed to help us with the script. And here we wanted to show—here the commander was again, the director. And as you can see, we were making this whole air-sea rescue movie out of Santa Ana.
- Terry: And they are showing close-ups of the planes that they were using.
- Russell: See, here's where they're throwing out that sonar buoy. We caught it on a map. See, now the camera is down. It looks like he's throwing it out of—
- Terry: Out of flying.
- Russell: Yeah, out of flying, right. Here's again off of the PT boat that we photographed out of. Here is when I took a picture of Harry James at the Casa Mañana.
- Terry: Was that like a USO show of some sort?

Russell: No. This was a—this was a nightclub. I just took a camera, and I knew he was going to be there, and I took a picture. Here was Santa Ana, our two hangars.

Terry: It's showing the blimps that's docked with the hangars for the blimps.

Russell: Yeah, the K-ship and the Mike Ship. This was the Rose Parade that we had taken during the Rose Bowl.

Terry: Was that 1946?

Russell: 1945.

Terry: Oh, '45. Okay.

Russell: Yeah. You can see our shadow, and this is Beverly Hills. Here's Santa Anita Racetrack. That's all kind of connected there together. And Balboa here. Here's part of our engine.

Terry: All these photographs were taken from a blimp that Russ was flying in.

Russell: Yeah. Let's see now. Well, this guy here, this fella here was the photographer aboard the first Hornet when Doolittle took off to bomb Japan.

Terry: Oh, and he was one of the ones recorded the fights?

Russell: Yeah. Yeah. And here is one of the—this is the big Mike ship, and this is the K-ship. This is much bigger. They had sleeping bunks on. We could stay up for seventy-two hours on that. And here is how we photographed out of the blimp, a still camera and a movie camera. To show—you know, when I told you about those ships that were—I think I have a picture of one of them here where we're—this was—look at this, how foolish we were making a movie. [laughs] Here's flying in the blimp. Here's the pilot of one of the blimps. Here was the crew. And there is where we're photographing out of it, and this is photographing. And this is—but there's a picture I want to—if I can find it. You know, so many of the pictures I don't know what the heck. Here's Hawaii. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel was the first hotel in Hawaii. This is back in '45. My dogs. Oh, wait. I got another album.

Terry: Russ was showing a variety of pictures he has in several picture albums of when he was the photographer. Also, Russ, when you were on the blimp, can you describe what it was like to land the blimp?

Russell: Well, yeah. The landing, you had to be very careful. As we would come in, any current from the ground coming up could lift you back up, so they had to make sure it was very calm. Sometimes we'd have to stay up for maybe thirty-six, forty-eight hours. If we couldn't land in Santa Ana, we'd go up to a place called Moffett Field where the weather was, would be a little calmer, and we would land there. But we

were able to stay up at least seventy-two hours. We had a kitchen, food, bunks. So we could entertain ourselves on the—and, of course, the top speed would be about maybe sixty miles an hour, but if you had a headwind, you were lucky if you could go twenty miles an hour. They had two engines on each side of the blimp. And, of course, it's like a big balloon. The wind can toss you all around. But coming in was always the most dangerous part. They'd have men standing down below. We'd drop two lines down, and there would be fellas that would be forward. And when we would drop them, they would quick run with those to the men standing where we would drift to, and then they'd all grab a hold of it and hold us down, and we'd have to find a spot on the blimp and stay there stationary because there's only one wheel on the blimp that lands, so it's got to be perfectly balanced, and if you shift around, then naturally the ship will shift. So you stand in one position, and as he comes down—it takes quite a while to land, and once you are down, then they are holding you down, then a tractor pulls a little mooring outfit up to you, and they will connect you up, and once you are connected up, then you can move all around because the blimp can't go anywhere, it's stabilized right to this tractor. But one time we came in, and they thought they had enough of crew. We were coming in. They thought it was going to be a Mike ship coming in, that's the small one, but we were on the K-ship. It was bigger. And they didn't have enough of crew to hold us down, and when we started lifting up again, they should have let go. All of them let go except a couple of them still hung on, and we tried to land, but we couldn't because of the current. So where we were in Santa Ana, we were very close to the water. We tried to fly over to the water so if they fell, they'd land in the water, but two of them fell, and we were maybe about a thousand feet in the air, and they hit the ground, and, of course, they died. So that was really the only time we had a serious accident. From then on they made sure they had way more men to hold us down when we would come in. But it was nice flying. We could back up and go forward, and it was perfect for motion picture. No sound. The engines were set back a ways that you really didn't hear the sound, and we had bomb bay doors that opened real big. They used the blimps on the west coast to hunt submarines. It's surprising, when you're up in the blimp and look down, you can look down almost eight, nine hundred feet down, you can see everything in the water. And, of course, if a submarine is down there, he's just had it because there's no way he can get away. And, of course, the blimp carried bombs, and they would just bomb the submarine. Of course, I was never on any of those where they did, but they did use them for that.

