

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
SAM ONHEIBER
Storekeeper, Navy, World War II.

1997

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Onheiber, Sam. Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Sam Onheiber, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II Navy service as a storekeeper aboard the USS Franks in the Pacific Theater. The son of immigrants, Onheiber recalls, as a sixteen-year old, hearing of the attack on Pearl Harbor and Roosevelt's declaration of war in the auditorium at Central High School where the principal had gathered the student body. He mentions that Central High began an accelerated physical fitness program for young men in the junior and senior years that prepared them for war. Enlisting in the Navy at age seventeen with his parents' permission, Onheiber explains his service branch preference because it was a cleaner life with showers on ship and no digging of fox holes in the mud. He speaks about boot camp at Farigot, Idaho where he preferred doing the obstacle course everyday instead of alternating it with mess hall duty. He relates that some had difficulty with a swimming test that involved throwing oil on the water's surface, lighting it, and then learning to swim away from the fire underwater. Speaking to racial tensions, Onheiber tells of a riot that ensued between Blacks and Southern Whites on the chow line where heavy food trays were thrown about. Receiving service school training as a storekeeper, Onheiber was assigned to Destroyer Squadron 47 (DesRon47) and tells of his roundabout trek through the Pacific, at times encountering Japanese submarines, until finally arriving at the Solomon Islands where he connected with his ship, the USS Franks. Characterizing the role of destroyers as protection ships, Onheiber says that the ship's early campaigns with the 7th Fleet involved a lot of short bombardment and escort work. His job aboard ship was running payroll, ordering supplies, and operating the ship's store. However, his combat role was as the sight setter on an automatic director for a quad 40 millimeter gun. Later the Squadron was assigned to the fast carrier task force with responsibility for rescuing pilots taking off or landing. The USS Franks was credited with twenty-two pilot rescues. Characterizing Leyte Gulf as his toughest campaign, Onheiber describes DesRon 47's assignment to protect the "baby flat tops;" Halsey's blunder that sent the heavy battleships away; and the heavy combat that occurred on October 25th resulting in the sinking of the USS Johnson and Hoel, and heavy casualties on the USS Herrmann. Onheiber describes heading in for the second suicide attack with the Navy expression, "browning your skivvy shorts" with orders to stay between the Japanese ships and the baby flat tops. The USS Franks was destined to be the next ship down with the Japanese firing close enough to make the ship buckle. "Help," a one-word uncoded message was sent to Halsey which history books later claim caused the Japanese ship to disobey orders and turned around to avoid getting cut off by Halsey. Onheiber tells what it is like to be on a Navy ship under heavy combat and to realize that you may not be alive in fifteen

minutes. He also tells of seeing his first kamikaze plane, which debuted at Leyte Gulf, and the psychological effects this caused with the crew. He was in the shower when the USS Franks collided with the USS New Jersey and relates running out naked to grab a life jacket and abandon ship only to be told that the ship was not under attack. Onheiber tells how with their ship out of commission, they missed the next day when two hundred kamikaze planes hit their force and some of the sister ships "took kamikaze." After his discharge in May 1946, Onheiber settled briefly in Arizona due to his mother's health need to relocate there. Denied entrance to the University of Arizona as an out of state resident, Onheiber moved back to Wisconsin and majored in accounting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the G.I. Bill; graduating in 1950. Onheiber speaks of his service disability that resulted in tenetis of the ear, a steady ring, a condition that lasted for ten years. He says that given Leyte Gulf and a typhoon he was in, he feels lucky to come out alive. He says that he joined the VFW in Arizona to assist him in getting his service-connected disability, but upon his return to Madison he never joined a veteran organization. He concludes by mentioning that the USS Franks and several crewmen are mentioned in the last chapter of Ernie Pyle's book before Pyle's death on Iwo Jima.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Transcribed by Rose Polacheck and T.J. Weinaug, n.d. & 2008.

