

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of the

Sea Stories of

KENNETH MILLER

Chief Engineman, Navy, Vietnam War.

2007

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Miller, Kenneth L., (1934-). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 15 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 15 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Kenneth Miller, a Mount Horeb, Wisconsin native, tells some stateside sea stories about his service in the Navy during the Vietnam War. Miller tells about serving aboard the USS *Peterson* (DE-152), having Cinderella liberty in Key West (Florida), hitchhiking with a gas thief in Middletown (Rhode Island), and being welcomed into strangers' homes while hitchhiking in Maine. He describes a practical joke they played on a sailor who had a job to do in the morgue of a mothballed hospital ship. Miller relates some incidents that happened at a WAVES barracks in Bainbridge (Maryland): one where some sailors pushed an airplane down the street and another about some male intruders in the barracks. He relates encouraging a newly promoted officer during a flooded-engine-room crisis aboard the USS *Newport* (LST-1179). Miller tells of having Survive, Evade, Resist, and Escape training at Coronado (California), where they got in trouble for eating the warrant officer's dog and spent time in a simulated prisoner-of-war camp. He comments on being shown around the colored part of Newport (Rhode Island) by Black sailors and in turn bringing Black sailors into White bars without any problems. He characterizes Blood Alley in Newport and a sailor there who would bring his boa constrictor into the bar. Miller touches on getting thrown out of bars for putting raw egg in his beer and letting yolk dribble out of his mouth. He portrays how wild the "Combat Zone" in Boston was on paydays and he describes teasing the Portuguese-Americans in Fall River and New Bedford (Massachusetts). Miller relates the story of a sailor who went home with a girl and jumped out a window into some rosebushes when her father came home.

Biographical Sketch:

Miller (b. 1934) was born in Middleton and grew up in Mount Horeb (Wisconsin). After high school, he joined the Navy and served two tours in Vietnam. For the first tour (1965), he was a Leading Engineering Petty Officer on the USS *Hissem*. For the second (1971), he was part of the MACV Naval Advisory Group, training South Vietnamese sailors in engine repair. After retiring from the Navy in 1973, Miller moved to Coloma (Maryland) where he continues to live today. He has participated in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the Fleet Reserve Association.

Transcription by Cathy Cox, Oct. 2007

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcript:

I'm retired Navy, Chief Engineman. I'm here to try and relate some sea stories or fairy tales. The difference between a fairy tale and a sea story is that a fairy tale starts out with "Once upon a time," and a sea story starts out with "This is no shit."

Well my first tour of duty was on the USS *Peterson*, DE-152, named after a Medal of Honor winner, Peterson, from Prentice, Wisconsin. I still believe that the ship's bell from the *Peterson* should be retrieved and either—and returned to Prentice, Wisconsin or to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

My first tour of duty was when we were stationed at Key West, Florida. While down there they had what we call a—at that time, a Cinderella liberty. You have to be off the streets and back to the ship before midnight. If you weren't off the streets, the shore patrol would apprehend you or the police would apprehend you. If the police apprehended you, you were subject to a twenty-five dollar fine, and just about every Monday morning they'd have a hundred or so sailors lined up down the court to pay their twenty-five dollar fine. I think this was used to pay for the police department.

And, then there was Middletown, Rhode Island. I was hitchhiking—this was in, January I believe it was. Cold out. And late at night, car stopped and picked me up and we were whizzing down the road and, we went by the State Police barracks, and he slammed on his brakes and he stopped and he said, "I have to go in and check with my dad." So he went in there, and then(??) back to the police station, and he started pumping gas. And the next thing I know I'm looking down the barrel of a .38. This guy had been doing this for the last several months, and the only reason that he was caught this night was because a squad car had just filled up and he left the barracks. And they couldn't figure out why he was back to get gas. This individual was subject to a summary court-martial—I believe he got ninety days restriction and a fine of some sort. It wasn't bad.

Well, we used to hitchhike up in Maine. A friend, buddy of mine lived up in Lubec Maine, most eastern point of the United States. And if we didn't have a ride at dark, people would come out to the road, bring us over to their home, give us a meal, put us up for the night, and then in the morning they would take us back out to the road so we could continue on our journey.

This is 1956; I was in Reserve Fleet Philadelphia. That's where all the mothballed ships were. And we always used to play pranks on each other or whatever. But we had to go down to the *Sanctuary*, which was a mothballed hospital ship. This one individual, he was just scared to death of going down on the hospital ship. But we had a job in the morgue, so we talked this one kid into laying on a gurney, and we covered him up with a

sheet, we turned out all the lights except one. And when this individual came down, he turned the rest of the lights on and we had this all planned out. This kid sat up and took the sheet off and said—and this individual ran hollering and screaming. We were down three decks and you could hear him all the way up and off of the ship. (chuckling) And he wouldn't return to that ship for a long time.

Then while I was transferred to shore duty at Bainbridge, Maryland, we had several incidents up there. We got a—I was at security, and the WAVES call up and they said the jet plane was being pushed down the *road*. Well there was a jet plane on the drill field up there. I went on up there and sure enough some sailors had been enterprising enough to push this thing down past the WAVES barracks. So the next day they had to tow it back, and they'd gotten tired so they couldn't move it any more.

