

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Irving Koren,
U. S. Navy, World War II

2003

OH
346

OH
346

Koren, Irving, (1922 -), Oral History Interview, 2003

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

The Durand, Wis. native discusses his World War II service first with the commissary department maintaining warehouses and later as a cook aboard LSM 52 in the Pacific Ocean. Koren talks about working in a warehouse, lack of cooks training, and preparing food for soldiers while traveling aboard troop trains. He describes the division of duties in a Navy kitchen, getting supplies while at sea, lack of fresh food, and the different types of dishes prepared. He tells many anecdotes related to Navy life including instances of drinking and food preparation. Koren mentions his battle station as a fire controller, liberty in Tokyo, transfer to an AKA (a cargo transport ship), and corresponding with the woman he married upon discharge.

Biographical Sketch

Koren (1922-) served in the Pacific theater of World War II aboard an LSM (landing ship medium). Upon discharge he returned to Wisconsin and eventually settled in Eden.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2003.

Interview Transcript

- John: Let me just introduce this. Okay. This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And today is June 2, 2003. And this is an oral history interview with Irving Koren, a Wisconsin veteran of World War II, of the United States Navy. We are doing the interview at Chula Vista Resort, at Wisconsin Dells, and this is during a convention of the LSM and LSMR [Landing Ship Medium and Landing Ship Medium - Rocket] crews, of the mid-western states, from World War II. So, not only is Irv the guy that is doing the interview, but Irv is the guy that was in contact with the Vets Museum and set this whole thing up for us. So we can blame or be grateful to him for the way this whole afternoon goes. So, thanks for agreeing, Irv, and thanks for offering to do the interview. Why don't you start at the beginning. Where and when were you born?
- Koren: I was born in Waupaca, Wisconsin, August 5, 1922. I enlisted in the Marines [sic] out of Dunn County, from Durand, no, not Dunn County, Pepin County, from Durand, Wisconsin and was inducted in Milwaukee. I took my boot camp training in Farragut, Idaho and this was in, I went in in 1942 and boot camp early winter and spring of '43. I was in ship's company at boot camp after I got out of boot and working in the Commissary Department because I, that was the experience I had in warehousing. And since it was an operation of the Commissary Department, and we were there long enough to acquire rates, for the storekeeper rates, which we were entitled to, was reserved for WAVES just coming in the service at that time. And they, I received a cook's rating, through the Commissary Department, because those were the only rates available, storekeeper or cook.
- John: Now, did you have a background as a cook?
- Koren: No.
- John: Okay.
- Koren: I was strictly warehousing. The only background I had as a cook I fried an egg at home once in a while, but nothing major. And I was there long enough and rode troop trains as a cook for a period of maybe six months, taking drafts of men from the Farragut, Idaho, to various schools or ports of embarkation, and we rode troop trains out with a, we took a baggage car and made that a galley car that was between the trains, we would take 500 men and, with the baggage car in the center. Some of the food was partially cooked at the base before we put it on the car. And we heated the food with canned heat. We required mess cooks out of the ranks of the men. We would take 250 through the mess car to one end of the train, and then they would come through the baggage car, mess car, and this became a chow line. And they would go back to their seats, and have their meals. We, at the

end of our trip, or when the last meal was served, and whether it was Hawthorne, Nevada, or San Diego, or Seattle, or Chicago, all of our gear, cooking gear, the canned heat and the pots and the pans, what have you, was put aboard a, in a large container or boxes and shipped back to Farragut, Idaho, by Railway Express. And then we came back on civilian trains, with deferred time, which was pretty wild stuff, sometimes. Because that was the major means of transportation in those days, was railroad cars. The trains. And there was always a club car and lots of great activity.

John: Yea.

