

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
FRED RISSER
Medic, Navy, World War II.

2002

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Risser, Fred A., (b.1927). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Risser, a Madison, Wis. native, discusses his military service as a Navy medic immediately following World War II. Discussed is his entry into military service including religious and moral convictions against carrying weapons, eye-strengthening program, and sudden departure to Great Lakes Naval Training Center (Illinois) before high school graduation. He characterizes a lighter basic training program for medical corpsmen and discusses integration of African Americans into his program. His crash course at Medic Corps School in San Diego (California) and travels are described as enjoyable. Depicted are his strategies in getting assignment choices first at the Naval Air Station in Rhode Island and then at Coco Solo Air Station in Panama. Risser addresses Jim Crow segregation in the Panama Canal Zone and tells a story about gold and silver drinking fountains. Additional discussion involves his work assignments with a crash boat in the Canal, closed psychiatric ward, and venereal and sexual disease cases. Risser talks about his recreational activities in the military and characterizes himself as "somewhat of a loner" who did not like regimented military life, but enjoyed the opportunity to travel and see new things. Mentioned is tobacco use in the military, military food, and use of salt peter in the food. Risser addresses differences between freshman veterans and non-veterans at Carleton College which he attended on the GI Bill. As a Wisconsin legislator, Risser feels that his interest in mental health, venereal disease, and birth control legislation can be attributed to his military experiences. He concludes by picturing what he did during the attack on Pearl Harbor and then discusses differences between Pearl Harbor and the September 11th Terrorist Attack.

Biographical Sketch:

Risser (b. May 5, 1927) enlisted in the Navy as a medic in 1945. The war ended while he was in basic training and he continued with his military service until being honorably discharged in 1946 to attend Carleton College (Minnesota). After earning his law degree at the University of Oregon, Risser set up private practice in Madison and was elected first to the Wisconsin Assembly where he served from 1956 to 1962 and then to the Wisconsin Senate where he has served from 1962 to present.

Interviewed by Mike Hollander

Transcribed by Crystal Olson and Noreen Warren, 2010

Checked and Corrected by Channing Welch, 2011

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Interview Transcript:

Mike: An interview with Fred Risser who served with the Navy during World War II. This interview is being conducted at his office in the State Capitol. The date is June 7, 2002, and the interviewer is Mike Hollander.

Tell me, Senator, about your background and life circumstances before entering the military service.

Fred: [Laughs] Well, I'm a lifelong resident of Madison, Wisconsin, and I am currently in the State Legislature. You asked about my background. Well, I was born and raised in Madison, and my father was an attorney, served as District Attorney in Dane County for six years, served in the Wisconsin State Senate for twelve years, and was active in the Progressive LaFollette political movement.

I had one brother who died at age forty-four. And I was raised, went to a small—raised in Madison, as I say, I went to a small country school, Highlands- Mendota Beach, now called Crestwood. When I went to school there were two classes per room. It was a school that had a rather small enrollment. I think our class was under twenty. I was the salutatorian, in other words, the second academically in the class. My brother was the salutatorian of his class one year later, which was, again, second academically in the class.

I had a very healthy period of existence. I was interested in politics from the very beginning because my father was. And I had interest in political activity, as I say, because of my dad I always knew I was going to follow in his footsteps. I was interested in civics, and in school I participated in school government. After I got out of grade school I went to Madison West High School and was active in a number of school activities. I don't think I had a particularly extraordinary life experience. I'm not exactly sure what you're interested in.

Mike: Well, just the general background. That was great.

Fred: Well, let me say that I was not in the city. I was out in the country at that time. Where I now live it was country and now is a part of the city. So, I didn't really participate in a lot of group activity. I won't say I was a loner, but I lived with my parents and brother, and education was considered very important to the family, and we enjoyed what I would call was a fairly normal lifestyle.

Mike: Can you describe your entering into military service?

Fred: Yes. Let me start off by saying that when the war started, as far as this country was concerned, I was fourteen years of age. I was a student, and I remember listening to the radio. We didn't have TV at the time, and hearing about the Pearl Harbor incident. At that time I thought to myself, "Boy, am I lucky. I'm only fourteen years of age, and the war will be over before I'm old enough to be drafted." There was a draft in existence at the time. And, you know, all our wars were relatively short. They didn't last too long, and I was thinking again, how fortunate I was, and I was thinking that we were fortunate too, that my dad was beyond the normal draft age, too. So we didn't really think at that time that we would ever become personally involved in the war effort from the standpoint of actually participating in the military.

I followed the war quite closely, having an interest in politics and foreign affairs. I, at that time being fourteen, knew all the answers to everything. And I was of the impression that since we had a great big ocean between what was going on overseas and this county the war was overseas, it was removed from any immediate problem. And I guess I just felt at age fourteen that I was pretty fortunate.

Of course the war continued on, and I became fifteen, then became sixteen became seventeen, and the war, it wasn't over yet. And so I started thinking, "Well, now what exactly are we gonna do when I hit eighteen?" At that time there was a draft, and if you hit the eighteen years of age you were subject to the draft, and once you were drafted—and everyone was drafted who was physically fit, you went where they sent you. However, there were certain programs that you could get in in advance of the draft. In other words, in order to encourage people to go into certain programs that the military wanted they would give you certain opportunities if you agreed before you turned eighteen to go into their program. For example, the Navy needed medics. And so, they [Approx. 5 sec. pause in tape; restarts with "needed medics."] had a program where if you would enlist directly into the Navy Medical Corps prior to your 18th birthday they would guarantee that you could finish high school, and then they would take you in, and you would participate in that particular program. There were other programs.

I had fairly strong moral and religious convictions, and I had to struggle with myself as to exactly what I wanted to do in the effort. I'm one that doesn't have a lot to do with guns, and I'm not particular—and I would have a hard time shooting someone, quite honestly. But there's lot more to wars than shooting people; there's lot of other activities. Through the process of my own moral review of the situation and my own feelings that I rationalized pretty strongly that I would like to try the Medical Corps and get into the Navy medics.

