

Wisconsin Public Television
Korean War Stories Project

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

VILAS E. MACHMUELLER

Mechanic, Navy, post-World War II
Fire Room Crewman, Navy, Korean War

2004

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Madison, Wisconsin

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Machmueller, Vilas E., (1928-2008). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Video Recording: 3 videorecordings (ca. 68 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Vilas E. Machmueller, a Wausau, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Navy during World War II and the Korean War. In November of 1945, Machmueller talks about enlisting in the Navy on his seventeenth birthday and being technically but not practically a World War II veteran. He describes tension in his family caused by his enlistment, boot camp and engineering school at Great Lakes Training Center (Illinois), and assignment to the *USS Albany*. He talks about serving with older men and leaving the service in 1947 after the ship was assigned to a bitter officer who had been downgraded due to Navy cutbacks. Machmueller speaks of working three years at a paper mill, hearing President Truman ask for reservists during a speech, and making a pact with his friends to enlist the next morning. He tells of missing being sworn in because he was in the bathroom, being hurried off to Treasure Island (California), and being taken to Sasebo (Japan) and assigned to the *USS Comstock*. He describes his first impression of the executive officer as “disheveled,” portrays his adjustment to the new ship, and tells of moving up and down the coast of Korea. At the invasion of Inchon, Machmueller portrays seeing the fleet. He speaks of minesweeping operations at Wonsan harbor, transporting British commandos north of the 38th Parallel, and delivering supplies. He characterizes his captain and explains his captain was awarded a silver star for missing a bridge and accidentally hitting a hidden munitions dump instead. Machmueller tells of the minesweeper *YMS Partridge* hitting a mine, the *Comstock*'s picking up survivors, turning the mess hall into a hospital, and helping the wounded. He portrays a couple of the men who died of their injuries and reveals the *Comstock* did not have any morphine because the pharmacist had secretly been using it on himself. Machmueller details rescuing crew members whose ship had run aground at Chinnampo (North Korea). He reveals that many of his officers were ex-prisoners of war from World War II and relates some of their stories and bitterness. He relates meeting up with friends at *Comstock* reunions and introducing them to his second wife after his first wife passed away. He compares the *Comstock* with a heavy cruiser and explains its pressurized fire room. Machmueller highlights almost falling off the boiler stack one day and refusing to climb up there again. He explains the *Comstock*'s duties as a Landing Ship Dock carrying minesweepers, describes the three-ship tactics of minesweeping, and talks about his own experiences on the Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel [LCVP] minesweepers. He reveals he had a friend working at MacArthur's headquarters who would send him secret information about where the ship was going to be sent, and Machmueller talks about winning bets onboard the *Comstock* with the information. He speaks of befriending a Navy underwater demolition team veteran who later committed suicide. He tells of being assigned fireman duties even though he'd been trained as a machinist, and he describes his daily routine. Machmueller recalls a memorable day trip to get a fuel oil pump repaired. He sketches the mountainous Korea coast and addresses food, daily rotation, and his awareness of the war's progression. Machmueller recalls the fleet using

contaminated water, pulling extra duty because everyone was sick, and hearing that it was caused by bacterial warfare.

Biographical Sketch:

Machmueller (1928-2008) served two tours in the Navy, one from 1945 to 1947 aboard the *USS Albany* (CA-123, later CG-10) and the other from 1950 to 1951 aboard the *USS Comstock* (LSD-19). After an honorable discharge, he worked for forty-eight years at the Rothschild (Wisconsin) pulp and paper mill with the American Can Company and the Weyerhaeuser Company. He was married twice and raised two children and three stepchildren. In 1960 he became active in local government and participated in state-level organizations such as the Wisconsin Towns Association and the League of Municipalities. Machmueller served as president of the Village of Weston from 1996 until his death in 2008 and was active in many Marathon County committees.

Citation Note:

Cite as: Vilas E. Machmueller, Interview, conducted September 24, 2004 at Wausau, Wisconsin by Mik Derks, Wisconsin Korean War Stories, for Wisconsin Public Television.

Context Note:

Raw footage interview filmed by Wisconsin Public Television for its documentary series, "Wisconsin Korean War Stories." Original WPT videocassette numbers were WCKOR053, WCKOR054 and WCKOR055.

Related Materials Note:

Photographs of this narrator's military service can be found in Wisconsin Public Television. Wisconsin Korean War Stories records (WVM Mss 1389).

Videotape Note:

There are missing audio segments! The WVM copy of the interview is missing a few sentences between the first and second tapes. Wisconsin Public Television should have complete audio of the interview, but there was a problem during the reproduction of tapes for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. The missing parts are italicized as a means of indentifying them in this transcript and the actual tape end and start in the WVM copy is clearly noted.

Interviewed by Mik Derks, September 24, 2004.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Public Television staff, n.d.

Transcript edited and reformatted by Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

Mik: And we'll talk about more than we would ever use in the program, but we want to capture your whole story because we're going to archive these, and so we're conducting the oral histories as we're doing our thing. Now I don't know what we will use when we get all the interviews done, we—

Vilas: Edit them out?

Mik: --the transcript, and see how things fit together, and we're trying to tell the story of the war, but I'll tell you, it's hard to find Navy stories in this war. There wasn't—there was so much naval action in World War Two. But, I think the best place to start is back before you were in the military and where you were and how you got involved in the Navy.

Vilas: Okay. Well, of course I was--World War II started when I was in the seventh grade and elementary school I think, yeah, seventh grade. And of course, young, the war thing, ya know, ya know all the young guys, boy oh boy. I always ran with a neighborhood of kids were mostly three, four years older than me. And so they were all, ya know, as soon as they turned seventeen or eighteen at the latest, they were gone during the World War II. And of course, as I progressed through elementary school and it was, pretty pressuring as we came out of it, it was a hard times, ya know. And I always felt I wanted to join the Navy. I--the posters and all that stuff, gung-ho. And ah--so I was, I had just entered my junior year in high school when I turned seventeen and of course the hostility ceased a week before I went back to school. But the war technically wasn't over until Japan--til December something if I remember. So technically I'm a World War II veteran, practically, no. I went to boot camp and stuff like that, but ah--On my seventeenth birthday I joined the Navy and in retrospect, ya know, my father was angry and my mother only signed my papers to stop another fight at home, ya know. But all my buddies were gone. In fact a lot of 'em that got drafted, they, a lot of 'em didn't make it back, ya know, they got into the heat of the European thing and some of the Japanese stuff. But ah--I joined on my seventeenth birthday. Ah--I was a straight A student in high school, my homeroom teacher was furious, she wrote a letter to my parents, ya know, and the whole bit, but I wanted to go. And ah--we got a hundred and twenty in our boot company at Great Lakes. It was Great Lakes Training Center. And I just wanted to get out to sea ya know. Catch part of the end of it anyway. The hostilities were over, but I knew the bikini atom test were gonna go and on and all that. But boy this was just exciting to me, ya know. Well, out of a hundred twenty, I was one of four that got sent to engineering school. So there I quit high school, wound up in engineering school at Great Lakes which, ya know, you fast forward in my life it was a benefit, ya know. Ah--so I graduated from there and then they shipped me out to east coast and went aboard the *USS Albany*. A new ship, we christened it on June 6th if I remember, 1946. And part, most of the older crew members were guys that had been in the Navy back in the '20s and '30s. So they were all old men to me, ya know, cuz by that time I was, well I was still seventeen at

this, before I was eighteen. And ah--So I went from seventeen to forty real fast ya know [laughs] running with that bunch. But it was really an interesting experience. Ah--I got outta engineering school, I got two great advancements because of my scholastic numbers there. Which was another advantage in pay, but a disadvantage again going with all these old timers, ya know. You got the, the stripe and all, you tell me what to do [laughs]. Ya know, like going on that search surgery when you don't have any experience with a knife. Anyway, ah--we spent the next couple years on the *Albany*. And I intended to be a career man at that time. I--

Mik: What was the *Albany*?