Terry: So how many blimps did they have out on the air bases there?

Russell: Well, we had maybe fifteen of the blimps, and we had the two hangars. We could put in about twelve of them in a hangar or seven of them in a hangar, and there would be—they would be flying night flights and morning, early flights on the coast, watching the coast for submarines, but I never did—when I was there, never did see any of the submarines come, you know, to the west coast, but they were prepared for it if they would.

Terry: So how long did you stay with the blimp company?

Russell: I was with them for about, oh, I think six, seven months we were, and it was all making movies. Really, the one movie took so long to make, I don't know what ever happened to the movie with the—well, it went into training programs. They would show it to different naval bases, especially when we did the one on the air-sea rescue with the sonar buoy, and that was a big procedure. It was kind of nice. We were able to get into 20th Century Fox. We would go there, and that's where they would process a lot of our film, and we'd go in the studios, and then it would be edited. And it was surprising. We did—at that time we had a big disk that the sound was recorded on like a photograph, only really a huge one, and as—and then we would photograph, and then Pathé News would take our film, process it, and then they would synchronize the sound from these big disks onto the film so that it was all synchronized together. Nowadays it's all done in one operation. When they take the movies with the cameras, the sound is right in it.

Terry: When you were at 20th Century Fox, were you able to meet any actors?

Russell: Oh, yeah. You know, yeah, I sat and I watched—I don't know if you remember the movie *For Whom the Bells Toll*, I watched them do that. I went to Jeanne Crain's wedding [laughs]. It was—because we had access to all parts of 20th Century Fox, so that it—it was just really great. It was like you were employed by the 20th Century Fox. And then you had a badge, and you were allowed to—if you go on a sound stage while they were making a movie there, you'd have to be quiet. But it was—it was really interesting. I enjoyed it very much, and I don't think I would have had that opportunity if I had—you know. And when I got out of the service, I wanted to be a motion picture—or a television cameraman because the Milwaukee Journal had just come out with Channel 4, and I went down, and I was interviewed, and they said, "Oh, boy," they said, "you are just great with all your movie background. We'd love to have you for a television cameraman." And I thought, well, this is great. They said, "Of course, you have to be a licensed radio operator." Well, I didn't know a thing about radio operating. They said, "We'd have to send you to school to go to radio school and learn the semaphore." And I said, "No, no," I said, "if I got to do that, I want no part of that." I thought—well, now you can get a job without going through the radio school. But they told me, "Please go. With all your background with motion picture, that's just what a television cameraman is." And I said, "Well, then why do I have to go to radio school?" So instead I went into lithography.

Terry: When you got out, what year was it you got out of the Navy?

Russell: In '46, in June of '46.

Terry: Okay. And what was your rank when you got out?

Russell: Third Class. Yeah. I was up for Second Class, but it had never gone. I had passed the test for Second Class Photographer, but it never came through for me.

Terry: Okay. So was your discharge—was your time up or—

Russell: Yeah, yeah, my time was up. It was for—I mean, you could sign over again if you wanted to, but everybody wanted to go home, you know. And I'm sorry today that I didn't stay in because, you know, after twenty years I'd have still been young, and I would have had all of that pension from the service, you know.

Terry: Sure. So you came back to Milwaukee then?

