

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
DONALD SCHROEDER  
Navy, World War II

2004

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**Schroeder, Donald**, (1925- ), Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 68 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 68 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Donald Schroeder, a Manitowoc, Wisconsin native, describes his Navy service as a quartermaster aboard the *USS Sangamon* in World War II. Schroeder talks about entering the service after high school graduation, his draft examination, and how he managed to actually get into the branch of service he requested. He mentions boot camp at Farragut Naval Station (Idaho) and reveals he paid someone to take his swimming test for him. He touches on getting over seasickness and stopping at Tent City at Pearl Harbor. Schroeder describes crew and armaments of the *USS Sangamon* (CVE-26) and his duties keeping the log and performing special sea details. Part of MacArthur's Navy, he mentions participation in the invasions of the northern New Guinea Coast, Saipan, Guam, and Tinian. He describes recreation ashore and the ship's captain, Captain Browder. He recalls gathering at Manus Island (Admiralty Islands) for the invasion of Leyte Gulf and seeing hundreds of ships. He talks about seeing some of the first kamikaze planes, defeating the Japanese navy, and witnessing the capture of a kamikaze pilot. While at Bremerton (Washington) for overhaul, he remembers visiting home and freezing. Schroeder discusses the ship's mission to keep island air fields from operating at the invasion of Okinawa (Japan). He details being attacked by planes while in a narrow channel, getting hit by a kamikaze, fighting fires, seeing the ship devastated, and witnessing the burial at sea of eighteen men. He expresses disgust at the smell of burning flesh and the crew's fear while withdrawing without escort. He describes the deluxe rest camp at Norfolk (Virginia) and attending fire school. Granted a thirty-day leave, Schroeder expresses shame at finding his mother worried after hearing about the attack but not receiving word he was okay. He recalls spending his entire leave drinking with two buddies from the Air Force. After returning to Norfolk, he mentions his ship was deactivated and his subsequent assignment to a M215, a minesweeper. Docked in New York on New Year's Eve, Schroeder talks about his being put in charge of the ship while most of the crew was ashore and being unable to restrain the remaining crew from drinking and making trouble. Passing through the Panama Canal, he confesses to almost hitting a tanker because he was so busy taking photos. Upon discharge, he speaks of joining the 52-20 Club and suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Schroeder sketches his career path, his marriage and his offspring, and being a member of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and Escort Carrier Association. He describes working with the Escort Carrier Association to fill out a roster, recruit members, and, as the *Sangamon* Group Historian, contribute information to the "*Sangy*" *News*.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2009.

**Interview Transcript:**

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and today is September 15, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with Donald Schroeder. Okay. This is at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and, Don, thanks for agreeing to the interview. Why don't we start off with where and when were you born?

Donald: I was born Manitowoc on April 5, 1925. The second of eight children. The first one died in childbirth. All boys.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: Over the years I attended public schools in Manitowoc through grade 4, and then I transferred to parochial schools, Catholic schools, and I graduated from St. Paul's Catholic School in 1939. And I went to Washington Junior High School in Manitowoc for one year, and then on to Lincoln High School in Manitowoc for three years, and I graduated from there in 1943.

John: Okay. Do you remember, then, what you were doing on Pearl Harbor Day?

Donald: I don't remember what I was doing but I remember vividly that, and I was not aware of what it all meant.

John: Yeah, okay.

Donald: It was a strange thing, anyhow. But as the years went on, and as we got draft cards, I became more aware of what was going on. And I was eighteen in April of 1943, and graduation was talking place in June. The principal, Professor Stengle, of the high school at that time, was also head of the draft board. He called four of us boys down to the office and told us that we had a choice. We were scared as all heck. We thought we did something wrong. He was a pretty stern guy. We called him Professor Stengle. He told us that we had a choice of staying on until graduation and getting our diploma, or we could leave and go into service at that time there, now. And someone from our family, or someone would get our diplomas to us. Three of the four of us decided to stay on for graduation. One fellow decided to go in right away. And he was killed almost immediately after going into the service. Overseas.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: So, whether that was an omen, or what. But, I graduated and, like I said, there

were seven of us boys living, and my parents never even attended my graduation. My dad just was not that type of a person, to take off work. He needed the money so bad. We had gone through the Depression. And I went down to get on the bus to get on Milwaukee for my draft examination, and when I went down there, there was an old warehouse, and as we got there, all these different tests, I remember the hearing test, which was some guy tapping some coins together and asking how many times he clicked them. That was the hearing test. So you had to be practically laying on the floor. Some of the guys didn't pass because they had been out drinking the day before and they were a little inebriated the next day, yet. But, anyhow, when I got to the point where there was a desk with about four or five officers, of somebody, sitting there, and asked me what branch of the service we wanted to go in. And the joke at that time, my last month of high school, was that if you asked for the Navy, they'd give you the Army. They did just the opposite. So as I came up there, I was kind of smiling and the one guy asked me what I was, an officer, I found out he was a chief warrant officer. He said, "What are you smiling about?" And I said, "Is it going to do me any not to smile? Am I going to get better preference, or something?" He says, "No, but most of these guys aren't smiling." He says, "What branch of service do you want to go in?" And I laughed some more. And he asked, "What's so funny?" And I says, "You aren't going to give me what I ask for." And at that time I was a very bashful guy. I'm not anymore. He says, "No, no. Come on. Honestly, where do you want to go in?" I says, "Well, I really prefer the Navy." He says, "Are you serious?" I says, "Yeah." Well, he says, "I'm going to be free in about half an hour. You go down and sit down in that chair there and wait for me." So, half an hour later, he was done, he took me across the street and signed me up in the Navy.

John: Okay.

Donald: That was my Navy start.

John: That worked. Okay.

Donald: It worked.

John: Okay.

Donald: So I got sent home for seven days, and then, when I had to report, I caught the bus again. And I didn't know where I was going, but I ended up out in Farragut, Idaho. Coming from Wisconsin, which is a total surprise to me. And that was really a God-forsaken place out there.

John: And that was a Navy facility?

Donald: That was Navy boot camp and school.

John: Wow.