But now there was a problem because you had to have pretty good eyesight, and I wore glasses, and I had farsightedness and astigmatism. And, as I remember, after I came to the conclusion that going into service I wanted to go into the medics because quite frankly I thought in high school, that while I thought I'd be a lawyer I also thought I might go into medicine. I wanted to be a professional person. I enjoyed that type of activity, too. Some months before I turned eighteen I entered into a program that—a private program—to try strengthen my eyes. I remember that my parents sent me to an individual who had you drink a lot of carrot juice and go through eye exercises in effort to build up my eyes to the point where I could pass the Navy eye exam. Other people had done this and been successful. To make a long story short, I took the eye exam, and I quite frankly I flunked it. And I was very upset. I asked for a retest. I didn't flunk it by much. The eye exam just consisted of looking at a chart and seeing how far down you could read. And while I don't say this out loud, what I did, I put on my glasses and memorized the correct line. So that when they gave me the retest my memory got me through. So I passed the test and got into the Navy medics that way.

So I signed up before I was eighteen, went back to school and figured on finishing. My birthday was May 5th and school was out, I believe, the middle of June at that time. Anyway, we'd been guaranteed—there were others in the same boat I was in—that we'd be able to finish high school.

What happened was that shortly after I was sworn in, and again I had to be sworn in before I was eighteen to escape the draft to get into the Navy. Shortly after that the Germans surrendered, and the full effort of the military was to go—westward towards Japan, and they started calling up those persons that had signed up in the service ahead of time. In other words, while I had been guaranteed that I'd finish school and then could go into the military, they decided that they wanted us all in right away. So those who were in somewhat the same program I was were notified that we could finish school after we had to go into the service. That at the time bothered me a little bit, but you know, there's a plus and a minus because the plus was that I went around and all the teachers gave me final grades without my having to take final tests. In other words, they, as a matter of record, completed my high school education. The minus of course, I felt at that time that I missed out on all the graduation activities, the social activities, and what not, and I was somewhat upset. But I hopped the bus and ended up in Great Lakes [Illinois], and I was at Great Lakes Naval Training School when most of my classmates were graduating from Madison West High School.

Mike: Okay, and you entered into the Navy.

Fred: Yes, and I was stationed at Great Lakes, the boot camp. Everyone that went into the Navy from this area ended up at Great Lakes for several months. And of course at Great Lakes the job was to learn how to march, and take orders and have your hair cut, and so forth and so on.

Those of us who were in the Medical Corps were treated a little bit differently. Actually, we didn't have to do quite as much [laughs] dirty work as some of the others. Most of the people who went through Great Lakes had a training program where they had to do quite a bit of work that wasn't the most desirable. We had to do all the marching and everything, but being in the Medical Corps we knew, for example, that we were going to school as soon as we got out of Great Lakes. We were going to Corps School. We went through the marching, and of course the marching is to get people to follow directions without thinking. In other words, they march you up and down and change directions, and you are supposed to keep changing directions at the call of the leader without thinking about whether it's the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do. The purpose of Great Lakes and any boot camp of course is to get you psyched up for following orders and what not.

The corpsmen all knew they were going to school and not going on shipboard right away, and it seemed like, as I remember, that we escaped some of the worst details, but it was still a boot camp, and I was glad to get out.

Mike: Do you remember anything about your induction interview and physical?

Fred: Well, I mentioned the eye exam and how I had to sort of memorize the line in the chart. I was physically fit. I had no particular problems. And my brother who was about a year and a half younger than I was had bad problems with asthma and respiratory problems and was classified 4F at the time he was examined some years later. But I had no problems in passing the exam. It was a group effort.

They'd line you up and strip you down and look you over. And when you finally got into boot camp, of course, they'd cut all the hair off your head, and you'd have to let it grow on again, which was an experience. I don't remember anything out of the ordinary as far as the physical was concerned except it was sort of a group physical, and I was grouped in with a number of others that were going through it at the same time. I think they were interested in getting us through as fast as they could.

Of course at boot camp we had to pass certain physical tests like push-ups and pull-ups and certain calisthenics. We were supposed to be able to tread water for a few minutes and a few things like that, and they would test us on that. But that was after we got into the service. To get us in, it

seemed like they weren't too particular. At that time every able-bodied male was participating in the war effort. And if for some reason you didn't want to, if you were conscientious objector you were signed up for several years service, and you were involved in the war effort one way or another. The only exceptions of course were some of the people that were really physically unfit such as my brother, but that didn't apply to me.

Mike: Can you describe the Great Lakes camp and the facilities?

Fred: Great Lakes was one of the bigger boot camps in existence at that time. And it was barrack facilities where you slept in barracks, and you slept in double bunks, I mean, one above and one below. The group I was in, we were all about the same age. They were all seventeen-eighteen year olds. We didn't mix with older individuals. Most of the older individuals who had gone into service had already gone in. So they were bringing up the new crop, you might say, at the time.

There was one part, though, that was different. And that's that Harry Truman became president, and he integrated the Navy. I don't know whether he integrated all the services or not, but I do know that our company was one of the first companies that had both blacks and whites. Prior to that time, in fact I remember that at Great Lakes that most of the marching companies were either all black or all white. They had segregated companies. Truman desegregated the Navy, and ours was one of the first units to be desegregated.

So we had a few blacks in, and we also had some whites from south of the Mason-Dixon Line who weren't very happy about that. It caused a little conflict, but it worked out. I can remember everything was done alphabetically. And my name was Risser, and a fellow by the name of Rice followed me. He was a fellow from Georgia, and he just didn't like blacks. He would mumble under his breath periodically about the fact that the—and he wouldn't use a friendly term about them. They would smell and be just not human you might say. He was really a racist.

I can remember when we were sitting down—at one time we went to a event where we were sitting more or less by alphabetical order, and it so happened that my friend that time was assigned a seat next to a black, and he wouldn't sit next to the black. He asked me to sit between them. I mean, there was a resentment amongst certain parties from, as they say the South, not all, to this integration. And our company being one of the first that was integrated—it was different because we marched around. We had some blacks as well as mostly whites in the company.

Other than that series of incidences, I can't think of anything that was particularly different than from what other companies were involved in.

The idea of course was to get up and march around every day and get to the point where you are following orders, right or wrong. As you progressed you saw all new people coming in, and you became more senior.

