

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM C. STEAFFENS

Radioman, Navy, World War II
Communications Technician, Navy, Korean War/Cold War.

2002

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Steaffens, William C., (1926-2009). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 49 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 49 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

William Steaffens, a Berlin, Wisconsin native, discusses his Navy service as a radioman in World War II and as a communications technician during the Korean War. Steaffens discusses enlisting in 1944 and attending boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes. He reflects that he got assigned to radio school because, while in high school, he had learned some ham radio code. He describes radio school on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison: attending classes underneath the stadium, eating in the Tripp Commons, constantly doing physical education activities, and putting a lot of effort into increasing his code speed. Sent by train to a receiving station in California, he mentions going into San Francisco for a day of liberty before being transferred to Treasure Island Naval Base. Steaffens comments that the first ship he was put on was a US Army Transport, the *Sea Cat*. He speaks of brief stops at Finschhafen (New Guinea), Hollandia (New Guinea), and the Admiralty Islands. While at Hollandia, he tells of throwing dud bazooka shells into the jungle, getting spooked while walking back from a USO show in the dark, and “borrowing” a truck. Steaffens recalls that, on the islands, hungry Japanese soldiers would occasionally steal uniforms and try to go through the chow lines. He states that while travelling, his main duty was staying “out of the way of the Master at Arms so I wouldn’t get put to work.” In the Philippines, he was assigned to the *USS Whitney*, a destroyer tender that was anchored in Leyte Gulf. He portrays the tasks of the *Whitney* in repairing destroyers and providing spare parts and men. Steaffens states his general quarters station was antenna repair, he often slept on the deck, and he would sometimes sell his allotted beer at the “recreation beach.” He reports he was kept busy copying the entire daily message from Honolulu. Steaffens recalls using up all the ship’s flares in celebration of V-J Day. He describes heading to Okinawa (Japan) to gather an occupation force, being escorted to Korea by a minesweeper escort, and getting hold of a Japanese rifle, which he mailed home. Transferred to Task Unit CTU-70.2.2 aboard the *USS Jason*, he speaks spending a few months docked at Tsingtao (China), where he got into a fight at the enlisted man’s club. Steaffens mentions seeing cheap movies and eating in restaurants at Tsingtao. Sent home on a fleet tanker, he says the first thing he did when he got into San Pedro (California) was go to a barber and get the works. With two sea bags, he tells how he got one checked at inspection and then reloaded it with the souvenirs he had gathered. He details the train ride to Great Lakes, with guys buying beer at every stop. He speaks of using the GI Bill to go to Ripon College (Wisconsin), where he got a bachelor’s degree in history, and trying, but not liking, American Legion and VFW meetings. In the Naval Reserve, Steaffens says that getting a job as a teacher was difficult because employers suspected he would be called to serve in Korea. In 1951,

he was called back and shipped to Bainbridge Island (Washington) where he learned Russian code. Shipped to Adak (Aleutian Islands, Alaska), he talks about his time at a radio base receiving code as part of a cryptanalysis program. Steaffens describes the snowy weather and earthquake-proof buildings he worked in, and he states that he never heard a thing on the frequency he was assigned.

Biographical Sketch:

Steaffens (1926-2009) served in the Navy during World War II and the Korean War. In World War II, he served as a radioman aboard the *USS Whitney* and the *USS Jason*, and during the Korean War he was based in Adak (Alaska) monitoring Russian radio frequencies. He received a bachelor's degree in history from Ripon College and eventually settled in Stoughton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.
Transcribed by Daniel Walker, 2010.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Okay. It's the, uh—twelfth or eleventh?
- Bill: It's the eleventh.
- Jim: Eleventh of January, 2002. I'm talking to William Steaffens. Where were you born, sir?
- Bill: I was born in Berlin, Wisconsin.
- Jim: Where—er, when?
- Bill: May twentieth, 1926.
- Jim: Twenty-six. Okay. And you entered military service when?
- Bill: Let's see [Pauses], 1944. I think May of 1944.
- Jim: May of forty-four?
- Bill: Yeah.
- Jim: And where was that?
- Bill: Well, I enlisted in Oshkosh and then I—
- Jim: In the Army?
- Bill: No, Navy.
- Jim: Okay, enlisted Navy—
- Bill: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. So, where'd they send you?
- Bill: Okay I enlisted in the Navy and then I came home for a few days, and then they—I reported back to Oshkosh and they sent me down to Milwaukee for what they called a pre-induction physical. That was for everybody, both the volunteers like myself and draftees, it was for both Navy and Marine Corps. It was a rat race.
- Jim: So, where was your boot camp?