Donald: It was way, away from everything. The closest place to go to was Spokane, Washington, if you went on a day pass. But most of us, in the evening, just went to a place called Sand Point. It was a little pub. Not, it was a restaurant. We weren't allowed to drink until twenty-one.

John: Let me just stop. Go ahead, you were talking about Sand Point?

Donald: Yeah. And, at the end of boot camp, we got, I think it was something like four days off, and I had a chance to get back home. At that time, it took almost three days to go across country by train. They had all the old trains drawn out of storage. Some of the cars that we rode on actually had pot belly stoves in the corner for heating, and gas lamps for lighting.

John: Yep.

Donald: And it was cold. And straight-backed seats. But, we left, I think it took about three days to get from Chicago out to the West Coast. But, I got home. Before I left, they had us take a test. I had to chance to go into school for radioman or quartermaster. Quartermaster was in the navigation department. I chose the quartermaster. I didn't want to get into radio. I wasn't interested in it at that time. So I went back there for another, I think it was about eight weeks of quartermaster school. And graduated as a seaman first class. And I missed quartermaster third by just a little bit. But in order to get overseas at that time, you had to know how to swim around the pool. I never did learn to swim. I don't know how to swim to this day. But, we were big heroes in those days. I was going to go out and single-handedly win the war.

John: Sure.

Donald: So, I figured out a way to get through this. I gave a guy my dog tags, and paid him five bucks, and he swam the swimming test for me.

John: Got there anyway.

Donald: So I got overseas, much to my objection one time. But when I got out of boot camp, I got delayed orders and I took a round-about way to stop home for one day, and then went out to Shoemaker, California. That is down around Treasure Island, somewhere down there. And I was put into a receiving camp there. And one night, it was ungodly, I think it was one or two o'clock in the morning, we got rolled out

of the sack, told to pack our bags. We got into a military convoy of trucks with Jeeps with machine guns front and forward running alongside of us. No lights. The West Coast was all blacked out at that time. And we went down to Alameda Air Station, and I boarded the USS *Lexington* as a passenger. I think they had about 3,000 crew on there and about 1,500 passengers. We slept on bunks, cots, I should say, folding cots underneath the wings of the planes.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: To Pearl Harbor.

John: Oh, man.

Donald: And we ate round the clock. And I got seasick. And so I asked this one guy, "How do I get up the stairs?" And he says, "When you learn to talk Navy talk, I'll show you where." I said, "I got to heave!" He says, "Come on!" Went topside, and I got on the catwalk, and I was looking down, and I could see the water below that catwalk, and then I really got, I got over my seasickness in a hurry. I got scared out. But I went to Pearl Harbor, and there I got put, they called it Tent City. It was over on the mainland, I think. And after I was there for a while, I got transferred over to Ford Island, and I slept on a cot underneath the wings of a plane in a hangar then. And from there I got transferred to the USS *Sangamon*, CV26.

John: That was a carrier?

Donald: Escort carrier, made from, converted from a tanker.

John: Okay.

Donald: There were four of them of that class. The *Sangamon* class. And so I got aboard there, and got put into the navigation department, which prevented me from getting into the deck force, for which I was glad.

John: Yeah.

Donald: So I worked my way up from there. Oh, boy, where were we? I don't know if I remember the orders. Anyhow, we traveled. We had 32 planes aboard, torpedo bombers and fighters. So we had 1,100 men total, with the crew and the squadron. We joined up with the mother ships. I don't know what they were, but I know eventually we, the *Sangamon*, the *Suwanee*, and the *Santini*, and the *Shenango*, four that were from the tanker hulls were part of the First Carrier Division, of Carrier Division 22. And Admiral B. H. Ragsdale was in charge. And he had a captain for chief-of-staff. We had a Captain Browser [Capt. M. E. Browder] for

our captain, of the ship. And all my watches were spent up on the bridge at sea, and in port it was spent at the gangway with the officer of the deck. And my main job up on the, two main jobs I had up on the bridge, was keep the log, which meant everything had to be written down on a four-hour watch, and for special sea details, which were flight quarters, and general quarters, fueling, and gunnery practice, the quartermaster took over the helm from a deck men, and so that was one of my jobs, too. We went down in the Solomon Islands area down there. We were in Espiritu Santo.

John: Yeah.

Donald: In and out of there, providing air cover and for different convoys and stuff down there. And we got transferred over to what they called MacArthur's Navy, the Seventy Fleet.

John: Okay. Okay.

Donald: Which was under Admiral Kinkaid, but he answered to MacArthur, because there was a big squabble between MacArthur and Nimitz and Halsey, as to who was what. So we ended up with the tab of MacArthur's Navy. And we took part in a bunch of landings along the northern New Guinea coast, Hollandia, Etepe, Talamahera, Watke. I think we came back to Kwajalein or Eniwetok. And prepared for the invasion of Saipan and Guam and Tinian.

John: Now, this was about when? What year? What time?

Donald: When I went aboard the *Sangamon*, I think it was March, March of '44, I think it was.

John: Okay.

Donald: March of '44.

John: That's good.

Donald: And then, yeah. All these invasions were in '44. And then we went to Saipan, Tinian, Guam. And there we got transferred with Admiral Spruance, to the Fifth Fleet.

John: Okay.

Donald: And we were involved in what they called the Turkey Shoot, there. Only the big carriers were on the west side of island, involved in the Turkey Shoot, and we

were on the east side of the island, keeping the airfields and stuff secure for the troops that were ashore.

John: Okay.

Donald: So we did not actually take part in the so-called dog fight, or the Turkey Shoot, as they called it. And that was supposed to be one invasion, but because of the trouble the troops were having ashore, it ended up in two invasions. And we ended being out there for sixty-two days without getting into dock. And the only place we ever got to dock was in Pearl Harbor. Otherwise, we were too big. In the islands, we always anchored out and the crews would go ashore for a couple cans of 3.2 beer and play some baseball, and that was your recreation.

John: Yeah. Two cans of beer, and a ball, and they'd say, "Here, go have fun."

