

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MORRIS V. GRENZOW
Seabees, Navy, World War II.

2002

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Grenzow, Morris V., (1916-). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 20 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 20 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 20 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Morris V. Grenzow, a Juda, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 50th Seabee Battalion in the Pacific theater. While working at the Badger Ordnance Plant near Baraboo (Wisconsin), Grenzow comments on being recruited as a carpenter's mate first class. He speaks of conditions at boot camp at Norfolk (Virginia), assignment to the 50th Battalion, and transport via California and Hawaii to his first assignment at Midway Island. Grenzow talks about dredging the harbor and building airfields at Midway Submarine Base, having five months of R&R at Pearl Harbor (Hawaii), and constructing a harbor and airfield at Tinian Atoll. He discusses the high skill level of the men in the Seabees, living in Quonset huts, and drinking bad beer, and he touches on the food and mail service. Grenzow addresses attending 50th Battalion reunions and making limited use of a VA hospital for skin cancer. He talks about his marriages and children. After being discharged from the Navy, he discusses getting a job as a construction foreman in Arizona, but soon returning to Wisconsin to run his own residential construction business. Grenzow recalls an accident on Tinian when some men were killed by a mine explosion.

Biographical Sketch:

Grenzow (b.1916) served in the Navy during World War II. He returned to Juda, Wis. after the war, had two children, and worked as a builder.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by Matthew Sorensen, 2010.

Checked and corrected by Channing Welch, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Talking to Morris Grenzow and it's the 30th of May, 2002. You were born where, sir?
- Morris: I was born in Juda, Wisconsin.
- Jim: And when was that?
- Morris: September 8, 1916.
- Jim: So tell me now, on that Sunday when you suddenly found out about Pearl Harbor, what were you doing?
- Morris: I was coming out of a theater in Monroe.
- Jim: What did you think about that? What was your reaction to that?
- Morris: Well, that--uh, I was quite surprised, yeah. And, uh, but there had been trouble brewing for a long time, and that was, uh, the result of it.
- Jim: You had already registered for the draft by then so you had your assignment?
- Morris: Yeah, I was registered for the draft.
- Jim: But you hadn't been inducted yet?
- Morris: No. Well, I tell you--actually I had enlisted voluntarily in Navy Construction Battalion.
- Jim: When did you do that?
- Morris: I would imagine that was about, maybe in August. I was working up at the Badger Ordnance Works in Baraboo and a recruiting officer came up there from Chicago.
- Jim: This was in 1940 or '41?
- Morris: That would have been in '42. Yeah, it was while they were building the Badger Ordnance Works.
- Jim: You were working on building it then?
- Morris: Yeah, mm hmm.

- Jim: And then your recruiter caught you and—
- Morris: Well, I knew he was coming, and I was working with Wilmer Anderson, and he was from Royall. And we enlisted together.
- Jim: And that was in—
- Morris: Probably along in August, or so, of 1942, yeah.
- Jim: And then you went into the U.S. Navy. Where'd they send you?
- Morris: We took our boot camp training in Norfolk, Virginia.
- Jim: Oh, not Great Lakes!
- Morris: No.
- Jim: That's unusual.
- Morris: This was, uh, the coldest spot that I was ever at [laughing]. You know, I thought that, really Virginia was a little bit further south than Wisconsin, it wouldn't be quite as bad, but, I tell you, that's the only place in my life where I ever slept with my pea coat on, four buckle overshoes, and put newspapers over the top of me yet.
- Jim: This was in the barracks?
- Morris: Yeah.
- Jim: It wasn't heated?
- Morris: Well, I tell you, you're limited to two gallons of fuel oil for the night and that was burned up just before you crawled in the sack. [Jim laughs] Well, before we got there we had tents before that. About every other night that soft coal burner would explode, and someone would have to get up and clean the pipes out [laughing]. It was not a Holiday Inn [laughing].
- Jim: I can tell that. How long was your basic training in boot camp?
- Morris: Oh, I would—not very long, maybe six weeks or so.
- Jim: Not too bad.
- Morris: Yeah.

Jim: And then did you have an option to pick what part of the Navy you wanted to be involved in?

Morris: Oh, no. We were assigned to the 50th Battalion right then and there.

Jim: As a deckhand?

Morris: No, I was, I was a carpenter's mate first class when I went in. Petty officer first class.

Jim: You went in as a first class?

Morris: First class.

Jim: You weren't a striker [sailor who receives on the job training for a rate] at all!

