

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Martin F. Gutekunst
World War II
U. S. Navy

2005

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Gutekunst, Martin F., (1917- 2008) Oral History Interview, 2005.

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Gutekunst, a Milwaukee, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service with the 2nd Beach Battalion during the D-Day invasion and his experiences preparing for the invasion of Japan. Prior to entering the navy Gutekunst worked in a war industry. He mentions the negative reactions he received as a young man not in the military. He touches upon his training as a signalman, trip overseas with an amphibious airplane escort, and being seasick for the majority of the trip. Landing in England, he discusses his transfer to the Seabees, demolition work, and carrying his unit's radio. Landing on Utah Beach on June 6, 1944, Gutekunst speaks to the high morale of soldiers prior to the invasion, the advantage of landing at Utah Beach where there was less resistance, listening to 88 mm guns firing, and the invasion noise making it impossible to use the radio. He touches upon stringing communication wire on the beach, losing his carbine rifle because it was a nuisance to his work, and clearing debris. Returning to the U.S., Gutekunst tells of the hushed reaction aboard ship to the statue of liberty. Sent to Hawaii in preparation for the invasion of Japan, he tells a humorous story about a mix up with his unit's uniforms. He touches upon the Okinawa landing, learning of the high invasion casualties, living on a base under constant bombing threat, hearing rumors that his unit was to be in the first wave of Americans landing in Japan, his respect for the Seabees, and difficulty getting discharged due to paperwork problems. Gutekunst also provides an interesting discussion of the "three hots and a cot" perception of the navy, telling many incidents when he and his unit went without meals and slept in fox holes.

Biographical Sketch:

Gutekunst (1917-2008) served with the 2nd Beach Battalion during the D-Day invasion. After the war, he returned to Milwaukee and worked for Milwaukee Boiler.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcript edited by Abbie Norderhaug, 2006.

Interview Transcript:

- John: This is John Driscoll and today is April 11, 2005, and this is an oral history interview with Martin Gutekunst, a World War II veteran. We are at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in the conference room, and Martin, thanks an awful lot for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start at the beginning? When and where were you born?
- Martin I was born in the town of Auburn, Fond du Lac County. In a little country church parish. My father was the – in 1917 was when I was born.
- John: Okay.
- Martin January 1, 1917. I lived at the parsonage, my father was a Lutheran pastor there and then I attended grade school at the church, and then high school in Kewaskum High School. And then when my father died, my family decided to move to Milwaukee. And during the time in between, I attended the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.
- John: Okay. Brothers and sisters?
- Martin Oh, there were nine of us in the family.
- John: Oh, wow.
- Martin I was the second youngest of those nine. And only one of two still remaining alive. So in Milwaukee, that was in 1940, and so the draft numbers, or rather the numbers for the lottery numbers for when you were going to be drafted And I had a high number so I felt the war would be over by the time, but it didn't take long and things changed, and after a few deferments because of defense work, I was drafted.
- John: What kind of defense work were you doing?
- Martin Mostly small weldments.
- John: Okay.
- Martin We made buoys for the Navy.
- John: Okay. As I said I would, can you tell me about Pearl Harbor Day?
- Martin Pearl Harbor Day, the family, our family visited a family, one of the farmer families in the area on that Sunday, and we heard about the invasion, or the attack. And we all said, "Oh, those little Japs, they couldn't do anything right."

- John: I remember my dad saying, "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?" We didn't even know. And you got drafted?
- Martin: Drafted after a few deferments. And I was rather happy to be drafted because every Sunday when we would go to church, all the mothers with kids in the service would come up and say, "How come you're not in? You're healthy." Got sick of hearing that. So at the draft headquarters, they asked me what I'd like to get into. And I told them the Air Corps, because my brother was in that, and it seemed like a good service. And the officer that asked me the question said, "Well, you go over to that table over there." There was nothing but navy over there. And I went over to the table and they said, "You're in the Navy now." And I said, "Can't. I get seasick." And they said, "Everybody does." So then I was in the Navy. And I got back home temporarily for the induction. But everybody was telling me, "Well, you're lucky to get in the Navy. You will always have a dry bed and an in-door john and three meals a day."
- John: Right.
- Martin: Later on we were to find out that was not true. For me. So, I was drafted and left in May of 1943. And left for Great Lakes, and had my boot camp there, and then also service school.
- John: What school?
- Martin: It was in signaling. Signalman.
- John: Okay. I went to basic electronics at Great Lakes. Long after you were there.
- Martin: Yea. So it was a good recommendation for me to get in there. I enjoyed it. Operating the lights.
- John: I noticed you have a picture of a (signal) light there.
- Martin: Yea. That is the one we had in Okinawa. After graduating from service school, we headed out for Camp Bradford, Virginia, and we learned there how to dig foxholes. And that was kind of an indication that this was not the usual Navy.
- John: Yea.
- Martin: We were there just a short time and we went to Lido Beach, and from there we left for England. In 1944, beginning of '44. And the ships never got out of port without an accident. A freighter hit our ship and there wasn't enough damage to discontinue. It was loaded to the gills and before