Koren: We had some great experiences. We got back, one time we got back off of a trip and our officers had changed, and they wanted to know what all these cooks were doing up in the warehouse. And the new officer, a lieutenant j. g., says, "Get all these cooks down to the galley." So, then, by that time, I was ships cook second class, expected to know how to cook, and I didn't. And went down to the galley, and since there were six thousand men in a camp, and there were six camps at Farragut, Idaho, with six thousand each, as a cook we didn't have, we had a hundred cooks, we didn't have to perform all functions. So one cook would make a salad, another one would turn the meat, and another one would make gravy, and so on. I didn't learn a heck of a lot there. What I did learn is that I didn't know anything about cooking. And I caught lots of hell there. We were assigned to Little Creek, Virginia, for amphibious training. And I didn't get amphibious training, I worked in the galley. And Little Creek, and from there we were transferred to Houston, Texas, in preparation for our ship, for our LSM. And I was on LSM52. We took out ship shakedown out of Galveston, Texas, and we come back to Galveston, and tied up. That is the only time I got put in the brig. For drinking, and insulting an SP [Shore Patrol].

John: Yea, yea.

Koren: Should never, I learned never to do that.

John: I think we all did that. You said you took it out on a shakedown. Some of the guys have answered both ways. Did it shake down well, or was it in bad shape?

Koren: No, the shakedown was a test, a test cruise, to learn how to manipulate and handle the ship.

John: The ship operated well?

Koren: The ship operated well.

- John: One of the guys was telling me that--
- Koren: We had no problems, although the executive officer was kind of upset when he had to come to the jail, or the brig, to get me out. Because they had no cook, and we were leaving in another day.
- John: You were an important guy. Yea, I've been through that experience.
- Koren: And, anyway, I was a mess, because when the SP hit me in this dance hall, and all I did was mouth off at him a little bit, but he hit me unexpectedly, and I dropped right to the floor, and I had whites on. And I remember how dirty it was when I got up and how my mouth was pretty upset, and I am talking to the officer of the day, I think, at the brig, trying to explain that this son of a bitch should never have hit me. But I got nowhere.
- John: No, you can't talk your way out of it.
- Koren: But, anyway, I got aboard this ship not knowing how to cook. And we were going, I had enough bread on the ship to get us to Panama, and we went through the Panama Canal. We got at Cocle Sol (??) for a couple of days, and were preparing to go through Panama, and I picked up some bread at the local naval station to carry us, which got us to Bora Bora. And we tied up there. In the meantime, I am explaining to the captain that I don't know how to make bread. And he is telling me that I've got to learn how to make bread. And so we ate baking powder biscuits for about three or four months before I learned how to bake bread.
- John: When the ship was provisioned, did you have anything to do with that? Did you have any say on what provisions were put on board?
- Koren: What do you mean by decisions?
- John: The food, the supplies of food that were put on board? Could you pick and choose?
- Koren: Supplies, we could pick supplies. We could pick supplies, up to that point we had no problem picking supplies. It was after we were in the Pacific and after we were at sea, from New Hebrides up to Borneo, up to New Guinea, Hollandia, New Guinea, we were close enough to pick up some supplies, but I couldn't pick up any bread. And so I, and of course, cooking, we came by hit and miss, and I was in real trouble with most of the crew. The pork chops were underdone and the turkeys were underdone, and the vegetables were overdone. It was a question of learning and by hitting and missing that it came about. But when it came to making bread, that was one of my biggest handicaps. I could master the others,