I think the boot camp experience was probably a two or three month experience. And I knew all along that once I got out I was going to be going to Corps School where a lot of the people who weren't in the program I was in did not know what they were doing. I might say that our whole company was corpsmen. So that they all knew in our company that we were going to Corps School. And as I say, I think sometimes our company was treated a little different than others because we were pre-professional individuals.

Mike: Do you have any memorable instructors or friends?

Fred: You know I did not keep contact with anyone that I was in boot camp with except for one individual who was from Madison who I went into school with. In fact, I still see him now and then. He and I went in together, went through boot camp together, and then lost track of each other. And he ended up somewhere, and I ended up somewhere. And then after we got back into the Madison community we discovered each other and so maintained a relationship.

But as far as building up friendships with individuals in boot camp that were lifetime, I can't honestly say that I developed any new lifetime friends in the boot camp period. I didn't particularly like the military. I don't like being told what to do; I guess I'm independent in that respect. And the best part of boot camp was mail call when the mail came in, and the cookies came from home, and I was more or less counting the days until it was over with.

Mike: What did you do for recreation?

Fred: I did not smoke or drink—or gamble. So, I did not participate with the smokers or the drinking group or the gambling group. I had one experience. I did participate in a poker game once. And I lost a weeks or months pay, and that cured me. I couldn't fathom the fact that in wasting an afternoon—and it was beautiful weather outside—wasting an afternoon and being tensed up and money coming and going and then ending up in the hole, it just seemed such a waste to me. It cured me from any gambling, and I never really participated in anything like that before.

I never smoked in my life, and at that time people smoked fairly heavily. There were free cigarettes given out that would get people addicted to the smoking, and I always gave mine away. There was also a—at the same

time there was ration. There were ration cards for smoking, and I always gave those away. I never used them.

I just never participated in the drinking bouts that occurred. I would drink a little beer once in a while, but coming from a German family beer wasn't considered drinking in my family. We always had beer from the time I can remember, but never to any extreme.

I used to bowl; I like to bowl a little bit. When I had an opportunity I used to—when I had the ability to get out of camp I'd take off, and I'd either—well, I was close enough to home so I could come home. If I had anytime at all or if I had a short time I would roam around. I was somewhat of a loner, roam around to various—they had—oh, the Red Cross had recreational activities. They'd have sometimes dances and social events. There were certain communities where they'd have certain social events. I was not married, nor did I have any steady girlfriend at the time so I would go to some of those events just use up my time you might say. And again, that was different than some. Some of the people actually were married at that age, and many of them had steady girlfriends or were engaged, but that wasn't my situation so I was a little freer to engage in whatever kind of activity I wanted to engage in.

Mike: So then after basic training you went to the Medic Corps School?

Fred: Yes, in San Diego, and I liked San Diego. I'd never done much traveling, and I liked to get as much—I figured in the Navy I might as well do as much traveling as I could, and I ended up in San Diego. And the San Diego Zoo was, at that time, the area was a Corps School. It was a beautiful facility. San Diego was a small town at that time, you might say. It's a big city now. But the weather was beautiful, and I enjoyed the location.

We went to Corps School. As I say, the boot camp was close to three months. Corps school was another, let's see, probably another three months. And it was very intensive. I enjoyed it. We studied, and we learned how to sew people up, dispense drugs, and do things that doctors take three or four years to learn how to do. We had a crash program and did it in a very short time. It was like school, and I didn't mind school. I kind of liked school.

The way it worked at that time is that if you got the top grades—if you were an A student, you got the top grades—when you got done with Corps School you had a chance to choose out of possible hospitals or locations where you wanted to go. And your choice was based on your standing in class. So, if you were the top person in the class you got your first choice out of maybe three or four or five places. That was true with the A

students. Then the top students had their own schedule, and then from the B students on down they had their choices, too. In other words, you took the top 5 percent or 10 percent and sprinkled them around the hospitals. Then you took the other 90 percent and sprinkled them around. What I'm really saying is that if you were in the top, in the A class, you would get your first choice; if you were bottom A you get your last choice. If you were top B you get your first choice because of the next grouping.

Well anyway, I was probably a low A student. And I was not gonna be getting my choice of where I wanted to go. So, I intentionally dropped my grades down to a high B. So, consequently I was in the beginning group of chosen so—but, anyhow I wanted to travel so when choice came around they had some openings on the East Coast so I decided to take one of those openings.

And I had, as I say, one of the first choices because I was high in my grade group, and I went to Rhode Island. That was my choice. So I crossed the country by train. And it was a troop train. You might say it was an experience in itself. It was interesting. I did not go to Newport, Rhode Island [Navel] Hospital. I went to a Naval air station. They assigned me, there's a Naval air station, and at that time the way the military was organized hospital corpsmen did everything. They didn't just take care of medical things. They did everything from the commissary, they ran the program from top to bottom. In other words, they'd use—it was sort of a separate, I won't say elite, but they were just sort of like—you know the Marines are different than the infantry. Well, the other Corps School people were different than the rest of the Navy. And, ah, and they did everything—so I didn't get much medical action in Rhode Island. I was more or less assigned to work in food services, unloading trucks for instance, stacking things up, I had to find storage. It seemed to me I was doing more in the commissary work than the medical work at that-at that location. And of course, no sooner did I get there that I wanted to try to find the next place to go.

And at that time the war had actually—by the time I got to Rhode Island the war had ended because this was in the fall. Probably—I was in Corps School—well, the truth is the war ended—I was in, I was still in boot camp when the Japanese surrendered. And I remember that certain people were able to go out and celebrate the surrender, and I was confined to camp at the time. And at the time it bothered me a little bit because I was reading all these—seeing all these pictures, reading all these stories about how the sailors would get on the street and everyone would hug each other, you know. And everyone was euphoric because the war was over. And I had to spend that particular period in boot camp.

So the war was over. And when I was in Rhode Island, uh, there weren't too many people being shipped out of the country. But they had a point system, and people that were overseas got a half point extra per month, I guess. So they were bringing people back to the United States and discharging them, and at the same time a few people were going out of the United States to replace them. So my goal shortly after I got to Rhode Island was to try to find opportunity to go overseas. I wanted to—and they weren't sending many of them over, many of us overseas, but they were sending a few of us.

