

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Charlie May
Navigator, Navy, World War II
2002

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May, Charlie (b. 1923). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User: 1 audio cassettes (ca. 53 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master: 1 video recording (ca. 77 min.); ½ inch, color.

Abstract:

Charlie May, a resident of Madison and native of Morley (Missouri), was waiting on his ship to be ferried to church services aboard the USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) on December 7th, 1941 when Japanese warplanes attacked a portion of the Pacific fleet and other installations; he recounts his activities that fateful day as well as discusses his World War II service as a yeoman aboard the USS *Phoenix*, US Navy, Seventh Fleet. May covers his training as a clerk typist, his postwar education and career, attendance at ship crew reunions and membership in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, and the fate of the *Phoenix*. May enlisted in January 1941 and chose service in the US Navy due to paternal heritage and a desire to “see the world.” Upon completion of basic training at Great Lakes Training Center in Waukegan (Illinois) he sailed by troop transport from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor. Moored behind USS *Nevada* and the rest of Battleship Row May manned a .50 caliber machine gun on light cruiser *Phoenix* when the call-to-arms sounded. He outlines the counterattack that the cruisers and destroyers mounted on the attacking planes and the ensuing search for the Japanese fleet, the post-attack escort of hospital ships, and convoying the troopship carrying the 32nd Division to Australia. Beyond convoy duty, *Phoenix*’s main task, as May relates, was to bombard islands, as at Guadalcanal, preparatory to the landing of US Marines. He shares an observation of General Douglas MacArthur. In 1943, his ship’s guns are refitted at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, rendering his weapon expertise obsolete, and he became a telephone operator at his old battle station aboard ship until late September 1944. May states that upon completion of a shorthand course stateside and attainment of the rank of yeoman second class he expected to return to his ship; instead he was asked to stay in San Diego as an instructor and teach the “Navy way of filing and typing.” He was discharged in 1946. He comments on his return to his wife in Missouri, his education, and his careers as a high school teacher and in the insurance industry. May reflects that membership in the local chapter of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association has led him to reconnect with old shipmates.

Biographical Sketch:

May (b. 1923) served on the light cruiser USS *Phoenix* in World War II. Stationed aboard ship at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, his service included convoying ships in the Pacific and pre-invasion coastal bombardments. He was discharged in 1946.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002
Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2012
Edited by Channing Welch, 2014
Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2015

Interview Transcript

McIntosh: Talking to Charlie May, and it's the 2nd of January in the year 2002. Where were you born, sir?

May: I was born in Morley, Missouri.

McIntosh: And that was in what year?

May: That was in 1923.

McIntosh: I was born then. [May laughs]. Very good, and what were you doing in 1940?

May: I was in high school.

McIntosh: School? Right. In Missouri?

May: Yes.

McIntosh: I see, and then you joined the military. When was that?

May: In January of 1941.

McIntosh: Where you drafted?

May: No, I volunteered.

McIntosh: What service did you volunteer in?

May: The US Navy.

McIntosh: And what prompted this, the fear of being drafted, you thought you'd pick your service, or what?

May: Well, I preferred the Navy mainly because my father had served in the Navy in World War I suppose, but also I was anxious to see the world.

McIntosh: Ah, and get out of Missouri.

May: Right [laughs].

McIntosh: Find out what the rest of the world—

May: Right [laughs].

McIntosh: Did your parents approve of that?

May: Yes, they did.

McIntosh: Did you have brothers that left for service early or not?

May: Not early, I had a brother who joined right after Pearl Harbor.

McIntosh: Your younger brother then?

May: Older brother.

McIntosh: Older brother. Okay, and so when you joined the Navy, where did they send you?

May: They sent me to Great Lakes Training Center [Waukegan, IL]..

McIntosh: You finished your boot training there, and then what, they turned you into what specialist?

May: Well, they didn't really turn me into a specialist. I was just a seaman.

McIntosh: And where did they send you as an ordinary seaman?

May: [laughs] Well, they sent me across the country to catch the USS *Henderson*, a troop transport, and I was transported to Pearl Harbor.

McIntosh: You went from Washington or from San Diego?

May: I went from San Francisco.

McIntosh: You picked up your transport there?

May: Yes, at Mare Island, uh-huh.

McIntosh: You were stationed on that ship?

May: The USS *Phoenix*.

McIntosh: The *Phoenix*.

May: A light cruiser.

McIntosh: What was the number of that?

May: That was CL-46.

McIntosh: And then you picked that up in Honolulu?

May: No, in Pearl Harbor.

McIntosh: In Pearl.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, Oahu.

McIntosh: Now, what kind of a world did you enter? Was that one that was very strange, one that's different, or how did you react to that?

May: Well it was quite different—

McIntosh: I'm sure [May laughs].

May: But I think I adjusted pretty well.

McIntosh: You were just an ordinary seaman at that time?

May: Yes, I was for the first, oh I don't know, month or so, and then they needed yeomen, and I had taken both shorthand and typing in high school so I was put into the Executive Office, training as a yeoman.

McIntosh: They taught you how to type?

May: Well, I knew how to type.