but I didn't know what I was reading when it said to "proof," I didn't know what that meant, and when it said to "raise," I didn't know what that meant. The first bread I made, on a test, was, I mixed the dough and put it in the oven, molded it in loaves and put it in the oven. And the insides of the bread was raw and the outsides had a great crust of about an eighth on an inch, or a quarter inch crust. It was very good. So, that was all we had. So they took the center of the bread and they threw it against the bulkheads, and it stuck. They ate the crust, but it was, and then finally we tied up to a ship and I went up, I asked one of the cooks on the ship, "What does "proof" mean? What does "raise" mean? What is this business about baking bread that is so difficult?" And he told me, and from that point on, we made bread every other night, and we baked pies and cakes every other night. We made nine pies, but we would make this bread every other night, and it turned out, well, by that time, I was making sweet rolls, cinnamon rolls, things like that. But you just learned by hit and miss. And that was, I never got sick on that ship except once when I had a ham in the oven, and I had it dressed with cloves and pineapple, brown sugar. And the ship was rolling a bit, and every time I opened the door to baste it, I got this sweet, sickening, cloves smell, and to this day, I can't, I don't care for that odor. But that was the time I got sick. Bad. Some of the other messes we had were, we had a bar in front of the stove. We had electric stoves with three plates, and I had a pot, a stock pot full of spaghetti. And the ship rolled, and the spaghetti hit the bar, and tipped over, and we had spaghetti over the deck, completely over the deck. And it was a mess to clean up. And, of course, difficult, everything goes by the clock on the ship, and when food, when dinner is late, or anything was late, it throws all the watches off. And you have one hell of a time, and then you hear from the captain. One time I traded some canned lamb tongues and some stuff for some rice wine in the Philippines. I think it was Mindanao or Mindoro, and we had rice wine stocked all over the ship. And I started drinking that one night when I was making blueberry pie, and the blueberry pies all boiled over, and stunk. I had flower all over the galley. And I went to bed sick. And breakfast was late in the morning because the cook who baked the bread, baked the pies the night before, did not do breakfast in the morning, so I took the heat for that mess. I got called before the captain on that one, too, because all the watches were screwed up, because the galley had to be cleaned up before they could make breakfast. And even to this day, I don't like saki, or rice wine. But you learn. The 190 proof alcohol, which is in the hands of the corpsmen, we traded and incorporated that in grapefruit juice, and it made a fine drink.

John: Yea. Yea.

Koren: But one time we ran out of grapefruit juice and, while we were still drinking it. And I thought, well, let's try something else. Try tomato juice. And that didn't work. Everybody got sick. So, we learned.

John: I remember one night at Great Lakes, four of us had like a buck thirty among us. And we bought a pack of cigarettes, and a big bottle of muscatel wine. And to this day I can't get within feet of muscatel.

Koren: I can understand that. Too sweet. But, this is, we made invasions in, I was aboard a hospital ship, not from a wound. But I had prostatitis. And so they were doing some experimenting with me. And I got transferred off the LSM54 and went on the LSM 139. LSM 139 was en route to, during the tornado, en route to Japan. We got there in November and then we, I remember, we needed stores, and I made friends with a guy that had a jeep. And he took me to an Army warehouse, they told me I needed authorization from an Army officer to pull stores, because we didn't have anything on our ship. So I had him write his name down, the officer I needed the authorization from. And I took that to the warehouse and got a bunch of stores, and got it back to the ship before they caught us. Otherwise, we just weren't getting our supplies. And one time, the only vegetable we had left on the ship was carrots. And we had creamed carrots, and buttered carrots, and parsleyed carrots. Until everybody was sick of carrots. But we had no other vegetables because we couldn't get supplies. Lost my pay records, and didn't get paid for nine months. I didn't have shoes that fit. We couldn't get supplies. All the flour had mites and, which are little black bugs. We did what we could at the beginning to sift them out, but then after a while we just gave up on it and everybody ate them. First they pulled them, picked them out of the bread. But then they gave that up. And it was something we learned to live with. Nobody got sick from mites. Kind of disgusting when you see them at home, now, but--

John: You were, what? Fifty, fifty-five guys in the crew?

Koren: Fifty. Forty-five men and five officers.

John: And one cook?

Koren: We had two cooks. I was in charge of the galley, and I had a striker as a helper, and then we were able to draw mess cooks out of the seamen. And those were helpers. And I was supposedly the knowledgeable one. So I learned to make things that tasted pretty palatable after a while. After doing it for about three years. I still cook, a lot.

John: I cook. During the invasion, was your battle station the galley?