- Bill: Boot camp was in Great Lakes. I think my company number was eleven seventy-two if I remember.
- Jim: So what did they—specialty did they head you for?
- Bill: Well it's interesting; as you got in the boot camp they gave you tests for different things.
- Jim: Sure.
- Bill: Prior to that, when I was in high school, I was interested in a ham radio, and another fella and I were talking with a guy that was a ham in town and he said, "Oh, you have to learn the code first." So we, uh—went to his house everyday after school, every once and a while, and he taught us—tried to teach us the code. Well, with that as a background when I got to boot camp, for radio school it was simple for me because I knew the code—the few letters they said with dots and dashes, and so right away, "You're just perfect for radio school." Well then when they found out that I had halfway decent grades in school too, they said, "Well maybe you ought to go to Radio Technician." Well, I flunked that test real good, because that was *way, way* over my head. So it was radio school for me.
- Jim: Where'd you go to radio school?
- Bill: Believe it or not, Madison.
- Jim: Madison. I was going to say, they had a large contingent there—
- Bill: It was amazing how that worked out; I never got that far from home. We spent the first month in rooms underneath the stadium; that's where we had all our phy-ed stuff too, with hand-to-hand combat, you know, that type of stuff. They had an obstacle course alongside the stadium. We used to have to—we marched everywhere with a drum. We had a drummer, and we'd go from there down to the waterfront; we'd go swimming—had to be able to swim. I think we always ate at the same place. It was over—
- Jim: Tripp Commons.
- Bill: Yeah, Tripp Commons. Then after we got through underneath the—month underneath the stadium we went to—was it Adams and Tripp? Yeah, the men's halls right along the lake. So we were there for a while. Instead of—I think instead of just one in a room or two in a room, I think we had four. And then from there—
- Jim: How did school go?

- Bill: Well, school went real good. I had trouble with code speed, but they had a set of—if you didn't make what they thought you should make each week, we were given one more week to get there, with our speed; if you didn't get there, you shift out. At that time, we were putting a lot of guys out loading ammunition. And I thought, "That's no place for me."
- Jim: That was an incentive.
- Bill: That was a *real* incentive. [Both laugh] So, I did have trouble with that, but we had typing up in one of the buildings of the agricultural school; we had radio theory in one of the engineering buildings; we had code in—I think what's Blackhawk garage now, if it still is anything. We had direction-finding there. Let's see, what else did we have? We had phy-ed in every place they could get us.
- Jim: So what rating did you end up with at the—
- Bill: Out of school?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Bill: I was just a second-class striker; radio—er just a seaman. They didn't promote you too awfully fast. The last part of school was in another dormitory. We moved to three—we were in three different places. This at that time was a new dormitory not too far from Tripp—or to the west, I can't think of the name of it—two stories high and it was nice, had a barber shop in the basement I can recall. From there is when we shipped out. I can't remember now, I think it was seventy in our company.
- Jim: When did you move?
- Bill: It was—
- Jim: Because the radio school was what, three months?
- Bill: I think it was three months, yeah.
- Jim: That's what it usually was.
- Bill: Let's see, so I would be—[Counting months]—I think we finally moved up in November. It wasn't snowing yet, but it was getting cold. We loaded up all our gear and went down to a railroad station here in Madison and we took the train from Madison to Chicago; we were supposed to change trains at Chicago. I think at that time not everybody's going to the same place, but I was heading west. We went from Chicago—we went by train to a place called Schumacher which doesn't even exist on a map anymore.

One of those places that was built just for the war, like a receiving station, had a stockade for guys that were breaking the law. It was in California; it was not too far from San Francisco because I did have a liberty and got into San Francisco one day.

Jim: It was a receiving station?

Bill: Yeah. So you were shipped there and you waited there until orders were cut for you to move on to the next place and so—

Jim: How long were you there? A month?

Bill: No. Couple—maybe a week at the most.

Jim: Oh, that's it.

Bill: While I was there I was assigned as a runner for the brig. At least I was on the outside. We had one or two liberties in town, so I know it wasn't more than a week.

Jim: So then you got a ship?

Bill: Then we got transferred from there out to Treasure Island. Treasure Island at that time was a place that was—a Navy station. It had a good sized barracks and a—we were put in there until the proper transportation came along. It wasn't too long, just—didn't even have to unpack the sea bag, I don't think. I was put on—of all things—instead of a Navy ship, a United States Army transport, the Sea Cat.