Donald: Yeah. And when we were in boot camp, one of the things I looked back on is, we went out there for a whole day at a time drilling, marching. And I never could figure out why in the hell in the Navy you are marching. But it finally dawned on me, years later, it was strictly discipline was all it was. You were told when you go to the bathroom, when you eat, when you could have a smoke, and all that stuff. That was all what it was for, discipline. Which you need when you are out there. And we had a captain, Captain Broward, who was very strict on discipline but was real nice as far as being personal to you. He, when he came aboard the ship, he went over the PA system, and he said, "When I pass you guys, if you want, you can salute me the first time you see me, but after that, just say 'Good morning,' or 'Good afternoon, Captain,'" he says. "I've only got one arm." And when we were up on the bridge with him, he'd joke around a lot. He was very nice. And we took part in the invasions of those islands, and then we went back down to Manus Island, in the Admiralty Islands. That was a huge -

John: Where?

Donald: Manus Island, Admiralty Islands.

John: Okay.

Donald: It was north of New Guinea.

John: Okay.

Donald: It was a huge atoll, harbor. There were hundreds of ships in there. And that is where we gathered for the invasion of Leyte Gulf and I guess that thing had been, was supposed to happen at one time, and it ends up they moved it up, or



something. Then they postponed it one day because of a typhoon. We went through a typhoon to get out there. And we were taking water up on the bridge at that time. We lost the escort ship. When we got out there, well, we left Manus Island, I remember the group that I was with alone, which was, I think Admiral Sprague was in charge at that time. Yeah, Admiral Sprague had taken over for Admiral Ragsdale after Guam. Admiral Thomas Sprague. And when we left there, that was the first time that we went out on the sea when I really felt secure because in our group alone we had eighteen escort carriers. I think we had fifty some destroyers, destroyer escorts. We had six of the old World War I battleships. And we had seven cruisers with us.

John: Wow.

Donald: And as far as you looked on the horizon, as far as I knew, that was supposed have been the largest naval battle in the history of the world. I think there were 284, 282 ships actually took part with gun power on them that took part in that battle.

John: That is amazing.

Donald: But there were a total of 700 or 800 ships involved in transporting troops and everything, so whenever you looked with the binoculars, all you could see to the horizon was ships. So it made us feel pretty secure. The invasion went off okay, and we had split into three carrier groups of six carriers each. I think, at that time, we were down to four because two of ours went back for replenishment for the planes. But that was the time when the Japanese Fleet snuck out on us. Halsey had messed up someplace up there on his calls. There was a big discussion about that. To this day, it never has been hashed out. And the Japanese, the biggest guns we had with our group was 5-inch, and torpedoes on the, and the Japanese came out with that battleship with 17.5-inch guns on it.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: And we had three different groups, each one under charge of a different admiral. Our admiral was in charge of the whole works. And we were the southern-most group, "Taffy One." Then came "Taffy Two," and "Taffy Three" was about eighty miles north of us. And they are the ones that got hit first. And of that group, there were two carriers went down that day, and I think three escorts went down that day.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: So those DE's and destroyers were using 5-inch guns and torpedoes against the big Japanese battleship. But we had sixteen carriers which were able to put up

thirty planes apiece, so I think I remember one time it was over 500 planes at a time in the air. And they fought him off so good that the Japanese admiral thought he was fighting Halsey's Sixth Fleet, and all of a sudden he got so messed up from them laying smoke screens and getting torpedoes and stuff, he turned around and went away. If he wouldn't have, if he had kept going south, he would have got every last one of us out of the water. We would have all been gone. But at that particular time, that was the first time the Jap kamikaze ever came out. They had never been known before.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: And they attacked our southern group. We were the first one to ever get attacked. And when they came out, everybody from the admiral on down looked at them, and "What in the hell is going on?" Because they just kept coming down. You could fire all you want at them, they just kept coming down. And one of the ships about 1,500 yards away from us got hit with a kamikaze, not seriously but enough to put it out of commission for a while. But a little while later, about a half an hour later, that same one took a torpedo. The Japanese were very deadly with their torpedoes. They had much better than ours. And, anyhow, that battle went on, I think, for I think it was the 20th of 25th of October. And we finally peeled out of there. They got Halsey back down there, and the Japanese Navy turned and ran. But, that was the last stand of the Japanese Navy as a navy. Because the bunch that came through Suragao Straits and met out battleships and cruisers, they got all sunk but one of them. They met on the T-formation, which these guys all liked, these old battleship commanders. But we went back to Manus Island.

John: Do you know how to spell that?

Donald: M-a-n-u-s, I believe. It was in the Admiralty Islands.

John: Yep.

Donald: Seadler Harbor.

John: Okay.

Donald: And from there we headed back, and we dropped our squadron off in Pearl Harbor, and we went up to, no, we dropped our squadron off in Alameda Naval Air Station, and we went up to Bremerton, Washington. And there we underwent, they put us in dry-dock. And they rigged our ship up with all new guns, and radio, and radar. They rigged up the ship for landing and take-off of a night squadron. Because the planes were going to have rockets aboard, which we never had before. A lot of our 20 millimeter guns were taken off and replaced with 40

millimeter, which were much more deadly. And at that time, I got a chance to go home for twenty days. The crew rotated. Each one took twenty days. And that was in December, and I had just come home from the islands where temperatures were in the nineties. And I about froze to death when I got back to Wisconsin.

John: I'll bet.

Donald: That train ride was cold. With those old pot belly stoves. So we went back out. And we changed captains. We went from Captain Browder, we went to Captain Malstrom. And we went back out and joined our group, and some of them had been out there yet. And then we went from Admiral Ragsdale to Admiral Sanborn. And we stopped together in Eulithi Harbor. And from there, I think, it was in March of 1945, we left for the invasion of Okinawa, which took place on April 1, it was April Fool's Day, and it was also Easter Sunday. And I remember the chaplain getting on the PA system and leading everybody in prayer, and giving his absolution. Because they didn't know who was going to come out of where.

John: That's right. Yeah.

Donald: And during that period of April 1 to May 4, we operated with carriers trying to cover the air fields south and east of Okinawa and Formosa. There were a bunch of crazy names islands there. I've forgotten their names. But our job was to keep those island air fields from operating. While Okinawa was going on.