Ah, this was during the winter time that I was there. As I said I was at boot camp from roughly May to August. And I was in Corps School in September and October, and I probably got into Rhode Island somewhere around November-December. It was cold and snowy out. I spent my first Christmas in there, in Rhode Island, by choice. Actually, they had—some of us had an opportunity to take either Christmas or New Years off. And I was in the group that had the choice of which one. And I had a friend who was married who wanted in the worst way to go home for Christmas. So I filled in for him at Christmas, and then I went back to Wisconsin at New Years. So I spent Christmas in Rhode Island and New Years back in Wisconsin, and shortly after that I left the country.

It's kind of interesting how I got out of the country. As I say, they weren't sending too many of us out. But they were sending a few out to replace, not to the front lines because there were no front lines anymore, but there were hospitals that needed to be staffed, and they were sending home some of the veterans that had been in service for a number of years. And I built up a friendship with the sort of the master at arms or whoever it is that had charge of assigning people and worked out an arrangement where I tried to get out of the country. And I finally sort of—I won't say I bribed my way out, but I worked on it to get out.

And they did decide to ship me out, and I thought I was going to Africa, but I ended up in Panama. And, uh, I left the States in winter time and ended up in Panama which was a hot, sticky place for me, in the middle of winter. I was stationed in what was called Coco Solo Naval Air Station. It is no longer in existence; I looked it up on the website the other day. That's Coco Solo. It's near Cristóbal in Panama. It's on the opposite side of the canal from Panama City. Panama City's on one side; Cristóbal's on the other side.

Ah, at that time by the way, Panama did not have a roadway across the isthmus. The only way you could get across the isthmus was by train. And I had built up a friendship with an individual whose father had worked on the railroad, and anyway I had railroad passes through that. So I frequently

when I had time off would take the train back and forth across the Canal Area.

But again, as I pointed out the Medical Corps was structured so that those corpsmen, and I was a corpsman, did other things than take care of ill people. We took care of the mess, the messes, I mean the food. We took care of the administrative work. We took care of everything from top to bottom, if you know what I mean. And in Panama had a number of experiences; I was assigned to different—different things.

I often remember that when I first got to Panama—we flew, they flew us down. And we didn't take a ship, a boat, they flew us down, and I was thirsty. It was a rough ride. I got off the plane and there were two drinking fountains together, and they had the name above. One said, "gold," and the other said, "silver." And I noticed that there was—nearby there were two restrooms, and one said gold and one said silver. And this was in the Canal Zone. Now remember, I was sort of a naïve eighteen year old at the time, and I assumed that, well, I'm white so I'm supposed to drink out of the silver, and colored people will drink out of gold. So I took a drink out of the fountain marked silver, and I was grabbed by the back of the neck, and they pulled me away from it, "What are you doing? What are you drinking out of that for?" I said, "Well, I was thirsty, and I used the white—silver" "Which is worth more, gold or silver? Gold is worth more. You drink out of the gold fountain." And I learned that the same thing on the restroom, you went to the gold restroom because the whites were worth more, and gold meant white, and silver meant everyone else. So that was one of my early experiences with segregation.

The Canal Zone was very segregated, but once you got out of the Canal Zone the segregation disappeared. And so you had buses, and in the Canal Zone at that time, this was in 1946—5 or 6. Ah, the buses would have their little movable sign, and the whites sat in the front in the Canal Zone. As soon as that bus driver—the bus driver's usually black—as soon as he got out of the Canal Zone immediately he'd get up and pick that divider up, and it would disappear. There was no segregation in Panama proper. But, there was very—quite a bit of segregation in the Canal Zone. And that sort of made an impression on me because I wasn't used to segregated facilities particularly.

But, the situation was that. Actually I had a pretty good deal in the Canal Zone because of the segregation, and the difference—differences—they had all the dirty work done by Panamanians. And so while in the States we would have our own people cleaning up the floors and toilets and whatnot. Once we got in the Canal Zone all that was done by local people. And those of us in the Navy lived a better lifestyle. We didn't have to do that

type of things. And it made me feel a little funny sometimes that we weren't allowed to do things like that.

Let me give you another incident. As I said I like to bowl a little bit. I've been a member bowling league back here. Anyway, I had a friendly Panamanian kid who was setting pins; he was a pinsetter. They didn't have automatic pinsetters; they had to do it by hand at the time. And I bowled a lot, and I remember bowling and this kid setting pins for awhile, and I felt that I wanted to set pins for awhile so he could bowl. So I started setting pins for him. I was immediately pulled aside. He said, "You don't do that. You don't set pins. That's what they're there for." I said well, he's a, you know, just a nice friend of mine, and I just was—nope, that was a no-no. I guess what I'm saying is at *that* time the segregation was almost enforced on—on people whether they wanted it or not.

I did, as I indicate, have different duties down in Panama. I worked in a psychiatric—closed psychiatric ward for a number of months. I worked in a ward that dealt with venereal disease, sexual disease cases. Most of the time I worked on a crash boat. In other words, what I did, I was assigned to a small boat, and we floated around that section of the Canal. We spent most of our time picking up logs and what not. But the idea was that if a plane should happen to come in and crash—that's why you call it a crash boat—I'd be a corps person on the boat, and I'd be the first to get to the plane to help out. We never had any plane crashes while I was there, and as I understand after I left Panama they abolished that activity. But at least it was kind of fun. I'd be able to swim in the Canal and sun myself, and life was very easy there.

In the psychiatric ward, again, it was interesting. Work, if anything really dirty or messy came along they had local people to do the work. We sort of chatted—chitchatted with the individuals and tried to keep their morale up and talked to them if they had some problems and what not.

By the way, prostitution was legal in certain areas. So we had number of some sailors that would get themselves into trouble, would end up with venereal disease, and we'd have to give shots. And I gave an awful lot of shots. That's one thing I did do. Penicillin shots were the shots then. And the interesting thing that came out of that is if the person was in that ward was an officer he was never diagnosed as having a sexually transmitted disease. He was always diagnosed as having a bad cold or respiratory infection or something. It never showed on his record. But if it was an enlisted man far down the line it would say venereal disease or syphilis or whatnot.