Jim: [Unintelligible]

Bill: It was the USAT.

Jim: A-T?

Bill: US Army—United States Army Transport.

Jim: U-S-A-T. Transport ship.

Bill: Yep. It was a Sea Cat; S-E-A Cat. We left from San Francisco and that wasn't like a troop ship by any means, I mean it had Army on it and some Navy nurses going out, it had—

Jim: It must have carried personnel.

- Bill: It carried a lot of personnel, it had some cargo too—it was a combination. So we went out with that, we missed the Hawaiian Islands by a bit, south of that, came in so we could almost see Guadalcanal, we were a little bit south of that—
- Jim: Where'd you dock?
- Bill: The first time we docked was at Finschhafen on New Guinea. We docked there just long enough to load some stuff on the ship. It hadn't been too long since the war had gone through there; there were the old remains of a PT boat base.
- Jim: When did you ship out?
- Bill: I'd say probably in January.
- Jim: January of Forty-five?
- Bill: Yes sir. I think I was somewhere in California for Christmas, so it was close to there.
- Jim: How long were you at Finschhafen?
- Bill: We were there just a couple of days. Just enough to unload. From there we went to—oh boy, I can't say the name of the place now, isn't that funny? It was a place where MacArthur had his headquarters for a while, called Pancake Hill, it was still in New Guinea.
- Jim: Hollandia?
- Bill: Yeah.
- Jim: I thought so.
- Bill: That was interesting there—there were a lot of things that were interesting there. While we were at Hollandia—I think that's where it was—we went down to where the landing beach had been and—just horsing around down there, and these guys found some bazooka shells that were duds. So they'd pick them up by the fins and toss them—see how far they could throw them into the jungle—see if they'd explode. We were eighteen years old, couldn't be hurt by anything, you know. We went swimming, I had some stuff I brought back, I got rid of that—I had a belt of thirty caliber machine gun stuff and a few other knick knacks like that that I found down in the water. At Hollandia too we went to a USO entertainment thing at one of the camps that was away from where we were. And here again you know being young and stupid I guess, we—a bunch of us, three,

four, five of us, whatever decided we were going to go see this USO show. Well we walked down this trail through the jungle—you know, who's going to hurt us anyhow—well that's ok in broad daylight, but coming back it was pitch black. All you could see was the lightness of the trail as opposed to the dark jungle on the side and, I swear to God, there was a Jap in every tree. I don't know about the other guys, but I was scared.

Jim: Did they shoot at you?

Bill: No they didn't shoot at us, but your imagination was crazy. Somewhere along in this same time period, we did all kinds of goofy things—we got tired of walking on one of the little journeys we took. We found a six by six hard bow by the side of the road, and one guy said, "Well why should we walk?" There was nobody around, so we just cranked it up and used it. Somebody was probably missing a truck afterwards. We just went as far as we wanted to and then just put it off to the side of the road and left it there. But then again, who cares, you know? From Hollandia we went out to—

Jim: Back on the ship?

Bill: Yeah back on the ship.

Jim: Now before we leave that, what were your duties aboard ships?

Bill: Ducking work.

Jim: I'm sorry?

Bill: Keeping away from getting put in work.

Jim: Didn't you have any—wasn't there a radio shack?

Bill: Nope, not going out.

Jim: You had no radio—

Bill: I had no duties at all, except if the Master at Arms caught me I had to do what he told me.

Jim: You were just a deck—

Bill: I was just there. From Hollandia we went out to—this was on the Admiralty Islands—I can't think of the name the, uh—boy this is awful—but we got off the ship, the ship that I had been on, that was the end of that extrusion with that one. We stayed there for a while. This was the same

base where they'd had some bombing raids by the Japs a number of months before we got there and they hit a floating dry dock that was in there.

Jim: Was it on New Britain, or—

Bill: Out in the Admiralty Islands. Now if we have to to verify this later, I can get out my atlas, I think it's there. I'm sorry I just can't remember it. Anyhow then we got—from there we went—we were there maybe a week.

Jim: And you got off the ship?

Bill: Yeah got off the ship, was on a—just a—

Jim: Changed ships?

Bill: Yeah. So we were just there, we slept in Quonset huts, they had a number of those—this is an interesting experience—one of these places, they had trouble in the chow line, because a Japanese had come in from out in the jungle where they were hiding and they were hungry and they'd come in—they'd swipe uniforms from the clothesline and dress up in those and try to get in the chow line. Well if they didn't say anything, and nobody talked to them, they could get food because nobody would know—if they didn't look too Japanese they could be a steward from the ship or something like that, because we had Philippine people onboard, we had, of course blacks and so forth, so just depending on how they looked, they could get away with it. If they didn't then they just got caught. So then we got put on another ship that was a cruise liner that had been converted to a troop ship, and I don't remember the name of that either, somewhere I think I have it written down, but I don't remember where.