John: Okay.

Donald: And every ten days, one carrier with two escorts would break off and go into Kerama Retto and get ammunition and fuel, and whatever was necessary. You'd leave one day, late in the afternoon. The next morning you'd go in there at day break. You had to be back out by nightfall. We did that two different times and no problem. The third time we went in there was on May 4, 1945. And all day when we were in the harbor, we were under a smoke screen. And it was either some rockets or some aviation gasoline, they were late in coming to us. We got out of the harbor late. And there was kind of a channel you had to take out of there through the coral. And we had a destroyer ahead of us and the DE in back of us. The *Fulham* and the *Dennis*, and as we were coming out. Our planes, we couldn't launch our own planes because we had to get into the wind. We couldn't get into the wind, the channel was too narrow there. And radar reported bogies coming in, that is, enemy planes. And as far as I know, there was something like ten to twelve planes. They didn't drop after a while. One of them was a bomber. The rest were fighters. At seven o'clock at night, one of the fighters came in at us and landed about, I'd say, about twenty-five feet beyond the bridge and twenty-five feet off the ship on the starboard side. And hit the water. It broke the antennas off, that

were for the radios for the ship. And kind of shook the ship a little bit. In fact, two guys jumped overboard at that time. And then at 7:33 at night, at 1733, anyhow, thirty-three minutes later, on the starboard side, in amongst the clouds, the sun was setting. And we seen this plane. And they started firing at him. And he disappeared into the clouds. And all of a sudden he came out astern of us, and he came in going in the same direction we were going in. And the guns on the aft were firing at him. And I remember looking back, and I remember seeing that pilot in that cockpit, with flames around his face, but he kept on coming. And when he got within about fifty feet of the stern of the bridge, right in the midships, he went right down, dove into the ship with a 500 pound bomb and with himself. Through the flight deck, through the hangar deck, he went down three decks. Two elevators got torn out of their sockets. They weighed about twenty-five, thirty tons apiece. I don't remember much that day. They tell me that that is not too unusual when you go through trauma. Your mind wipes stuff out.

John: Sure. Sure.

Donald: But, in going back and talking with guys now, over the years, I don't remember how I got off the bridge. I have no idea how I got off the bridge. I came out of it unhurt except for a slight sunburn, or burn, whatever you want to call it, from the fire. But the ship was on fire. It was divided into two sections. The people on the bow did not have any contact with the people on the stern. And they tell me they were jettisoning planes off, I saw them going off, exploding. And one destroyer came alongside to help us out and they actually jettisoned a plane right onto him. So he had to get rid of it, off of his ship. And him, kind of panicking, he come close to us, and caught his mast or something on our superstructure, and that was tore up. He got as much damage as we got. But those fires went on from 7:33 at night and I think they said something like 11:40 at night before the fires got under control. And the hangar deck was completely wiped out. The flight deck was completely wiped out. The bridge was wiped out. We lost 28 men that night. We had 115 over the side. We had 117 wounded. I'm very accurate on these figures because I have over the years, I obtained 2,200 pages of the ship's log and archives, and I've gone over it with the fellows, and so I am the historian for our group, and we put out a paper. But, I remember the next day, when daylight came, we were using the port aft steering stage on the catwalk, for steering the ship. The captain was sitting there on a chair. And the destruction was just, it looked like an atomic bomb had hit us. We only had part of one plane left, and that plane had one wing off. But his radio was operational, and that was the only radio we had all the way back to the States.

John: Wow.

Donald: Because all the radio and radar equipment was wiped out, totally wiped out on it.

It looked like hell.

John: Don, let me stop and turn the tape.

**[End of Side A of Tape 1.]**

John: Okay, you said it looked just like an atomic bomb had hit the ship.

Donald: There were some bodies where there was no head, and only parts of arms and legs left on them.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: And these guys that were in the ready ammunition room, all of the exploded shell casings were in their rib cages. I remember the guys took white gloves, they laid a piece of canvas next to them, and rolled them on the canvas to bury them. We only found 12 complete bodies and six were grouped into one bag. We actually buried 18 bodies that they could identify because of the belts that we wore, with your name and ID tags, so we knew we had 18 bodies to bury the next day. They cleared off a spot on the hangar deck. They had to take a shovel to shovel the stuff aside so we could have services. I'll never forget that service. We had a guy, a machinists mate, a big, heavy-set man, and he sang the Lord's Prayer. He did a good job. But those bodies going over the side. When we headed back, we rejoined our carrier group, the admiral had gone off the ship the night before. He came back aboard and took one look at it and said, "You guys are going Stateside."

John: You could still navigate the ship?

Donald: From the secondary steering station.

John: You had engines?

Donald: The engines were giving trouble for a while, but they were able to get them going. Our top speed was 18 knots, I think we went on 12 knots for a while. We were able to get going and they sent the destroyer escort *Dennis* with us, who had picked up a bunch of our men. And 115 men who went over the side, they never got back aboard the ship. They were all taken to the island because there was no way they could get them back aboard a ship that was burned out that bad. And the one thing that I remember, not only the mess that was aboard, but the smell of human flesh burning. I can smell it today. But I'll never, never forget it in my life. When I burnt my own hand, I associate them bodies and that burn smell. It got into the ventilating system. And we went to Eulithi Harbor and there a bunch of

the brass came aboard. Admirals and everything. And they said, "Go on to Pearl Harbor." And when we went to Pearl Harbor, the destroyer escort didn't go with us. It went with a transport ship, or something. We were so scared out that time, that they didn't give us some help. They told us that we'd be on a flight where planes were flying back and forth, and if something happened, they'd see us. Half of our life rafts were gone. And I remember one time a plane did appear out of the sky. The guys manned the guns and started firing at him. I mean, it was an instinct, to fire, you know. And they had a hell of a time stopping the guys from firing the guns.

John: Sure.