Vilas: A heavy cruiser, CA-123. Ah--I really enjoyed the Navy, I enjoyed the travel, ya know and it was just, I was happy. But then ah--in 1947 and about in August, September '47 I--we got a new division officer aboard. I remember the World War II, a lot of guys had temporary rates, they were advanced up to officer warrants and what not, but after the war, if they were career men, as they were peeling down the Navy, a lot of these people had to move back to their previous ranks. So we got a guy that was first class machinist made as my boss who had been a, a second ah--let's see--lieutenant. As an engineering officer, but he got moved back to first class petty officer. He only had a few years to go to get his thirty years in. And he was bitter, ya know, and he took the bitterness out on those of us who had put the ship in commission and nursed it along, ya know, the whole bit. So I just, ya know, young and impetuous, the heck with you, I don't have to take that. And I took a discharge, I figured I'd go home for ninety days and come back and reenlist, ya know. Well, in those days if you came back in ninety days, you got your rate back, the whole bit, but ya know, you got home and the dancing, the girls and what not, n' first thing you know, it was hundred days. So I went down to reenlist and well, you gotta take one rate lower, ya know. Oh no, not gonna do that, ya know. But seventeen bucks a month, that a lot of money then.

And so I just, I went to work at the Rockhouse Paper Mill here. My old man told me, you gonna live here, you better get a job [laughs]. So instead of, I did, ya know, I was not too smart because I coulda had the GI Bill, but I went back to school, the whole bit. Twice I coulda done that, but I didn't and got use to spending money. Ah--so the Korean War came along a little later and it was about almost three years later and of course a whole bunch of us guys, we were single, we hung out at the local watering hole, ya know. And Harry Truman made his famous speech that night, ya know and called for all reservists, we could use you all, ya know, it's time to help your country. And of course by that time, we'd been ready to charge the hill ya know. And we all made a pact, we'd be down at the recruiting office at nine the next morning, which was in Wausau. Well, nine the next morning, I was down there at quarter to nine. By that time, you think, "Geez, what do we do?" But I'm the kind, if I made the vow, ya know, if it means jumping off the bridge at high noon, I'm gonna be there. And so it got to be almost nine o'clock and nobody else was there yet, and I'm starting to think, "Well, maybe this will fizzle out." And about that time a guy by the name of Johnny Jaggert come walking slowly down

Washington Street, ya know. And ah--he lives over here in Rothschild. And a couple minutes later, Cal Chamberlain and Cope Fayo. So well, let's go down, ya know, boys. Well, we got down there and ah--I had I think it was eight, nine days to report to main station in Minneapolis to get sworn in and then down to Great Lakes for up going duty. And ah--well, to make a long story short, three of us went. Cope Fayo was down to the bus station to get on the bus and he got the orders not to go. His orders were reversed, ya know. So he never did go.

Ah--we got to Minneapolis, this another one of those quirks, ya know. Ah--we were moving fast, fast, fast after we got on the bus once. Ah--we getting ready to, get sworn in and I had to go to the bathroom. So I go to the bathroom and I come back I, couple of guys, "When we gonna get sworn in?" "Oh, we did already." So I never even got sworn in the second time, ya know, that [laughs] they issued us temporary ID cards, which was all I had a year later yet 'cuz we kept on the move. And ah--we got on a train went to Great Lakes, outgoing unit and ah--caught the first troop train to the west coast and I was glad of that cuz everybody was kinda flying people out. And I didn't like that, I'd never flown at the time, and I didn't care to. So, I got the first troop train out, we went to Treasure Island and ah--at Treasure Island, we ah--were there a week or so mobilizing--caught the first sea draft out on the *General Collins*. And we got out to ah--we pulled into Yokohama. It was a miserable rainy day and all. Loaded us on the back of open cattle trucks, semis. And hauled us down to the train station where we got on a train. I call 'em the forty by eights, they was little on something like them European trains where, ya know. And a thirty-nine hour ride down to ah--Sasebo, Japan and there was the whole fleet, ya know. I got a lot pictures in there, of the fleet there. And I thought, "Well, this is not so bad, ya know." All these capital ships, cuz remember, I was on a heavy cruiser, that's like, being on a Cadillac compared to a Model A. So all day long they're calling off the--somebody didn't pay the light bill. Okay. Each, ya know, every little island be calling off a certain ship and then calling off a bunch of guys. There must've been about oh, at least three hundred of us that came with that group on to our receiving ship, the *USS Piedmont*. In fact I got a picture of that in one of those pictures. And ah--all day long, ya know, pretty soon, there's about, I think we were thirty-eight of us left, thirty-eight just under forty. And it's getting late in the afternoon now, about three, three-thirty, ya know. And miserable, one of those miserable days, ya know, like this is gonna be the way, I think. And ah--finally they call off this group. *Comstock* LSD-19 [dock landing ship] and we, we'd seen that since, sittin' there all day, ya know. You ever see the movie *Mister Roberts* or read the book, that was the bucket, and that's exactly what the *Comstock* was. So guy, I'll never forget this kid, he was a tall, good lookin' Pollack kid. He, name was Oldakowski and he hears that and of course we became friends on the trip over that sea for a couple of weeks. He said ah, "Boy, Machmueller, we gotter made." I says, "Well, what do you mean? LSD?" He says, "They never move. We're gonna be right here." He says, "My brother was on one during World War II. They never moved. They stay right in port and shuttle things around, do some repair work." So he said, "We're gonna have lots of good liberty over here." "Ah--ok." So we got in the boat n' went over to the *Comstock* and then the tailgate was down, it was ballasted up, and came

around on the port side n' around the tailgate up to the gangway n', and there's this guy hanging over the gangway, ya know, collar open, disheveled and God. He was the executive officer, Commander Ernst. And ah--as we come up the quarter deck and all carrying our sea bags n' he's mumbling a few conversation pieces here n' there n' everything, ya know. And finally get us all lined up and he says, "I know, I know. Before you start gripin'." He says, "You all been on the road for the last month or so, haven't had time for any liberty, haven't had any time for a good shower really," he said. "I'm gonna give you all fifty bucks and liberty till midnight cuz we get underway at four in the morning." Underway at four in the morning, well, guess where we were going? Inchon [laughs].

So ah--the next, during the next eleven months, we steamed ninety thousands miles. Up and down the Korean coast, both sides. We--this minesweeping operation, ya know, we pioneered it n' that was our charge. Hauling troops in. The British couldn't take their troops above the 38th parallel, or their ships, so we would take British commandos up, ya know. Commando runs back runs in. You name it, we did it. Deliver ice cream to the capital ships, ya know, n' stuff like that. We'd get hit, to Sasebo about every thirty, thirty-three days for twelve hour supply, turn about and get out again. And just about every morning when I'd see Oldakowski I'd say, "Ya know Oldakowski, there's one thing about these LSDs, they never move," [laughs]. But it was interesting. Ah--after Inchon, ah--we went around and made the back run at Wonsan on the other side, on the eastern side, way up behind the lines. Ah--we made a lot of in runs like that. Ah--we took people out, we brought people in and of course our main charge was always minesweeping. Wonsan harbor we got to call our second home port. We were usually, ballasted down and in Wonsan if we weren't making a special trip for someone, then we'd sweep. Ya know, like this was always puzzling me cuz you'd sweep, sweep, sweep and the next day, mines would be in the same area, ya know. Well, what was happening, some of the North Koreans were actually working with us with the small boats, ya know, sometimes. And at nights they were bringing mines out. We didn't discover that for quite a few months. Well, once we discovered it, took care of the problem, ya know, didn't happen anymore after that. Ah--we would go in, our main battery was an old open breach five inch sets. That was our main battery and all. And ah--our skipper, he made captain at the age sixty-five. So you know he's through the whole World War II in the thirties, if he'd just made captain there in the Korean War. He was not the sharpest guy on the ladder, let's put it that way. So he liked to come down and when we'd be shelling bridges or highways along the coast, he liked to fire that gun, ya know, cuz he had, he had a pointer and a trainer. Each one cranking one up, one down and around, and then the fire, he had that big foot pedal, ya know. And give her a push, he liked to do that, that. So whenever he had the opportunity, he'd come down and he'd wanna fire that gun. And ah--I didn't find this out now until the reunion we had at Branson. First time I'd seen some of these guys in fifty years. And one of the old time officers, he was first lieutenant on at that time, Lieutenant Davis. And he was there and he's eighty--eighty-four, eighty-five now. And we were BS-ing a little bit ya know. Looking at pictures n' he says, "Hey," he says, "Remember that time in Wonsan Harbor?" He says, "Go ahead--the captain, he

use to like to come out and shoot the gun." "Yeah, yeah, yeah." He says, "Well, ya remember that time when we're shooting at that bridge n' nothing was happening and all of a sudden, over ya know on the farther--" There was a bunch of li--we thought they were fishermen shacks "Blew up, ya know." And he started laughing, he said, "Ya know," he said, "He got the Silver Star for missing the target. He was shooting at that bridge and accidentally hit this and what it was, was a big munition's dump that was camouflaged there." We, we saw that thing day after day [laughs], ya know, cuz we're on the beach. So ah--things like that happen, you don't find out till afterwards. Ah--we, we lost ah--a few people.