Morris: Well, I tell you, there was a little story behind that, too. [laughs] When I was working with this Wilmer Anderson from Royall and we were gonna enlist together, why, before we went in there to see the recruiting officer, he said, "We better get our heads together before we go in there." We went in there knowing that we'd come out first class petty officers or they could lump it. They offered us second class right off like that with our experience we had, but he gave me an oral examination. I'd say in about fifteen seconds I passed it, and I was a first class petty officer and he was, too.

Jim: Boy, you really jumped in at an upper level.

Morris: Well—

Jim: But you had the experience so why not.

Morris: Oh yeah, I could handle it. Yeah. I wasn't as young as a lot of them. Heck, I was about twenty-five years old. I was an old guy. Twenty five years old—

Jim: I'm sure you were six years older than most of them.

Morris: Yeah, I was a lot older, yeah—well, in the Seabees they took them, you know, from seventeen to fifty-five. They figured it out that the average fellow in our battalion was thirty-six years old.

Jim: This is a Seabee battalion you went right to?

Morris: Yeah, the 50th Seabee Battalion.

Jim: And were did they send you?

Morris: Well, we went down to Gulfport, Mississippi from Norfolk and we stayed there for about two or three weeks. Then we went on to Port Hueneme and we were there for about a week—

Jim: Where was this?

Morris: California. Port Hueneme, California. The Marine base, yeah. We were there for a week or so and then we went to San Francisco. We went to Hawaii and Pearl Harbor on the Matsonia; that was a passenger ship.

Jim: When did you land in Pearl Harbor?

Morris: Well, I'd have to kind of figure that out. Let's see--probably, oh no, maybe more like March, yeah. It was about February to March.

Jim: But you still hadn't done anything.

Morris: No.

Jim: They moved you around, but you--

Morris: Yeah. We got to Pearl Harbor, and we were there three weeks, and then our first assignment was Midway Island.

Jim: Ah, now they were going to put you to work.

Morris: Yeah.

Jim: And what was your job on Midway Island?

Morris: Well, Midway was a submarine base and, I would say, primarily most of the work was in the harbor there; dredging, you know, and—

Jim: Yeah, but a carpenter doesn't dredge does he?

Morris: Well, you have buildings. We built buildings too. There were always building under construction, and they worked on the airfield and then the harbor—

Jim: This was after it had been bombed by the Japanese?

Morris: Oh yes.

- Jim: You had a lot of work to do then.
- Morris: The Marines that were there were the same ones who were there when, the—
- Jim: When they were attacked.
- Morris: Yeah, when they were attacked. And I used to have a Marine work detail once in awhile, and I had two different groups. I had the good boys and the bad boys. [Jim laughs] The bad boys, they were all court-martialed for something or other. Most of it happened during the invasion, and I had the good boys. But as far as I was concerned, there wasn't any difference in the two.
- Jim: The ones who came out of the brig worked just as hard?
- Morris: Yeah. The good ones, yeah. [laughs]
- Jim: How many were in your 50th Battalion? How many are we looking at?
- Morris: There were approximately 1,100. The five companies: A, B, C, and D and headquarters company. It'd be a total of about 1,100.
- Jim: Well, you didn't have to worry about getting cold out there.
- Morris: No, we didn't. [laughs] And it wasn't unbearably hot though. It was quite comfortable. There was always a breeze blowing there—
- Jim: That's fairly north anyways.
- Morris: Yeah, it's further north you know. And later on, why, we got down where it was warmer, yeah.
- Jim: How long were you in Midway?
- Morris: We were there, I'd say, thirteen months on Midway.
- Jim: Then the whole battalion moved?
- Morris: The whole battalion came back to Pearl Harbor for R&R and we were there approximately four or five months I think.
- Jim: Gee, that's quite an R&R! Holy smokes!
- Morris: Yeah. [laughs] Well, we were reassigned then, and we went to Tinian.