Donald: And we went back to Pearl Harbor and we were only in there for a couple days, and, there again, all the, from the Naval Air Base there, the whole command for the Pacific came aboard the ship. And they decided that we should go back to Norfolk, because Norfolk was where the ship had been converted from a tanker to a carrier. And they figured they had all the blueprints there, and everything, and they could fix us up. So we went through the Panama Canal, we passed the Panama Canal, I think, on June 6. And they actually had to cut parts of the gun mounts off so we could get through the Canal. They were too wide to put through with their gun mounts. So we got into Norfolk, and they took us all off the ship, and we got put into rest camp. And that was deluxe. Yeah. We has six inch thick mattresses, no duties to perform except for going aboard the ship to start the inventory of stuff, to see what was available. And for breakfast, we'd have eggs and steak. I never tasted that before. For me, that is too big a breakfast. But we had swimming pools and tennis, and everything you'd want. Baseball. And to keep us occupied, they sent us to various schools, like gunnery. The one they sent us to was the fire school. And I remember I was sitting in class that day, I was with another guy from aboard ship, and there was an officer running the fire school. And, it was kind of odd, you go to fire school after you've had a serious fire like that. And he was asking us what ships we were from. We told him. He said, "I think you guys can do better than I can."

John: Yeah.

Donald: But, that fire school they had, they had a dummy hull of a ship set up. They really went through. And we went out on gunnery school. I never fired a pistol in my life and I got marksmanship with a pistol. But the rifle, I hit the hill in the back of me all the time, and I ended up with a sore chin and a sore shoulder. And some chief hollering at me, "Hold on to that S. O. B!" I was scared of it because it hit me back. And then I got a thirty day leave at home with three days traveling time. And I didn't tell my mother I was coming home. And, unbeknownst to me, the depot had changed locations from the time I left until the time I came back, and so

here I was getting dumped off practically two blocks away from where my house was, not knowing where I was. And the train pulled up and said, "Manitowoc," and I am looking at everybody ready to get off. "This ain't Manitowoc!" When I got off, and realized where I was, I just had to cut through some empty fields behind the factory and I got to my house. And I walked in. And my mother broke down. And she asked me how I was. This part bothers me.

John: It's okay.

Donald: Because we weren't allowed to write home and tell anybody what happened. But when the ship pulled in to the dock, the officers wives were there for them. And my mother took a newspaper from St. Louis, front page, that she had on the window sill, and she handed it to me, and she said, "Here, look here." Here, my uncle lived in St. Louis and the story about our ship getting hit was on the front page, and he sent it to my mother, so for almost sixty days she was worried about what happened to me.

John: Oh, man.

Donald: They tell me when I was in Norfolk, I could have mailed a letter and no one would have known about it, but I wasn't thinking at that time.

John: Sure. Sure.

Donald: But I got thirty days leave with three days traveling time, and the day I happened to meet up with two of my buddies in the Air Force who were home at the same time I was. And I think it was a thirty day drunk. I remember coming home one day. You didn't take no car. You walked. I remember coming home one day, and my mother says to me, when I got up the next morning, she says, "You and Wes and Bob were rather drunk last night, weren't you? Or, yesterday, weren't you?" I says, "No." She said, "Well, Agnes seen you." That was her sister. And I said, "Yeah, what did she say?" She said, "Well, you three guys were walking." We all had to wear uniforms at that time. You couldn't wear civvies. She said, "You three guys were walking up the street with the two Air Force guys on the outside, and you were in the middle, and your arms around each other, and she said it looked like, if you let go of each other, you'd have fell flat on your face." I said, "Mom, I think she was right." But, anyhow, I ended up getting back about three hours late because I wanted to stay with the guys until they left. So we could all leave at the same time. And so I had to go to captain's mast. And when I went to captain's mast, my story was, and I told them, "I have no excuse. It was my buddies were at home. I should have left earlier." And he said, "Well, you got seven days restriction to base but you are losing one rank. You are going to quartermaster third." And I looked at him and said, "Sir, that's all there was in

quartermaster third.” And he said, “No, you made quartermaster second while you were gone, and I am taking it away from you.”

John: Oh, Jeez.

Donald: So, that was the shortest hike I ever had. Then, I don’t remember what the dates were, but when did the war in Germany end? What month was that?

John: April, May? I’m not sure.

Donald: Yeah, I think Japan ended in August, didn’t it? Around the 15th?

John: The bomb was on my birthday, August 6. Didn’t it end in early September?

Donald: No, it was August 15. Anyhow, at that time, they discontinued working on the carrier because they figured they wouldn’t need the carriers any more. And so we had to inventory everything and we decommissioned it then, on October 25, I think it was, 1945.

John: Okay. That was at Norfolk?

Donald: At Norfolk. So then I got sent to a receiving station there, at Norfolk, and I got put on a minesweeper, the M215, which was just a bit smaller than what I was used to being on. And a crew of 140, I think, versus 1,100. And we had to go on a shake-down cruise. After we got it ironed out, on Chesapeake Bay. And we got the skipper to take us, he was a lieutenant, and we got him to take us on a shake-down cruise up to New York Harbor, so we were in New York Harbor on New Year’s Eve.

John: Okay.

Donald: Everybody wanted to go ashore on New Year’s Eve, so we had to draw straws. One guy from each division. So I happened to draw the straw. Quartermasters are a right arm rating, so everybody including the officers left the ship, and that left me in charge of the ship, with six other enlisted men. We said, no problem. We were tied up to a dock. We were tied up on 43rd Street Dock, right below Times Square. And as the evening went on, and some of the guys could see where there was a bar, or a pub, or whatever you want to call it, over there. And they went up, and they were bringing beer back in these waxed cheese containers by the quart. And everybody started to get a little inebriated. And I didn’t drink. I knew I’d be in real trouble if I did, because I was in charge of the ship. And around midnight, they were trying to blow the whistle. And I tried stopping them, when I tried stopping the guy on the bridge, the guy down in the engine room would blow it.