we even got out of the harbor the sewage system got all plugged up. And it wasn't long and I was seasick, because getting out in the North Atlantic was pretty rough. And we had a ship, an airplane, an amphibious airplane that watched over us for a couple of days. I don't know how they got enough gas to go that far. But anyhow, well, that was pretty good. And as soon as that left, I thought, oh, no, we are all alone.

John: I can imagine.

Martin: And after a few days, I didn't care, I was so seasick, they might as well sink this thing. Then we got to England, to Portsmouth, England.

John: How lone did it take you to go across?

Martin: It took us ten days. We went, we headed, it must have been way up close to Iceland because the days were so short that I knew we were pretty far north. But this was extremely rough. And we got to Portsmouth and from there we took a train to, it was supposed to be Southton (?) but our train for some reason our car wasn't unhitched at Southton and we went all the way down to Landsend. And the sad part of it was that when we got back to the base we were supposed to get into, it was about midnight, and none of our gear came with us. In those days, in the Navy, you carried everything by yourself. Mattress, hammock. So we didn't have our gear until three weeks later. That is when I found out, too, there isn't a nice bed every night. We slept right on the frames, no covers, no blankets, so we did a little, very little training. And we traveled, we were situated between Folley for a while, and then Southton a couple of times, and finally when we were in Folley, the high brass came in and we had, and this is verified by the yeoman who was with us in this, and this officer was really upset because here he had a hundred or so trained communications men doing nothing but stevedore work or painting, anything but training for the war. So right after that we were all transferred into different areas. And the alphabet from, it was about the middle of the alphabet where I happened to be, and so we were chosen to join the Sea Bees for the underwater demolition teams.

John: Oh, wow.

Martin: The other fellow said, "You don't have to worry. It's just like that. Everything is over with."

John: Wow.

Martin: We had no training in that. We were supposed to be communications men in these teams. And a lot of this, you know, searching the internet, I found

out, what I knew then, or heard then and thought was rumors, was actually fact.

John: Okay.

Martin: Demolitions teams. So we didn't have much training for demolitions. But we did help pack the sacks that the demolitions men carried, two pound bars that looked like naphtha soap. And each man then had to carry about twenty of those on his back for the invasion. Except me, I had a big radio I had to carry. A lot of this, of course, they read in the paper about the rough seas. They had to cancel the first invasion date and, well, there, of course, just before boarding the ship, we were in the staging area and we got the famous message from Eisenhower. And that seemed to calm everybody. Very good morale. So then we boarded the LST for our journey to France and naturally, for some reason, I always seemed to end up on the cargo decks. And that was the worst area because if the ship was hit, they would seal off everything so you couldn't get out of there. And then on D-Day, we were close, as close as the ships could go, and from there then, and it was perfectly dark when we headed for going off the ship. And we were watching all the fireworks. It was just tremendous.

John: Where were you going in? Which beach?

Martin: Utah. Utah Beach. That was not near as violent as Omaha. We circled around, they had a definite pattern for the boats. LCVP's. We circled around and the peeled off at the right time. There was a little conference between the men on the boat and the officers. Just one officer. There were ten of us on this team. And we were discussing about going in, because everything seemed wrong according to the pictures we had looked at the day before. And history has proven that was right. We were at the wrong spot. But it was fortunate because the resistance wasn't that great.

John: Okay.

Martin: Getting off the ship on the ladder, rope ladder. The ship went up and the LCVP went down.

John: I remember stepping into the boat and went down about six feet.

Martin: Yea. Yea. I got my foot caught between the LST and the LCVP and the officer saw that and said, "Do you want to go back?" And I said, "No way! Let me get off of this thing."

John: You weren't hurt?