Ah--in February the *Partridge* was a YMS. Now that's a little bigger, we called 'em a yard minesweep. A yard tug size. And we had a few of those out there with us. Now they carried thirty-three men to complement and ah--it was just a little after noon in February, about February 12th, I think. It was colder than heck that winter and ah--we just had, in fact I was sitting in the mess-hall eating chow, and we heard this terrific explosion n' somebody said the *Partridge* just got hit. And she was just off our starboard quarter. So I went out there and sure enough, she was. What had happened, they were sweeping along side of us there and ah--a mine came up and--it's the second boat is usually the one that's gonna get it if you're gonna get it. And that happened to be. The bow watch was standing on the bow and he didn't see it till they were coming down. Well, that's the last he ever saw, ya know. But ah--water was so cold we immediately launched a rescue operation and there were quite a few acts of bravery that day, ya know. Ah--and ah--we got the survivors aboard and then we had to ah--out of the thirty-three aboard, I think we picked up twenty-seven, if I'm not mistaken, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, it was not the full compliment. And ah--we had a thirty-nine hour run, thirty-eight hour run to ah--Pusan. Where the first, closest hospital ship was. So by the time we got there, some more had passed away, ya know. We turned our mess-hall into a hospital. We didn't have a doctor, all we had was a third-class pharmacist mate, that was our doctor. So it was interesting, also some trout trauma. But ah--it--

Mik: What kind of injuries did they have? Was it from exposure or--

Vilas: Well, one guy I'll never forget 'cuz I was helping putting the, the bodies on the tables. His name was Short, I forget his first name, but one of the guys in my division knew him real well from previous years. And he was up on the, he was quartermaster, he was up on the bridge when it happened. And some of the breed came up and took top of his head off, opened up his head. But he was still alive when I picked him up. Well, he died shortly thereafter. Ah--one fella I'll never forget, I can see him till this day. He had most of his hand blown off and he's holding that up in the air, but he's hanging on to another guy and paddling his feet. Picked him up, well, he saved the guy that he was hanging onto, but he died from loss of blood. And that opened up another whole chapter on that trip because it turned out that we didn't have any morphine. Ah--the pharmacist had been using it on himself. That's the first exposure I ever got to drugs, ya know, before you just never heard of anything like that. And so that opened up a whole investigation in

the Far East. A couple ships were involved. But ah--most of the inj--and of course, few of 'em drowned. Ah--this Ed Davis that was down at the reunion ah--he was taken the official photographs of the things too. And that night, and these were things that we never knew happened. Never knew until this, this past year. Ah--the intelligence group came aboard and when we got to Pusan, and took all the documentation, everything. Nobody was supposed to know about all this. Some reason or another, in hindsight, God only knows what else took place. But ah--he had his own camera under his big mackinaw [jacket]. And he took some shots and just kept them, ya know. And he had the one shot there of my best friend Bill Kennedy n' him pulling the ah--executive officer from the *Partridge* aboard. Of course he was already dead; we didn't know that, yet, that he had been shot. But ah--that picture, Ed told us, was the cover picture for *Colliers* in 1952, I think he said. And I don't even remember anything like that. But ah--he said he'd probably got hung if they didn't know he had that prior for that, ya know. But anyway, it was a very interesting experience.

Ah--we made a back run on the other side. Ah--at Chinnampo, it's north of the 38th Parallel, this was when the Chinese had just come in, shortly after the Chinese had come in. And ah--we a PF, Patrol Frigate, had run aground, when the management in North, South Koreans, and we've had to get up there in South, get the crew off, ya know. We had two helicopters, the yearly whirly birds, ya know, we had two of those. And ah--we were about mile and a half off the beach and we sent the first helicopter over the, the ship was our grounded, and the Chinese, you could see them coming over the mountain with the field glasses, it was just like having them in your living room, ya know. And of course they were firing down, main thing was to get the crew off. Well, the first chopper was over the boat and a rotor hit the mask. And of course it flipped, flew, and exploded. Well, now we had a fire and sent the second helicopter up. Second helicopter almost the same thing happened, but it splashed into the water. Now we had to send out the small boats, ya know. All the time these Chinese are just like ants coming over the hill. Remember it's winter and they're all suited up. So all we had left out there was phosphorus shells for the five inch main battery. So skipper said to break out the phosphorus shells, ya know. So we're shooting these phosphorus shells up there now. At night they light up nice, that's what they're for. But this was broad day light. And ah--they shatter, ya know and of course that's like throwing matches at people. Well, it was not pleasant to see what was happening, but that's all we had till we could get most of the crew members off. Ah--that I always remember, ya know, and that's another thing that never hit the press or anything because when the kids were doing this book for the high school, I was relating some of these things and nobody could figure Chinnampo, there is no Chinnampo. Well, I found out through the internet through the vets office later I was looking for some of the citations I had had 'cuz my mother had it in her house years ago and my sister lost the house, ya know, that's another long story. So I wanted to get them replaced, ya know, for my kids. And found out there was the whole list of things that we had three presidential units citations, Chinnampo indeed was there, and it talks about the ah--the trip up there, ya know, and things like that. So ah--it was very interesting.

Ah--we had a lot of, most of our, well, all of our chiefs and some of the warrant officers were guys that had been prisoners of the Japanese. They were in the Navy when World War II started. And they were all prisoners. And of course when the war was over, those that were alive yet, like the ones that we had, they had the opportunity to leave the Navy then or stay and finish their twenty or thirty cuz they had so many years in by that time, which they did. They made 'em warrant, chief warrants. And ah--I'll never forget the, some of these guys. I couldn't understand the bitterness in the beginning, I really couldn't. Ah--one guy, Redwell, felt--he just passed away last June. Ah--he had two pearl handled pistols, just like Patten, ya know, and ah--first trips on to *Comstock*, and we went up into ah--Kobe Japan to put our mezzanine deck on, that's the deck that you see the boat sitting on top of over there. When I went on that, that wasn't on. It was just the well deck. And ah--so the Japanese yard workmen, would come and line up outside the mess hall waiting for us to get done then they'd get in the garbage can, with their tin cans and take their food, ya know. And Well felt if he'd stand their right at that rope and the minute the rope was down, the first guy that came in, they could, you got whopped on the head, ya know--but good. And we couldn't understand that well. We learned the story of Red Wellfeld, we could understand it. He was one of those, the few that made it up to Japan as a prisoner, remember a lot of the prisoner ships were sunk. He made it up there and they put him in the Okito coal mines. When the war ended, now this guy was six foot three, six foot four. He weighed seventy-eight pounds. You can imagine why the bitterness was there, ya know. Guy by the name of Huey Long, not the Long from Louisiana, but. He had out--he was one of the guys that rigged MacArthur's escape boat. And he was very bitter cuz they could've taken another dozen guys; instead Mrs. MacArthur had some furniture she had acquired and she wanted that on the boat. So that's, ya know, they wound up in Cabanatuan camp. So I do was, met a lot of interesting people, ya know, that's something I probably would never do again, but I wouldn't take a million bucks for the experiences we had. Ah--cuz, like I say, we put on ninety thousand miles in eleven months. And ah--my best friend, ah--Bill Kennedy, his name, I'll be seeing him next Friday down in Texas. I hadn't seen him for fifty years. Ah--but he had bet me that time, he was just about to get out the Navy when the Korean War started and they froze him for a year. Moved him onto the *Comstock* and he had just gotten married two months before that, ya know. So when I met him, he was my bunk mate, he was bitter, ya know. He was bitter, but turned out that I worked for him the first few months till I took my own chief's [laughs]. Ah--when the Korean, we made me a bet that ah--he would be off that ship before I would. And I said, "No, no, no." Cuz my intent now that I was in the Navy again, was to still make a career of it. But I wanted to get back when we got back to the States, or somehow I was getting back here if I was alive. I was gonna go out to the east coast and go on the *USS Albany*. It was now touring Europe. It toured Europe for seventeen years, ya know. I mean a paid vacation, ya know. Ah--but I took a detour when I got home up to Chicago and Milwaukee, and the woman I'm married to now. We had a little tryst there and ah--that's another story, but ah--Bill bet me that he'd be off the ship first. I says, "I'll be off and you'll carry my sea bag." And he reminded me of that here back in, says,

