

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
LYLE TENNIS,  
U. S. Navy, World War II  
2003

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**Tennis, Lyle**, (1923- ), Oral History Interview, 2003.

User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **ABSTRACT**

The Unity, Wis. native discusses his World War II service as a communications and stores officer aboard an LSMR (Landing Ship Medium Rocket) in the Pacific theater and receiving the Navy Cross for actions when his ship sunk. Tennis talks about deciding to enlist in the Naval Reserves in order to finish college. After attending OCS (Officer Candidate School) at Pattsburg (New York) he was assigned to an LSM which was recently converted to an LSMR. He speaks of the voyage overseas, going ashore to collect mail at Eniwetok Island, and firing rockets at Leyte Gulf. He details the invasion of Okinawa where his ship was stationed at the Kerama Islands. Tennis describes the destruction caused by the two kamikaze attacks on his ship, being called to take command of the ship, decision to abandon ship, and helping evacuate wounded and dead sailors before he left the LSMR. He touches upon return to the U. S., difficulty replacing clothing and uniforms lost when his ship sank, and receiving the Navy Cross and Purple Heart. Tennis touches upon joining the Naval Reserve, involvement in the Navy Club of America (Racine Chapter), and his feeling that patriotism was the reason for his military service.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Tennis (b. September 18, 1923) served with the Navy during World War II and assisted in landings on many Pacific Islands. He received Navy Cross for his actions on May 4, 1945 when Japanese kamikaze pilots sank his ship.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2003.

## Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And this is an oral history interview with Lyle Tennis, of Racine, Wisconsin, who is a veteran of the United States Navy in World War II. We are at Chula Vista Resort, in the Dells, [and today is June 2, 2003] and Lyle, thanks a lot for agreeing to sit in on the interview. We appreciate it.

Tennis: Yes, you are welcome.

John: This is part of an LSM crew members convention. This is the Midwestern unit, taking place here at the Dells and there are maybe forty guys here?

Tennis: I would say about forty people.

John: About forty people, and their wives, and that. And for me, it has been a very interesting experience. Before we get to the Navy, where were you born and when, Lyle? Something about your early life?

Tennis: I was born in a small town up in central Wisconsin by the name of Unity. It's located twenty-two miles north of Marshfield, and my parents were farmers. They moved around from farm to farm. They rented at that time. I was born on the farm.

John: When were you born? Your birthday?

Tennis: 9-18-23.

John: '23. Okay.

Tennis: And my early childhood, my first seventeen years of life, were spent in a small town high school, Unity. And I went to a country school before that. I went to the grade school in Unity, and then I went to the high school in Unity. And graduated from there in 1940. At that point, I received a scholarship to go to Whitewater State Teachers College, now called Whitewater University. And I accepted it in the field of business education. At that time, they called it commercial education. But I spent my next three and a half years there. And that was during the time when the war was starting in the Pacific. And in November of 1942, I and three other guys decided it was getting kind of close so we better do something. So we went into Milwaukee for an interview with the Navy, and all of us enlisted, in the Naval Reserve. And the deal was that we could finish college and then would go to Officers Training School after that. And that is what they did but they made us speed it all up. But we didn't get a four year education, we got a three and a half year education. We had to go summer, we had to go to night school, and everything else in order to complete it in three and a half years. And then I went in

service in June, in March of 1944.

John: Okay.

Tennis: At that point I was sent directly to Officers Training School at Plattsburg, New York.

John: Okay. We talked about Plattsburg earlier.

Tennis: This was, of course, in the middle of winter, colder than Hades up there in northern New York, snow up to your eyeballs. And, you know, it was miserable that way but it was a good school, and I learned a lot, and it paid off. I was assigned from there, when I graduated, to go to Little Creek, Virginia, for training. And we didn't know what kind of an amphib it was going to be on at that point. Until June, and in June we were told we were going to go to Charleston to pick up an LSM [Landing Ship Medium]. And we got to Charleston, we found out that they had changed their mind.

John: Which they do.