So I finally gave up on that, and I let them blow what they wanted. But then one guy got into the Very pistol locker, where they got all the different colored shells for different emergencies. And the ferry tie-up dock was right next to us, going over to New Jersey. And so he pulled out this Very pistol, and he starts firing them at that ferry. Not at, but up in the air so they would explode in the sky. And I finally got that away from him. And the next morning, I got called down to the captain's office, and he said, "Quartermaster, what the hell went here last night?" I says, "Nothing that I know of." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yeah." "Well," he said, "here, read this." It was a radiogram from the harbor master that said, "You were the smallest ship in the harbor but you made the most noise last night." He said, "Do you know what he's talking about?" I said, "No." And he said, "I happened to be on that ferry coming back across when you were shooting off the Very pistol." And I was so scared. And he said, "Go on, get the hell out of here."

John: Now, you said a quartermaster was a "right arm rating?"

Donald: Yeah.

John: What does that mean? I never heard that.

Donald: You had patches on the right arm or the left arm. Quartermaster and I think the radioman was right arm, too. In the Navy, they were higher. If it came down to showdown, like, that is why I got left in charge of the ship. You were a little higher up in the ratings.

John: Okay. I had never heard that.

Donald: Yeah. Yeah.

John: So that was the ferry boat your skipper was on?

Donald: Yeah. And we had come into New York Harbor with a blizzard that was so bad that our radar had snapped off in the wind, and we had a Coast Guard boat come out and get us in. Talk about embarrassment. We passed the statue of Liberty, and never could see it, because of the blizzard. And I think I got home for five days then, too. Yeah. Anyhow, after we left there, we were supposed to go to Sasebo, Japan, to sweep mines. We only went nine knots an hour. I remember when we came into the harbor, the current was so strong we had trouble tying up at their dock. But we went on the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. We were tied up there, and we went to an outdoor movie one night there, and we got called back aboard ship. All naval personnel report back aboard ship, because there was an uprising in Haiti. At that time. So we all went out to sea, but we never took part in anything. Everything quieted down. From there, we went through the Panama Canal. That

was my second time through there. And, when you go through the Canal, you come into these bigger harbors, and you get a pilot aboard. The captain gives up command of the ship. So we started to pull up to the first lock. The pilot was on the bridge with the captain and the pilot says to me, "You been through the locks before?" I says, "Yes, sir." "Well, do you know the rules of the road?" "Yes, sir." "Okay," he says. "The captain and I will be below. Take her through." In those days you weren't allowed to have cameras, neither. Especially in the Panama Canal. But I had a camera, and I was bound and determined I was going to get some pictures. So here I am on the wheel, and trying to take pictures through the port hole, and I got too interested in the pictures, and all of a sudden, I hear, someone is blowing a whistle at me. And here is a tanker. I am headed down the wrong side of the channel. So I wheeled it over so quick to get on the sea side, the captain and the pilot both came roaring up, thinking we hit ground or something. He didn't chew me out. He just said, "Did you learn your lesson?" I said, "Yes, sir." And they went back below again. They were probably having a drink down there. It takes, I think it takes ten or twelve hours to get through those locks. You go through three on one side and four on the other. You are going up I think like a 70 foot raise.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And from there we went to Solera del Cruz, Mexico, to pick up some more fuel. And one thing I remember very vividly from there, I was standing watch, and it was very, no uniform. I had on my white pants and a t-shirt and a .45 automatic. And we didn't carry any shells in the gun. We carried the clips in the gun. And we had trouble there with the Mexicans. They didn't speak any English. And they tried to sell little knickknacks, you know. And they kept trying to get up the gangplank. And I am hollering at them, get back. Because the captain said don't let anybody aboard ship. And they weren't listening to me. So I just reached down and I pulled the .45 out. No shells in it. But, boy, that was a standard language. They all took off. So we pulled into San Pedro, California, at night, in amongst the oil fields there. We couldn't make land because it was dark. And there I had enough points. I got off the ship and was sent with a bunch of people back on some old cattle cars, boxcars with bunks in them. Back to Great Lakes, and I got discharged out of Great Lakes, Illinois. And I didn't even have any civilian clothes to change into, to go home. Because when we went into the Navy, in those days, when I went to boot camp, we stripped down and you were given your Navy clothes. Your civilian clothes they put in a box and sent them to your folks. Because we had to wear uniform at all times. I remember when I was home for them thirty days leave, after we got hit, when I was with my buddies. We were down in a bar, down in Manitowoc, and the submarine program was going on. And they had SPs all over the place, too. And there was an officer sitting at the bar. And we didn't have to buy any drinks then. We were old enough to drink, but

we didn't have to buy any drinks. Everybody in Manitowoc would buy us drinks. And this officer was sitting there, and he was talking about his experiences over in the European Theater. And my two buddies were in the Air Force in the European Theater. And what he was talking about didn't make any sense. And as the evening went on, he started talking about the Pacific. He's all screwed on dates. And we wondered, what the hell was going on? And we called one of the SPs over, and we said, "What's with this guy?" Here, they found out, he had an officer's uniform, and he wasn't even in service. Looking for free drinks. So they put him in the cuffs and took him away in a hurry.

John: Good for them.

Donald: Yeah.

John: That is something. Ah, when the war in Germany ended, when all the attention went to Japan, were you, of course, your ship was in bad shape, but were you guys thinking about the invasion of the Home Islands?

Donald: Yeah, when I left to go back aboard ship, that was probably, of all the times I had been home, that was the hardest time for me to go back, because of what we had been through, and I knew we were going to go back out there.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And we knew, after Okinawa, it wasn't going to be easy, because those kamikazes sometimes would come down to Okinawa 700 at a time.

John: Yeah.

Donald: They were, they just sunk everything in their sights. But we weren't looking forward to it.

John: Don, you got out, what did you do?

Donald: Well, when I got out, I joined the 52-20 Club. \$20 a week for 52 weeks.

John: Oh, that's right. Yeah.

Donald: That was our payoff. For all of our time in service. I never got anything else out of it. And we did a lot, we went golfing, we went horseback riding, we went fishing, we went hiking. I used to do it with ex-servicemen who were out there together. And drinking. I've got a problem to this day. I've got PTSD for years after, and I've still got a problem. I told the psychiatrist and the psychologist I've talked to

over the years that, maybe it wasn't right, but drinking got me through at first a lot of it.

John: Sure.