"I lost a bet to you, had to carry your sea bag off." But ah--it--and he only knew of my--the one I'm married to now, her name is Rose. Ya know, we correspond ya know, and so all he ever knew was Rose. Well, back a couple years after we were all out, we had the reunion down in Kenosha, Wisconsin of our fire room group. And Bill came and he said, "I can't wait to meet Rose." "No, no, no, her name is Sharon," [laughs]. I was married to someone else, ya know, so this time when I found out there was *Comstock* reunion, I've been looking for years, ya know, they finally popped one up. And I said I gotta go, I gotta find, I trying to find Kennedy for years on the internet. But he got a common name and there must be ten thousand Kennedys in Texas with a wife Marilyn, ya know. Ah--so finally, he saw my inputs on the internet and his wife, his wife did, actually. So we made contact and I said, "Bill, you gotta get to that reunion." I said, "I'll meet you there, I gotta tell you the rest of the story." So he finally got to meet Rose [laughs]. Ah--but it was very interesting, we ah--it's a whole different culture.

See, another thing was, I think during the first time I was on a heavy cruiser, Cadillac. Going on the *Comstock* was going not to a Model A, to a Model T. We had all, there were two of 'em that were built alike cuz they were all basically built for a one way trip, ya know. Ours was built in 1944. Ah--some of 'em had, when I was on the *Albany*, we had six hundred pounds super heated steam, ya know, and high pressured turbines, nothing but state of the art at that time. Go on the *Comstock* a few years later and we got reciprocating pumps, pressurized fire rooms, if you understood what a pressurized fire room is, you got a compartment that the boiler's in, but a boiler has to have air, see. Well, in a pressurized boiler, you got a case around the boiler and the room is just a normal room. You can have a pressurized boiler right here. Not in the *Comstock*, you had to pressurize the room to keep the fire in the boiler. All there was, was a burner plate and then the fire, if you didn't have pressure, the fire came around and you were history. So that was another cultural shock [laughs]. Low pressure steam, we called it a teakettle at 250 pounds saturated. Ah--we had turbine engines, ya know. Our engine rooms were--the fire rooms were way down below the well deck.

Ah--one of the experiences that I had that was very scary, ah--I didn't like heights for years after that. If you look at that picture, you got the two stacks on what they call the island deck. Port and starboard boiler rooms are down below. Well, when you're not steaming both boilers, you put a stack cover over the other stack so you don't get the weather and that down in ya know, the moisture. So it was on this again was in the winter, and it was in February or March and it was a wild winter that year. Ah—it was my turn to go up and take the stack cover off for getting on the way in, fire up the court boiler. So there was a ladder up the front of the stack, and then there was a rail, a one inch conduit it's like a pipe, bent around for your feet to walk on, another one to hang onto where the ties were. So I crawled up the stack ya know, and like I say it's winter and I got the big arctics on ya know and the foul weather gear. And it's pitching and rolling and on and we had an empty well deck, when I say empty it was just a couple boats in it, but I mean it was a [unintelligible] dry. So if you fell off the stack that way, you were mustard, ya know. If you fell off

that way, you were drown, one or the other, ya know. So it was pretty precarious, cuz the island deck was only about as wide as this room, and ah--So I'm up there and I'm out on the outboard side about--almost around to the back curve. This, this stack was about twelve feet long and about six feet wide. And the ship takes a pitch and a roll to port, which was the water, and my foot slipped off the rail and I grabbed onto the other one cuz I was just untying one of the ties, ya know. And the other foot slides off, I let that, I let the tie go and grabbed the rail here and my feet, ya know, here's the stack and this is me hanging there. And I literally stopped breathing, I think, ya know. Until the ship took a roll back the other way and swung my feet back against the stack, I let the stack cover go, I got down there, I said, "I don't care what you gonna do, I'm not gonna go up there again today," [laughs]. And so the stack cover eventually blew off, ya know, [laughs]. Got the message on that, it was interesting.

Mik: How many people were on the *Comstock*? Ah--we had a compliment of about three hundred, average.

Vilas: Of which they were the same crew, people, were the same ones that ran the small boats. So when we were out sweeping, there probably was 220 on board and the rest were assigned to boats, ya know, and that was a rotating issue, yeah. There was three men to a boat. A rifleman, a engineer, and coxswain, the guy that drove the boat, ya know.

Mik: It was rotating in terms of everybody in the crew went out on those boats?

Vilas: Everybody in engineering, yeah, yeah.

Mik: So tell me about the minesweeping, how did that work? And how did you launch those? **[End of Tape WCKOR053]** *Tell me about the minesweeping. First thing I was wondering was* **[Start of Tape WCKOR054]** how'd you get those boats off of the--

Vilas: Ok, I'll explain the picture of the ship there. You got the boats you see on top, that's what you they call a mezzanine deck. Underneath that is the well deck. Actually, an LSD is a landing ship dock. It's literally a self-powered dry dock is what it amounts to. You got, the tailgate goes down. Tailgate is closed on that picture, you're steaming, you go into an area that you wanna sweep. This is always the precarious part, I mean you knew the minefields were there, your navigator had to kinda trust that poor instrumentation he had and his intuition, if you will to get us in there without hitting something. We would then literally sink the ship. They call it ballasting down. Open the tailgate, start pumping the tanks, the ship would go down. When it got down to ballast level, all those boats that were sitting there on pilings were floating. And you drove right out and did your sweeping, came back in, pumped, closed the gate, pumped her up and went on. That's how you did. Now the principle of the LSPs, LSPs, ah--not LSPs ah—LCVPs [landing craft personnel vehicle]. Doing the sweeping was cut down casually like I explained about the

Partridge, that was, at that time the smallest minesweepers. Well, you had thirty-three men, so casualties could be high. With an LCVP, if you lost a boat, you lost three people. If you lost two, you lost six. Traditionally swept in a row of three. They got paravans, that's nothing but a cable with a tank on the end to suspend it out there. It's like a big Y and the boat is pulling it and it had cable cutters on, spaced at different intervals. And the theory was that well, actually practicality, the cable hit a mine cable, it would close automatically and clip it. And the mine would then float to the surface. Theoretically, the second boat then would see that coming up and then the rifle men would try to detonate it. Ah--what happened, most casualties happen to the second boat when there were casualties. Cuz the mine didn't come up fast enough, the distance was just a little different and it came up under or very close to it. Ah--the third boat was usually the safest one. If it got by the first one, second one. First one, their problem was getting over the top of them, hoping that they were at a depth, ya know, and that's why LCVPs flat bottom at the surface. Ah--so that, that was the theory and it worked. I mean the problem was the other people putting in mines in all the time. Theoretical, ya know, you go in and sweep mines in Wonsan Harbor. You go sweep that whole harbor in two, three days, ya know. It was a big harbor, but you could do it in two, three days. And then you should theoretically have been able to move on to the next point of impact. But ah--that wasn't the case, all of sudden, my gosh, there's something would blow up, ya know a little boat going in and mines, mines! Start sweeping again, ya know, sure enough. That's what went on, so. Ah--we, we took our first Wonsan invasion, we took a bunch of people in, ah--engineers and signal men to go behind those, behind the enemy lines at the time to try to cut off the Koreans that were, the North Koreans to the south of there. Ah--that was a bad, in fact I got a picture in there about--you can see how the weather was. You couldn't really see much. The visibility was bad so ah--the mines took the biggest toll on that one. That's when we started our minesweeping operations after that. Prior to that, ah--this was the war--was in it's early stages and they just didn't think of anything like that. So it all came along later.