Jim: What kind of a ship was it?

Bill: It was a troop ship; it was a regular cruise ship that had multiple decks—

Jim: A converted cruise ship? And what did you do there?

Bill: Same thing I'd done before: Stayed out of the way of the Master at Arms so I wouldn't get put to work. This was a lot of Navy and a lot of Army it was full. I don't know how many thousands of guys—

Jim: Where did you go?

Bill: From there we went up towards the Philippines. That's where I offloaded, onto an LCI: landing craft infantry, And used that, they took me up to the

Whitney. I got onto the *Whitney* sometime—I think by the time I got there it was probably April of Forty-five.

Jim: You were aboard the *U.S.S. Whitney*?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: It was a command ship?

Bill: No, the *Whitney* is a destroyer tender.

Jim: Oh. That's the third ship.

Bill: Yeah. That's the AD-4. I was never a part of the crew of any other ship until I got to that.

Jim: So you said AD what?

Bill: AD-4.

Jim: It's a submarine tender?

Bill: No, destroyer tender.

Jim: Destroyer tender.

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: When did you get aboard that?

Bill: Oh boy, I'm guessing maybe April.

Jim: April of?

Bill: Forty-five. We were anchored in Leyte Gulf off of the Island of Samar. I was there until after the war.

Jim: What were you doing at Samar?

Bill: I was a radioman. I got to be radioman third class there.

Jim: Third class?

Bill: We had—we always had a number of destroyers tied up alongside us for various types of repairs—we had some that were coming back from

Guadalcanal that had been hit by Kamikazes, we had to repair them. Some of those were in pretty bad shape, but they were still floating.

Jim: Did they hit you?

Bill: No, they didn't hit us. We had two air raids while I was on it in the Philippines. They didn't hit anything—

Jim: No Kamikazes.

Bill: Well they weren't real Kamikazes, those were just bombers; they didn't try to hit anything. I know I found out where my general quarters station was, which was just delightful; it was [unintelligible] antenna repair. Which might have sounded—but if the antennas got shot down, I was supposed to climb up the mast and put them back together. I said, "Oh no, I won't do that." But there was more than one of us, so I figured I could say no and another guy would probably be crazy enough to go. It was nice there, really, as far as conditions you know, the ship was built to maybe hold 500, we had over a thousand on it, so sleeping conditions were kind of squeezed; I slept on a cot out on the deck when we were just anchored and if it rained I had a piece of linoleum I could pull over me. If we were underway then I found a place in the passageway to sleep.

Jim: Did you have a place on shore where you could get some beer?

Bill: Yeah, we had what they called a 'recreation beach.' It was interesting in a way; you were allotted so many cans of beer, and of course the thing to do—I wasn't much of a beer drinker, I'd never been much of a beer drinker until I got there—but some guys wouldn't drink beer, so what the guys who liked the beer would do is go and try to trade them money or whatever. After all, you're getting, what, fifty dollars a month? It was a lot more than thirty-seven when I started.

Jim: You had nothing to buy though.

Bill: Oh boy, well we had to buy our own tooth paste and stuff like that.

Jim: Aboard the ship?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: How was the food aboard ship?

Bill: It was good.

Jim: Most of those tenders always had great kitchens.

- Bill: We had a big crew there, and looking back at it—I looked back at it just recently for some reason or another, I guess all the stuff on Pearl Harbor and all that, you think back—the ship was actually—it could resupply most of your destroyers. We had extra gun barrels for their five inch guns, we had extra gun barrels for forty millimeter, twenty millimeter, we had extra torpedoes, we had extra depth charges, we had ammunition, we had food, but also had—I thought, “Wait a minute, why do we have a radio gang so big?” We had extra people. Because why did we need to have so many—what was the torpedo man doing there?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Bill: We had two or three of those. We had a whole bunch of different types of mechanics. The reason was if the destroyer came alongside and lost a person, one way or another, we replaced them. I never thought of that while I was there. I wouldn't want to go on a destroyer, because those can be pretty miserable. Your living conditions are a lot different. It was something that just dawned on me. There were spare parts, men too. Well, we were there during the big V-J Day, I guess—no that was V-E day, no V-J day. We used up all of our flares—
- Jim: Celebrating?
- Bill: Yeah. We burned out one searchlight, but everybody did. The whole gulf there was full of ships and—
- Jim: Raising hell.
- Bill: Shortly after that we got word that we're going to go up north, I guess I could say north. Let me say before that—you could always tell when something was cooking because we had some destroyers around us and all of a sudden in the morning, you'd watch them and see a little hustle and bustle around the deck and all that; well all of a sudden goes—when they start increasing the speed on those destroyers, it's really fascinating, the boat comes right up out of the water and just start cutting that wave and oh man, that's beautiful, they're just beautiful. Well anyhow, then we went—we had to almost pull us off of the pile of coffee grounds we'd dumped over the side over those months, we went north and we hadn't gotten around the islands to the east of the Philippines very far, then we had a warning of a typhoon.
- Jim: Where were you headed?
- Bill: We were actually; I found out later, headed for Okinawa. We had a group of ships; we had us and two seagoing tugs, and two destroyer escorts, and