McIntosh: Ah, okay. So you became a clerk—

May: Right, a yeoman.

McIntosh: Aboard the *Phoenix*.

May: Uh-huh.

McIntosh: Was that tough work, or was it easy?

May: That wasn't tough work, no [laughs].

McIntosh: Did you enjoy the food in those days?

May: Not particularly [laughs].

McIntosh: Right. Well, you must have good liberty—

May: Had plenty of food.

McIntosh: Yes, I understand. It wasn't—

May: It wasn't like home cooking.

McIntosh: I believe it. Your liberty in Honolulu at that time probably was pretty good.

May: Well, it was kind of overcrowded with sailors, and you didn't see too many civilians when we'd go ashore, but it was some beautiful country.

McIntosh: Sure. So—and this is what you were doing when December 7th rolled around?

May: Yes, well, when the attack started I was standing by the gangplank of the USS *Phoenix* waiting for a motor launch to come along to take me to the USS *Arizona* for Protestant church services because we had only a Catholic chaplain aboard the *Phoenix*.

McIntosh: Were you tied up at Ford Island on one side? Or were you out into the—

May: No, we were moored behind Battleship Row [the grouping of eight US battleships in port at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked]. The direction I think they say was northwest.

McIntosh: I see. What were you behind? You recall what ship?

May: Well, the closest one to us would have been I suppose the *Nevada*. I believe that's right.

McIntosh: I'm trying to put those in positions. Anyway, you were going to take the motor launch over to the *Arizona* for church services.

May: Right, uh-huh.

McIntosh: So that was about a quarter to eight then?

May: That's right.

McIntosh: Then what happened?

May: Well, while we were standing there we noticed the planes coming in which we first naturally took as being our own planes and that it was training. We even thought it was training when they started diving on the battleships. But when they started releasing the torpedoes it started

becoming evident that it was something else. We noticed the Rising Sun emblem on the planes, and then we knew that it was the Japanese. So about that time, why, the General Quarters [or Battle Stations—announcements made aboard a naval warship for the crew to prepare for battle or imminent damage] sounded, and everyone went to their battle stations.

McIntosh: And where was your battle station?

May: My battle station was a loader—gunner and loader, alternate gunner and loader on the .50 caliber machine gun, and what is called Bat 2 aboard ship. That really is the secondary control for the ship in case the bridge would get blown away. The executive officer, the second in command of the ship, also has a battle station in Bat 2.

McIntosh: How many machine guns in that battery?

May: Well, there was only one right where we were, but on the other—

McIntosh: A dual or a quad or a—

May: No, it was just one machine gun.

McIntosh: One?

May: Uh-huh.

McIntosh: Oh my goodness.

May: And then right across the beam there was another one, and there were—I believe it was eight .50 caliber machine guns on the ship, and there were also eight 5 inch antiaircraft guns.

McIntosh: That was the biggest your ship had? Was 5 inches enough to—

May: No, no. No, we had— in the turrets we had 6 inch.

McIntosh: Right.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, and we had a total of fifteen guns in the turrets, in five different turrets.

McIntosh: So did you find something to shoot at?

May: Yes, we did [laughs].

McIntosh: They were coming close to your ship?

May: Actually they were coming more over our ship because their main purpose was very evident. It would be the battleships. They would come over a nest of destroyers that was behind us and then over us, and then they would go in to drop their torpedoes.

McIntosh: So you started shooting up in the air at these things?

May: Oh yes, uh-huh.

McIntosh: How'd that go?

May: Well, it went fine. Well, with the .50 caliber machine gun every third bullet is a tracer, and so you can adjust your fire. It's pretty easy; you don't have to depend on sights.

McIntosh: Right, so did you hit anything?

May: Well, when I was loading a guy by the name of Wolf definitely hit a plane, but I also think it was also hit by some of the destroyers that it was going over as well.

McIntosh: Sure, everybody was shooting.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, everybody except there wasn't too much shooting from the battleships because they were put out of commission real soon.

McIntosh: So this went on for a while, and then all of a sudden they disappeared before they came back a second time. What did you do in that interval?

May: We were just waiting to see what would happen. We remained at our battle stations all the time.

McIntosh: You didn't move the ship?

May: Yes, they started getting underway even while the first wave came in, and then we were ordered not to sortie, not to leave, and we went back to the very spot where we were and moored again. Well, the first one lasted about forty-five minutes, something like that, and then there was a lull of maybe fifteen minutes until the next one started. It was over by, oh, a little bit after 12:00, I guess.

McIntosh: So was the second attack about the same as the first, or was it different??

May: Well, the second was more the high level bombers instead of the torpedo planes.

McIntosh: That's what other people have said, was the dive bombers then were hot on 'em.

May: Right, uh-huh, yeah.

McIntosh: And did you do anything differently, or did you stay at your station?

May: I just had to stay at my station, right.

McIntosh: Didn't eat?

May: No, no, unh-uh.

McIntosh: And everybody was all dressed up by that time.

May: Well, I don't even remember whether--I think I would have had on my whites [laughs].

McIntosh: Sure, if you were going to church.