Mik: So the first boat that was pulling the cutters, did you feel that when it would hit a cable?

Vilas: Oh yeah, yeah. It would be like snagging something if you were out in a power boat, ya know. So you knew something, if it hit way out on the starboard cable, for instance, you'd hit the tub, ya know.

Mik: And how fast were you going?

Vilas: Oh, probably about ah--five knots, six miles an hour. You, you went pretty slow. So they went--other wise you went too fast, they'd slide down and made you miss the scissors completely. Just snap on over it, ya know.

Mik: And could the scissors actually detonate the mine?

- Vilas: No, they just cut the cable. Unless the mine was so low that, there were some magnetic mines that--they were not prevalent at, in that area. They had 'em in World War II already, but there weren't that many there. Ah—if it was a magnetic mine, yeah, they could've happened. Yeah.
- Mik: And you went out in those LCVPs?
- Vilas: Yeah, yeah.
- Mik: Was it nerve racking at all?
- Vilas: Well, at the time you didn't really think of it that way. It was just another job, ya know. I don't think any of us really thought how vulnerable we were. Until after when we were long gone, ya know [laughs]. Really, you just never gave it a thought. I remember one incident and, ya know, I never knew why it happened until this reunion. But Kennedy, my best friend he says, "Hey Mock," he says, "Remember that time four in the morning it was General Quarters, we had to get up and get under way, right away." I says, "Yeah, I vaguely remember," ya know. He says, "Remember we traveled about eight hundred feet, maybe a thousand feet and dropped the hook again. Shut down the boiler again. Yeah, we thought the skipper was nuts, ya know." "I remember that." He says, "Well, do you remember why we had to do that?" I think I says, normally I got a good memory, but I says, "No, not really. I remember I was so POd cuz I had just gotten in the sack and they had to roll out again and get back down there." He said, "Yeah, well, the intelligence had indicated to the Koreans that, that we were a cruiser. So they wanted to get that cruiser. In fact the bomber came over and bombed the place where we had just been. [Laughs] That was only eight hundred feet away from where we are now [laughs]. We were a sitting duck, ya know, we woke up at four in the morning, we'd a probably been history." Things like that, but you just never thought of it, ya know. It just, it was just another day of steaming. Most of the griping was because we never got back for a decent liberty.
- Mik: So that was need-to-know stuff, and you didn't need to know.
- Vilas: No [laughs]. See I had, one interesting thing is my friend, Donny Jagler, the guy that went in with me. He wound up in MacArthur's headquarters in a Dai-Ichi building, in Tokyo. So he, would always send me a note, ya know, on where our next mission was gonna be. And this, ya know, we never got to open our orders till we were out of the sub nets in Sasebo Harbor. And we, so I'm betting, "Where the hell we going this time," ya know. "Oh--I bet we're going to Chinnampo," ya know. "Chinnampo, ah--that's way up on the east side. You're nuts," ya know. "I got ten bucks says we are," ya know [laughs]. Nobody ever knew I getting a little, of course he could've got hung for, ya know, just breaking that kind of stuff too. But ah--there's some pictures in there of four of us up in Tokyo. Went, we got into ah--well, this was ten months later. Ah--we were going into Yokosuka for an overhaul. And that's when this whole druggy thing blew up, ya know. And they shipped us back to

the States, all of us. And ah--so we were out and having a good ball, ya know. And I said, "I'll take you guys up to meet my friend from home. He's in MacArthur's Headquarters." So--and mind you, this was the first actually liberty what you could call it we had in that whole year. Sasebo, we'd just go ashore, ya know, and do our thing for five, six hours n' let the other half go. So we're up in Tokyo, and having a few, ya know, n' ah--Donny let's it slip, ya know. He says, "Hey that was pretty good information I was sending you." The other guys said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I was telling you--." Oh--[laughs] they gave me a hard time [laughs].

Mik: They want their money back?

Vilas: But ah--I say, there were good times and bad times, ya know.

Mik: Did you have when you were out in the LCVPs, did you ever have what you considered a close call?

Vilas: No, I didn't, no, not personally. The closest call I had was when we were on the ship. Which is ah--like the bomb incident and going in, into the mine fields. Ah--one particular time, we had left Sasebo, we'd always have to get up before sun down. There was subnet across the harbor. And they'd open it in the morning and ships could go in and out during the day because they're under surveillance and close it at sun down. So we always had to wait to get in, do our thing, and get out, ya know, fast. Ah--our quartermaster's name was Tony, I can't--he was an Italian guy, I can't remember the last name anymore, but he was a career man. And he was chief warrant quarter master. Ah--he'd also been in the thirties, ya know, and all that stuff. But he was good, he would, his home place, he lived in Honolulu. Ah--and the skipper just relied on him. I mean that, he was the heart and soul of us getting through. And ah--we kept waiting, Tony wasn't back aboard, Tony wasn't back aboard, we gotta wait for Tony. And finally got the word, you get out now, to, the net's gonna be closed, ya know, and so. We get out, so we get outside the harbor a little ways and we'd idle her out to about three knots, ya know, just enough to keep from going backwards. And finally we were almost out of sight of land already and here comes a harbor boat with Tony on, ya know. Oh--you so glad to see him. That's the night we were all worried, cuz he wouldn't have made it aboard, we had to negotiate. There was a big mine field on the south of the peninsula that was always there, just moved, ya know. And he'd have to get us through that mine field. And uncanny how he could do it, but he would get us through it, ya know. And we'd go up to our station [laughs]. We ah--some years back there was a case, you probably remember when Hortonville where a house blew up and a guy blew himself up. He was one of the UDT men that we took ashore, put ashore up at ah--north of Wonsan almost up to Hungnam. And I, I didn't know him personally at the time, but many, many years later when I was at Weyerhaeuser, I was utilities manager. And we stopped, put in number six, number three, and number one boy. And here comes this guy from Bailey meter company, a service man, ya know, in a minute I saw him and, geez he just looked familiar, ya know. And his terminology and everything, I

knew he had to be in the Navy sometime or another so as we working together, he was there for about a week we were working together. And I said, "I know you were in the Navy." And we got to talking a little bit, experience, ya know finally he said, well, he was UDT. And I say, "Were you ever in Korea there?" "Yeah, oh sure." And I said, "Were you ever on the *Comstock*? Did you ever go up to--" and I can't think of the name of the place that was above Wonsan. "Yeah," he says, "I was on the *Comstock*." And I say, "Well, that's where I saw you. I knew I had seen you before." Anyway, we got to be good friends. I mean now we fast forward about ten years, he got shipped over to India and he was working on that place in Bhopal where they had that big cloud, ya know. And he just went ape over that. So it wasn't long after that I read in the paper, this guy blew himself up and over here at Hortonville. I turn it around, I saw the name, Reece Nelson, holy cripe. I wonder. So I call one of his buddies in the company, "Yeah, that's Reese," he said. "You know what he did?" He said he went down in the basement, opened up the gas line, sat on the toilet, and lit a cigarette, [laughs]. It finally got to him, ya know.

Mik: Demolition man.

Vilas: [Laughs].

Mik: Tell me about concerning people, UDT [underwater demolition team] and commandos.

Vilas: Ok, what we would do is go into the area ah--oh maybe stand off the beach about two miles at the most, load 'em into LCVPs with their equipment and run 'em in--usually, ah--very early before dawn or late at night. And run 'em in, drop 'em and get out. And then move on and get the big ship out so they, ya know. It ah--I often thought those guys had more guts than brains, really. And I think a lot of them were just the kind that liked it a little on the edge, ya know. And are tough. I could never have made it for that. I wasn't tough enough, I mean physically tough. Boy, when that boat came to pick them up. If they weren't there to grab that ring, they're history, ya know. There, everything depended on their watch.

Mik: And that was your LCVP officer who'd pick them up?

Vilas: Yeah, oh yeah, same boats.

Mik: And tell me about the ring, how did that work?

Vilas: Well, it was like a life ring. And ah--it would be dragged behind the boat and they were supposed to be at that station at that time, ya know. However they figure where that station was and the boat would make that sweep. Dragging the ring and the guy, he'd have his hand up in the air, have to grab it as they go. They'd slow down a little bit, ya know, have to grab it and they'd pull 'em on, on to the next one.