- Jim: To do what?
- Morris: We built the airfield there that was used to drop the atomic bombs from. And we built the harbor. The harbor was a far bigger job than the airfield was. The airfield was built in sixty days and sixty nights; round the clock, twenty-four hours a day. But the harbor, uh, at the time we got there we'd have to unload ships out in the open water.
- Jim: Yeah, but that wouldn't do for that atomic bomb. They wanted that [USS] *Indianapolis* in closer than that I'm sure.
- Morris: Yeah, and—
- Jim: Somebody might drop it in the ocean [laughs].
- Morris: Yeah, and I'll tell ya, I wasn't there when they delivered the atomic bombs there. I had so many points gathered up that I was on my way home. The day I got in Chicago was the day they dropped the bomb.
- Jim: You were in Tinian building the harbor until probably July—
- Morris: That was in '45. See, the bomb was dropped—when, August? Yeah, yeah. I started home in July. I got to Chicago the day they dropped it.
- Jim: Until July of '45. And then from Chicago you went out. I mean you were discharged right?
- Morris: No. No, I went home and then I had to come back to Chicago, and then they sent me to Minneapolis Chamberlain Field, and that's where I got my discharge in September. The last of September sometime.
- Jim: Did you find the work in the Seabees especially difficult or not?
- Morris: No. No, I tell you, we had a lot of talent in that battalion. And, uh, a lot of skilled men and a lot of people that knew what they were doing.
- Jim: Oh, then you had a chance to learn something.
- Morris: And I certainly did. I'll tell you, being--those three plus years that I was in the Seabees was like a college education. You get to mix with all these other fellows and—
- Jim: You were a chief by the time you were discharged?

Morris: No. One of my friends called himself an interviewee, and I was in the same boat. We been interviewed for so many times for chief, but I guess we didn't have the right attitude. I didn't care less if I got it our not.

Jim: Oh, you weren't gung-ho for 'em.

Morris: We just wanted to go home. [laughs]

Jim: Were you married then?

Morris: Yes.

Jim: Did you write home unprompted like a nice boy?

Morris: Oh yes. Yeah I think most of them did.

Jim: How was life on Tinian?

Morris: Well—

Jim: Pretty skimpy—

Morris: No, we had plenty of food to eat—

Jim: An NCO club that was okay?

Morris: We didn't have anything like that. Oh no, there was nothing like that.

Jim: You slept in barracks there on Tinian.

Morris: Well, at first we slept in tents, and then we built regular, standard Quonset huts, you know. Our unit was all by itself, you know.

Jim: I'm kind of surprised that you wouldn't have an NCO club.

Morris: No, no [laughing]. We never heard about that.

Jim: Where'd you get your beer?

Morris: Well, we had beer; stale beer. I'll tell you, the beer we got, I tell you it wasn't what I was used to drinking in Wisconsin. Usually it sat on a dock someplace, probably for six months in the hot sun. I tell you, you had to have a lot of courage to drink it [both laughing]. But some of them didn't know the difference between good beer and bad beer, but see, that's where I live--I got a brewery within six miles of me, and another one within fifteen miles of me [both laugh], and, uh, yeah.

- Jim: Was the food okay?
- Morris: It was adequate, yeah. We were served—a lot of our food came from New Zealand, and—
- Jim: Did they try to shove some of that mutton on you?
- Morris: We had lots of mutton.
- Jim: Most of the guys I've talked to hated that stuff.
- Morris: No, I didn't. Really, I'll tell you—I like venison, and mutton isn't just a lot of difference. Really, I never complained about that at all.
- Jim: You're the first person. I must have talked to fifteen guys in the Pacific who complained about the mutton from Australia. They said it smelled awful and tasted awful even if they put that mint jelly on it.
- Morris: Oh, I'll tell you, I liked the mutton a lot more than I did the hamburger [laughing]. Because that hamburger, I tell you, I think they led the cow into the grinder, and they ground the whole thing up, bones and all.
- Jim: They didn't know how to treat meat either [Morris laughs].
- Morris: We had cooks that did their best, you know.
- Jim: Sure. The mail okay?
- Morris: Yeah.
- Jim: Was your mail on a pretty regular basis?
- Morris: Yeah, our mail service was good.
- Jim: Did you keep track of any of your chums in your unit?
- Morris: Now? Oh, yes. We have a reunion every two years of the 50th Battalion. Our next reunion will be in November in North Carolina. Our numbers are dwindling down, and our chairman has had that job for a long, long time. And he likes it. This reunion will keep going, I imagine, until there's only about two left [laughing]. He's the head of the Seabee organization in Florida, and he was up here to Minnesota for some national Seabee event in Minnesota here within the last year. I wish I would have known it. I would have driven up there myself. It was in St. Cloud, but I didn't know it.