May: Yeah, and—

McIntosh: Came on Sunday and—

May: Yeah, and I kept my whites on, of course.

McIntosh: Of course. Your ship wasn't damaged at all?

May: My ship went through the attack without any damage whatsoever and no casualties aboard our ship.

McIntosh: Did you take men aboard from other ships?

May: Well, we did before we—no, not during the attack, of course, but after we had gone to sea there was the USS *Phoenix*, the USS *Detroit*, and let's see, what was the other one? USS *Honolulu* I believe it was. No, wait a minute. Well, anyway it was another cruiser, three cruisers and several destroyers went to sea. And some other ships too, like I think there was a couple of aircraft carriers that were coming back to port that eventually joined us, and we spent three days looking for the fleet. Of course, they were already gone, and we were lookin' in the wrong area at first. So we never saw them and probably a good thing we didn't 'cause we would have been outmanned then.

McIntosh: So you are out looking for several days?

May: Yes.

McIntosh: Then returned to Pearl?

May: Returned to Pearl Harbor, and there some of our crew manned boats and took bodies that were recovered from even underwater, and the boat took them over to Aiea, a Naval landing, and they were piled up there. And of course, they eventually ended up in the Punchbowl [Crater, home of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific].

McIntosh: So how long did your ship stay in Hawaii?

May: Well, in Pearl Harbor we were only there for about I think a couple of days, and then we escorted a hospital ship from Pearl Harbor back to Mare Island, San Francisco, and we got in there about, oh, I guess it was late one day, and no one got to go ashore. And we took on supplies all night, and then we headed back to Pearl Harbor again.

McIntosh: When was your first contact with your folks at home?

May: Well, I couldn't contact them at that time, and even though I had written a letter to them on the way back to San Francisco, an E-mail—

McIntosh: V-Mail.

May: Yeah, it wasn't mailed, and I understand the reason it wasn't they didn't want to leave off mail because that could disclose the location of our ship.

McIntosh: I see.

May: So we went back to Pearl Harbor, and then we picked up another hospital ship, the USS Sylvus [*Solace?*] and escorted it to back to the same place, to Mare Island. Then at that point we did get to go ashore, and I visited an aunt of mine down in—

McIntosh: Make a phone call home?

May: Tried to, but I didn't really able to make the call until after I was with my aunt in Atascadero, California. And then we came back to the ship, and we headed out escorting and convoying a troopship to Melbourne, Australia.

McIntosh: The 32nd Division.

May: I don't know what the one it was.

McIntosh: Sure, the Wisconsin 32nd Division.

May: Was it? I didn't know that.

McIntosh: That was the first division taken overseas. They spent more time overseas than any other division.

May: Is that right? I can believe that because they certainly were about the first ones that we sent over. But we left them off in Melbourne, Australia, and then from Melbourne we went around to the west side of Australia to Perth, Australia, the port there is Fremantle, and we operated out of there for really several months.

McIntosh: Did you operate in a group in a task group or individually?

May: Not at that time, it was individually.

McIntosh: Your duty involved what?

May: Well, we would leave Fremantle, and we would go about half way to India and meet another escort—convoyed ships with troops on them. They really were mostly Australian soldiers who were being evacuated from India and brought home. We would take over the convoy then, and the other ships would go back to India, that this convoy, and we would bring them back to Fremantle.

McIntosh: But you were the only cruiser in that group?

May: Yes, uh-huh.

McIntosh: I don't see that you could offer them much protection. You can only be on one side of that convoy at one time.

May: That's correct. That's right, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Were there any submarines in your group?

May: No, not in our group, unh-uh.

McIntosh: Amazing.

May: Yeah. But then after we had done that for really several months, that type of duty, then we went around to Sydney, Australia, and there we joined the 7th Fleet. We operated mostly out of Brisbane but also from Sidney. Then

we spent quite a bit of time in Sydney, but we would operate out of there, and our main job was bombing and preparing the beaches for the landing of the Marines by bombarding them prior to the attack.

McIntosh: What islands?

May: Well, several of them.

McIntosh: Guadalcanal?

May: Well, we were at Guadalcanal, yes, but earlier than that we were up to Biak which is—and Sansapor and the—well, several groups of islands. I have the records of all the—our actions of our ship and so forth, but I can't just remember them offhand. On that duty that was about as safe as you could be because we would lay off shore about two miles and throw 6 inch and 5 inch shells in against the enemy forces, and then they would fire back at us, but they couldn't reach us. We were as safe as a babe in the cradle [laughs].

McIntosh: Were you out in a group this time with other cruisers?

May: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: You must have been.

May: Right. Yes, we were, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Probably operated under the 7th Fleet.

May: Yeah, 7th fleet, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Did that involve aircraft carriers too?

May: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah, in fact we were right off Guadalcanal. When the *Saratoga* was hit by a torpedo broadside we could see it happening, see it was hit from our ship because there was an alert then that submarines were in the area, and we'd been put on battle stations, and the *Saratoga* had to come back to the States for repairs.

McIntosh: All the way to the States, right.

May: Uh-huh.

McIntosh: It seems funny they didn't sink it.