Interview Transcript:

- MARK: Today's date is July 22, 1997, this Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Sam Onheiber?
- SAM: Onheiber.
- MARK: Onheiber. O-n-h-e-i-b-e-r.
- SAM: Correct.
- MARK: A veteran of the U.S. Navy during World War II. Good afternoon and thanks for coming in.
- SAM: You bet.
- MARK: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.
- SAM: Ok. I was born September 3, 1925 in Madison, Wisconsin about two blocks from where I live, from 1925 to 1960, not including military service.
- MARK: And where was this?
- SAM: 719 Mound Street, right off of West Washington, just east of West Washington, west of West Washington Avenue on Mound.
- MARK: What did your father do for a living?
- SAM: My father worked for A.J. Sweet & Company, a wholesale fruit and produce company here in town that still exists. His, my dad's boss' son, well, the grandson I think now runs the company.
- MARK: Did your mother work at all? It was the depression years.
- SAM: No. Mother never worked. They came from the old country, mother came, dad came before World War I, mother came in 1921 with two kids from Russia and then two were born in the U.S. My older, an older brother and myself were born in Madison.
- MARK: So when Pearl Harbor happened, you were still fairly a young man, just surviving.....

- SAM: I was right around the corner here at Central High School in 1941.
- MARK: You were about 14 years old or so.
- SAM: Well, in '41, in December of 1941 I was 16. Getting ready to go into military service, '40 to '41, about 16.
- MARK: Do you recall the incident?
- SAM: Yes, oh yes.
- MARK: Why don't you just recall your recollection of that.
- SAM: Yes, yes, we recall the incident of course on the radio on Sunday. There was no television in those days but the radio was blurping quite about it and then Monday I can remember right around the corner from where we are at that at the auditorium at Central High School, the blank spot up there between the MATC and what is it, Carroll Street, the principal had everybody come to the auditorium and we listened to Roosevelt's speech in declaring war upon Japan. So that was quite an event and one that stuck in my craw, as we, everybody, I think maybe about 500 or 600 junior and senior high school kids were all sitting in that auditorium listening to the famous FDR speech and followed up with the declaration of war against Japan.
- MARK: Now had you been following world events prior to that, as a 16-year old kid, you know?
- SAM: Not too much, except the war was going on and some of the history classes were talking about some of the current events taking place in Europe with the war in Europe.
- MARK: The thought of going off and having to fight in the war, did that thought occur to you as going?
- SAM: No. No. We weren't in it yet and never even thought that we would be in it as high school kids. You were just too carefree and enjoying the high school years.
- MARK: So after Pearl Harbor, then, I would imagine that you would have started to give it some thought to it?
- SAM: Yes, yes, definitely.

- MARK: What were your thoughts on it? You still had several years before graduation...
- SAM: Well, we had about two more years to go, but you know, you were hoping that it might end before you finished high school, but, realistically, I think they started preparing us in high school, especially the physical fitness program that they installed into the gym class and they said, well these guys are going to be out there pretty soon, we're going to start getting them in shape right now. So they had sort of an accelerated physical fitness program in the gym class in our junior and senior year of high school so that we were pretty ready and of course I went into service about two months or so out of high school.
- MARK: Between the Pearl Harbor attack and the time you went into the service, how did things in Madison change as a result of the war, or did you notice anything?
- SAM: Oh yeah, you notice everything because my older brother had gone into service, a lot of friends and neighbors had already gone into service, so you knew people next door who had gone into service or people across the street and you had cousins in the war, so and of course the rationing started to take effect, so you definitely knew that life was different once we were in the war.
- MARK: And you decided to enlist. As you mentioned before the tape, before I turned the tape recorder on, you lied about your age to come to the.....
- SAM: Well, no, not to get in the Navy. I actually enlisted at the age of 17 and I needed my parent's permission to go in because I had my older brother in the Army and I wanted, I preferred the Navy to the Army,
- MARK: Why was that?
- SAM: Well, its basically a cleaner life. The showers are still aboard ship, the food is right with you, you don't have to dig yourself into the fox holes in the mud, and I just thought it would be a cleaner and better, well healthier life, so if you got hit, you got hit, regardless of where you are at. If your number is up, it's up, so I preferred the Navy. Where I flubbed my age I think was somewhere along the line I think I must have been around San Francisco before I went overseas, or maybe it was even later. We, in order to make myself look older I think I changed the date from 25 to 24 on my original Navy ID card, but not before I went in.
- MARK: And what made you volunteer? I mean, you could have waited for the draft to come in?