Mik: How many did they usually drop? Were you involved in those?

Vilas: No, no, never did. I just knew what they were doing and yeah, yeah.

Mik: So was it like just a few of 'em or?

Vilas: Usually a half a dozen or so at a clip. Yeah, it was small groups, yeah.

Mik: And some of those were British Commandos?

Vilas: No, those were the, the UDT guys were our guys. The British were Commandos. These were the guys that went behind and wrecked havoc and then tried to get out again. Hey, I'll tell you, I got a lot of respect for those British, British guys, I really do. Ah--it was interesting thing, in the British Navy, when you join the British Navy, you were in for twelve years. That's a long time. So these guys, by the time we met 'em, they'd already had many, many years under their belt cuz this is the Korean War already. They were in, ya know, before World War II. And ah--it--when we were in Sasebo, they had a ah--the USS, HMS Ladybird. Which was a recreational ship in the harbor there. So on one of our short turn arounds, we went over--a few of us went over to the Ladybird to some of the British guys that we had known. They said, "Come over by us," ya know. And ah--we talk to 'em, he said, "Hi, you're married." "Yeah, I'm, I'm a twelve year sea-man. We been married about eight years now," ya know. "Well, how does it work when you're gone so much?" "Well, gotta have a lot of trust," he said. That was the answer. But ah--they were brave guys. Got to say that.

Mik: You mentioned some incident about a bomb?

Vilas: Yeah, they bombed the position where we were that particular time. Yeah, yeah.

Mik: Did you ever take fire from shore?

Vilas: Not from shore, no, no.

Mik: From planes?

Vilas: If we did, planes, yeah. But they didn't have that kind of an Air Force either. That was few and far between. Ah--if we took fire from shore, I didn't know about it. It's possible if I was down below in the fire room or something, ya know. But we took, there was fire from shore when we made the invasions, but there nothing, nothing heavy artillery, ya know, small fifty caliber stuff like that.

Mik: How hard it is to detonate a mine with a rifle?

Vilas: If you're a marksman, it's hard. If you're not, it's almost impossible [laughs]. I, I can't hit that doorknob from here, ya know. I didn't have to go very often [laughs]. I

did my obligatory tour once or twice and then after that I was excused [laughs]. I, I am not good with a rifle, never was.

Mik: So what is it you aim at?

Vilas: Pardon?

Mik: What do you aim at?

Vilas: Oh, the pongs. They're like spikes and they got a knob on the top.

Mik: And all you have to do is hit that knob?

Vilas: Cheekaboom! Yeah, yeah.

Mik: Now you mentioned that you found out that the *Comstock* had received three Presidential Citations.

Vilas: Three Unit Citations, yeah.

Mik: And what were the other two for?

Vilas: Ah--well, they all had to do with, that one was the Chinnampo thing, one was Wonsan, and ah--I'm not even sure what the other one is now. I got 'em written down there somewhere.

Mik: Just for clearing mines?

Vilas: Yeah, clearing mines and well, destroying that ammunition dump was one of 'em [laughs]. Captain got the Silver Star [laughs].

Mik: For bad aim.

Vilas: [Laughs] yeah, yeah. But ah--well, I'm trying to think of any other experiences that we had that were not just routine. Most of the stuff was routine.

Mik: When you were at Inchon, first time you sailed on the *Comstock*, right?

Vilas: Yeah, well, it's the first time I even heard of the word Inchon [laughs]. It was funny, because the first shock we got was, you got fifty bucks and liberty till midnight, ya know. And the next thing General Quarters at four in the morning two days later and ah--bombers were over, ya know, planes and. I said, "Where the hell are we?" Somebody says, "Inchon." I said, "Where's Inchon," [laughs]. Six weeks ago I never heard of the place, I was working in a paper mill [laughs]. It was interesting.

Mik: And that was the invasion?

Vilas: Yeah.

Mik: So did you see--were you were up on?

Vilas: I was not up close, I was on the five inch gun at that time. When I first went aboard, I got assignment as second loader on the five inch gun. Second loaders, the guy that hands the shell to the guy that sticks it in the barrel. We had a young guy from Mississippi ah--he was a recruit, ya know, just come outta boot camp and he was hot shell man. And when we were going through our drills, ya know, he told you how to do, you gotta catch that hot shell. You had the asbestos gloves up the air and then throw it over the gun tub. Make sure you don't hit anybody, you throw it the other way. And he's all eyes roll big and he says, "I ain't gonna catch it. Ain't gonna get me to do that," ya know. And the gunner was an old time Navy guy too. And he says, "I'll tell you, you--blankity, blankity, blank." He said, "You catch that shell, and you throw it, if you don't catch it or you hit somebody, I'll tell you, you're going right over the side," [laughs]. But ah--it--well, I didn't relish the fact, we knew it, I've never been on a gun, ya know. I was an engineer, machinist, ya know. And fact of the matter is, only getting under way that first morning. Ah--I couldn't even find a bunk hall, all I found was a rack, ya know, with no canvas in it, threw my sea bag in it and went ashore. When I came back, that's the place I went to and I just pushed the sea bag over, laid down and went to sleep, ya know. And it seem like I just shut my eyes and a guy shaking me he says, "Your name Machmueller?" "Yeah, I'm Machmueller." He got a flash light and he says, you got the port watch, port fire room. Port fire, I said, "I'm not a fireman, I'm a machinist." He says, "Your name Machmueller?" "Yup." "You got the port fire room lighting watch, better get on down there right now." And I said, "I don't even know where the fire room is," ya know. He said, "Well, you follow this guy up on the second rack, he's going down there. He's getting ready right now." And he turned out to be my buddy Kennedy later on, cuz I got a rack the next day. And ah--he had a--I would've never found otherwise. Cuz our compartment was way up on the--folks were right under the five inch gun. So we had to go down two decks to a passage way and then go out of the super structure, on to this island deck, and right by the stack, there was a hatch, you had to go down that hatch into the next level and then you had an airlock to get, you had to go through an airlock to get into the pressurized fire room. And then once you got in the airlock through there on the platform, then you went down three more landings to the firing floor. So, I followed Kennedy, 'n all, found my way down there and the chief, his name was Drake. He's a career man too. He had one of these big handle bars, ya know, and he's, he was always stroking his mustache and he stand there, "Your name Machmueller?" "Yup." I said, "Chief, there's some mistake." I said, "I'm not a fireman, ya know, I'm a machinist." "Well," he said, "You're a fireman now and you got the lighting off watch." I said, "I have no idea what a fireman does." Actually I, in engineering school, we went through a week or two of that stuff, ya know, but that was years ago. And he says, "Well, in about fifteen minutes, you'll know all you have to know about firing the boiler," [laughs] he says, "Grab that burner," [laughs]. That was it. So I became a fireman.

- Mik: And did you do that the whole year?
- Vilas: Yeah, yeah. Well, in a few weeks I was running the watch, my own watch even though I didn't have the rank for it. But ah—if you could handle the job, well, you know, I was always mechanically inclined so it didn't take me long to catch on. Actually, I had more fear of the boiler than I did of whatever else we were doing because if somebody opened that airlock by mistake, you're toast, ya know. Or if you had a fast bell, a quick change, like an emergency astern, which happened occasionally. Ah--the fire a lot of times you'd just lean up against that fire plate because the fire come out around you a little ways until the blower could catch up cuz the blower was not instantaneous, ya know. And normally, when you'd increase the speed, you'd always, you had your air, air pressure gauge and you'd watch and keep that at five inches of air and you didn't fire into the next burner until you had that five inches back. But that blower catch up, but when you had an emergency stop in the stern, there was no way, you know. First of all, the blower had to start running down and by the time you were turning it around again the fire was behind your shoulders, ya know. Hot fire [laughs].
- Mik: Wow! Did that continue to be your GQ [general quarters], you went to the five inch gun?
- Vilas: No, after about ah--two months my GQ station, after I took over the fire room, and then shortly after that my GQ station was manning the fire room. Yeah, port fire room.
- Mik: But you were up on the five inch gun?
- Vilas: Yeah.
- Mik: Before Inchon?
- Vilas: Yeah.
- Mik: So what did the fleet look like? Could you see that?
- Vilas: Oh, it was just, yeah it was mammoth. I mean there were, every place you looked there was ships, capital ships, landing ships, LS, a lot of LSTs. Yeah.
- Mik: Well, that must have been pretty impressive?
- Vilas: Yeah, it was, it was, yeah. I didn't realize it at the time, but I'm sure it went through all of our minds, we were making history or something, ya know. But I was just in my element, I was back at sea again. I just like the Navy. Why? I never, well, I know why, ya know, you get detoured when there's females and--[laughs]. But you're young, ya know.