I don't—I think that's all we had in our group. We hit this real rough sea and the seagoing tugs had to turn back, they couldn't handle the waves, and one of the destroyer escorts went with them to keep them company. So we had one destroyer escort with us, and we kept on going. It's interesting. We went through the edge of this typhoon, and the waves are breaking over the main deck, which was—I'd never seen waves like that in my life—but you're young, and it's exciting. We didn't think that maybe the ship would sink.

Jim: Your ship had 500 men—

Bill: A thousand of them—

Jim: It was rated for 500 but it had a thousand?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: Because it was all replacements.

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: And how long was that ship—how big a ship was it?

Bill: I don't know, over on the table there is some information on it, but I would say it's 400 feet long, maybe. The radio shack was third deck below the main deck, just one deck below the bridge.

Jim: Were you busy?

Bill: Yeah, we had what they called 'Fox' which was continuously sent from, we copied it from Honolulu.

Jim: That's where you got your daily message.

Bill: Yeah. But most places, or most ships, what they do is they listen to it, and when they hear the code that indicates your ship they copy that, but they don't copy anything else. With us, because somebody might—some ship might miss something—we copied everything. So twenty-four hours a day we were copying this code, which was nicely sent, because it was five letters in a group, and it was a steady rate of speed. Real easy to get once you got into it. You had to be able to copy that at eighteen words per minute or better because that's the way they dumped it on you. The fastest I ever copied was when we had some plain language news coming in, and it was at thirty-five words a minute, and I got most of that. But that's because you knew what the words were as they came out.

- Jim: What did you do at Okinawa?
- Bill: Okinawa we stopped there for a little while, this is where they were gathering together an occupation force. I think it was the 25th Army Corps getting on transports, and we were going to go with them just to get up to Korea. From Okinawa going up to Korea we had a minesweeper escort, because there were mines in the area but they didn't know where, so they were sweeping ahead of us. We were heading for the harbor in Seoul, Korea. It was called Jinsen when I was there, but it's probably called something else now.
- Jim: Jinsen.
- Bill: Yeah. Well we were there—
- Jim: Laid anchor at Inchon?
- Bill: Yeah. I don't know why, we just were there. That's where I picked up a Jap rifle. They had an occupation force going into this Japanese base that was inland a ways. It had a supply depot, and they said each ship had to furnish so many people. They needed one radioman, and I didn't draw the lucky card, but I didn't want to go anyhow. Well the guys went in there, and when they came back, each shipped was allotted—if you had a thousand men on the ship, you were given a thousand rifles. Of course officers always got the better ones, pistols and machine pistols, we had the rifles. I still got it, I'm going to sell it, find somebody who wants it. While we were there, too, we had a storm coming along, and for some reason they wanted to have all of our boats, the small boats, they wanted to keep one available at all times, the rest they hoisted up on deck, we had some big ones—
- Jim: Landing boats you mean?
- Bill: No, these weren't landing boats. Liberty boats, they used to be landing boats way back before landing boats were invented. So they wanted to take this one, it had a cabin on it, and put it over around the island so it would be available, the rest they secured. So I got volunteered to be the radioman to go along with a portable radio—well that was OK. We got on this boat and chugged over to this island and got on the lee side of it, where it was nice and calm with, I don't know, maybe five of us there and they'd given us a bunch of food; of course we were having fun, and we ate all the food—it was supposed to last us a couple of days and we ate it all up right away. We had to report in every so many hours, and we did that. We weren't there very long. We weren't there I don't think more than eight hours, nine hours, then we came back and the food was gone, nobody said anything about that. Then the word came along that the

Whitney was going to go back to the states. Well, as you can tell from the time I got into the Navy and onboard ship, I'd be considered a short-timer. Because there were some guys on the ship who had been there for four years. So I got transferred and I got put on as part of a flag. Now if you know anything about the Navy, you have Task Forces, Task Groups, and Task Units. In other words, Task Units make up a Task Group, and Task Groups make up a Task Force, that's the organization. So I was assigned to the flag of Task Unit CTU seventy-point-two-point-two [CTU-70.2.2]; that's the designation of it.