Tennis: The LSM was not going to be as we expected. It was going to be converted to an LSMR [Landing Ship Medium Rocket]. A rocket ship, and that would take another six weeks. So we were down there, and we had most of our crew with us already. So we had trained on the ship and in schools down there, for this six weeks. And they did a good job of converting the ship. They worked day and night to do it. What they had to do, of course, was weld over the whole well deck, to make it a flat deck and then put these rocket launchers on it. And these rocket launchers were in series of six, six five inch rockets to be fired from one launcher. And there were four hundred and eighty of those launchers. We were really loaded with ammunition. And really a floating ammo ship, is what it amounted to. If they'd have hit us when we were loaded, there would have been no talking today at all. But this finally got completed and we went on our shake-down cruise and we passed that, and we went on down through the Panama Canal.

John: Some of the fellows have mentioned getting new ships and taking them on shake-down cruises and some of them weren't really ready for shake-down. Was yours?

Tennis: Ours was. We had enough time, you know, in the yard, with all those additional six weeks that they got everything in really, really good shape.

John: Okay.

Tennis: We had very minor things go wrong. But we got through the shake-down cruise very easily. And, of course, we went down through Panama then, and we were assigned to the Pacific, and we didn't know where we were going. Nobody would

tell us. And coming up the Mexican side over there, the Gulf of Tehuantepec was rougher than sin, and everybody was sick, seasick for the first time. And it was an awful trip. And then we got into San Diego and they found that we had a bent screw on the ship, so we had to go into dry dock. One day in dry dock to change the screw, and back out again, and we were ready to go.

John: What was your billet on the ship?

Tennis: I was the communications and stores officer. So I had all the quartermasters, the radiomen, the radar, the signalmen, and all of the storekeepers and yeomen. They became my buddies. They were really great people. To this day I still go and see them. Visit them. Then, as we got formed out of San Diego, there were twelve of these LSMR's. Twelve of them were done at the same time. And we got, we formed the flotilla, went to Pearl Harbor, and from Pearl Harbor out to the Marshall Islands. And Eniwetok. I got off at Eniwetok to pick up the mail for the guys. That was an experience I'll never forget. Eniwetok was nothing but a coral reef, it was just a terrible island at that point. Since then it has been blown up, with bombs, you know, the atomic bomb was tested there. And from there we went to the Phillipines. Well, it took us twenty-three days to get from Hawaii to the Phillipines on this flat-bottomed boat. And the weather wasn't too bad. We didn't have such terrible rough seas out there. Some people got in hurricanes but we did not. We were very fortunate. We got there fairly safely. Phillipines, we went to Leyte Gulf, and the war was pretty well wound down in that area at that time. And we made one run to the beach and fired some rockets, and then they called it off and they sent us back up toward Okinawa, and the island of Kerama Reto, which is off Okinawa about thirty miles. And there we started with our rockets in full force. And it became a training ground for all twelve of us to see if we could, if the rockets were functional. Because this was the first ship that ever had rockets on it of that size. Five inch. Oh, big rockets, and the launchers were that long, they were big things. So we found that they were pretty effective. And so we were slated to go somewhere, didn't know where, but of course then we found out that D-Day was April 1st, 1945, at Okinawa. So we were in on that initial invasion, the first invasion, and these rocket ships then became very helpful to the Marines and the Army in landing, because we would fire these on the beach and they would go five thousand yards, and make a very big hole in the surface, clear everything out of there. If there were Japs in the caves, they would have been flattened at that point. When anybody, the Army or the Marines wants to land after, they had clear sailing, at least to set up and get started in that area. Following that, of course, it became tortuous. We made that run, that first day. Second day, we were out just patrolling around the harbor. The third day they decided to make another run and we unloaded all our rockets. I don't remember how many rockets there were on board that ship but not more over than four thousand. And so, we unloaded all of them. Just fired them like crazy. And I think, seeing that flare in the air all the time, it still gives me chills, because, you know, those things were so big and six of them went off at one time. It splattered