May: Right, uh-huh. So under my tour of duty we went through seventeen Naval actions in the Pacific, but I wasn't on the ship all that time. About half way up, when we were advancing with MacArthur, MacArthur incidentally would just about at every landing be on our ship.

McIntosh: Oh, really?

May: Yeah, he liked the *Phoenix*, and he would watch the bombardment and all. I still remember one picture that I saw in *Life* magazine of MacArthur standing over a dead Jap on an airfield and saying, "That's the way I like to see them." It was all publicity because he didn't go ashore until after the Marines had completely secured the land.

McIntosh: Of course.

May: Then he went ashore, and that's when the picture was taken.

McIntosh: Of course.

May: It would have been foolish for him to go ashore with them of course, but he liked to give the impression that he did.

McIntosh: You were still a clerk/typist then?

May: Well, that was my main duty, yes. I was still—my battle station was still—

McIntosh: At the gun [??].

May: Uh-huh, yeah.

McIntosh: .50 caliber.

May: Uh-huh.

McIntosh: Okay.

May: Then we came back to the States. We left the 7th Fleet and came back to the States in 1943 to the Navy Yard in Philadelphia.

McIntosh: You went through the [Panama] Canal?

May: Yes, uh-huh. And then we had our .50 caliber machines guns were replaced at that time by they called the pom-poms, the 1.1s. And so I lost my job [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh really?

May: Yeah, well it was rather unusual for a yeoman to be alternate gunner and loader on a .50 caliber machine gun. But I had been a seaman before and had some training in that, but I had no training on the 1.1s. So my battle station became really operating a telephone between Bat 2 where I had been before, still at the same area, but I was on a—would push down on it to talk to the bridge, in communication with the bridge with earphones on.

McIntosh: Well, that was a little different.

May: Yeah [laughs].

McIntosh: How long did it take to be refitted in Philadelphia? Was that three months or?

May: It was about three months because half of the crew got a leave, thirty day leave, and then when I went back and the other half—I was in the first half. The other half got a leave for thirty days.

McIntosh: I bet your mom was happy to see you.

May: Oh yes [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, that was nice. You were home for, what, a couple weeks?

May: Well, it was thirty days.

McIntosh: Thirty days, that's a long leave.

May: Yes, it is, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Right. Well, you had lots of stories to tell.

May: Yeah, well, of course I don't know, we didn't talk much about that [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh really?

May: No, unh-uh.

McIntosh: I would think they'd just be dying to hear what you had to say.

May: Well, I don't think they understood it [laughs]. Really, I don't think they understood what was involved. If I would have spoken to them and told them that we bombarded islands and so forth.

McIntosh: Didn't mean a thing.

May: I don't know. It—

McIntosh: Probably. I don't really think they were interested in that, they were interested in the war.

May: I understand that.

May: Civilians really pitched in and did the job for us.

McIntosh: But not with any details.

May: No, unh-uh.

McIntosh: All right. By this time, what was your rating?

May: By that time I was a yeomen first class.

McIntosh: Very good.

May: Uh-huh.

McIntosh: Well, you moved up fast.

May: Yeah, and see, I came back to the States. I left the *Phoenix* in late September of 1944.

McIntosh: What was the purpose of that? I mean, how did that come about?

May: Well, that came about because I had been a yeomen first class for quite some time, and in order to become a yeomen second class I had to pass shorthand at a higher speed than I could take it from just my high school deal. So they sent me back to San Diego, California to school for shorthand, and I went through that school. They were short on instructors. I was supposed to come back to the *Phoenix*, but they wanted me to stay there as an instructor, and actually I spent the rest of my time in San Diego as an instructor.

McIntosh: Teaching other guys how to do shorthand?

May: Well, yeah, that and other things too. I taught at the Yeomen School. So it also involved teaching the Navy way of filing and typing.

McIntosh: All the clerical stuff.

May: Yeah, yeah, right, uh-huh, yeah.

McIntosh: Well, how did you enjoy your time in San Diego?

May: Well, ah—

McIntosh: It's like Honolulu. It's full of sailors.

May: Right [both laugh], that's true. I was always just anxious to get home. Let's see—I don't know where to go from here.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. Well, you stationed there, did you live in town, or did you live just at the base?

May: No I lived aboard ship. Oh, yeah, no, in San Diego, yeah, I stayed at the base, yeah, uh-huh, and I had my own quarters in the barracks, and the students—

McIntosh: You must have about ready to make chief there pretty soon.

May: Well, I probably could have [laughs] but I ended up yeomen second class. I had joined the Navy when I was seventeen in the Minority Cruise where you serve till twenty-one, and then you're out. Well, I was twenty-one in September of 19 and 44, and—

McIntosh: What day were you born in September?

May: September the 18th.

McIntosh: I was born on the 15th.

May: Is that right? [laughs] So I was eligible to get out, but of course with the war on everybody's enlistment was just automatically extended. If I had just remained in a hold position there it would have been nothing to me. But if I shipped over by either extending my enlistment for two years or re-enlisting for four years I would get a \$300 shipping over bonus, and that \$300 looked pretty good so I extended my enlistment for two years figuring it looked like the war was gonna go on---

McIntosh: Go on and on.