Mik: So when you said other than those few incidents, you couldn't think of anything that wasn't routine. What was the routine?

Vilas: Routine was ah--of course being in the fire room ah--you had your watch. Four on, eight off, normally, if you were in General Quarters, it was four and four. Ah--so routine for us guys was if you had say the four to eight watch, ah--you got up at three-fifteen in the morning, relieve your watch at quarter to four. Ah--the eight to twelve would come down and relieve you for breakfast, half-hour. And then you'd go back, finish your watch till they came down, then you had the ah--the next eight hours if you were underway, which is what we were. Good share at the time. You just did maintenance that didn't interfere with the operation, in the fire room area. If you were ballasted down, it was sometimes, we'd sit for a week at time in Wonsan Harbor for instance, while the small boats were plying all the time, then we'd go down just like going to a job at the mill, ya know. You'd get up in the morning, go down one fire room would keep the fires lit, the other one would be down. Well, if your fire room was down, you'd paint, spray paint overhaul the equipment, ya know. Nothing that you couldn't get up and running in about, no more than two hours. Cuz you could, we could get by up to about eight knots with one fire room. Beyond that we had to have the rest of 'em--the other two.

Mik: So you can only do things that you did in a couple hours, you could batten down and--

Vilas: Yeah, yeah. We had one interesting experience in Sasebo, in a repair ship. Ah--we got a new ensign on board. He had just graduated from Sheepshead Bay, the Merchant Marine engineering school. Name was Cockran, young guy, twenty-one—twenty two years old. Came aboard and he got the third watch, which happened to be my watch on down in the fire room, so I was in the port fire room. And our fuel oil serv--all the pumps were reciprocating pumps. Ah--our fuel oil service pump, which is the key to keeping the boiler going, was a good one. The starboard fire room had a pump that needed a valve job, there were sliding valves on the separating pump. And we all knew that, I mean that one every so often would fail, they'd have to over tap the tappets, ya know, get it going. So we were getting into Sasebo on one of the trips, and I forget which one, but ah--we were gonna be in there the whole day. So we made plans, the Kermit Roosevelt was a repair ship, floating machine shop was in there. We made arrangements that we would take the fuel oil pump over there and have them reface the valve facing. So ah--we get in, aim for the harbor and Ed Cockran comes down, he says, "Pull the fires in the port fire room. We're taking the pump out the one from the Kermit Roosevelt." I said, "No, no, no." I said, "We're on line here, we're stand by. It's the starboard pump, starboard boiler goes down, we take that one over." "No, it's your fuel pump." I said, "There's nothing wrong with ours, it's the starboard one, believe me Mr. Cockren." You're always suppose to Mr. Mr. Mr. You felt like saying something else. And but he was authoritative, ya know. "Ok." So he pulled the fires, starboard went on, in port steaming and ah--Bill Kennedy and I, my best friend, we--

he was mumbling all the time, he was so bitter about being pulled yet just after he got married, ya know. Being out there. And I chide him on a little bit. Bill was a good guy, but he wasn't much of a mechanic, ya know. He, so and I'd be a mechanic sometimes and I'll just tell him what to do and I worked with him. So we get the pump out in the LCVP and go head for the Kermit Roosevelt. When we were about half mile away from the ship, we had about a mile to go across the harbor and we look back and all of a sudden, black smoke is pouring out of the starboard stack, ya know, I mean black smoke. And I said, "Guess what happened Kennedy?" He said the pump crapped out and I bet you they're running the handy billy. And you can't keep enough to keep a clean stack then, ya know. And I say, "I bet you're right." He said, "Maybe we ought to go back." I said, "Bull, this one's going to the Kermit Roosevelt." "Oh--I don't know." And he was second class, he was rated, ya know. "I don't know," he said, "Maybe we better go back." "No no no, we're going to the Kermit Roosevelt." We spent most of the day watching them do our machine work and went back when they come back--two guys were alternating every half-hour on the handy billy keeping the fires going. And I'll tell you, the crap hit the fan then, but we went out and that pump never get overhauled for another two, three trips, ya know. But the guy that was, one of the guys on the handy billy, his name was Gene Sylvain. I saw him in Branson, first time I've seen him since we got back to the States. His father, they come from Maine. And as we pulled into Long Beach, I had a thirty day leave I was gonna start on. And Sylvane's father was caught in a mine accident, he's a miner. And they asked if I would let him go first and I could go ten days later. I said, "Absolutely, go." Last time I ever saw him. And till that last reunion, we got talking about that incident, he says, "Yeah, I remember," he says, "You remember?" He said, "Every half-hour I was on that handy billy." He said, "We were cussing you and Kennedy out like you wouldn't believe," [laughs]. But it taught the other guy a lesson, ya know. Sometimes the guys that work on the stuff know a little bit more about it.

Mik: I'd take that to be a lesson you learn pretty early on.

Vilas: Yeah. I, in my experience ah--over the years, and I had a lot of 'em. I, industry too. I've always learned that the guy that does the actual work is the guy you want to kinda listen to.

Mik: When you said you lost a few people, was that always in a minesweep?

Vilas: Yeah, yeah. That was the only time we had casualties.

Mik: How many of those of you LCVPs did you lose?

Vilas: Ah--I don't think we lost more than two LCVPs. The biggest casualty bunch was the, was the *Partridge*. But that was our group too.

Mik: And when you went on the LCVP, it was always as rifle men?

Vilas: Yeah.

Mik: That's why—

Vilas: That's why they didn't, I didn't go very often [laughs].

Mik: Now you weren't missing on purpose were you?

Vilas: [Laughs] no, I can't hit nothing [laughs]. I still can't [laughs]. No, I, when I first, it was kinda thrilling the first time I thought, "Hey this is okay." But I am not good with a gun. Shot gun, maybe [laughs], close range. But ah--it was interesting.

Mik: So did you ever--? **[End of WCKOR054]** You said you were, they made you a fireman?

Vilas: Yeah.

Mik: But you were a machinist?

Vilas: Yeah.

Mik: What would your job have been if you hadn't been a fireman?

Vilas: I'd most likely been would have been in the engine room, operating turbines and doing the repair on turbines. I was a machinist mate which did some machine work, like in a machine shop, but basically I was a turbine man and turbine pumps.

Mik: So instead of keeping the power going, you would have kept the engine maintained.

Vilas: Yep. Exactly, and the transmission.

Mik: What did Korea look like from sea?

Vilas: Mountainous. [Laugh] Right from the shore it goes up you know. It almost looked like Malibu, Malibu and south California. Where they film, if you ever watch the M*A*S*H series on TV, that is--that's California, but that's the way the Korean coast looked. You'll see that on a lot of these pictures that I've got there.

Mik: And did, could you tell by looking at the coast where you were, north or south, east or west?

Vilas: Nah. All looked the same, yeah.