Donald: I used to wake up and drive my mother nuts at night, screaming and hollering. And then they started to pressure on us. They promised us all this money and then started to put pressure on us, that we should try to find a job. Well, the employers in Manitowoc were very sympathetic. We'd go to them, and they'd give us what they called a pink slip. "We don't have a job that you are qualified for." So I think I had thirteen or fourteen weeks of this \$20 check, which at that time was big money. And I got a letter from Milwaukee, from the Veterans Office, that I was to report down to their office because they had known I had this new job. So I hadn't cashed the last check. I put that check in the envelope and sent it back to them, and told them to shove it up their ass. I never went back to them for another check.

John: Yeah. Okay.

Donald: I went back to my old job at the White House Milk Company, where they canned evaporated milk.

John: Okay.

Donald: I went down there for several years, until it got slack down there. Then my wife's uncle got me into Manitowoc Engineering Company, and I worked there for many years. I think sixteen to seventeen years, and I got into the experimental department in there. And I just didn't like that type of work. I always wanted to go to maintenance in the school system, and I tried to get into the Manitowoc Public School System, and I couldn't get into that. And I applied for a job at Roncolly (?) High School, the Catholic high school in Manitowoc when it first opened up. They never had a high school there before. And I interviewed with twenty-seven other guys for the job, and I got the job.

John: Hey, good.

Donald: And so I worked there for twenty-five years, retiring in 1990. Then I went to work part-time for seven years, and then my children got on my neck and told me that it was high time I retired. All through my life since I got out of service, I am a very nervous type of person. I've got to keep going. At times, I'd hold down three jobs just because I had to keep doing. I married my wife, I met her in 1947 when I was in my buddy's brother's wedding. We married in 1949. We celebrated our 55th wedding anniversary.

John: Oh, great.

Donald: We have seven children. We have three boys and two girls, and I have one son has a son and a daughter, and one daughter has two daughters and a son, so that is five grandchildren.

John: Hey, great.

Donald: And in between it all, the youngest daughter, when she was in junior high school, and she brought a girl home with her one time, and asked if she could stay for supper with us. Her dad would pick her up. And the girl was filthy. Absolutely filthy. And her dad never picked her up that night. So I called the juvenile police officer in town who was a personal friend of mine, a classmate. And asked him what to do. And he said, "Donny, you keep her overnight and we'll pick her up in the morning." He said, "She comes from a very, very bad family. Their parents are alcoholic." So I had my daughter send her into the bathroom and said, "Take a bath." And we went over to the store and got her some cheap clothing. Her feet were just full of sores.

John: Ah, Jeez.

Donald: And the next day the juvenile officer called us up. He sent the Social Services up. And they didn't have anybody that could take her in. They wanted to know if we would keep her temporarily, and they would pay us for taking care of her. Well, we became so attached to her that after a month's time, we took her in as a foster child.

John: Hey, great.

Donald: So, we kept her for seven years. And she took off, she went to [unintelligible]. She took off. We lost track of her. I went down to Social Services and asked them if they knew anything about her. And she said, this was very common for a foster child to do this. They had lost one family, and they were afraid to become attached to another family.

John: Okay.

Donald: So, she said, either she will eventually get ahold of you, or you will never hear from her again. And all of a sudden we got a phone call from her, apologizing for the way she had [unintelligible]. And we got in contact with her again. In fact, we took part in her wedding out in Montana.

John: Oh, hey.

Donald: She has two children now. So we have kept in touch with her. That is part of my extended family.

John: You had the GI Bill. Did you ever use it?

Donald: Ah, in 1946, I enrolled down here at the University, into a civil engineering course. I was down here for two months, and at that time my nerves were shot. They are still shot. If somebody, if a noise would go off, I'd go for that door. I just jump something terrible. And I had a heck of time. We all had trouble because we had been out of school for four years. We had to take the math classes, back it up one. We had some trouble with chemistry class. So that wasn't helping out with my problem, as it was. And I was in a dormitory. I think it was called Tripp Hall. Another guy and I were rooming together, and we had a cleaning lady who would come in once a week to clean up. And I was ironing my pants one day and she opened the door, and came in. And I turned around and took the iron after her down the hall. Just a natural response. And I went to, they had me go see the doctor there. And they thought it would be better if I dropped out for one semester and went for some treatment, and came back. I never been back. So that was my two months down here with my...

John: Okay. What about vets orgs? VFW? Legion?

Donald: I am a member of the American Legion. I am a member of the Disabled American Veterans. I belong to the Escort Carrier Association. Which holds its reunions once a year. I have attended one out in Norfolk two years ago. I attended one, no, it was in Washington, DC. Last year I attended the one out in Norfolk and my second-oldest son with me, because my wife didn't want to go, because she had a slight stroke at the previous one. And he went with me down to Norfolk. We had a good time. That was the first time the two of us ever went anyplace together alone.

John: Oh, okay. Sure.

Donald: And they got one out in Boston this year. And over the years, I think it was through the computer I became acquainted with one of my former crew members who I did not know at the time. He was in the deck gang. In fact, he was not aboard ship when I was aboard ship. And he said they were looking to try to get a roster of all the guys who were aboard the ship.

John: I was going to ask you how you got into that.

Donald: If I thought I could help them out in any way. So I said, yeah, I sent for the logs. So I read through these 2,200 pages of the logs, copied down all the names and serial numbers.

John: You've had the logs?

Donald: I've got the logs at home now, yes.

John: How did you get them?

Donald: I sent to the Archives in Washington, DC.

John: Okay.

Donald: And also we got ahold of a microfilm roster, on microfilm. And that had something like 33,000 names on it, because every month they'd put that, because they were changing all the time.

John: Yeah. Sure.

Donald: While we went through the whole work. He got them, somebody in a library out in Pennsylvania put it on the paper for us, and we started making phone calls and writing letters, and wherever we could. And we went to the Veterans Administration, to some guy out in Pennsylvania. Here in Wisconsin, they wouldn't do it. They wanted to charge me a dollar a head, down in Milwaukee. And we contacted, we were able to, by looking at their, on that microfilm copy, it's easier. Your name, your home town, your relatives, and the date you enlisted. So we have found over the years that most people stayed within fifty miles of where they lived. That is of our generation. Now, they don't anymore.