- Jim: When you got home did you use your GI Bill for a loan or education?
- Morris: Not really. I got some skin cancer out there, and for awhile I got treatment at the veterans hospital in Madison until they started the means test, and then they kicked me out. And of course I'm at the age now where it doesn't make much difference. I have AARP insurance, and Medicare, and the whole nine yards and as far as going up to the VA hospital anymore, it really isn't of great importance to me.
- Jim: So you raised a family?
- Morris: Yeah, um, I have two kids. I've been married three times. That girl over there is a child bride
- Jim: A trophy wife? [Morris laughs]
- Morris: We've only been married five years.
- Jim: Oh, my goodness. Well, you're adventurous.
- Morris: Yeah, and my children come from my second wife. They've done very well.
- Jim: They live around here?
- Morris: Yeah, my son lives in Madison here, and he's on the staff of the university in the department of medical physics. His wife came here--she's Chinese--she came here from Indonesia and is a very sharp girl. She has two doctorate degrees. She came here when she was twenty-four, and she had her veterinary degree; veterinary medicine, but she didn't really care about it. She went to school over there in Jakarta. It kind of spoiled the whole thing for her. She dumped the whole thing. She didn't even go after—she got her diploma in the mail. She didn't even go to graduation, and she packed her suitcase and came here and enrolled in university in food science. My boy belongs to the sailing club at the university; Hoofers. And his best friend married her roommate. And he told her that Frank was the guy to go after [Jim laughs]--said he was real dependable and he wasn't like the other guys at all. And she went after him. I would say she grabbed a hold of him like an English bulldog. An English bulldog grabs a hold and never let's go. But I couldn't have a better daughter-in-law than her.
- Jim: Oh, how nice!
- Morris: Yeah, I couldn't have a better--

- Jim: And your other child?
- Morris: My daughter is in Janesville; she teaches. And her husband, he's an engineer at General Motors.
- Jim: Well, it's nice to have successful children and close, too.
- Morris: I have three grandchildren and they've all done extremely well. In fact, my daughter, she's at the bottom of the pile in terms of money. My grandchildren make fun of her [laughing].
- Jim: Tell me what you did when you got home.
- Morris: Well, after the first winter, I worked out in Arizona, and I worked for a Mormon real estate company as a carpenter. Well, I'm telling you—those people, when they get out there, they move at a snail's pace. My boss, why, he thought that I was a whirlwind, but within a little over a week, why, then I was the foreman. But I kind of debated whether to stay out there or not, but I didn't. I couldn't imagine what it would be like there in the summertime, you know? You know, a lot of my work is outside, inside and outside both. But, anyway, I came home and I went into business for myself.
- Jim: Where?
- Morris: In Juda. My father was a builder. My grandfather's brother was also a builder—that's where my father learned the trade. He was in business for himself. His uncle, he worked for the University of Wisconsin. He started in when they built all those fancy barns for "Ags;" the Agricultural College. [Probably using "Ags" as slang for college students and faculty.] Of course most all of them have been torn down by now. But I went into the business for myself and—
- Jim: Home building?
- Morris: Mostly residential work, yeah. Of course you live in a small community like that. We live very close to Illinois, within eight miles. That is a great community with all them German farmers down there in northern Illinois. They're all good old German farmers down there. Getting your money is the last thing they think of.
- Jim: Whereabouts is Freeport?
- Morris: Freeport would be just straight east. I live within twenty-five miles of Freeport. But I worked in all those little towns there, and those people

down there—if you're in good with one of them, then you're good with all of them because they know everybody down the road twenty miles you know. If you got a good name, well I'll tell you, I inherited a damn good name; my father and my grandfather. I got jobs down in that country just because they knew my grandfather.

Jim: Knew that name, right?

Morris: Yeah.

Jim: Well, that's terrific.

Morris: I never had to bid a house. And lots and lots of times, I had the job already when I drove in the yard and didn't even know the people yet.

Jim: They didn't want to give it to anybody else.

Morris: No. No.

Jim: They knew you were reliable. Did you enjoy that career?

Morris: I did. It was hard work, I'll tell you. I never had a forty hour week, I'll tell you. I probably worked seventy or seventy-five hours a week.

Jim: The boss always works hard.

Morris: Yeah, [laughs] I know. That's the truth. But then in 1962--when my second wife--in a period of thirty-five years, we had a total of two weeks vacation. At that time, we worked six days a week, ten hours a day on the job, and then I did my work, other work, after I got home. I talked to one of the fellows I met up in Monroe [Wisconsin] there. He was a cheesemaker, and he didn't have a day off in seven years! In seven years he never had one day off.

Jim: I didn't realize that cheese making took so much attention.

Morris: Well, he was the boss. Yeah, I know a good many cheesemakers down there, and it's the bosses that I know. Really if you have to work in a cheese factory, it's a very mediocre job. But I'll tell you, if you're good, when you retire you are not poverty stricken, yeah. It's at a good pay, you know. Good guys to work with.