Koren: Battle station, I was a fire control. In the event of a fire, I was supposed to go over there and wet it down. But, during battle stations, we had to continue to feed the men. So, it was a question of sandwiches and soup, and so I continued to make

bread. And we continued to do our duty in the galley. But the battle stations was, they still had to eat, because that was important.

John: Were you generally part of a fleet, or were you generally on your own?

Koren: We were in a flotilla most of the time, with other LSM's. And with other ships. And we were involved in landings, in preparation for the invasion of Japan. I was in, the first invasion was Lingayen, the gulf in the Philippines, and we hit, we were at Bataan, we were at Manila Bay, we were at Corregidor, we re-took Corregidor, we re-took Bataan, Zamboango, we were at Mindanao, Mindoro. We took the Australian armor into Borneo. And we made a couple in Borneo. And that was when, it was right after that, that the atomic bomb dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And we were under way, under black-out conditions, when it came across the radio that they were surrendering. And, well, we didn't celebrate it, because we weren't sure whether the Japanese out there knew that the war was over.

John: I see. Yea. Okay.

Koren: And so, until they signed it, when they signed it, we were in Manila Bay, in preparation to go into Japan. And that was like on September 2. And we had a big celebration on the ship. And the captain thought he was doing us all a favor by breaking out all the liquor. Little did he know that this was in addition to everything else we had. At one time, at Coca Sola (??), I was coming back from liberty into the ship and I had a pint. And in those days, Old Overholt Rye was the kind of whiskey you could get. You couldn't get the real good stuff, but Old Overholt was a brand. And I had it, this pint, in my, under my jersey and in my pants, and the SP tapped it with a night stick, and then he hit it hard, and broke it. And I had Old Overholt and glass all over the inside of my legs. And he said he was doing me a favor.

John: Yea, sure. I remember coming aboard with a bottle in each sock, inside of each sock. And, of course, I had enough in me that I had to prove that I was sober, so I clicked my heels together. And I walked down the companionway, the ladder, I think it was Greek ouzo, or something, and broken glass in my socks. When, how long after the surrender, did you stay over there? Did you come back soon?

Koren: I got transferred. We went back to Yokosuka, in Japan, and then I took liberty in Yokohama, liberty in Tokyo. And I was re-assigned. I went back to the hospital ship, again for the prostate infection. It was not the clap. It was actually a prostate infection. And I was assigned then to an AOG, which was a gasoline tanker, and I was aboard that, well, at that point, we had enough cooks on each watch, so I was in charge of the galley. I cooked then for Christmas and I cooked for the major

holidays, New Years and that type of thing. And I still have menus and stuff from that. But, we hauled gasoline from Sasebo, Japan, to what they called Jensen, Korea, which is now Inchon. And we were on that run, back and forth, aviation gasoline. And I remember a few times being on the deck and watching a movie, and when your ankles got cold, you put the cigarettes out, because it was highly inflammable.

John: Yea.

Koren: But the, and I was there till March, and I went on an AKA [amphibious cargo attack transport]. I had enough points. You needed forty-five points to go home, and I had enough points then, with length of time, and the duty, and I guess you got a point and a half for overseas. And so it took us thirty days from Japan to California, Oakland, California. Ah, San Diego. I was involved with two other guys. We ran a blackjack game almost continuous from the time we got aboard that ship. That was the only time I ever saved any money.

John: Let's get back to that blackjack game in a minute. You said you took liberty in Tokyo and that, right after the surrender?

Koren: Right after, in November, of '44.

John: Coming back on the AKA, were there troops on board?

Koren: Yea.

John: There must have been one hell of a payroll. Heading for that game.

Koren: Oh, yea. It was great, it was great blackjack. It kept going continually. But I remember going to Japan, I remember going to Nagasaki, where there were factories that were absolutely black fields, and flat. No rubble, and everything had just disintegrated. But I remember, and the people lived in huts that were five gallon tin cans flattened out. And that was their housing. In a lot of Yokosuka and Yokohama and Tokyo. We would hitch-hike, but the Japanese were very polite to us and very gentle. Like there had never been a war. I was picked up by a pickup truck that had, that was fueled by wood with steam, a steam engine on the back of the truck. They had little pieces of kindling that they would keep that fire going, and that is how a lot of them motivated these vehicles. Because all the oil and the gasoline went for the war effort.