May: Yeah, and so [laughs] I was caught in there, and I had to stay at San Diego a year longer than I would have had to had I not extended my enlistment.

McIntosh: But the war had another year to go anyway.

May: Yeah.

McIntosh: It didn't make that much difference.

May: Well, just a year.

McIntosh: So it was just a year more than ordinary?

May: Yeah, right, uh-huh..

McIntosh: So you didn't get out till '46 then?

May: Right, uh-huh.

McIntosh: You were still at San Diego when you got—

May: When I was discharged at San Diego.

McIntosh: They send you back to Great Lakes on your—did you get out from San Diego?

May: While I was there I escorted a group of sailors from San Diego to Great Lakes by train. And that enabled me to get home again [laughs] to visit my folks for a while. But when I was discharged though, I just went to the airport where the Air Force played through planes, and on standby would get a flight when one became available. So I came home through Salt Lake City and then St. Louis [laughs].

McIntosh: You drove home from St. Louis?

May: From St. Louis I took a bus.

McIntosh: Took a bus. How far where you lived from St. Louis?

May: About a 150 miles south.

McIntosh: Well, then you got out in '46, and were you married yet?

May: I was. I had come home when I bought this group of sailors back to Great Lakes. That was—I wanted to be back in order to get married at that time.

McIntosh: Aha. High school sweetheart?

May: Yeah.

McIntosh: Someone you knew all your life?

May: Well, not all my life. She was from a little town with a little school that was four miles from my school. And we competed with them in basketball and all kinds of sports so [laughs] I got to know her that way.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. So you corresponded during the war then?

May: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Okay. So she had her eyes on you right from the start?

May: Not exactly, I had my eyes more on her [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, I see [both laugh].

May: But it all worked out.

McIntosh: It sure worked out, I'm sure.

May: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: So then you got married right at the time you left the service then? Or just before?

May: No, just before, really the December before because I came home, and we were married on December the 27th, 1945, and I didn't get out till 1946.

McIntosh: And where did you move to next?

May: We moved to Cape Girardeau, Missouri. My wife had been in nurses training and was a graduate nurse at that time. And she worked at the hospital, and I got my bachelor's degree at Southeast Missouri State University.

McIntosh: Just an L&S [Letters and Science] degree?

May: Just a B.S. [Bachelor of Science].

McIntosh: Then you had to go to work.

May: No, then I went to the University of Michigan. I had liked mathematics and had majored in mathematics, and I went to Michigan because Michigan was one of the few schools that had an actuarial program for the actuaries of insurance, you know, figuring deaths and so forth.

McIntosh: Not necessarily a CPA [Certified Public Accountant] but a—

May: No, unh-uh.

McIntosh: So you took a master's at Michigan?

May: No, I didn't finish my master's, but I got about half way through it. And my wife got pregnant [laughs] and we came back to Missouri, and I taught school for a year in Sikeston.

McIntosh: What kind of school, high school?

May: High school, mathematics and biology in high school, uh-huh..

McIntosh: In Cape Girardeau?

May: No, in Sikeston, Missouri [laughs].

McIntosh: Now, there's a town I never heard of.

May: Well, that's twenty-one miles south of Cape Girardeau, and it's on the— now it's the Interstate 55.

McIntosh: Oh, on the interstate, I've probably driven right through it or passed it. I've been down that way. Well, that was a small town.

May: Well, Sikeston was 12,000.

McIntosh: Oh, that's not so bad.

May: Unh-uh.

McIntosh: So how did you enjoy those years teaching school?

May: Oh, I enjoyed it. But I only did it for a year because after a year they offered me a new contract. For the following year they were going to give me a \$50 a year raise, and we were having a hard time getting along on what I was making at the time.

McIntosh: I was gonna say, that wouldn't cut it.

May: Unh-uh. So I left, and because I'd been so interested in insurance and actuary and so forth I went to seek a job and ended up with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company as a salesman.

McIntosh: As an agent?

May: Uh-huh, as an agent.

McIntosh: Where did you take that training, St. Louis?

May: The training for as an agent, no I did that at—where? You know, I don't—I can't even—

McIntosh: In other words this is a tough question? [both laugh]

May: Yeah, yeah, I was not prepared for that one, but I was a salesmen at Carbondale, Illinois with Metropolitan for I guess two years, and then I was promoted to assistant manager in—

McIntosh: In Carbondale?

May: No, in Elgin, Illinois.

McIntosh: You're getting further north every move here.

May: Right.

McIntosh: You get out of that "Little Egypt" area.

May: Right [laughs]. So I spent several years as assistant manager in Elgin.

McIntosh: For Mass General?

May: No, no for Metropolitan.

McIntosh: Oh, Metropolitan. I misunderstood.

May: Yeah, okay. And then when I realized, well, I'm not going to be able to go up the ladder any farther.

McIntosh: Well, you didn't want to be an agent?

May: No, no, no I became assistant manager, see.

McIntosh: Right, but you preferred that?

May: Oh, yeah, uh-huh, but I didn't want to really stay as an assistant manager either. So I was offered a position with Pacific National Life Insurance Company.