- SAM: Well, mainly because in the draft you are taking your chances, you could be drafted into the Army, and I wanted to make sure I got into the Navy. And some of my buddies went in either drafted or enlisted just prior to when I did. I had a little trouble convincing my parents to okay it at the age of 17 but I finally got them, so I followed several of my best high school buddies by about two or three weeks. They went two or three weeks ahead of me.
- MARK: So why don't you just walk me through your induction process. You had to go to a recruiter and sign up and then you had to go off to boot camp somewhere.
- SAM: Yeah, we went to I think a recruiting officer locally to sign up and then you went down to Milwaukee for a physical test and I think some oral, some written test too that they used, and it went into your file.
- MARK: They also had a, this is they first started psychological testing, do you remember anything about that?
- SAM: I don't remember the necessary psychological testing but I do know we went through a battery of a lot of tests, both at the recruiting center in Milwaukee, when they went from Madison to Milwaukee, and then when we went to boot camp, where I went to Farigot, Idaho. When we first got to boot camp, and again, it was a series of physicals and shots and tests, various tests, both, the Navy was pretty good about trying to match you up with your skills. My skills were fairly good with numbers and I ended up going to what they call storekeeper school which involved payroll, disbursing, supply and so I went to boot camp at Farigot, Idaho for eight weeks.
- MARK: And what did that training consist of?
- SAM: Well, physical fitness training was one of the things. We practically had to run the obstacle course, and a tough one almost ever day, actually it was every other day, but you had your choice. You either had to do mess hall work, cleaning up in the galley, the kitchen, whatever. One day, or if you didn't want to do that, you could run the obstacle course again, and I preferred, we had been toughened up in high school, so I preferred running the obstacle course, then getting in the galley or mopping floors. So, I was running the obstacle course every day and of course we were giving us, basic boot camp training, drilling, marching, learning how to tie knots, learning Navy nomenclature, and so forth and so on. That was eight weeks of very intensive, physical fitness program.
- MARK: Was the discipline very tough?

- SAM: Yeah, yeah.
- MARK: You had to study a time with a sergeant before that.
- SAM: Right, we had what they call Chief Petty Officers, they were called Specialists A's. Most of these guys had been athletes and were given pretty good ratings as similar to a Master Sargent and they were basically in charge of a company and these guys were pretty good disciplinarians and you towed the mark, because if you didn't tow the mark, they were teaching you discipline, you had to jog around the compound with your rifle and a backpack and everything else for an hour or so, so if you goofed off, you paid the price. It was strict discipline.
- MARK: Did some people not make it through the basic training process, or did pretty much everyone go?
- SAM: Most people made it. Some of them had trouble passing the swimming test. You had to pass a swimming test and one of the parts of that swimming test, if I remember right, they would throw oil on the water and light it and you had to go underneath it, and come up and splash and get a gulp of air and go underneath it until you got away from the fire. Some of the people who did not know how to swim had problems with that and maybe got held back and didn't graduate with their particular company, but then most of them probably eventually graduated and passed those tests.
- MARK: Now military life is very different from civilian life. Did you have any trouble adjusting to life in the military, the regimentation or perhaps things like the salty language.
- SAM: No, I think as a 17 year old kid going in and turning 18 shortly after I got in and a lot of people were the same age bracket and basically I think it depended up on the friends that you made. I look at the military service and probably especially the Navy which I am more familiar with, as a catalyst. If you have a tendency to go the right direction, you're gonna get there sooner. If you have a tendency to go the wrong direction, there's too many circumstances that will help you get there faster. So to me, I was fortunate that I made a lot of good decisions about who my friends were, and as a result, I stayed out of trouble and went in basically the right direction.
- MARK: I just have one last thing about basic training, basic training sort of brings together people from all different parts of the country. Did you travel outside of Madison much by this time?