Jim: What ship was that on?

Bill: That was on the *Jason*, the *U.S.S. Jason*. Which is ARH-1, is a Heavy-hull Repair Ship.

Jim: It was an LST.

Bill: No, this was different, I think I have some pictures of it somewhere; it was a big, real big thing.

Jim: It opens up in the back to take a ship in?

Bill: No, this wasn't like that.

Jim: What was it again?

Bill: ARH-1.

Jim: Repair ship?

Bill: Yeah. Heavy-hull Repair is what they called it. I don't think they did any heavy-hull repairs; they had probably done it before.

Jim: Now we're getting into October?

Bill: Now we're getting into October, and I'm on my way, on *Jason*, over to China to Tsingtao. We tied up there, without having it in front of me I can't keep track of the hopping around I did there, because the flag would go anywhere that they could. If the *Jason* was going to go away, then we got put on another ship. So I was on a Blackhawk, I was on *Antares*, I was on a number of other ships that were tied up there, and it was really funny. We didn't do much; we stood watch, put in the radio shack, at one time we even had a teletype in there with a landline. We more or less were marking time, I think.

Jim: Sure. Weren't you thinking about going home by this time?

- Bill: Yeah, you think about it because of all these other guys—in fact, the only fight in my life that I ever got into in the Navy was at Tsingtao at the enlisted man's club. We could go there and sit and get dinner. You didn't get anything for free; you had to buy your own beer and stuff. We were sitting there and talking and the guy came over and started giving me a real hard time about being—not going home with my ship—that I couldn't go, they went home and left me here and he just—
- Jim: Why would that be your fault?
- Bill: Well he was just riding my butt about it, “Ha, ha, ha, see you couldn't go home.” Well he wouldn't let go, and so finally I stood up and I was a good sized guy then, too—not quite as heavy as I am now [laughs]—and I told him leave me alone; He wouldn't, so I gave him a backhand right across the chest as hard as I could and pushed him right through a set of French doors.
- Jim: Good.
- Bill: Well, he gave up and I went back, and it wasn't five minutes later, the SPs [shore patrol] were there, “What's going on?” “Oh nothing, there's nothing going on here!” Because nobody's going to squeal on their buddy. So that was the excitement of the day for that. Tsingtao, I was there for quite a while too, because I was there for Christmas I know.
- Jim: Was that Tsingtao or Chingtao?
- Bill: It's T-S-I-N-G. [explains spelling] That was, like, the port for Beijing, I think.
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Bill: Well, we had a rickshaw race down a hill one time that was exciting.
- Jim: How old were you there?
- Bill: Let's see: I got there probably around October; I was there until the following February or March; I'm guessing of forty-six.
- Jim: Then you must have been ready to come home.
- Bill: Yeah. I sure was. I had a lot of fun, because your responsibilities weren't that great at Tsingtao. We got to know our way around the town, and we went to a movie one time, I saw all twelve chapters of a serial—it was an American serial—at one time. They just ran it one after the other. It was

fun sitting there watching them. I had my own bottle of booze in one of the restaurants—of all things to drink I was drinking cherry brandy. The restaurants were very clean, the food was good—I paid, what, three dollars I think it was—for, oh, about an eight course meal. I paid, maybe, twenty-five cents for the movie. After all the fun was there, I got word that we were going to go home, and it didn't work sending us back now in big bunches anymore, you know, they had a fleet tanker called the *Cohocton* which I don't think my papers ever showed that I was actually a member of the crew on that one, I was just a working passenger.

Jim: But you came home on that?

Bill: Came home on that.

Jim: And then where did they sail to?

Bill: They sailed from Tsingtao to San Pedro. Then again, it was kind of nice; we had to stay and watch the radio shack of course, but we had real good living quarters and real good food, and it was kind of nice, really. We got into San Pedro, and there again it was a long time after the war of course by that time, but there were an awful lot of guys still coming in from the Pacific; there had been an awful lot of people out there, so we weren't like strangers in the place. San Pedro was quite a Navy town anyhow. One of the first things that a bunch of us did was we went to a barber shop to get a decent haircut, and we had the works; I had a haircut, and a shave, and a manicure, and my fingernails clipped [both laugh] the whole nine yards, it probably cost me six or seven bucks.