McIntosh: I'm not familiar with that one.

May: You aren't? Okay. But they were operating in Europe, and they wanted me to go to Europe, and I did.

McIntosh: Where?

May: To Frankfurt.

McIntosh: Frankfurt?

May: Yeah, moved my wife and three children—

McIntosh: I was gonna say, about three kids by then.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, to Frankfurt, Germany.

McIntosh: All—"We're gonna learn how to speak German now, kids."

May: Well, my wife and kids did, but I didn't learn too much [both laugh] because I had a secretary who was bilingual, and so I got by without it.

McIntosh: Well, kids learn it so fast anyway.

May: Right, but it was really quite an opportunity over there, and we were doing quite well financially, but—

McIntosh: Who would you sell—pardon my ignorance, who would you sell the insurance to? This is life insurance?

May: Yes, uh-huh.

McIntosh: To the servicemen?

May: To servicemen who were married and had families and who lived on the bases in Germany.

McIntosh: Okay. All over Germany?

May: Right, and my job was—Pacific National would recruit the people in the States here and send them over to me, and I would teach them the veterans benefits and the programming of the veterans benefits with other life insurance to make a total program. The servicemen would only have to sign an allotment for it, and the insurance went in force. So really it was quite an easy sale. I ended up in the first year, they had sent over nineteen people to me that I'd introduced to the business and trained, and we wrote over \$25 million worth of life insurance that year. At that time that was a pretty—

McIntosh: That's outstanding, yeah, well, you must have been a good teacher.

May: Well [laughs].

McIntosh: I believe you were.

May: Well, it worked out real well, but the only problem we ran into there was that my wife's father passed away while we were over there, and her mother really just had no place to go. And we tried to get her to come over there, and she wouldn't do it. I ended up giving up my position over there and coming back. And at that time then I went to work for State Farm as a manager.

McIntosh: Now, what year is this now?

May: This would have been in 19 and 49, I guess.

McIntosh: '49. Before 1950 then?

May: Yeah, uh-huh, okay.

McIntosh: And State Farm is located where?

May: In Elgin, right back to Elgin [laughs].

McIntosh: Did you get your old house back?

May: No, no, no, I had to buy a different one [laughs], and then my kids all went to school in Elgin and graduated from the Elgin High School.

McIntosh: That seems like a nice community.

May: Yeah, oh we loved it.

McIntosh: You liked it in Elgin.

May: Yeah, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Yeah, I've known some people that spent—they thought it was a nice place to live.

May: Yeah. And then after twenty some odd years I retired, and when I retired we moved to Madison, really to Cambridge.

McIntosh: What was the impetus to doing that?

May: Well, we had been on a trip up to Milwaukee to a wedding and went to go back to Elgin. It was just a short trip really, so we took the long way around, and when I came towards Madison I got off at Cambridge to see the pottery works there, Rowe Pottery Works. And while my wife was looking at the pottery, I went out and saw the lake. I liked the lake, Lake Ripley, yeah. I liked the area and all. So when we retired we came up looking for a place.

McIntosh: On the lake?

May: Yeah. I didn't find one on the lake, but we found one just off of [Highway] 12 that overlooked Red Cedar Lake. I don't know if you are familiar with Red Cedar Lake or not?

McIntosh: Well no, not really.

May: It's a large lake. It's about the size of Ripley, but it's a shallow lake. And DNR [Wis. Dept. of Natural Resources] really controls it, but we liked the view, and we bought a trailer just for the weekends really. And then we liked it so much up here we decided we'd sell our home in Elgin and just move up here. So we built on the three acres that we had and have really enjoyed that for a while. And then the whole farm that this was carved out of became for sale so I bought it. And there was a spot that was up high that had a beautiful view, and so we built another home then. Sold the one way out here, and built another one, and had a pond dug that was three-quarters of an acre. There was already a little pond there. We made it larger. Fifteen feet deep, stocked it with fish. Had two piers, canoes and paddle boat and swimming docks and all my grandkids just loved it!

McIntosh: I'm sure they did, I'm sure they did.

May: And then we—of course being in Cambridge we were in Madison quite a bit. We always liked Madison. And it got to where that was just too much work, taking care of the fifteen acres and apple trees.

McIntosh: You didn't have help? You mowed all that?

May: I mowed it, yeah, uh-huh.

McIntosh: That's a lot of work.

May: Yes it was. I didn't mow all of it but around the pond and—

McIntosh: Right. You had to tend that pond a little bit.

May: Oh yeah. So it was really keeping me busy, and it got to more than I wanted to do.

McIntosh: I would think so, I would think so.

May: And the kids didn't come up as much because they are getting older.

McIntosh: No, they have their own life to live—

May: So we sold it, and came out real well on that, and we moved to Madison.

McIntosh: When was that?

May: That was, oh let's see, about ten years ago I guess now, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Ten years. Okay. Do you miss the pond?

May: Yeah, yeah I did [both laugh].

McIntosh: But I'm sure you didn't miss the hassle.

May: No, no, and we love Madison.