Mik: Now we've heard some things about the, the quality of the water around Korea, people talk about it being brown or--

- Vilas: I can't say that. All I remember it was so damn cold all that winter it was blue [laugh]. I really can't a--never thought about that. On a cloudy day it was brackish, yeah. But on a nice day, cold day it was blue.
- Mik: Just like a coast anywhere, isn't it?
- Vilas: I never thought about that. Maybe when you got real in the beach 100 ft., or something like that, but I--you know never thought about the deep water. It's all black when you get further on down [laugh].
- Mik: And was the *Comstock* usually traveling alone?
- Vilas: Yeah. Mhh hm.
- Mik: You're going up and down, an all around--
- Vilas: Yep, yep. Like the sweeper, you know [laugh]. Clean up.
- Mik: What was the mess like? Or where you took shower, where you ate?
- Vilas: Oh, oh the, okay. Our mess hall, half of it was on the port side, half on the starboard side, the galley was right in between it and I would say our eating space on each one, probably was the width of this room here and maybe about this far here. Two spaces like that. It was right behind our compartment so for us it was just around the corner to the next hatch, you know. But there, there wasn't much space on a LSD. It was mostly engineering and work spacing.
- Mik: And did you eat three meals a day?
- Vilas: Oh yeah.
- Mik: Good food, hot food?
- Vilas: Well the food was good. You know you hear, I gotta--digress here a moment. You heard a lot about the 'five and one' C-rations during the Korean War. We thought they were great, see we'd have to haul those out to supplies too. Now here was our stack and the crane was right behind it, see? You'd bring the stuff in, to load it on the boats to go. Our hatch was right here, so every so often a couple cases dropped down our hatch and we had our own little storage area there for the five and ones, you know. Which actually was darn good food. I suppose it wasn't good if you were sitting on the beach and that, in a fox hole, but for us it was sometimes better than the stuff we had. We had a pretty good stash there. We ate well--all the time.
- Mik: How big a part of your job was hauling supplies?

- Vilas: Oh, just a, well, as far as, total cruising time, I would say a--thirty percent--yeah, thirty, maybe forty.
- Mik: And that was picking them up from--
- Vilas: From Sasebo and taking them out to where, whatever ship, you know. Yeah.
- Mik: So you were hauling supplies for the ship, but not for docking or on land?
- Vilas: Well, yeah, for when these commandos, UDT guys, that was all stuff we supplied for them, yeah.
- Mik: And did you ever have an opportunity to spend much time with the commandos?
- Vilas: To talk with them while we were on route, yeah, mhh hmm, yeah. Interesting people.
- Mik: And you weren't interested in changing places with them?
- Vilas: Not at all [laugh]. I think that is why I always did like the Navy, usually had a clean bunk, shower and good food [laugh].
- Mik: So you're on, you're on the *Comstock*, you're going to stay there, you're taking these guys in, who are going on these really, pretty dangerous missions--
- Vilas: Yeah.
- Mik: What, what do you talk about?
- Vilas: Well, you don't say too much about those guys, about the mission, but amongst yourself, after they left you say, "Boy I wonder, hope they're gonna get back, wonder how they're doing, you know?" And of course we never did see most of them again because they went, came out someplace else. Sometimes we had a group we took in, picked up again. Sometimes some where missing, you know, but that was the nature of their job. No I would, that would not be for me. Again physically [laugh] I am not a physical person [laugh] they'd kill me on foot before anything else [laugh].
- Mik: Well you were physically enough to hang on to that smoke stack.
- Vilas: That was fear [laugh]. That was fear, I will never forget that as long as I live. Never.
- Mik: You tend to remember things like that.
- Vilas: Oh, yeah, yeah.

- Mik: When you think you might be a goner.
- Vilas: You know and when you think about it, if I had fallen in the water, I probably never would have known what hit me 'cause you know it was 28, 30 below, cold, cold, cold. You would hope that the numbness would get you before you knew what was happening. But if you went the other way, splat, you know. There you could live, but would you want to [laugh]?
- Mik: So spending that much time in the fire room it probably felt really cold to you when you were out on deck.
- Vilas: Well, ah not really. Remember now, this was a pressurized fire room, you're pulling air right in from outside. When it was hot outside it was hotter down there, when it was cold outside it was cold down there. The fire was in the box, you were in that cold blower air coming right at you. We would wear foul weather gear down in the fire room, when it was February, March that year.
- Mik: What do you think the temperature got down to in the fire room?
- Vilas: Damn close to freezing. Damn close to it.
- Mik: And you'd be in there for eight hours?
- Vilas: About four, four on and eight off, and four back again. Unless we were in a moving operation, sweeping you know moving to get from here, to here, to here, then it was four and four. Because you had, boat crews were not in the circuit at that time.
- Mik: So you had three crews, that's where the four and the four, four and then when they'd be--
- Vilas: Yep. Yep. And on four and four after a few days it starts to get you ready. Sometimes we were on four and four for like a week at a time. You get pretty darned burned out by the end of that. Crabby, you know.
- Mik: You'd only recover with a couple hours.
- Vilas: There was a guy that, just across my bunk isle and he had a portal but he'd been in the Navy in the thirties too, his name was Minzer, and he was actually on the borderline of wacko, you know. But he played the mandolin and the guitar and hour after hour after hour you'd hear the Golden Eagle, dadada, dadada [laugh] he'd just rattle that thing on, walk up and down the isle [laugh]. Well when we got back to the States he went out and bought a brand new Pontiac, '51 Pontiac, four-door. And he got jagged up that night and he didn't--something he wasn't happy with the car so we were in dry dock at the time, right along side, of course the end of the dry dock is San Pedro Harbor. And we could all park on the pier, you know. And he come in

about 11'oclock at night and he's swearing down there but, what's going on? Jumps in the car, starts it up again, you know, puts her in drive jumped out, let her go to the end of the pier into the water. He was mad at the car [laugh]. Then he had to pay to get it taken out, yeah. Ahhh, never forget that guy. But I was going to say before, before we change the tapes, ah they were on the soil. I wasn't, but some guys were, I was at Pusan just a short time, but the second trip to Inchon, we were anchored there for about three--four days, and some of the guys in the motor pool went up the Han River to Seoul, and Seoul was in total ruins at that time. They had gone up, now this is second hand from me because I wasn't on the boats, three--four boats went up there, actually they were taking some supplies in for some merchant people. And they came back and that's when the Turks had just gone through there. And what they witness, when the Turks go through something, it's done. Completely. You never heard anything about all that stuff, but just recently, I think it was some WWII guys who were talking about it, I forget. Rose and I were listening to the History channel I think, and somebody talked about they were with the Turkish--it was the Korean War, it was guys that were in the Army they were talking about it. And they say, the Turks--They confirmed everything that Carl Eaton and a couple of the guys told us. You never heard anything about that over the years. Butchery took place then too.

Mik: Where you aware what was going on, on land, the course of the war, what was happening?

Vilas: Yeah, yeah, pretty much so.

Mik: How would that news come to you?

Vilas: Ah. They would come right over the Navy communications, Stars & Stripes, AFRS [Armed Forces Radio]. Yeah. We, we were pretty well up on it.

Mik: So you were there, while, when they were making the push all the way up to the Yalu River?

Vilas: Oh yeah, MacArthur told us we'd all be home for Christmas. And of course then Truman fired him. History has proven that had they let MacArthur go, you'd of never had the Cold War and all that stuff and the war wouldn't have lasted that long because China was not prepared, nor Russia to come in, in major force. Russia definitely not, everybody was afraid of Russia at the time mostly you know. Chinese were all volunteers that came. They were, they were something else. I am glad that I wasn't on land, let's put it that way. I respect a lot of these guys- I know a lot of them that are in that book there, that went on the same time I did, but they went into the Marines or the land fighters you know and--they had some harrowing experiences those that came back. Harvey Cooper, he was one of the Chosin survivors, Chosin Reservoir, ya know. Yeah, but we knew what was going on. We took part in some of the evacuations when we were pulling them out. Inchon, yeah it was Christmas, that's when we pulled a bunch of them out of Inchon. 'Cause the

Chinese had just come like swarms, you know this was about, oh maybe two months before we went up to Chinnanipo, and they were over there too. But ah, they talk about bacteriological warfare--that happened! That happened. Our fleet pulling people out, the whole damn fleet had contaminated water, and nobody could figure it out until some scientist somewhere pointed out that they were using bacterial warfare. Now that never came out publicly either. I firmly believe it. Because the *Comstock*, that's a time when Bill Kennedy and I, not only stood four and four, we were eight and four. Eight on, four hours off, and back on. There were so many people down sick, I mean you would not believe how sick they were. I'll never forget that.

Mik: What kind of condition were those people in when you would pull them out?

Vilas: Ahh. Worn out, tired, mostly. Ready for R&R [laugh]--badly.

Mik: They were probably pretty relieved to be on your--

Vilas: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yep.

Mik: Thank you.

Vilas: Yeah okay.

[End of Interview]