We had a number of those cases, as I say, prostitution—and there was a red light district down there, and people would visit. In fact, some of us

would go down there just to try to patrol the area. We were given shore patrol duty. That means that we were given a club and a badge and supposed to wander around town to keep our people in line. And everyone had to do that once in awhile. Even the corpsmen had to do it. But we limited ourselves pretty much to the area where the corps people would go. And I can remember wandering up and down the brothels of—on shore patrol duty. We tried to let individuals know what could happen. I remember they had movies and lectures on the dangers of participating in sexual activity. But you found there were certain ones that did it anyway. I never had any desire to get involved in that type of activity, but I have to admit it was kind of interesting to see what other people would do.

But, all in all, my experience in Panama—and I was there for—until I was discharged, was very interesting and enjoyable, really, because we didn't have any really tough duty. We had the—Panamanians that did the tough duty. We had very clean quarters. We had cleaner quarters than I had in the United States. They were kept very clean. The Canal Zone was a sort of unique zone. I enjoyed leaving the Canal Zone and wandering around the city, and again I was not exactly a loner, but not exactly a groupie either. I didn't participate in drinking bouts or the gambling bouts that some people did. I picked up my extra half a point per month and the

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

policy changed in Washington. Those veterans who were going to go back into school, they gave a little preference to getting out and discharging. You realize the draft was still in existence, and people were still being drafted into the services to replace the many that were being discharged. Anyway, I applied to a number of small schools and with the help of my father applied to the Carleton College in Minnesota. And I got accepted there as I remember while I was still in service subject to being able to get back and going to school. And that helped me—the point system was—I think you got a point for every month in service plus a half a point additional if you were overseas or something. Anyway, my point system was such that I was sort of again right on the line, and the fact that I'd been accepted into school gave me another little boost. Came back to the States and was discharged in time to get into school. So I actually spent less than two full years in the service. I missed the end of high school and the very beginning of college a year on down the line. Then of course I had the GI Bill to help me through. I have often said that I got more out of service than they got out of me because I spent less than two years in service and had something like four years of GI Bill to help me out in college.

Mike: Can you describe some of your life in the military? Like what you did on a typical day, or if there was anything you did for good luck [?].

Fred: My life in the military—well, it depended on where we were. As I say, Panama was almost like a—it was a foreign country, but it was a different existence than living in the military in the States. In the military in the States we had our details. We had a structure in which we had to clean the toilets, rooms, and we had to stand guard and watch whether it was needed or not—that that was part of the structure. We had our times when we had to get up and times we had to go to bed.

I didn't like the regimentation particularly. I'm sort of a free spirit, and I remember that you had to keep your shoes shined, and you had to keep your various possessions in your bag, and we had a duffle bag—which I still have to this day—in which we had all our worldly goods that could go into. The day started out with a bugle. I can remember that. I use to hate that bugle. It seemed to go off awful early sometimes, but they—the Navy and the Army—I guess all military, they all start the day off with the bugle it seems. That would be the beginning of the day. We were given very limited amount of time to dress up and shower and clean up. And then the first real activity was breakfast. And there again you would fall in line and wait your turn. We were restricted. You had to eat starting at a certain time and ending at a certain time. It wasn't something you could be leisurely involved in.

The one thing that disturbed me a lot was that people smoked an awful lot, and you know I didn't smoke. Not only did I not smoke, I just didn't like smoking. The secondhand smoke—what they call secondhand smoke in fact bothered me. During the day they used to have smoke breaks. And if you smoked you got a break to smoke, but if you didn't smoke you didn't get breaks. And what would happen is that some people would take up smoking just to get those breaks. But I can remember doing different duties, and it was a smoke break time, and just those that smoked got the break because—and I think some people picked up the habit because of that.

But our days were very, very regulated. I was a young eighteen year old for most of my Navy time and nineteen, and we had our work cut out for us. It wasn't a matter of living off the base; we always lived on the base. It wasn't matter of wearing civilian clothes at times; we always wore Navy clothes. We were *told* what clothes to wear. For instance, in San Diego it cooled off in the evening. We were to wear our dark clothes in the evening. Where in other areas we were to wear the white clothes. We were told exactly what to wear, and sometimes you had to see on the board what the uniform of the day was. We had to wash our own clothes except when we got to Panama we had someone else do all that work.

The day was very regulated. In boot camp it was just—we had our marching time and whatnot. And in this Corps School it was in school; we were in school all the time. It was regular school activity, and then we had time to study. It was almost like being a civilian except that you had the barracks to live in and you had the uniform to wear. We always wore the uniform; we didn't wear civilian clothes at all.

When I was located in the hospital area I'd make rounds with the doctors. The corps people would—if they were assigned to a particular doctor and help make their rounds. Like when I was working in either the psychiatric wards or the other wards there would be a doctor to make the rounds, and he'd have a corpsman would go around with him, and the corpsman would write certain things in the record. That's how I happen to know that officers never were diagnosed as having socially contracted diseases—contacted diseases, but others were.

The free time is what we'd look forward to. And when I was in, anywhere when I was in San Diego when I was free I would hitchhike up to Los Angeles for recreation. I did a lot of hitchhiking. I enjoyed hitchhiking around the country and did a lot later hitchhiking. But when you were in a uniform you were able to get rides much faster in those days. The days we looked forward to were the days we had off. We would know if we were gonna get a day off, a weekend off, usually several weeks before. We didn't get every weekend off. I can't tell you how often we got off. But we would look forward to those times we would have off, and then we would go out and go to the—we often went to, as I say, the Red Cross had their social activities, and other groups would have social activities. Some of the churches would have social things for the military, and then being sort of footloose and fancy free I'd go to those.

Back to your original question, I can't think of anything that would be somewhat unique as far as our activities are concerned. They kept us busy. I was not particularly enthralled with the military lifestyle. I was looking forward to going to college; I was college bound from the beginning. And I was sort of looking forward to mail call and cookies and letters that would come through and sort of counting the time until I could get back in the mainstream again. I enjoyed reading the papers and listening to the news on the radio, but again, TV didn't come into existence for me until sometime later.

Mike: What was the food like?