- Martin: The pain came three days later. But I wasn't injured. Probably in a little pain. So then we landed right after the first wave of Army.
- John: What was going through your mind as you were going in on that little boat?
- Martin: To be honest with you, I never knew what to expect, so I just took everything as just part of my job.
- John: Okay.
- Martin: And I never gave it much thought as to what was going on. Besides, I was sort of numb by the whole thing. Because it was something we didn't have any training in this sort of thing, with all these guns going off, the Navy guns and the other Navy firing, and the Germans had the bombs and they also had their 88 millimeters. And those were something that really gave you a scare, because they had an odd whistle to them.
- John: Oh, did they?
- Martin: Yea. You could tell an 88 when you heard it. The rest of them, they must have purposely done that to scare people. So that kept on going for about three weeks, at least. They'd cease every day. But on D-Day, there was a tremendous noise of these. It was so noisy that the radio wouldn't work. Couldn't use the radio. So the officer told me to help string wire from one obstacle to another for the explosions. And at one time, not very long after we landed, the team adjacent to ours had a direct hit, and pretty well demolished all of them.
- John: Oh, wow.
- Martin: Ten or fifteen men on there, and there were, or I read since, that there were six people killed and eleven people injured.
- John: Now, Martin, going in like that, a sailor, were you armed?
- Martin: I had a carbine.
- John: Did you have any training on the carbine?
- Martin: Training on the carbine? Oh, yea. We had drills. But knowing the Navy, they were never experts in shooting small arms. In fact, I lost my carbine because, well, it was just a nuisance to have that thing swinging around all the time, and you were running from one spot to another with the wires. So we, if we had an awful lot of fire for the first few days but, of course,

after the Navy stopped, they had the rockets, and they didn't always land where they were supposed to. Yea.

John: What were you blowing up?

Martin: The obstacles on the beach consisted of X-frame pipes, and also like telephone poles with Teller mines on top.

John: Okay.

Martin: They were placed in the area closer to the beach because they expected that they'd land in high tide to get up close. And at high tide, they would have been blown up. So we landed in low tide. We had a long walk from where we got off the LCVP until we got to the area where we started to having to blow up the obstacles. You know, they were wicked looking things. I remember so well how many there were and how much we cleared away when we got through. Of course, the debris was there, which some of the bulldozers could get in and take care of that. So that was the extent of it there, and we were there for a month, and he had duties there, on watch. So on July 6, we headed back for England, and got a royal reception from the people there. And they were still, in fact, in some respects were more concerned than before because at that time the V-2 rockets came. And they said that was really terrible because there was not advanced warning of them coming in, and so all you heard was the explosion. Before that there wouldn't be anything. So then we got back to the United States. And an interesting experience here, too. As many experiences, I can't even think of them all. They weren't just war but they were the effect of the war. And we were heading for Pier 92, and our ship, the *Aquitania*, it had a lot of injured people and numbers of Sea Bees, and our ten demolition guys. And they, everybody was joking and having a great time, knowing we were heading home, and everybody was looking for the Statute of Liberty. And most of us had never seen it before. So we didn't know what to expect. And so we went from jovial to complete silence when we saw the statue. Very emotional.

John: I can imagine. I've never heard that. That's great.

Martin: And we had a band greeting us. And I didn't know what the band was for. Well, they must have a concert here. I didn't realize it was for us.

John: Martin, what was your rating? Your rank?

Martin: My rating was seaman first class. I was always a little bitter about that. I never got advanced until after the surrender. But, anyhow, we were trained for the mission but we were never given the rating in the area that we were trained in. So when we left New York for a thirty-day leave en route to

California, and in California we had more training in landing from the LCVPs, and of course the area where they did a lot of landing and they built up a lot of sand bars, just like in Normandy. The more traffic there was, the more sand bars there were. So the skipper of the LCVP has more power to say when to land than an admiral has got. Of course, he better watch out when he gets back home.

John: Yea, right.