Russell: Yeah, came back to Milwaukee, and that's when I got the job at a place called Mueller Color Plate in printing as a color photographer there. We did color separation work, did posters, and there were just three of us photographers, and I took—they gave me an apprenticeship in photolithography. Well, I was about two years into it when the head guy photographer quit, and they said, "Well, we'll make you a journeyman right away, and you'll be in charge." So there were three of us, and I stayed there for thirty-two years, and at the end, we were the world's largest color camera department in advertising in offset and rotogravure. And I had twenty-seven cameramen under me, and we had three shifts of cameramen, so we did an awful lot of posters and magazines and all kinds of advertising. But it was all done in color separation work on these large color cameras.

Terry: Now, you showed a photograph of a—

Russell: A camera, yeah.

Terry: —a camera.

Russell: That was made—that camera was made by the Braun Company. At the time it was the world's largest camera. You could stand in the bellows. Our film was on rolls one hundred feet long by sixty feet wide, and we could take a picture, oh, about ten by twelve feet, and they'd be for the posters, and we would process those, we would color separate them. And nowadays they don't use it anymore. It's all computerized on scanners. All the cameras are scanners. In those days they didn't have scanners, in the '40s and the—or in the '50s and '60s.

Terry: So, Russ, when you got out, did you raise a family?

Russell: Yeah. We've got—I got—we got married on December 23rd of 1948. I met Jenny. She lived in the neighborhood. And we got married. We have one son. He's a doctor in Milwaukee, and we have three grandchildren. We got a granddaughter who now is going for her doctorate at the University of Utah. Got two grandsons. One is out in California making movies in the movie industry, and the other one's in California. He's working for some company. They all graduated from college. And this Scotty, the youngest, he studied a while in China and learned Chinese, and now he can be a

representative for their company. He can't write Chinese, he said that takes a long time, but he can talk it and understand it, so it's a big asset for him.

Terry: Russ, did you keep in touch with any of your friends you made in the Navy?

Russell: Yeah, I did. I kept—Tony Facone his name is. He was a photographer on the *Bunker Hill*. He was on it when it got hit. I was—I got on it after. The *Bunker Hill* got hit May 11th, 1945, south of Okinawa, hit by two kamikazes, and the planes were refueling at the time. The morning flight was coming in, and the two kamikazes snuck in with them, and they landed while the planes were being refueled, and there was about four hundred men lost their lives. And Tony grabbed the camera and ran forward, and he made this spectacular picture of the *Bunker Hill* in flames. It made all the newsreels. If you go on the Internet just to look up the *USS Bunker Hill*, it will give the whole history of all the battle of it when it got hit May 11th and the pictures that the photographers took. And I met—I still keep in contact with him. And a good friend of mine that was on it at the time from Milwaukee, well, he passed away a couple years ago, he was a photographer on the *Bunker Hill* when it got hit. And then another fella I keep in contact with, we were together—we got on it together. He was a photographer too, and we got on the *Bunker Hill*, and he lived, he lives in St. Paul. Those are the only two now that are left that I keep in contact with.

Terry: Did you join any veteran's organizations when you got out of the Navy?

Russell: I joined the American Legion for a while in Milwaukee, but I wasn't really too active in the military. I'm a fourth degree Knights of Columbus, that's a military. [laughs] I just made fourth degree, but I won't go into the honor guard, I'd have too much trouble marching at my age. I'm eighty, going to be eight-one now in August.

Terry: Did you use any of your veteran's benefits that you earned?

Russell: Well, I did. I got into a medical program where I would go to Cleveland, Wisconsin, to a doctor there, and I would get my medicine there, but it was kind of hard to travel there, so I kind of gave up on that, but, no, I really am not into anything military now.

Terry: Well, can you—what did you think of your military experience? What was your—

Russell: I got one thing to say. I wouldn't go through it again for a million dollars, but I wouldn't give a million to give up what I got. I learned a lot. It makes a man out of you. I mean, I was seventeen, I had never left the state of Wisconsin, and here I am. I thought, oh, my God, I can't believe I'm going here and there. Everything was an adventure for me. But, like I say, you can't beat the Navy.

Terry: It's a tremendous experience for you.

Russell: Yeah. Especially the flying and the motion picture end of it. I'm sure that there's fellas that were maybe radiomen or whatever field they were in, but the photographic department, it had so much interesting adventure to it. It was just—it was endless. And when we got into doing the—when color photography came in and especially with the motion picture, working with 20th Century Fox was really a great experience.

[End of interview]