- SAM: I made a couple of trips to Tucson, Arizona, mostly health related because I couldn't, I was getting, my resistance was down in Madison, so outside of that, as a kid, I belonged to a kid that made a trip to the New York World's Fair in '38 or '39, but outside of that I hadn't done much traveling. My dad didn't even own a car.
- MARK: So, I am just sort of wondering, bringing all these people together from all different parts of the country, were there any problems involved with that? Is it an interesting experience in all
- SAM: Yes, there was some interesting experiences. It didn't happen in boot camp or service school, it happened at a point of embarkation, when we were waiting to get shipped out to the Pacific and they had these, oh boy, there must have been thousands of people at this place and they had these great long chow lines. And evidently, a couple of Black buddies left some of their buddies in line ahead of them, and a few southern Whites who were behind them didn't like that and that started a fight and the next thing you know it developed into a full-scale riot and they had these here plates that you ate out of, I don't know if they were aluminum or what the heck. No, they were heavier than aluminum, almost like cast-iron, they were about that thick, and these trays were sailing through the air, could have taken your neck off. Well, needless to say, I went down flat on my stomach and got the heck out of there, but that was a full-fledged riot. A couple of people got killed I think before they were able to quell it. So, I saw that.
- MARK: That sort of thing was not typical though?
- SAM: No, it wasn't typical, but it was an incident that could happen if you put three or four thousand people together and in those days, Blacks and especially southern Whites, you know, involved. But it wasn't for me because I went to Madison Central High School, and it was all Jew, mainly Italian, Jewish, Black and a few Irishmen and other people from the East side, or a little bit central part of the city and I was from the Greenbush area, so we didn't know what discrimination was and some of those Black kids I grew up with are still my best friends today.
- MARK: Well, back then regional distinctions were much greater than they are today too. So you finished basic training, you go off to some sort of technical training then?
- SAM: Right, the St. Maria. I qualified for service school and they assigned me to basic boot camp was eight weeks, service school was sixteen weeks so I had an intensive calculators in those days. They didn't have any computers obviously. Calculators and typing and everything else and I'm learning the Navy supply and disbursing system and I qualified, when I

got out, as a third-class storekeeper. That was 16 weeks then you get shipped off to your point of embarkation and your orders were assigned to Squadron 47 I think it was, I think it was called Squadron 47. It was Desron 47 [Destroyer Squadron], yeah, I got assigned to the Squadron, and then the Squadron reached out and lucky for me, I was on the only one that wasn't sunk or damaged, or hit. Most of them took kamakazee planes.

MARK: That's the breaks. And you got to that ship at what point?

SAM: Oh boy that was another story in itself, I don't know if we got enough time for all that.

MARK: I'll make time.

SAM: I got probably assigned to the Squadron before I left the States and then we landed in Noumea, New Caledonia in April of '44. And from Noumea, New Caledonia, we went to on a free French ship, no we went to Noumea and we went to the New Hiberties Islands, then we on a free French ship, we went from the New Hiberties Islands to Tulagi in the Solomon Islands and we just missed a ship there and then they kept on moving us around, and we got up to Manus Island, probably in late May or early June of '44. They said what the heck you guys doing here, the island isn't even secure, I'm not going to deal with a bunch of transients so they threw us out. They put us on the first ship leaving, we didn't even get ashore. Took us off of one ship and put us on another ship, we ended up getting underway on the other ship and after two days, one of the Di Maggio baseball players who was in charge of our group on that ship told us where we were headed, Sydney, Australia, which was the destination of the first ship leaving. Got down to Sydney they said you guys don't belong here took us 30 days of red tape to get us back up to the Solomons, we're in August of '44 I finally went aboard the ship I was assigned to.

Mark: That's quite a trek.

Sam: Oh yes. If you look at a map it is quite a trek all the way up to Manus then your getting up to about the Philippines then down to Sydney and back up to the Solomons. And there were a few scary moments in between from submarines were out there, and we had to hide in some kind of a little cove for uh if it was a day or two while the area cleared I guess.

MARK: Now there's an Army term, SNAFU, would you say that...

Sam: Yeah. That was a snafu, a similar term. A snafu situation. I first missed it when we got to the Solomon Island when we got there in probably April

or May, late April or early May and when did I get to Tulagi there, uh, looks like it was May 25th we got to Tulagi and I almost got it then so I missed out on Guam and Saipan cause they were headed. The ship was just going out when they saw my records, USS Franks? There it goes

Mark: So you eventually made it onto the Franks. Perhaps at this point you could tell me about a destroyer. What its mission is, how many men are on the ship what they're all doing.