And then, another incident up there we got a call from the WAVES barracks—they had a male intruder. So we went up there, and sure enough, boy they had two young sailors up there that had bet each other that they could walk through the WAVES barracks without drawing any attention. Well, they got in the door and they, they (laughs) ____(?). They beat these guys with swabs, brooms, buckets, whatever they had, and they—these guys were crawling down the stairs when *we* arrived. Got 'em up. And every time they tried to get up, the girls would hit 'em with their swabs and brooms. We finally got it all straightened out—I was laughing myself, I just couldn't keep a straight face. Finally, we got it straightened out and I talked to the WAVE in charge and I said, “Do you want to press any charges against them?” And she said, “Well, it's up to *these* guys.” So I talked to 'em, I says, “What do you think we should do with ya?” And ____ (nod??). And I said, “Well, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do.” I said, “I'll let you go, and this ought to serve as a lesson.” They says, “Man,” they said, “thank you.” They said, “We ain't even gonna walk on the same side of the street as that WAVES barracks anymore.”

And then on the USS *Newport* (LST-1179), and we've just been in commission, I guess several months, maybe six months. And this Sounding and Security watch come running up to Chief (Kurtz??). He said, “Chief,” he says, “number two engine room is *flooded*.” And I said, “Oh my God.” So I went down there and I looked down the stairwell and they're(??) gone two decks, and I said, “See the water coming up.” So I proceeded to have everybody isolate everything and I had the alarm sounded and I got the Officer of the Day there and he come down and I was sitting at the top of the hatch. And I says, “Sit down here.” And he sat down and he was almost crying. I said, “Well what's the matter with *you*?” He said, “I just made JG today.” And I said, “Eh,” and I said, “no matter what,” I says, “no matter what happens there's always good and bad on everything.” He said, “What do you mean good and bad?” I said, “Well, the good part of this is we sure don't have to have any drills for this program tonight.” And that sort of took the wind out of his sails, and I said, “Now get up there and call the XO and the CO and everybody else that you have to call to know we probably have a major problem. So after that he was all set. He took charge and was doing okay.

And after that I was sent to SERE training survival. Survive, Evade, Resist, and Escape training at Coronado, California. And we were sent out to the beach. Well, this was at the end of the program, and we had to ___(et??), eat, whatever we caught, which was *nothing*. So then they took us out to the mountain, and they had a simulated prisoner of war camp out there. And this CO, Warrant Officer, he had a big mean German Shepherd. Though we didn't know this. This was before we got captured. Anyway that dog got loose and we hadn't eaten anything in over a week, so we killed the dog, and put him in the pot, and boy did that burn up the old Warrant Officer. We really paid the price after that deal. Anyway, they always gave us a chance to escape. And this one big Lieutenant, he must have weighed about two fifty, about six five, anyway he was a big man, and he made it out the gate. He was over on the side of the hill there and they blew the whistle for him to come back, and he just stood there and shook his head, (chuckling) he ain't coming back to that place. So they had to stop the training program to go out and find him.

Then we were in Newport, Rhode Island. We had a couple of colored sailors on board with us, and every once in a while we'd go down to the colored part of Newport, and they'd always try to hook us up with some black girls down there, and they're always say[ing], "Well, you're gonna split an oak." (laughs) And then we would take the colored guys down to the white bars with us, and we never ever had any problems.

And I used to go down to Fall River and New Bedford. That's all Portuguese descendants down there. And we used to get in the bar.

When we were in Newport, Rhode Island they had the section of town where they called Blood Alley. That's where the majority of the bars were where the sailors hung out. Come pay day, they'd—oh boy, they lived up to its name. It was fights and blood all over the place. And we had this one guy, Haskell. He had a great big snake, boa constrictor—it's about ten-foot long. And if the bar was filled up, he'd go home and get that snake, and he'd come in and he'd throw that thing across the top of the bar, and (laughs) he'd be sitting there in that bar all by himself, and the cops and the shore patrol didn't even want to come in there. They finally got him to put that damn snake away.

And this buddy of mine would, when we really got wound up, would go in the grocery store and get a couple eggs. And we'd go in the bar and order a draft and we'd pop an egg in the beer. And then the people really got upset. We'd get the yolk in our mouth and break the yolk and had it run down the corner of our mouth. (chuckling) And we'd end up getting thrown out of the place.

And when we're in Boston, Massachusetts they had this section of town there where all the servicemen hung out and, it was really wild on Friday, Saturday night or on a payday. They called that the Combat Zone. (laughs) Oh God Almighty, that was a trip and a half. There was always something going on down there.

For Fall River and New Bedford, which is all Portuguese descendants, we'd get down in a bar and would holler at one another and say, "What kind of geese don't fly?" We'd say, "Portuguese." (chuckles) The natives would really get going on that one. And then we'd get 'em really riled up and we'd say, "I see they clipped all the seagulls' wings out there." Somebody'd say, "Why?" And I'd say, "Well, because they were beating all the Portuguese to the dump." (laughs)

Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I had the quarterdeck watch and we were right next to the Pease Air Force Base. Well I had mid-watch, and this sailor come back and oh, he was covered in blood and grass stains and everything, I said, "Wow," I said. I had to ask him, "What happened?" because I had to log all this stuff in. And he was telling me how he picked up this, this young girl over at the M Club, Pease Air Force Base and—and he went home with her. And was up there in her bedroom and was—all of a sudden they heard this car screeching into the driveway and the door slammed and the girl said that was her dad, coming home. (chuckling) And old Grady Staggs jumped out the second story window into a rose bush garden. That's where he got all scratched up at.

[End of Stories]