Fred: The food. Some of the food was miserable, and I can't think of any really good food I had. The milk was powdered milk. I loved milk, but the powdered milk in the cereal—it just didn't taste right. But that's how they shipped it around. They use to, I don't know how much they did, but they

use to put saltpeter in the food for the men to try to keep their sexual hormones from exploding I guess. They, ah—it was mass produced food. And as a general rule it was good fuel, but some of it wasn't particularly good. I remember that powdered milk. We just couldn't eat it, that's—drink it. Oftentimes they would put chocolate with it to try to give it a different flavor to it. But coming from a dairy state where milk was part of the daily habit I just thought that the milk was probably the worst [laughs] part of the meal. And it was all powdered as they say.

Ah, there was some rationing going on in the country at the time, and so we didn't have as much fresh fruit or vegetables as I'd like. It was all canned. Canned vegetables are not things that—they were boxed I should say; I don't want to say cans. It was warmed up, and it wasn't particularly good. I can't think of any good meals I had. Served as fuel, and of course at that age you don't pay as much attention to good food and bad food as you do now. Now I like a good meal and look forward to it. But, ah, then it was just a—the meal period was a time you got to sit down and rest for a few minutes, but it wasn't particularly an enthusiastic time for me.

Mike: Can you talk about your discharge from the military?

Fred: Yeah, that's interesting because as I told you all along I really wasn't too thrilled with the military. I was serving my time, and I made the best of it. I enjoyed the traveling and whatnot. When it came time to discharge I just couldn't wait to get out. And I was absolutely certain that the sooner I got out the better, and I was going get as far away from things as possible, get back to school and practice—get into law school as soon as I could.

I had a series of lectures and at that time they were trying to build up the Reserves, and I was sure that would never happen to me. But they gave us a series of lectures, and talked about if you would sign up for four years in the Reserve that they would upgrade you maybe from a corpsman to pharmacist mate or something like that. And you'd get a little bonus. And if you were in the Reserves you were better off than if you weren't because if there was another war they would be calling up the new people. The Reserves would be in reserve, for back later. After all you were a veteran, and veterans would be the last ones called, and so forth and so on. It was quite a pitch. And believe it or not—I still can't believe it today—believe it or not, I signed up for the Reserves. And a four years stint in the Reserves I got my little bonus, I got my little upgrade. I got my pin. I got my little badge. And I got the feeling that, well, if I'm in the Reserves, if there is another war—we didn't know if there would be another war—if there was another war they would call up everyone first. And being in the Reserves as a veteran you'd be the last ones called up.

What happened of course is that Korea came up. And a number of the reservists were the first ones called rather than the last ones called. And actually I had some friends that signed up in the Reserves the same time I did who were called into Korea. I was not because at the time I was in school, and there was an exemption, more or less, for those reservists who didn't have too much time left in the Reserve who were actively pursuing school courses. We, as a matter of public policy again emanating out of Washington, were not necessarily called up first. And I guess I was in the, I think I might have even been in law school at the time, and I was worried. I thought that I was gonna get in the Korean conflict. But I didn't, and my Reserve period came up, and I can tell you that I did not re-enlist in the Reserve. I counted the days until my Reserve period was up. So I didn't get in the Korean conflict even though I was in the Reserves because I was in school at the time, and my Reserve period was just about up. And, ah, I did not reenlist. But I have to admit they must have given an awful good pitch because I was sure I wasn't gonna—I was gonna get as far away from the military as possible when I was discharged, and yet they got me to sign up in the Reserves.

I've always said that I got more out of the service than the service got out of me because I was in for less than two years, and I got four years out of the GI Bill, and I got a great experience, too. And I did a lot of traveling. I went to the East Coast, West Coast, got down to Panama, places I'd never been before. I was in good health when I went in and good health when I got out. So overall the experience was a very good lifetime experience for me. Though at the time I was sort of an impatient person, waiting to get on with my life, and the war was over, and the fighting was over so discharge was something that was on everyone's mind, those who wanted to get back into civilian life.

Mike: What was it like when you first got home?

Fred: Ah, when I first got home I came back to my home in Madison. And actually I didn't have much time here because I, as I indicated, I signed up to go to school at Carleton College. And so I don't remember there being hardly any time because I had to ship off right away to Carleton, which is in Northfield, Minnesota which I could get to by train or by car. At that time there was a good train connection there. I went right into college and into a dormitory, and so my transition was not from the service to home. It was from the service right into school.

And when I was in college there were a lot of veterans. And also there was a group of non-veterans coming along. In other words, the draft was still in existence, but it wasn't as all inclusive as it had been. And so there was a mixture in the freshman class that I was in of people right out of high school and veterans of different ages. And the veterans seemed to have a

different attitude than did the non-veterans. For instance the non-veterans seemed to be more involved in fraternities and sororities and that type of social activities. Primarily with the veterans who went back to school, so far as I could see, were interested in catching up, interested in making up the lost time, interested in getting to work and going to school. And so we didn't go along with the little freshmen who wanted to wear the green hats or stuff like that. That was in the—the veterans felt that—well, I wasn't twenty-one when I was in school, and yet I was, as I told you, I felt that I could drink beer if I wanted to. And of course the age limit was twenty-one in Minnesota at the time. It was not supposed to be done. We had little conflicts with that. The veterans, by and large, seemed to be more dedicated and older than some of the younger, non-veterans coming in.

I really didn't have a transition period home. Home didn't really fit in. I went right down to school, and my difference was between school and service rather home.

Mike: You talked about the one fellow you were friends with in Madison. You kept contact with after you came home. Where there any other close friendships that you made in the service?

Fred: Ah, I had some pen pals that I made contact with that really I didn't live with. In fact, just in that respect, I got a letter the other day from a friend of mine who is ninety-one years of age who is still typing his own letters, and he was a pen pal. I don't know where I met him, but he was with me. He was a medic who I contacted through a mutual friend. At one time I wanted to write letters, and I found people to write letters to, and we've kept up a running correspondence for some fifty years.

I would be hard put right now to name even a dozen or maybe a half a dozen people that I served with. And I can't think of that many that—other than people that might have come out of Madison who had been in high school with me—that I built a friendship with. In service you keep—you see I moved around. I was never in one place more than, except Panama, I was never in one place more than three months. In boot camp less than three months, Corps School less than three months, Rhode Island less than three months, and then in Panama for the rest of the time. In Panama I didn't seem to mix with a lot of the people. I was sort of footloose. When I had time off I would take a pass and go to Panama City and look around on my own. The answer to your question is very few if any contacts that I made in service do I still know about or consider. In fact, I guess I would say that outside of people who were in high school with me and went into service from Madison, I don't have any friends that I contact, did I have contact with, or that I served with, specifically. I did not build up the buddy relationships that some people did when I was in service.