Sam: Well a destroyer is one of the more expendable ships and is basically a protection ship. And when you travel with the fleet the most vulnerable ships are in the middle, that's the aircraft carriers. Then you've got your battleships fairly close to help protect the aircraft carriers too. And then your cruisers and your expendable fast moving ships, a little more expendable, are the destroyers and they're sort of a protection net. And in those early part of my career aboard the Franks we were involved in a lot of short bombardment work and uh we would, once we went up into the island we would lay off shore and fire our 5 inch guns all night long. And then later on we would join up with the fast carrier task force but the first couple of campaigns were with the seventh fleet which was uh, if I could just quickly read off a couple, anti sub-work, escorted transports headed for the Palou islands, patrolling and screening with the small baby aircraft carriers, baby flat tops, some shelling and after that we basically left, went up to Manus island to escort a bunch of LST for the McArthur return trip to the Philippines. And when we got to the Philippines we were assigned to protect some of the baby aircraft carriers that were in support of the ground invasion at the landing in Leyte Gulf and we were near the island of Samar and there was a big battle there off the island of Samar where some of the Japanese forces broke through the trap that the Americans had setup for them and when that happens all hell broke loose and our sister ship got, sister ships got clobbered and we were lucky to come out of that one alive.

Mark: So while these various operations were going on it sound like there were a lot of different activities your ship was doing. As a storekeeper—

Sam: That was my technical, uh, professional job aboard ship. Running payroll, ordering supplies, had a little ships store about as big as where your sitting to that and the width of the file case not quite as high with candy, cigarettes, toothbrushes, shaving stuff.

Mark: Now in a combat situation what do you do when they yell battle stations and stuff?

Sam: Ok. My battle station was the automatic director for a quad 40 millimeter guns that were on the main deck and on the smokestack was a platform

with an automatic director. Another storekeeper, a guy by the name of Bill Dryer, he did the firing with that when we were automatic which had to be in daylight because you couldn't illuminate the sight at night so we had to use daylight and at night they would fire locally and I would adjust the sight, so I'd watch the tracers and if he's firing at a plane and you know by watching the tracers I'd adjust the sights. So I was the sight setter on an automatic director on a quad 40 millimeter gun amidships on the port side of the ship.

Mark: So in a combat situation you weren't below decks or anything.

Sam: No thank God.

Mark: You were out...

Sam: Right up on top of the smoke stack.

Mark: Now why do you say thank God?

Sam: I never liked being below decks. Too hot down there. That's the firemen, the boiler rooms and everything I liked being where you could get over the side in a hurry if necessary.

Mark: Your first combat experience, do you recall that incident?

Sam: Well the first stuff was pretty much like watching, you know, because we did a little shooting but there wasn't too much shooting going back. When you shore bombard there wasn't too much coming back at you [inaudible-tape problem]. They don't want to reveal their...[inaudible-tape problem]. The first waves start going so its almost like watching a show when you do that type of work. We did a lot of what they call, in those days World War II destroyers were also used for rescue work in case a pilot, anytime there's operations off of a carrier. When we got to Leyte we joined the fast carrier task force. We were assign to short carrier task force 2 but there we did just screening and protecting but once we joined the fast carrier task force frequently when the flyers take off or land there's a destroyer situated off of the fan tail of the carrier and if a pilot runs into trouble landing or taking off and ditches into the water we'd go out and rescue. We had swimmers with ropes tied around who would rescue pilots. Our ship was credited with 22 pilots rescued.

Mark: That's quite a number.

Sam: It was. Sure was. 22 of them we rescued. We did a lot of that after Leyte Gulf.