We had to—if we were going to send anything home, it had to be inspected. I happened to have two sea bags by that time, with all the stuff I had gathered, so what I did is I took one sea bag that was strictly GI and took it in and had it inspected, and they tagged it—they didn't padlock it or anything, they just put the tag on it. So I went back to the barracks, transferred the tag to my other bag with all my—oh I had some pieces of PBY that—the metal from the skin of a PBY that I found, and I had the bullet cartridges and stuff I found—all of this other stuff, which might have been legal, I don't know, but I didn't want to take any chances—so I just sent that home and it got home okay. In fact that rifle—that Japanese rifle—I had mailed that from onboard ship when I was over in Korea. The sail maker, now, we had a sail maker, but no sails ok, but he made body bags—but he made a gun case for us and I stuffed that darn gun in the gun case and tied it shut, and put my post name and address on there with stencils, and they got it. It came all the way through the mail and everything—now this is a gun; everybody knew it was a gun, and it got to my house; nobody stole it. And it's just fascinating that something like that happened. So we were now in San Pedro, I don't know how long I

was there, it wasn't too long. It was interesting when I had the bag inspected, you should have seen the stuff that they collected—things that weren't supposed to go; they had hand grenades and they had all kinds of guns, they had submachine guns, everything you can think of. I know that the guys who were sorting that out, they plotted that for themselves anyhow. I'd seen enough of that—the Navy is like that—well, the military is—the higher up on a pile you are the more you can keep for yourself.

So we got on a troop train that was heading for Great Lakes. Well the troop train had some troop cars and some passenger cars. I was lucky—I think I was lucky—I got on a passenger car. The bunks in that one were a lot better. The only trouble is if you know how the sleepers are, you're three assigned to one. In other words, you had two guys who slept together in the bottom bunk—and that wasn't that big—and one guy on the top. So thank God I didn't have to sleep that way too long because that was not comfortable—you couldn't even roll over. The food was not too good but it was edible, and everybody—nobody cared, we were heading home—nothing could go wrong. We stopped at one town and the guys piled out and found out they could get beer. They were told, “If the train leaves, you're stuck and you're in trouble.” Well, I can still picture looking out the door and here comes two guys with a case of beer between them, running like crazy—must have been twenty-four bottles, not just a six pack—running for the train; they opened the door and threw it in and crawled in and there was their beer. Some guys had chipped in, so everybody had a beer. Well that was going on at every place we could stop at; there wasn't a state that was dry. They chalked a bunch of clever remarks off the side of the cars and that, which the train people didn't like. We thought, “That's too bad, that's not our problem.” Got to Great Lakes, went through the mill there and got home, and I'm trying to think; I must have been home by sometime in April of Forty-six.

Jim: You were discharged then?

Bill: Yep. Discharged at Great Lakes.

Jim: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

Bill: That's interesting. When I got home—I had gone to Ripon College for one quarter, and that was just to take up time until I was a little older to get into the service—

Jim: So you used your GI Bill?

Bill: So I went—through the GI Bill—I went back to Ripon College. Well, somewhere along in there I decided I should probably belong to a veteran's organization. So the first one I joined I think was the American

Legion. My dad had been in the American Legion too. But I went to one meeting and all they did was—the meeting was about ten minutes and then they had to get out the beer and the cards, and I'm not a Poker player. I thought, "Well this is great; if this is all they're going to do why should I belong to this?" So I let that lapse and I also tried the VFW and by golly they do the same thing, so I quit that too, and I haven't joined any veteran's organizations until just last year.

Jim: Did you finish at Ripon College?

Bill: Yep.

Jim: What did you—what kind of degree did you get?

Bill: I got a Bachelor of Arts in History.

Jim: So what did you do with that?

Bill: I was going to be a teacher. But because I was—during the four years there as you recall by the time they had—the problem happened over in Berlin, Germany; I thought, "Oh, maybe if I go back into the Reserve and this breaks loose like it looks like it might, I still have my rate and seniority," so I joined the Reserve. Okay, so now when I get out of school Korea was—

Jim: The Naval Reserve?

Bill: Yes. When we get out of school, the Korean War's going. So I'm trying to get a job as a teacher, and every place I go, "Well what's your military status?" I said, "Oh, I'm in the Naval Reserve," "Well, uh, we'll call you." So I got the bad end of that, that's for darn sure.