Mike: Did you join and become involved in any veterans organizations afterwards?

Fred: One. And, uh, I'm a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I—I'm not a professional veteran type. But the Veterans of Foreign Wars, at that time before I got out, was the one organization that insisted that members have some overseas service. And I had a couple of friends that joined, and they felt that that was a little different. It wasn't just a Veterans organization. For a veterans organization it was a more specialized group of people that had served overseas. I'm still a member. I'm a lifetime member of the VFW, and that's the only organization that I belong to although I've only gone to, I think, one meeting. I went to the first meeting, and I was turned off in that they were saluting and calling each other by their—by their titles and that they had a militaristic attitude that they liked. But I didn't particularly like it. So I really want to—I've gone to a couple of their organizational activities, but I don't go to their regular business meetings. It was one business meeting that I went to, and that's the only one that I've gone to though I'm glad to be a member, and I get their newsletter and am interested to see what goes on.

I always thought that—you know, I never felt myself as a professional veteran. I always felt that veterans who served a long time in service, lost job opportunities, got wounded, had their life altered as a result of service, should get whatever the country can afford to give them. But I was a type of veteran who was fortunate enough to have come through unscattered. I just lost about a year of my education that was made up again and accelerated and got it made up. And I never felt that the government owed me anything.

There's a lot of—that's another reason that I didn't really participate in the veterans affairs—veterans groups because it seemed to me they were always out trying to get things like bonuses and whatnot. I didn't think that I was entitled to all this. I didn't think that I was entitled to anything that any other person—I mean—wasn't entitled to any more than anyone else that wasn't a veteran.

I feel that—or felt that a lot of those veterans organizations were for a different group. They were there for veterans who, as I say, were disabled or entitled to whatever the government can give them; those that have lost job opportunities, unable to get an education or whatnot. But in my case I've giving them a couple of years and just under a couple of years—they sent me to college. They—I don't deserve any more. And so I haven't been very active in the veterans groups. Though politically, obviously, I keep my hands in them, and there are certain veterans that are entitled to whatever we can give them. Others like myself, I think, had a great experience, and I got more out of it than they ever got out of us.

Mike: How would you say that your military experience and your experience as a legislator has anything in common—if anything?

Fred: I suspect the most significant thing that I can say is that when I started out in the legislature a good share of the legislators were veterans. And so emphasis on a lot of activities was veteran oriented. At the present time, I'm the last surviving World War II veteran, and I came in at the very end of the war, in the State Legislature. So the main advantage, I guess, is that I can say, "Well, I'm a veteran of World War II," and for what it's worth, I have a maybe a little different perspective than those that aren't.

But, I'm the only one that has that perspective left in the legislature. It does give me a perspective, and when certain veterans measures come along it—I can have my own experience to fall back on. But I've never been one to be a particular leader in veterans bills mainly because my experience has not been that overbearing as far as veterans activities are concerned.

Of course, I like to tell people that history passed me by, that I won the war because shortly after I was sworn into the Navy the Germans had surrendered unconditionally, and just about the time I was going to be let out of boot camp the Japanese gave up. Then they kept me in service for another year to maintain the peace. But the history books don't recite it that way. I had a great experience overall. I didn't particularly like military lifestyle. I was sort of an independent person. But in retrospect and at this point in time, I've got to say that it was one of my more fascinating lifetime experiences, and it was overall a very worthwhile experience for me. I learned a lot about problems of segregation—I've discussed a little bit about that—I've always been opposed to it, coming from the background I'd come from. It was something that I had never experienced until I got into service. It repulsed me quite a bit.

I had a chance to work in a—as I told you—a psychiatric ward and developed an interest in mental health that I've retained to this day. And I am interested in mental health legislation. People who look perfectly normal and act perfectly normal on occasion because of certain problems are—act un-normal on occasions, and I've been involved with them. The experience, actually, the experience I had in the venereal disease wards made me very, very active in the—birth control legislation and trying to—Planned Parenthood—trying to get the education out. It's an education matter. We saw some very, very sad cases of young people who get sexually transmitted diseases. In that day and age syphilis was the main problem, and they were sort of ruined for life. Penicillin didn't cure all those cases. And I was very—it made an impression on me.

The military lifestyle made an impression. It's a lifestyle that I don't particularly like. Some people do. By and large it was an educational experience. It was a fairly healthy experience—although that reminds me—they had a program of free dental care for persons in the military, and I had a lot of work done on my teeth. But when I got back out in civilian life I had to have it all redone because the work was done by beginning dentists in the military that really didn't know what they were doing. And so I—but that's a little incident that I remember. And I had to have that redone.

I can remember people getting tattooed excessively in the military, and trying to get rid of the tattoos. Now they have a laser way that they can do it. Back then the only way you can get rid of a tattoo was to cut it out of the skin and pull the skin together, and it made some messy scars when people would do that.

I certainly built up an anti-gambling feeling as a result of an experience I had in the military. I told you about that. And it has affected me for life-long. My aversion to cigarettes was there, and it's still here. Again, I think that the overall result was a real plus in my lifetime.

Mike: I was wondering if we could just go back real briefly. You said that you were fourteen when Pearl Harbor happened.

Fred: Yes.

Mike: I was wondering if you could just tell me where you were and what you remember about that.

Fred: That I remember very well. I remember so well. A little background, I told you I was very interested in civics. My father had been in policy—in political office. At that age I read several newspapers a day. I am a very strong newspaper reader. I was following the war. It was overseas. As I said, I personally at that time, at age fourteen, I knew all the answers. I don't know them now, I knew them then. And I had the—what later became naïve—but at that time I had this strong feeling that there was a big ocean out there, a couple of big oceans that we should just stay out of the war. The war was overseas, and we shouldn't get ourselves involved.