- Mark: What was the toughest campaign you were involved in?
- Sam: Leyte Gulf without a question. You can read that up in some of your great Naval battles. Probably the greatest.
- Mark: What was your part in that? When you read history books its Admiral so and so and that kind of stuff. I'm interested in the typical sailor, your experience.
- Sam: Well basically at Leyte Gulf we were assigned to what they call a taffy group. And the taffy group was the name of our code words basically and we were mainly to protect the baby flattops that had the planes for the carrier, for the anti personnel bombs for the landing and our job was mainly to protect them. Well, if you read about the battle of Leyte Gulf Halsey pulled a blunder and fell for Japanese sucker trap and he took all the heavy stuff with the armor piercing bombs north to go after what thought was a major Japanese force which was actually a decoy to get him away from Leyte. When did that he took everything away from us.
- Mark: That's the missing task force.
- Sam: That's right. There's a famous quote from Admiral Nimitz a pin coded message to Halsey "where the hell is task force 34-whatever it was numbered. The world wonders". In other words he actually disobeyed orders and the reason the *Hoel* and the *Johnson* and the *Herrmann* got clobbered was because Halsey disobeyed orders, and went after what he thought was going to be a major kill and when he took everything north a section of the Japanese heavy ships, battleships, cruisers, destroyers much faster than ours, broke through the trap at Leyte Gulf and on the morning of October 25th 1944, they were in our backyard. And by the time we went to GQ you could see some of our baby flat tops on fire from already being hit. And they started coming towards us and the ones who got the first brunt go after daylight broad daylight torpedo attack against superior, that's basically a suicide mission was the *Herrmann*, the *Hoel*, the *Johnson* from our taffy, we were taffy 3 I think they were taffy 2, and a destroyer escort by the name of Roberts went after the first one and they got clobbered. The *Johnson* was sunk the *Hoel* was sunk the *Herrmann* had about 40 or 50% casualties and then they started after us after they polished those off. We turned around and headed towards them because our orders were to stay between them and the baby flat tops. And we were ready for the second suicide attack against the Japanese. And just as we were heading into them and everybody was, I guess the Navy expression is browning your skivvy shorts.
- Mark: What does that mean?

Sam: Use your imagination [laughs]. It was, we were just getting ready to start shooting off our 5 inch guns for cover as we went in with the major job to lob a bunch of, we carried 10 torpedoes on top deck on the destroyer, to release our torpedoes. But we never got to release our torpedoes because our orders were changed to stay between the Japanese ships and between the baby flat tops. Our taffy groups was run in by a rain squall. And the minute we turned around we were the closest ship to the Japanese ships so they started firing and the salvos landed fairly close, close enough to make the ship buckle. Just about the time we, I gotta tell you about this one. One of these salvos landed real close and I'm up there on that smokestack on that platform with the guy who did the firing, who was also storekeeper. We both cover for cover and we're laying there flat on our stomach and he pats me on the shoulder and I says "yeah Bill? I don't think were gonna get to send our reports to the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts this month". I didn't know whether to hit him, laugh, or what. Anyhow we were very, very fortunate the Japanese ship. We sent out a one word message to Halsey, "Help", uncoded. And I guess the Japanese admirals orders were to inflict as much damage as possible. He disobeyed his orders and turned around. I guess he was afraid of Halsey getting down from up north, cutting him off, and they he knew what was left of the Japanese fleet, there wouldn't have been anything left. So that's the story I've read. As to why, there've been books written on this: why did he turn around when he did. He could have easily sank every ship in our group. They were much faster more firepower. So that was the toughest situation. So between that and the typhoon I'm very lucky to be sitting opposite you. The typhoon happened that was October 25th of '44, the typhoon was I think December 17th and 18th of '44.

Mark: I want to come back to the typhoon because I'm interested in that. As far as the battle is concerned you sort of the described the way it progressed and while this is going on your up on the deck.

Sam: I'm up on the smokestack at my battle station.

Mark: I'm just sort of curious as to what a Navy battle looks like. How far away are the ships?

Sam: We were probably 15, when we went to general quarters you could see, a clear day about 7 30 in the morning you could see some of our ships on fire, sinking. You could see those with the naked eye, you could see the Japanese ships coming toward you. I think it was the largest battleship in the world at the time, I think it was bigger than our New Jersey, Wisconsin class, the Japanese battleship. So you could see him coming, you know, you were wondering what the hell was going on. We were well prepped, this wasn't supposed to happen we knew what was supposed to happen. We were supposed to sink 'em all at the trap that our intelligence picked

up before they broke through that trap. But I guess that we didn't fire our guns, we were just getting ready to start firing our guns but we were fired at by a friendly plane from one of our carriers mistook us for one of the Japanese ships and started to strafe us. You could hear it on the loudspeaker, not the loudspeaker but the inter-ship communication system, you could hear em say US planes currently knocked off strafing US destroyer, well thankfully he missed. But you could see the water turn colors where the salvos had landed on the sides of the hip and dead ahead of the ship. You could see what it does to the water and you hear the impact and you could feel the shaking of the ship and like I say you're browning your skivvy shorts because you don't have the firepower to match them and you're thinking this is it. By some miracle if he doesn't turn around and peruses us for 15 minutes more I'm not here.