Jim: So they did call you?

Bill: Nope. So I got a job with a construction outfit as their expediter—fuel expediter—that lasted until I got called back into the Reserve. And let's see, I graduated in June. I got called when I worked there; the first time they called me back was probably in November of 1950. I talked to my employer and I said, "What can you do?" He said, "Well, I'll see what I can do." So he got me deferred for about three months, and that was it. So I finally had to report back down to Great Lakes, and that must have been in probably March of Fifty-one. So, going through the same old routine again, getting a physical, getting your equipment, your uniform and all that stuff. Oh also in that time I changed my rate while I was in the Reserve—I don't know why I did some of that stuff it was kind of stupid—I went from radio to communications technician. I can talk about

it now but I haven't talked about it for a long time, because it was cryptanalysis. So after going through Great Lakes I was shipped out to Bainbridge Island. It's one of the islands in Puget Sound—

Jim: You were on active duty?

Bill: Yep.

Jim: And when was that?

Bill: That was probably in May.

Jim: Of Fifty-one?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: Bainbridge Island?

Bill: Yeah, that's in Puget Sound right across from Seattle.

Jim: Oh, Bainbridge. Bainbridge, Washington.

Bill: Yeah. That's right, I should have mentioned that. I said I went out there in May, but whenever they have a lot of rain out there is when I was there, because it rained almost everyday, so probably April or May. There was a radio school again, but it was learning a different type of code because of the work we were going to be doing.

Jim: Cryptography you mean?

Bill: Yeah. We were copying code in messages that others were sending—our little brothers that were over there in Asia with a red star on their hat.

Jim: Okay.

Bill: And then from there I was shipped up to Adak in the Aleutian Islands; I was based at the radio station there, and came back in 1952.

Jim: For how long were you there?

Bill: Well, let's see, from maybe August until the following April.

Jim: Six months. And then what, you got out?

Bill: Yep.

- Jim: Good service. How did you enjoy Adak, Alaska? That's not one of the garden spots on earth.
- Bill: No, no. It's interesting. The climate was similar to here. Now if you look on a map, it should be pretty similar. We had winds up there like you don't have here, and we had one where it snowed, and because of the sort of U-shape of the barracks, the snow whipped in there and we had a snowdrift in there that was about twenty feet high. There was no snow anywhere else! One of the pieces of equipment that they had out there was a rotary snowplow that sometimes they had to use. Because I was in barracks in one location, but to get to where we worked, we all got on a school bus and had to go about three or four miles all around and go up on a hill where this building was that we worked at. Everything was built to withstand earthquakes. That's interesting; if you're in a building with no windows, only doors and vents and have a slight earthquake, that's exciting because you don't know what's going on, because you have no way to relate one thing to another, and everything starts to sway and shake. There was an active volcano not too far away and that's what did this, it was acting up a little bit.
- Jim: Now what was your specific duty there?
- Bill: I was just a radioman—just receiving code.
- Jim: I thought that was cryptography? **[End of tape 1, side A]**
- Bill: Well that is, because what I copied was part of the cryptanalysis program.
- Jim: So the radio wasn't that much different from what you'd been working with?
- Bill: No. At the time it was considered top—well it wasn't top secret but it was secret. I was cleared for that. In fact I just did some checking with—I think I called a Navy recruiter to be sure I could even talk about it because you're supposed to have not said anything for so many years, but it has been about fifty years, should be able to say something—the recruiter actually checked to find out and said, "Yeah, you can talk about it if you want." Well here we are. We had this antenna field like you wouldn't believe, we had real good receivers and we were copying Russian code. Now Russian code is different from our code; our typewriters were different, because they didn't have A, B, C, Ds like we do. So we had to learn all that stuff; that's what that school did.
- Jim: Taught you Russian?

Bill: Yep. Not how to speak it, but when you heard certain combinations of dots and dashes it meant that letter. And there again, I spent all my time up there. I was assigned a given frequency; I never heard a thing. Not one thing. But they had certain frequencies that they knew they used, and we had maybe twenty guys with twenty different frequencies, listening. Some guys heard things, some guys didn't. When you heard something, you copied that, and that was sent by pneumatic tube from where we were to all the way down where the barracks were there was another part of the system where they would go and transmit that—I don't know how they transmitted it now, whether they just transmitted it by making tape of it and transmitting tape—but then it was sent to Washington and Washington would translate the Russian and determine if there was anything—[tape cuts out]

[End of Interview]