And, if—I sort of would pay attention to people like [Charles] Lindbergh [pioneer aviator], who was talking sort of the isolationist line. And I can remember some of his speeches. I can remember speeches by Warren [possibly California Sen. Hiram Warren Johnson?], the Senator who was sort of an isolationist. I can remember other—the *Chicago Tribune* took the isolationist—when they used to run great cartoons in front of the—Orr I guess was one of the cartoonists, O-R-R, I can remember the name—

interesting—he was—anyway, what I'm saying is I have had the personal feeling of the war was far away and across the ocean, and we shouldn't worry about somewhere—when Pearl Harbor came around the family, the brother, my mother, my father, and I were together, and it was unbelievable. We were listening to the radio, no TV at the time. And we were in the living room, I remember, listening to the radio, and we were shocked, and we just spent the rest of the day listening to the radio. Actually, we took some pictures at the time. I don't know if we have them now, but I can remember that we had some pictures taken because we knew it was a momentous moment.

My brother was a year and a half younger than I was, and I had told you at the time—being fourteen—I thought I'd never get involved. But we were just shocked, and as a result my own political philosophy drastically changed. I've become a strong internationalist. The world is one world; it's shrinking. You can not isolate one country or one group of countries or one continent. It—you can move a cow from Madison to Tokyo faster than you can move a cow from Madison to Milwaukee when we became a state. I mean, the world has just shrunk ter—and I feel very—I have totally flipped from being somewhat of an isolationist thinking we could do it ourselves to someone who realizes that we're involved in this world whether we like it or not. And we've got to get along with—be in contact with all peoples. But that was a very—we knew it was a momentous time. I actually published a little newspaper of my own at the time, and I remember editorializing in the newspaper. It just was a family newspaper that I ran as a kid, and editorialized about the war, and I would—when I turned out the editions I would put maps and show where the armies were at that time. Germany was making progress against Russia as I remember very well at that time and was moving across the Russian plains. I had maps showing where the armies stood and whatnot.

But it was a shock. As I say, I remember the white curtains in the living room. That's one of the few pictures of that—over fifty years ago that I—that's quite clear to me. And, as I say, I'm repeating myself, I'm sorry, but I just remember, again thinking how I was—our wars were generally short, and I'm lucky I'm born when I was and was too young to get involved, and my dad was of an age probably too old to get involved in the draft. My father was not in World War I. He was a farmer. Farmers were exempt. My father—grandfather had a 320 acre farm. And we were in World War I, certain farm people were exempt because we needed food. My dad, being a farm person at the time, was exempted. He also caught the flu. It made him—weakened him somewhat. So he was not in service, and so I didn't really have a history, again, of being a son of a service person.

My great-grandfather, Colonel Warner, lost an arm in the Civil War and ended up in the legislature after that. But my ancestry goes back to him and behind. But, so we have a lot of Civil War records, but as far as World War I is concerned, no real close relative is involved. And World War II, as I say, I didn't think I'd get involved. But I did as it turned out. But I can remember the incident very well, and we just spent the next several days right on the—on listening to the radio intently. It was just unbelievable, listening to Roosevelt's comments that had been stated over and over again. I didn't particularly like Roosevelt, personally, because I thought he—I don't know why I didn't—in retrospect he was one of our better presidents. But as a fourteen year old, you know, you know all the answers. And I thought I knew them all at that time. But, yes, I can remember it very well.

Mike: So then along those same lines, there's a lot of comparisons made between September 11th and Pearl Harbor, and you having been alive for both of those events, I was wondering if you—what you thought, if they compare at all, if there's any similarities.

Fred: That's a good question. I never really thought about it before until you just asked it now. I—well, for one thing we were glued before the TV on September 11th, so we had the visual as well as the audible. And in World War—in Pearl Harbor we had no vision, we had no TV at the time. We did not have—we did not have pictures of the airplane flying into the twin towers that we saw. In other words, it was much more visual on September 11th. And I think that that difference is very, very important. Because, for some reason, when people see something it hits them, I think, differently than when they hear it. I remember seeing the pictures in the newspapers of the battleships being bombed and later on in the newsreels. We didn't have TV, but we'd go to the theatre and see the newsreels of the event. But as it actually happened it was—we just were actually glued to the radio, and we turned radio stations to try to find out what was going on, and there were radio reports. September 11th, it was all—it was all visual media we could see.

Another difference, of course, was that there was a draft. The Congress of the United States had adopted a draft in 1940. So all people were subject to a draft, and so we were on a—on a war footing, more or less semi-war footing before this happened. I mean, the people were expected to go into service for a couple of years. We were building ships for the British. We were building up the military. It was more or less a prewar fervor in the area. We were already because of the war rationing some things. I remember it was very difficult to get tires. Now we throw tires away, but then we took tires and put synthetic coverings on them, and they were very valuable. We were recycling back then.

September 11th was something that we weren't geared up for in any way. It was a—in some respects it was much more of a shock because it was on our own grounds. Pearl Harbor, even though it was Hawaii, it was still a couple of miles away. I think that the September 11th made—in me—probably made more of an impression as to the horror of the thing than Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor, again, you were—the targets were ships, the military. And in September 11th the target was totally innocent—100 percent innocent people. And, the—it was incredible—I think that—while they thought that Pearl Harbor was impossible—I thought that September 11th was just—was even more than impossible. There were some similarities, but for the reasons I mentioned I think there were a lot of dissimilarities, too.

We aren't, for instance, having a president come out the next day and—I guess he says we are declaring a war on terrorism, but what is terrorism? In the case of—the case of Pearl Harbor we knew it was the—was the Japanese, and so we could zero-in on who it was. In the terrorism we—at that time we couldn't zero-in on anybody. You know, you want to zero-in on your opponents—well, you don't—you got to know who they are. You knew who the opponents were at Pearl Harbor, you knew that they were Japanese and the Germans and the Axis Group and whatnot. You knew who you were going to be fighting and where you were going to be fighting. You knew they had control of certain areas, and you had control of certain areas. You knew what was going on. September 11th it was—it was a shocker, and you didn't know where it came from initially and who you were going to go after or what you were going to do. Quite a bit of difference.

Mike: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Fred: Well, I appreciate your discussing things—maybe discuss things that—all this happened over fifty years ago, and so perhaps my memory isn't as clear as it—as it could be. I try not to repeat myself, and I hope that I've answered your questions as best I can.

Mike: Yes—yes, thank you very much.

Fred: Thank you.

[End of Interview]