Mark: Now if I'm not mistaken Leyte Gulf was sort of the debut of the kamikaze.

Sam: Yeah. You started to see the kamikazes at Leyte Gulf and they were isolated incidents .

Mark: Did you see one at all?

Sam: Oh yeah, yeah. One time we were, it probably was at Leyte Gulf in the earlier stages but I fogot when, let me see if I have it in my notes here, I'll have to leave about 2:15 so I'll have to see what I've got here, uh Leyte that's October. Picked up fighter pilot with 18 Japanese planes to his credit. Attacked by heavy Jap task force, cruiser began firing at us, got to within 3000 yards, 5 salvos landed close by and how I was scared. Um I don't see anything about so it must have been about September or December before I saw the first kamikazes. And they would come in, single or maybe 2, and they were trying to get to the most important ships, which were the aircraft carriers. And as they were coming in you would, all your guns, this was daylight I would be using the automatic director and we would be firing at them and watching the tracers. I didn't know this then but I found out later that some place we actually had a piece of the kamikaze plane land on our ship. But we were not hit by one. The ships that weren't sunk every one of them took kamikazes at one time or another either at the Philippines or at Okinawa or at Iwo Jima. We followed up with the Philippines and then Louzon where the typhoon was, then came Iwo Jima and Okinawa and we were lucky there cause that when they started coming in big time.

Mark: Well when you read the history about World War II there's a lot made about the psychological effect of the kamikaze. What was your perspective?

Sam: It was hard to believe that they would do this. That they resorted to these in action, and you find out by the end that they were using 16 year old kids and all they were taught was how to take it up and point it down and sure it was scary as all hell because you could see em hit some of the ships close by you or they would fly right over you. One time were at what they call condition 1 easy, which means there's trouble in the area but your at your battle station but in a relaxed atmosphere and then all of a sudden, he was so damn close I swear to God I could have jumped up and touched him here come this Japanese plane and you could see the red circles underneath him. He flew directly over us and started to head in for the original Enterprise, the big carrier right behind us and he lost his nerve at the last second and took it back up, the only one I ever saw do that. Then what they call CAP, cover air patrol, shot him out of the sky in a hurry. But he came so close I swear I could have jumped up and gone with him. He came in real low so radar didn't pick him up and he came right over the bow of our ship.

Mark: Something you don't forget.

Sam: Oh yeah I got a good memory anyhow but those type of thing you never forget.

Mark: You mentioned your sort of pressed for time.

Sam: Yeah a little bit, another 10-15 minutes. 10 minutes.

Mark: Tell me a little bit about your experience after the war ended then I want to talk a little bit about your post war experience.

Sam: Ok. Well I gotta tell you a little but about lucky 'nother thing we survived. Were at Okinawa, D-Day at Okinawa was April 1st of '45. We were returning, after the night of D-Day we were at our battlestations, no not battle stations, we were at plane guard duty. We right behind the fan tail of one of the carriers till dusk when all the planes landed from the afternoon raids on the island that first day. Then our orders were to proceed to the outer screen, so were fishtailing through the formation, the big heavy task force, going back to the outer screen when the task force commander executes a maneuver, and when that happens the New Jersey, they were what about 40,000 ton and we were 2,100 was bearing down on us and it ended up as a side swipe and I was actually in the shower when we collided with the New Jersey off of Okinawa and I ran out of the shower room and grabbed a life jacket. So here I was in my birthday suit with a life jacket on ready to abandon ship because I didn't know what had happened. I thought we hit a mine or maybe a torpedo hit us. Then somebody said "Where the hell you going? Nobody said abandon ship yet." Well that got us out of there and the next day 200 kamikaze planes

hit our force and some of our sister ships took kamikaze. So there again if we wouldn't of hit the New Jersey on April 1st 1945 I might not be sitting here. Now I'll answer any other question you have.

Mark: After the war, you got discharged when?

Sam: I got discharged in May of 1946.

Mark: You didn't come back to Wisconsin right away?