Martin: Then we had a lot of what they called dry landings, but they were kind of wet. And then when we headed for the Pacific, in January of 1945. And prior to the shipping out, we had to send all our Navy gear home, except our skivvies or shorts and I guess a pair of odd shoes, because we were issued Marine fatigues and Marine shoes and, for some reason, they told us we were going to be in the 6th Marines. And so there was about a hundred of us that were in that group. And we went to Hawaii, and since we had the Marine uniforms, they wouldn't let us into the Navy mess hall. You weren't in uniform. So we decided, we didn't have any choice, we had to go to the ship's store and buy some Navy gear. And we got in there and, "You can't, you don't have the uniform of the day on." Finally, somebody convinced them, and one or two people were allowed to go in and they had to buy the equipment, these two people, to buy all the uniforms. Now we couldn't eat at the mess hall. We were there for about a week, and then went back again to a ten man team for communications for the Pacific. Nothing was ever said about the Marines after that. So we don't know what happened. So from Pearl Harbor we took a ship out to the Philippines and we were there at Leyte. They claimed it was the same spot where General Macarthur came in, but they didn't have a camera crew there for us. So we were trained there for a while. Then they had probably what I enjoyed most, though, while I was in the service, I had charge of designing and making these boxes to house our light equipment, the generator, the lights. So I was able to do that aboard the ship, although I had to collect all the material, much of it from shore. I found out –

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

although I had to collect all the material and much of it from shore. I found out that the Air Force was the most gracious in giving you what I wanted. I wanted a saw, a hand saw, and a square.

John: Okay, would you repeat about they wouldn't let you in.

Martin: We had to take the materials in a small boat to the ship, and when we got aboard the ship, to start the work process, we weren't allowed to use the carpenter's shop. So it was delayed until our officer got all the way to the

top of the command, the captain of the ship, and gave approval to do this. Interesting. But then we did some training there, and then we headed for Okinawa. At Okinawa, we were there for D-Day, also, but we didn't land on D-Day. It was a couple days later. We had the bulk of the problems with the bombings the night before D-Day. The Japanese hit a lot of ships.

John: Yea. Yea.

Martin: And so when we landed there, there was no opposition for the first troops that landed, so when we got in there it wasn't any particular danger from enemy fire, but we found out we had our own friendly fire to content with.

John: Oh, wow. Oh. Wow. Do you know where on the island you landed?

Martin: Somebody asked me that and I don't know. I think it was on the west side, about a mile from Ie Shima.

John: Okay.

Martin: So that general area. What this was called, I don't know. No town nearby. So, yea, then we got, we were on the beach, and prior to this, the Navy ships, the small boats especially, would keep on shooting at planes that flew over, and, of course, our planes weren't supposed to come in the area, but some strayed, but, in spite of the markings on there, some would shoot at them. So the first ten days or so, I think there were seven planes shot down and most of them were our own. And in the one case, the small Navy vessels kept on firing as they came down, and they sprayed the entire beach. They fired and 130 sailors died.

John: Oh, that's tragic.

Martin: That night I was on telephone duty and the admiral came on the air and he told us how many were killed, and told us what happened, and then he started crying.

John: That's understandable.

Martin: So, that was the worst attack. Later on, well, he had alerts every night practically that averaged three alerts a day, for enemy in the area. Unidentified. Some of them identified. In addition to that, there was a couple, twice, that the kamikaze came through. There was no warning in advance at all. And they fly so low the radar couldn't catch them. So they would, in both cases, they had two planes and one was shot down without doing any damage, and they other one hit a ship. And then, of course, the bombing every night. By the time you got started on the movie, there would be an alert and there goes the movie. Either that or it would rain.

- John: Oh, wow. What was the living like? What were you living in? Tents? Foxholes?
- Martin: I mentioned to somebody here earlier, foxholes, and K-rations.
- John: Okay, that is not good living. For sailors, especially.
- Martin: Hell, we always had foxholes right there, and we used them an awful lot. First, in Normandy, for instance, we just had foxholes. We didn't have a pup tent, or anything. You would be surprised how comfortable a helmet was for a pillow.
- John: I know what you mean. Yes. How long were you on Okinawa, then?
- Martin: We were on Okinawa for two months. And then we headed back for the Philippines, and did some more landing, and we heard rumors, which were verified in books printed today, that our group was to land on the southern end of Japan, in the first wave. We weren't looking forward to that. You can imagine the kind of joy we had when the atomic bomb was launched. At the same time, the immense damages the thing did, it left us kind of wondering what next?
- John: Yea. Yea. That would have been so terrible if you had had to land on the Home Islands.
- Martin: Yea.
- John: They thought they would lose a million men.
- Martin: No, from all the reports we had heard was that all the small boats and everything was combined and the Japanese were so desperate that anybody in the family was to protect the homeland.
- John: Yea. Yea. Wow. That is something. So then, after you got back to the Philippines, then what?
- Martin: We were waiting out turn to be sent home. I had enough points to be sent home, but my records were in Hawaii, so they couldn't give me, release me. In a way, I didn't mind. I had that opportunity then. They sent us to Japan, and we got there on September 2. The same day that the treaty was signed. And we stayed there for two months, and then we headed back home. We got to Pearl Harbor and I thought, now we can get the paperwork done, and I can go home. We got to the office and the yeoman said "Your records aren't here. They were sent to the ship you were on

when you were in Okinawa.” We were transferred off of that before the records came in. The records didn’t go with us.