John: I see. What was it, steam?

Koren: Steam. Actually a steam driven truck.

John: I'll be darned.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

Koren: And cars. That was some of our transportation. We were told not to eat the food, no raw vegetables, because they used human waste for fertilizer. And we were invited to a number of homes. They were, like I say, very polite, and courteous. And we were quite inquisitive. We used, barter was the major means of buying things. Or getting things. Cigarettes, which cost us a nickel a pack, were very valuable to them, and we traded cigarettes for other things, like kimonos I brought back, and I brought back army rifles, samurai swords.

John: Is that your sword that is out here?

Koren: I'm sorry?

John: Is that your sword that is out here?

Koren: Yea. And also there is a bolo knife, or a modified bolo knife that I got in the Phillipines, that is hand-made. And a bayonet, that went to the rifle that I lost to the American Legion.

John: When did you get out?

Koren: I got out in '46. I think it was April, or May. April, of '46.

John: Did you have reserve time to do after you got out? Or did you just get discharged?

Koren: Discharged.

John: You never got called back, or anything?

Koren: No. I went to Detroit. I became engaged to my wife in the mail. We had only had three dates. When I met her. I met her on a liberty from when I was in Norfolk, at Little Creek. Went to New York and I met her on the beach. And we had two or three dates. I got very upset with her because I had taken her coat to my hotel room and she refused to come up and get it.

John: Smart girl.

Koren: Well, I was very upset. But, when I picked her up on the beach, with two other girls, I said, "Let's go out and get a drink." And they said, "Fine." They took me

to an ice cream parlor and I was pretty upset about that. Anyway, when I left the States, when we left Galveston and went to Panama, I wrote her a letter telling her what I thought about the whole date situation with her, after two or three dates. She wrote me back, and never mentioned my letter. And we continued to correspond for a couple of years after that. And when I got discharged, went to Chicago, picked up a ring. I was discharged at Great Lakes. Picked up a ring in Chicago. She was from New York. And I went to New York, and I gave her the ring. And we became engaged through the mail. And after these dates. We were married for fifty-one years before she passed away.

John: What did you do after you got out?

Koren: My father was in the egg business. And in the feed business, in Waupaca. And I worked with him for a number of years, for a few years. Then my wife got pregnant and wanted to have the baby in New York. And that was in, so we went to New York in '47 or '48, and I became a cheese broker there. And she would write the names of some of the distributors off the trucks that went by, and then I would go see them, and I started selling cheese in New York, and did that for about three years. People in Wisconsin that we knew would put cheese on a rail car and ship it to us and we'd get it in through a lighter on the Lackawanna Railroad, I remember, because I made friends with the people running the, they were sales people for the railroad, encouraging business. So they would give me storage, refrigerated storage at the dock. It was Pier 14, I remember that. And so cheese that I had sold en route I notified the people when the car came in and they came and picked it up, or we arranged for drayage to ship to them in the local market. And I did that for about three years, and I did things that most of the people who lived in New York said couldn't be done, because the people aren't kind to you. But, being a country guy from Wisconsin, and telling them my problem, most everybody cooperated with me, and people bought cheese from me then. And we did that for about three years, because my wife wanted to have the baby there. We bought a home. We lived with my in-laws, my mother-in-law for a year, then we bought a home over in Dumont, New Jersey. I remember, we paid \$9,000 for a brand new home and two years later I sold that home for \$11,000 and I thought I was stealing money from the people that bought it. So we went back to Wisconsin and I had a 1936 Ford when we got married. And we took our honeymoon in Canada. My wife had never been west of Philadelphia, when we got married. We got married in Waupaca and we took our honeymoon, we went up through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and then cut across on 2, to Duluth, Minnesota. Burned a rod out. But I had cheese and butter in the car, and I was able to convince a mechanic in Duluth to fix it for us in exchange for some cheese and butter, because rationing was still on, at that time.