Sam: Yeah I came back after I was discharged. I came back to Madison. I didn't stick around here long because my mother's health wasn't very good and they wanted her to go to Arizona for her health and I was the only single one in the family. So I came home in May and left again in July and found some living, got a job at the Army airbase on Tuscon, they had a spot at the airbase as a civilian attached to the fire department down there on the base and I sent for my mother and after I got the job and was there until about May and I tried to get into the University of Arizona, and they said "out of state resident, no way" so they kicked me out of there and wouldn't let me go to school so I quit my job and came back here in 47 and started at the UW at that time under the GI Bill.

Mark: Did the GI Bill cover the expenses?

Sam: Everything. The Army covered your expenses at the university your tuition, your books and supplies, your union membership fee. And you also got a check and in my case because I had some sort of a small service connected disability I got a little bigger check, I think I got about \$115 bucks a month and I was living at home so I saved a few bucks going to school.

Mark: Would you have gone to school without the GI Bill?

Sam: Yeah I think so. My brother went to college and the parents of my generation knew their children were going to have a better life. And that was everybody including the Black kids and the Italian kids. They knew that they had to get it through education.

Mark: What did you study?

Sam: I majored in accounting, business administration with a major in accounting at UW.

Mark: So when you got out did you have trouble finding work at all? There were a lot of vets...

- Sam: My graduating class was the largest graduating class in the history of the UW, 1950. And I went to work for Uncle Sam, I got a job with the VA for awhile in Saginaw, Michigan and I ended up taking an exam for the IRS and they were giving me a job back in Madison and my mother wasn't doing too good so I decided to come back to Madison and work for the IRS for quite a few years.
- Mark: Well in civil service there are veterans preference points. Were you conscious of that when you took these jobs?
- Sam: I don't know how much I benefited from it but I scored higher on the exams as a result. In other words if you scored a 90 on the exam you got a 95 or 96 because of the veterans points.
- Mark: Did the points attract you to government service?
- Sam: No. No. I actually had taken public finance in college and that sort of interested me in government. That's the reason I took some of those exams. But instead of getting into the public finance of government I got into the IRS end of it first.
- Mark: Now in terms of physical and emotional readjustments, did you have any difficulties? You mention you had a service connected disability.
- Sam: Oh yeah. I dunno how, well right near the end of the war before I got discharged I came down with facial paralysis, bellspalsy I think its referred to. During the treatments for that they effected a nerve or something and I developed what they called tenetis of the ear, just a steady ring and it drove me nuts. So it was in my service check and that was the service connected disability. Took me a long time before it cleared up, probably over 10 years.
- Mark: Did you have any sort of adjustments to make, say psychological adjustments for example. You'd been gone from home for a long time, experienced combat...
- Sam: No. And I just think I'm lucky to come out alive with the Leyte Gulf and the typhoon and you just thank the good Lord that you were one of the guys who came back because there were several guys in the neighborhood who didn't.
- Mark: I've just got one more thing I want to ask, I don't know if it applies to you and that's veterans organizations.
- Sam: I think I joined the VFW down in Tuscon, Arizona mainly because when my ear was bothering me down there, I tried to get treatment from the VA

and they says “the only way we can get you out, if you want to come in to the hospital as an in patient we can treat you. If you want to come in as an out patient you have to have a service connected disability. So they told me to go to the VFW”. So I think I joined the VFW chapter there mainly so I could get their help in getting the service connected disability, which I got, and then I got some treatments down there while I was working but I had to work to help support my mother down there.

Mark: And when you came back to Madison you never rejoined?

Sam: I did not join the Madison chapter. I don't know why, just didn't think about it. I usually send money to them every year but I just didn't join it.

Mark: Well those are all the questions I had. Is there anything you would like to add?

Sam: No I think I covered it pretty much. One interesting thing, Ernie Pyle died on Iwo Jima I believe, just prior to that he was with our group in the fast carrier task force and he witnessed one of the guys from our ship rescuing some pilots. So they sent over a message and he wrote an article that hit the newspapers and its also the last chapter of his book cause after he wrote us and he names the guys from our ship Mel Collins, Calloway, Battis, I guess the three guys that did the work. First Class Calloway, Philadelphia, Melvin Collins of Iowa, and he writes them up and goes over to Iwo Jima to cover the ground operation and gets killed himself. Our ship is mentioned in the last chapter of Ernie Pyle's book.

Mark: I'll look it up. Thanks for coming in.

Sam: You're entirely welcome.

[End of Interview]