the ship. So following that, they put us out on what they called the radar picket patrol, it was an early warning system for the islands to let them know that planes were coming in, that Japs were in the air, whatever. Well, we had spent our time out there. We were out there for thirty days. But the first week we were out there, a ship that was with us, a destroyer escort that was with us, the Luce, and it got sunk. And we picked up their survivors. And they were full of oil from the sea, they were in bad shape. We got them picked up and took them to an APA [Assault Personnel Attack transport] and they went to a hospital ship from there. The third week we were out there, we were with two other LSM's, to LSMR's and a destroyer escort, and the kamikazes came after us early in the morning, eighteen of them in the air at one time. And, of course, they are going to go for the big ship first. They got the destroyer, and that was the Abele. And that one, they hit it in the middle and it just folded up, and down it went, very fast. We couldn't even pick up survivors from that one because they were after us forever and ever, at that point. And they got all of us, they cleared us all out. Three LSM's, ours and that destroyer, they were all sunk that same day. That would have been May 4, 1945. So, this battle, you may want to hear something about what happened that day, in that the first kamikaze that hit us bounced on the deck and bounded up and hit the five inch gun mount on the stern of the ship, and that five inch gun mount just spun around, and there were nine people in the mount, and all nine of them were killed. Just a flash fire, and all nine killed instantly. And the next one hit, it landed just along side on the port side, just grazed the side of the ship, so we got the water hoses out, the fire hoses out, and tried to wash down the deck while it was on fire, no water pressure. So we were out of luck on that.

John: I'll say.

Tennis: Well, before we could even recover from that, another one came in and this one hit us at the water line, in the engine room. And the engineers down there said that it looks like there is no help, there is no way that we can plug this hole and keep the water out, and keep the ship going. So the skipper was knocked out when the very first plane hit us, the one that hit us in the five inch gun mount. The gunnery officer was killed. Those two were on the con, of course, and one other man was killed who was the coxswain, that is a boatswains mate third class. He was burned so badly that he died just before we got him off the ship. The executive officer, nobody liked him very much, including the captain, I think, because when it came time for somebody to be called to the con to take over the ship, he could have been the one called, but he wasn't. He called me, because I was in the radio room, right below. So I had to go up to take command of the ship and at that point we were on a zig-zag course, of course, and trying our darndest to get away from getting bombed or strafed, or anything else. And we did for a little while, but when we got hit on that engine room area, that was it. And I reported to the skipper, it appears like we are going to have to abandon ship. "Oh, no," he says, "we can't do that." And I said, "Well, just a minute, I'll call the engineering officer." I called the engineering officer and he rushed up there and he said, "Yes,

you have to. We have no hope. We are sinking by the stern now. We are going down and we better get people off if we are going to save anybody.” So we gave the order to abandon ship and off the life rafts went. The engineering officer and I carried the commanding officer down and got him off over the side of the ship. We didn’t know what to do with the gunnery officer. He was dead, laying up there in the con. Finally, a quick thought, let’s carry him down, let’s at least save his body, make sure that he gets a decent burial. We carried him down and put him over the side. And he floated in the water, he did not get put on the life raft at all. He floated in the water and he was picked up later by the surviving ship, and given a burial on Okinawa. So then we had a guy who was a radioman, a guy who was a quartermaster and myself and this engineering officer who were left on the ship. And we said, “Are we sure everybody is off that can walk? That are still alive?” And we ran through the ship to find out if there was anybody at all. And there was nobody, nobody responded. So we finally abandoned ship, so we were the last ones off the ship. And the ship went down in twenty minutes after we got off. And in the meantime, we all paddled like heck to get to the life rafts and get away from the ship far enough so we didn’t get pulled in with the vacuum, the suction when she went down. But as a result of all this, there were lots of medals given out. We went, my yeoman, my radarman and the engineering officer went to Washington, DC, to make the full report. And as a result of that report, we got medals for, I got the Navy Cross award, the Silver Star for four people, the Bronze Star for four people and a Purple Heart for a lot of them. And, of course, we were awarded the Navy Unit Commendation ribbon by the flotilla. So we really had some gay times over there.

John: The Navy Cross is a tremendous award. That is the top award the Navy can give out.

Tennis: That is correct.

John: That is tremendous. I see you have the Purple Heart [on your baseball cap]. Is that from the same event?