John: Yeah.

Donald: So we just went on the computer, on the search engine. And if you had a very common name, like Schroeder, or Smith, it was impossible to trace you down. But some of the other names, you were able to chase down. And then out in the Veterans Administration in Pennsylvania, I sent the guy all the names with the service numbers, and he looked through them for me. And he wrote back and told me that, "Now send me an unsealed letter saying that you are seeking to make communications with these guys. I cannot give you their name or phone number. It's against the law. I will forward the letter to them. So by doing this, we got in contact with over 500 guys.

John: Oh, that is great.

Donald: So, at one time, in our Escort Carrier Association, our ship has the biggest group of any of them.

John: That is fantastic. Let me flip the tape.

**[End of Side B of Tape 1.]**

John: Okay, you said 500?

Donald: We got in touch with over 500 people. And out of that 500, a lot of them actually almost hung up on me. They don't want to talk about their war service at all. But out of those 500, we were able to get 229 to join our organization. And then at one of the conventions, somebody suggested that we start writing up a newspaper, like we had aboard ship called the *Sangy News*. So one guy who was a yeoman aboard ship and his wife is a retired school teacher said they would do it if they could get someone to help them with the input. So my buddy out in New Jersey, who I got in touch with first, volunteered my name without telling me. So I am now the legal historian for the *Sangy News*. And I, they say without me, they couldn't keep it up. I just find this stuff.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And so we started publishing the paper. They brought copies of the paper here, and I am going to continue sending them some. And over the years, people have contacted me that their father, their husband that died, they wanted to donate some stuff or they want to know something about it.

John: That's wonderful.

Donald: I had a young man from Germany about five years ago get in contact with me. He was a high school student working on World War II. Wanted to know if I would help him out. Him and I are in communications [unintelligible.] I had a guy over is Salzburg, Austria, who is building an 8½ foot scale model of the ship.

John: Wow.

Donald: He's got it. The ship almost done and he is working on the aircraft and the guns now. He called me by phone even, he called me the other day. He wants to build the ship where he has personal contact with someone who was aboard that ship. And his model group has now made me an honorary member of their model group. And send me pictures. And we keep back and forth.



John: That's great.

Donald: It's unbelievable. He sends me candy sometimes. And then I was on the computer one day and I ran across a web site, I think it is called navsource.org. And I see on there they had all the different ships. And they were looking for photos of the ships. So I e-mailed this guy. He was the guy, I can't think of his name, out in Texas, that runs this web site. And I e-mailed him back and told him that I have all these pictures and stuff. And he said, "Would you get in contact with so-and-so? He runs the escort carrier association for me." So I had a couple of e-mails going back and forth, where I explained what I got. And then he says, "Could you e-mail them to me?" And I said, "Well, there are so many, and they take so long to e-mail them. Why don't I mail them to you?" The next e-mail he sends me back, he says, "I hope you know I live over in Barcelona, Spain."

John: All right.

Donald: So this guy has made up a web site for me. Both the guy in Austria and the guy in Spain, I got personal contact. I know their families. The guy in Spain just adopted a little Chinese girl. And they send me pictures of them.

John: That's great.

Donald: And I talk a lot to the high schools in town now. And my son, the one that brought me down to Madison today, has made me up a CD that has got, I think he has 212 entries on that CD. So instead of carrying this memorabilia along, I take the CD and they are able to transport it onto the computer screen, and I am able to talk to these kids for an hour and a half at a time.

John: That's great.

Donald: The majority of them are very attentive. You find a few in every crowd.

John: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Donald: You got to get used to that.

John: Well, let me ask you a question. You know, you were a young guy starting into your life there, and suddenly this thing happened. And, you know, three or four years, you know, were just taken out of your life. How do you feel about that?

Donald: Well, they were definitely missing. I feel a bunch of boys were sent out to fight a man's war, who grew up in a hurry. And I think, personally, we done a hell of a job. Even then, I couldn't swim.

- John: I have a friend, the writer, Steven Ambrose, who has written several books.
- Donald: I communicated with him.
- John: He just passed away here. But he was giving a talk here, some years ago, to a bunch of World War II vets, and most of them, as he was talking to them, were saying, "I didn't do anything. I really didn't do anything." Which is normal. And he said, "Wait a minute." He said, "You guys were giants!" And they looked at him. "You went out," he said, "and you saved the world." And that is true. You did.
- Donald: And we came back and we rebuilt it, instead of crying.
- John: That's a good point.
- Donald: They talk in the Viet Nam, I got nothing against the Viet Nam. I had a son-in-law that was in Viet Nam, and I got nothing against them at all. But what gets me is some of these groups that cry about these prisoners of war. Do people realize there were over 70,000 men missing in the Second World War who are unaccounted for?
- John: Yeah.
- Donald: And nobody ever talked about looking for them.
- John: Okay. What a remarkable story. Before we wrap up, anything else you want to be sure is in here. You'll probably get home and think, and remember.
- Donald: Well, a lot of it is on that. I know, one time, at Leyte Gulf, talking about these suicide planes, one of the Japs that suicided us, he got shot down and when his plane got hit and exploded, the wing was floating, and he was sitting on the wing. And the destroyer went over to pick him up. And he tried putting a gun to his head, and shooting it off, and the gun didn't go off. So they picked him up and they brought him back aboard ship so they could interrogate him. And they treated that guy with kid gloves, just as nice as could be. And the captain emptied the brig out. We had 3.2 beer stored in it. And they put him in there. And every day they would blind-fold him, and they'd bring him up on deck and walk him back and forth. And after about three or four days, that was after the battle of Leyte Gulf was over with, they turned him over to the Marines on the Philippines. I don't know what the Marines did with him.
- John: A captured kamikaze pilot, that's, wow.

Donald: And they got information out of him at that time, from what I understand, that actually turned out to be true, but they didn't accept it at that time. He talked about that Japanese fleet coming out.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: But they ignored that.

John: Let me - I'm going to shut this off. If there's anything you want to hit on?

Donald: No.

**[End of interview]**