McIntosh: Sure. Well, that's nice. Did you join any veterans organizations?

May: No, when I came out of the service I decided that I wasn't going to join the Reserves or the American Legion or the VFW or anything else. I was through from joining.

McIntosh: Right. Did you use your GI Bill though? You did that?

May: Oh yes, I did.

McIntosh: That's where you get your—thing at Michigan was under the GI Bill.

May: Yeah, and Southeast Missouri, my master's degree, yeah. Oh, well, I would never have been—well, I guess I could have because my wife was working. I had a part-time job too in addition to that when I was in school.

McIntosh: Right. Now do you keep in contact with any of the Pearl Harbor folks or anybody aboard ship on the *Phoenix*?

May: Yes, in fact we had a ships reunion two years ago in Washington State. And there were about 100 of them up there that I hadn't seen in fifty some odd years.

McIntosh: Sure. Ah, what a treat.

May: Yeah, and one of them was a guy that I worked right with in the Executive Office. And in fact while we were in Philadelphia in '43 he got married in Patterson, New Jersey and invited me to the wedding. And I went up there to the wedding, and then here was he and his wife. And she remembered me being at the wedding of course [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, isn't that wonderful?

May: And then last year they had the reunion in Branson, Missouri. So we went to that one, it was close enough, yeah [laughs].

McIntosh: That was well attended I'm sure.

May: Yeah, uh-huh.

McIntosh: How'd you enjoy that?

May: Fine, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Isn't that pretty wild?

May: Well, it sure is [laughs], and still another story there. We almost retired to down there.

McIntosh: In Branson?

May: We brought some property and then we sold.

McIntosh: Gee, so many people on top of people now, wouldn't they?

May: No, no, no, no. I mean this was way before.

McIntosh: Oh, before it became famous.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah [laughs].

McIntosh: Boy, 'cause I'm gonna say, that's just a busy place now.

May: Yeah. But talking about the *Phoenix* though, there was an interesting deal. There was a guy from Argentina at the first reunion that we went to out in Washington State. He came to our reunion, and he had served on the USS *Phoenix* after we had sold it. The ship was decommissioned, put in moth balls in Philadelphia Navy Yard. And then after the war—

McIntosh: [laughs] The government sold it?

May: The Government sold it or gave it one or the other to Argentina.

McIntosh: Oh my. God. I'll be darned.

May: And it became the flagship of the Argentine Navy. And it was renamed the **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** *General Delgrano* [*Belgrano*]. During the Falkland Island War in 19 and 82 the *Phoenix* was sunk by a British nuclear submarine, the [HMS] *Conqueror*, by firing two torpedoes into the side of it, and I have a video tape of that sinking.

McIntosh: Now how did you get a hold of that?

May: Because it was taken by the *Conqueror* with all of their modern stuff. They had cameras on the sides of the submarine and all. They had taken pictures of it exploding and all, and I have pictures of the *Conqueror* stalking it.

McIntosh: You got those in England?

May: It was actually on the Learning Channel, and I ordered the tape from the Learning Channel. I have the original one rather than just a copy, and I've got that.

McIntosh: Oh, that's interesting to see your old house being sunk.

May: Yeah, but when I first heard of that, though, we were still in Elgin at that time. I came home from work and was watching the news, and it came over that the USS [ARA] *General Delgrano* [*Belgrano*] was sunk.

McIntosh: You knew that was the *Phoenix*?

May: Oh yeah, uh-huh. [Approx. 15 sec. pause in recording]

McIntosh: What was that, *Delgrano*?

May: *Delgrano* [*Belgrano*].

McIntosh: How do you spell that?

May: That's the *General Delgrano*, D-E-L-G-R-A-N-O, I believe it is.

McIntosh: And what was this fella doing on that ship?

May: He was an engineer in the boiler.

McIntosh: He obviously was not aboard when that was sunk.

May: No, he wasn't [both laugh], no.

McIntosh: If he was in the boiler room he'd never have a chance.

May: Yeah, no, that's right 'cause there's 357 [323] people killed when this went down.

McIntosh: Well, it'd taken two torpedoes, Charlie—

May: Yeah. There were survivors.

McIntosh: A light cruiser would put that in the drink.

May: Yeah, right, and it did, but there were survivors.

McIntosh: There were?

May: Yeah.

McIntosh: Well, the ones that are topside.

May: Yeah, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Interesting. Well, that's unusual.

May: Because see the crew—there were on board the *Phoenix* there were about 1,100 sailors as a complement.

McIntosh: Is that the standard complement aboard that ship?

May: No, the standard the complement was about 900.

McIntosh: I was going to say, yeah.

May: Yeah, but the wartime complement was 1,100.

McIntosh: While you were on?

May: Yeah.

McIntosh: 1,100, I'm surprised there were that many.

May: Yeah, well, you know that it was 608 feet long and sixty-seven beam.

McIntosh: Yeah, a heavy cruiser wasn't that much bigger.

May: No, unh-uh, just had bigger guns and more armament.

McIntosh: Yeah, 'cause they didn't have that many more people. I know that I've talked to several people who were on the [USS] *Indianapolis*, and I think they had 1,300.