John: Wow. What was it like in Japan when you got there? What were the people like?

Martin: Yea. I am always happy to answer that question because when we got there, the Japanese generally would go to the other side of the street. And after just a couple of weeks, they could see that we were not there to harm them, and we had good relations.

John: That is interesting.

Martin: Yea, there was no problem. Of course, they were interested in our cigarettes.

John: Then you came back. When did you get out?

Martin: In December of 1945.

John: Okay. Where were you released from?

Martin: From Great Lakes. That is another interesting event along the line there, too. Things always foul up, it seems. But we had a train that took us directly to Great Lakes, without transferring anywhere. The only thing we found, though, was that every night we would end up in some yard, rail yard, and didn’t move at all. And so consequently it took us five days to travel from California to Great Lakes. We went right to Great Lakes on this. Took us five days, but we only had three days worth of food. There goes the three meals again!

John: Yea. Three meals and a clean bed. Yea, sure. Then what did you do when you got out?

Martin: After I got out, I went back to work at the company where I had worked before. And I worked there for the rest of my working career.

John: What company was that?

Martin: Milwaukee Boiler.

John: Oh, sure, I’ve heard of that.

- Martin: Small fabricating shop. It was very challenging. And I guess from my experience in the Navy, the danger made it possible for me to accept my working conditions at the shop because we did a lot of work for the underground tunnels. So I had to spend time in those tunnels on occasion. There was one particular time I had to go through what you call an air lock, where they have compressed air to keep the water from flooding in. And I wasn't so sure I wanted to go, and then I thought, I better, because I designed it.
- John: I usually ask about veterans organizations but see you have the VFW hat there.
- Martin: I am in both.
- John: What about reunions? Do you ever get together?
- Martin: No. I had one reunion but, remember we had just the ten men.
- John: Okay.
- Martin: In both cases. Most of them have died. There is no, I don't know of anybody living from the Atlantic area, and we did have one reunion but it was almost a dodge for me because I didn't know any of the guys, because we had been together such a short time. And of course we were two separate units, so we kept separate. We had one reunion. Didn't really enjoy, so I didn't go back.
- John: One of the questions I ask, you were a young man, your whole life was ahead of you. And yet this thing happened, and you were put in harm's way. You came through it okay. What is your reaction to that? Anger? How do you feel about having had to go?
- Martin: I wonder, right now, how I could take it at that time, because I don't know if I could take it today.
- John: Okay. Okay.
- Martin: Of course, I didn't know what was coming.
- John: That's a good point, you know. Yea.
- Martin: Everything was new to me. Of course, I am one that enjoys changes. Going for a new experience. Not necessarily war time.
- John: I was at a meeting with Stephen Ambrose, here. And he was talking to a bunch of World War II vets, and a lot of them were more or less saying that they didn't really do much. And he said, "Don't you say that!" He

said, "You guys were giants!" He said, "You went out and saved this world!" And you did! You did. That was very true.

Martin: Well, I feel the same. I don't see where I could be called a hero. I was just there, and not by choice. And I followed orders. But some of these fellows went way beyond, like in our case, going back to Normandy, these fellows who were the Sea Bees, they were demolition men from civilian life. They were tough guys. Very nice guys. But they were strong. When they carried a stretcher off, in fact, when one of my buddies was on the team that was shot down, and I helped carry him. There was two of us on one end and one of those Sea Bees on the other end. And him with his big long strides, we had trouble keeping up on our end.

John: What a remarkable story. Anything else you want to get on here before we wrap up?

Martin: So many things come to mind, and I don't know if they are really...

John: It's your story. Go ahead.

Martin: For instance, we got to England, before getting to England, they advised us what language not to use. So one was, don't use "bloody." That was a real bad word.

John: Yea. Yes.

Martin: And we got to England, and everybody, all the English people, say "bloody." Everything is bloody.

John: Yea. Yea. Well, okay, let's wrap this up. This is remarkable. What we'll do...

[End of Interview]