John: I remember rationing.

Koren: Sorry?

John: I remember rationing.

Koren: “A” stamps. Anyway, we went up into Canada. I remember one morning, this was, we were married May 19, and went on our honeymoon shortly after that. We got up early because the mosquitoes were driving us right out of the cabin. And the cabin had no screens. We were going crazy with the mosquitoes, so we got up at daylight and got in the car, and started driving. A moose ran alongside the car in the ditch. She come over to my side of the car so fast. She had never seen anything like that. And it was a big, big moose. Then we got to Kenora, and we had the biggest meal in your life for a buck and a quarter. From there we went to Winnipeg, and we stayed in Winnipeg almost a week. And this was in a ‘36 Ford. And we were staying at the Royal Alexander Hotel. We toured LaBat’s Brewery, we just had a great time in Winnipeg. People were great. We went to Hudson’s Bay Company. Then we drove home, drove to Waupaca and found out that a cousin was getting married in Detroit. So the whole family piled in the car and we drove to Detroit. The war was over then, and we were trying to get ourselves settled. But I did a lot of things after that in business. I administered marketing or a group buying program for Shakey’s Pizza Parlors nationally. I was in the cheese business prior to that. And egg business. And then the group buying program led to the Wisconsin Association of Nursing Homes, and we did group buying for them. Everything was on a voluntary basis. Organized the association for Shakey Pizza Parlor dealers and defended a class action law suit against us from the franchiser because he felt we were infringing on their opportunities. Actually, they were gouging the franchisees. And we did International Union of Gospel Missions, even though I am Jewish. I became a candidate for conversion a number of times. And Christian Camping International. And we performed services in that department. I did own a sporting goods stores. I owned an art gallery. And am winding up a property development now.

John: Any, ah, after you got out, any associations, legion, VFW? Anything with them?

Koren: With whom?

John: With the American Legion? VFW?

Koren: I am a member of the American Legion. I haven’t been to a meeting since Dumont, New Jersey, or Bergenfield. And I am a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. But I have never been to a meeting. I am a member at large in all of these. I am affiliated with one at Mount Cavalry, Wisconsin, but I’ve never gone to a meeting. I am a member of the Jewish War Veterans, but I’ve never gone to a meeting. And I contribute to all of them.

John: Did you ever use your GI Bill?

Koren: I have. Not the GI Bill. I've never used it for school. I've never used it and I never used it for a loan in the housing, although I still maintain my insurance. That was the \$10,000, converted it to ordinary life and it is now worth \$50,000. My dividend is \$2,000 a month and my premium is \$167.

John: Yea. I didn't. I should have.

Koren: Oh, yea.

John: That is quite a story. The big question all of us who do these interviews ask is, looking back from here, this thing happened and you just got pulled out of your life and sent overseas. What is your thinking about that? Your reaction? How do you feel about it?

Koren: It was exciting and it was an adventure. We felt invulnerable. We didn't feel we were the ones who were going to get hit. And it was a chance to see things I hadn't seen before, and do things I hadn't done before. I never felt, I was too dumb to be afraid. I had already left home and was doing some things on my own at eighteen and nineteen, and I was living in Durand, and my folks were, we had an egg station there. And my folks lived in Waupaca. So it was an adventure and an interesting experience. I am not sorry I did it. I didn't feel apprehension, I never felt homesick or lonesome. I was, I felt, I was unhappy if I couldn't get a cigarette and that kind of stuff. But I didn't miss the civilian life that much, because everything was an adventure. Every place we went was interesting and exciting and I was probably too dumb to be afraid.

John: That is quite a story. These have all been tremendous stories. Can I get a release from you? I'm going to shut this off.

[End of Interview.]