May: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

McIntosh: And that went down in a hurry, you know, that *Indianapolis*.

May: Oh yeah, yeah, after Midway.

McIntosh: I've talked to some survivors who swam around in the ocean for five days waiting to be picked up.

May: Oh, the *Indianapolis* that was the one that took the atomic bomb to Tinian [island in the Marianas in the Pacific Ocean where there was a large US airbase], and then on the way back was when it was sunk.

McIntosh: It was forgotten about and sunk. That's another story. In my book that's a whole chapter, that *Indianapolis*, a terrible tragedy. Okay. Any of your kids go in the Navy?

May: No, I got three girls [laughs].

McIntosh: Well, nowadays what does that mean? [both laugh]

May: Yeah right.

McIntosh: Are they married and have children?

May: Yeah.

McIntosh: You got a lot of grandchildren?

May: I have eight.

McIntosh: Eight, two more than me, I only have six. Do you have great grandchildren?

May: No little—no great ones, unh-uh.

McIntosh: Oh, gotcha there, I got two.

May: Oh, you have. I don't know when we we're gonna have on. Maybe not--I have one graduating from college this [laughs] year so—

McIntosh: Sure. Well, that's nice. Well, was your experience in the Navy rewarding?

May: Very much so.

McIntosh: You would advise anyone, young men to go in the Navy?

May: If they wanted to have at least a bunk to sleep in every night instead of a foxhole, yes.

McIntosh: Warm food, warm place to sleep.

May: Right.

McIntosh: You can't beat that.

May: Unh-uh. Of course if you get hit by a couple of torpedoes from the *Conqueror* you are a goner [laughs].

McIntosh: And your insurance business, was that rewarding for you?

May: Very much so, I was quite lucky. I had good breaks. I always felt like I had a guardian angel looking after me.

McIntosh: Why do you say that?

May: Well, I don't know, being at Pearl Harbor.

McIntosh: I think you earned whatever you got, don't you think?

May: Well, perhaps so [laughs].

McIntosh: I believe you did, sure. Oh, that's nice. And insurance—are your girls gonna go in the insurance business?

May: No, no.

McIntosh: Just going to be mothers and house mothers?

May: Well, let's see—I only have one—well, one of my son-in-laws went into the business. In fact, I put him in the business.

McIntosh: Ah, very good. Where do they live?

May: Well, two of them live down in the Elgin area. One of them lives here at Madison. She went to Tempe to school and then to the University of Chicago, and then her husband got his doctor's degree from University of California at Berkeley.

McIntosh: What doctor?

May: He is in geography and—

McIntosh: Oh, a PhD in geography?

May: Uh-huh, and he's at the University [of Wisconsin] here. He's a professor.

McIntosh: Oh, that's nice. At least you have some kids around.

May: Yeah, I got three of them [laughs].

McIntosh: You keep track with any other Pearl Harbor survivors? I know there is a group that meets, Pearl Harbor Survivors [Association] group. There's one in Wisconsin.

May: Yeah, I did join them. I joined that, and that's how I found out about the *Phoenix* reunion. If I would have joined earlier they had about twenty of them that I didn't even know about. But I joined that about three years ago.

McIntosh: Well, that's where I found your name was in their newspaper article.

May: Yeah, okay.

McIntosh: I've interviewed several people from the [inaudible] at Pearl Harbor, and you all have different stories, quite interesting.

May: There was a guy from a newspaper in over east of here. I can't even remember the name of the town, but he interviewed about seventy-two people who were at Pearl Harbor either in the Army, Marines, and so forth and had a spot on the internet where he showed all of 'em, and he interviewed me. He got my name from the—

McIntosh: Sure, well, I got seven survivors in the book that should be out this spring.

May: Oh yeah?

McIntosh: It was interesting that two of the guys were on the [USS] *Maryland*. The *Maryland* was right next to the [USS] *Oklahoma*, and the *Oklahoma* was torpedoed, you know, and went belly up.

May: Yeah, right, uh-huh.

McIntosh: And these guys said that everybody was at the side doing what they could from tipping their ship over because they were lashed alongside one another, you see, and these are out with axes [both laugh] trying to cut the lines before they were taken upside down too the way the *Oklahoma* was. These two guys live in Mequon [WI], and they live, I would say, fifteen minutes apart, and they didn't know each other. Well, there were 1,200 people aboard the *Maryland*, and you know, they just were in different sections aboard ship, and they never knew the other one existed. It's kind of interesting. Okay, I can't think of anything else to ask you.

May: Okay.

McIntosh: You didn't have any problem with the medical detachment aboard the ship, your *Phoenix*? They had nice complement there, a good doctor and so forth? Or do you recall?

May: Yeah, yeah, we did have a sickbay and beds and so forth for if a person got sick. I was never in it.

McIntosh: Oh, you weren't? That's good. Well, I always ask that question because, you know, I spent a year on a hospital ship so I know.

May: Oh did ya, which one?

McIntosh: The [USS] *Haven*.

May: The *Haven*?

McIntosh: That that was in Korea.

May: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

McIntosh: Okay. [END OF INTERVIEW]