Jim: The guys that work there, though, are not—

Morris: Just very mediocre, yeah.

- Jim: It's not a very skilled job.
- Morris: Well, it's a routine job, you know, and it's hard to get help now for a cheese factory.
- Jim: They don't pay enough.
- Morris: Well, young guys don't want to work. They walk in a place; they want to know how much, how much vacation. I'll tell you, there aren't many that want to grab the tiger by the tail anymore.
- Jim: They want somebody to hand it to 'em.
- Morris: They want a routine job, a lot of benefits, and good pay, and have nothing invested whatsoever.
- Jim: And they don't want any authority either.
- Morris: No. Down there, cheese factories are a dime a dozen where I live. One friend of mine he had three fellows lined up for work, and he got one day's work out of the three. One guy worked one day and quit, and the other two never showed up.
- Jim: That's pretty sad.
- Morris: Yeah, he thought maybe he'd go to the county jail and try to pick up somebody, [both laugh] but they aren't the best either, though.
- Jim: Did your outfit win a lot of awards?
- Morris: Well, I think that you mean the men themselves?
- Jim: The outfit. You must have won--
- Morris: Oh yeah. They got their—oh, what is the word I'm trying to figure out?
- Jim: Unit citation.
- Morris: They were commended, you know, for their work in this and that, you know. As far as, you know, we were not a combat unit or anything like that. There wasn't any heroes although we lost men occasionally.
- Jim: How about the accidents? I know when you're in this kind of business you lose some guys to accidents.

- Morris: Well, I tell you, the worst accident we had was on Tinian. That was the place where they stored the mines like when they mined the harbors of Japan. They are an ugly looking thing. They were about bigger than a bathtub. They were made out of plate steel with bolts sticking out all over them. They would go off sometimes when they got to much doggone sun on them; they got too hot. We had six of our fellows went out there to cover them up, and one of them went off just as the truck drove up, and they never saw the truck again, and some of those fellows lived maybe-- the ones that lived at all, lived about two days. They didn't even have their shoes on, and we lost six, and that was the worst accident. We had maybe one or two thousand rounds and I remember maybe a couple other accidents like that. All in all, things went pretty well.
- Jim: Did the USO bring a troop over to entertain you?
- Morris: Well, there were a few occasions that they did.
- Jim: Bob Hope or somebody?
- Morris: We never had Bob Hope, but we had some entertainers there. I know Jackie Cooper was in the Navy, that old movie star, and he played the drums, but he never showed off. He was one of the boys. And we had some local talent, you know, and they put on a little show once in awhile.
- Jim: Life on Tinian wasn't too unpleasant then?
- Morris: No, it wasn't. It was a warm there, but you got used to it, you know. I liked it there better than I did out on Midway.
- Jim: Because?
- Morris: We settled down, we had—
- Jim: Better quarters?
- Morris: We had good, yeah we lived in tents there for a while, for a short time. But then we had Quonsets, and everything was organized, and they set up a movie theater and all this and that.
- Jim: They had movies every night?
- Morris: Oh, every night, yep. Our movie operator was from Crawfordsville, Indiana. I could tell you a little story about that. I've ridden motorcycles all my life. I used to go to the Indianapolis race down there, and one year my friend and I were on our way down there. We stopped in a little country store in Crawfordsville, Indiana. By golly, there was a sweet

looking gal in there. I asked her if there was a place to camp, and she kind of directed us to someplace down the road there, but it didn't pan out. Went down the road another mile, and we slept all night in the churchyard there, but when we came back, I stopped again and she said, "You know, I went down there. I was gonna tell ya—" We could've camped in her yard." I kept in close con—[Tape skips] When he wanted to be a Harley dealer, and I told him I was thinking [that] I have a good connection for you. A darn good friend of mine is a department head at Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee. Anyway, one day I was thinking about this girl in Crawfordsville, Indiana. I said, "Say, do know _____[?]." He said, "I sure do. I was best man at her wedding." Just imagine that!

Jim: Small world.

Morris: Yeah, small world, small world. But I lost track of him. I wrote the VFW, and —

Jim: He hasn't come to any of your reunions?

Morris: We lost track of him. I always write the VFW to try to locate a guy. And they said he left Crawfordsville fifty years ago, and they don't know where he went to. Yeah, so—

Jim: Okay, I've run out of things to ask you.

Morris: Yeah. [laughs]

Jim: Thank you.

Morris: Well, it was nice talking with you.

Jim: Nice of you to come in—

[End of interview]