Tennis: That is from the same thing. When I was in the, on the radio room, I went out to help them on the deck to see if we could get the water going to help put out some of the fires, and the damage on the ship. And when that other plane came in, I saw it coming and I made a head-first dive long into the radio shack and as a result of it I got shrapnel in my back and in my ankle. And that was before I was called to the con to do the job up there.

John: Did you have to give the order to abandon?

Tennis: Yes. Yes, the skipper was very weak. He has recovered now, but he is very, very bitter about the whole thing. He does not want to have anything to do with the rest of the Navy people. My Navy people, my people from that ship, get together once

a year, yet.

John: Oh, that's tremendous.

Tennis: And we have thirteen people who still come. And their wives come. And, you know, this is a great thing to do. We are going to go to Cincinnati this year, in September. As I say, these people, many of them I called on after we got back from the service. My wife and I took a tour down south and we stopped and saw the storekeeper, the two cooks that were down that way, my radioman, the radarman, a signalman, and the [unintelligible] down in Illinois. Yea, we saw a lot of them.

John: That is great.

Tennis: When you are on a ship, a small ship like this, you better get along. If you don't, you are going to be in a world of trouble. And these people got along pretty well. We had a couple little tussles once in a while, but very, very rare. And never lost anybody overboard.

John: That's an achievement in itself. Yea. When you, how were you picked up?

Tennis: We were picked up by a PCE. I had the radioman make sure he called to the beach, to make sure they knew we had survivors in the water, for the destroyer escort to begin with, and then, of course, eventually us, too. So he had made the call and we had that PCE that came out and picked us up. And then we were transferred to an APA and our walking wounded were taken to Guam. And the wounded, the serious ones, were put on the hospital ship, the Mercy. And we lost thirteen people that first day and two died after that.

John: Out of a crew of fifty?

Tennis: A crew of about fifty, yea.

John: That is tremendous. And, from there, back to the States?

Tennis: They took us, they put us on this APA and took us right direct to the States, never stopped in Hawaii or anything else. We went right direct. And I think it was nine days back. We came in to San Francisco, Treasure Island, and, of course, we all looked like a bunch of vagabonds, because we didn't have any decent uniforms. We didn't get a shave or didn't have anything. I went to the Red Cross and said, "Well, you know, can't we do something? Get some clothes here? Loan us some money, or do something?" They gave us the shaving kit and a tooth brush, and a hair comb and that is all. They would not loan us any money to buy any clothes, and so we went to the ship's stores and cumshawed clothes. We had to. That was all there was to it. Because we looked like terrible, you know. Being an officer, I



went, I had no money to eat with. I couldn't go to eat some place. So I went to the chiefs mess, on the base at Treasure Island. Took my [unintelligible] off and went to eat at the base for free. That was the only way I could eat. And then we were there about four days before they let us go. And then back to our own home town, and then we were home for thirty days, survivor leave. And during that time, all that time, my ankle hurt, so damned bad. Oh, it hurt, with the shrapnel in it. The doctor on the ship, he said he couldn't get it. He said, "If I get after that, I'll cut a tendon and you'll be worse off than ever." So, it wasn't until I got re-assigned back to San Diego and was on the beach there for three days. And I went to the hospital there and I said, "Hey, what can be done with this?" They probed and they got it. But it was very sore and very touchy for a long time. Since then, it has healed good. And I have had no repercussions from that. But I do have some shrapnel in my back yet and that is going to stay there for the rest of my life, I guess. Now, when we were in San Diego, my wife was with me then. And we were able to stay on Coronado Island, at the Navy Training Station that is right there on the island. So I would go down and check in every day to see what my orders were. No orders, no orders. So, I say, "Okay, we'll go to Los Angeles for the weekend." I had two great-aunts and a great-uncle up there and the movie industry. And I had never seen them in their home environments. So, I said, "Let's go up there and see them." So we took the train up there and, sure enough, we just get there and they called us and said, "Your ship is leaving. Get back right away." Well, I didn't make it back in time. My ship was gone when I got back, and so I had to catch the next ship to Pearl Harbor to catch up with it. So, when I got to Pearl Harbor, they said, "Well, we don't need you on that LSM now, we're going to put you on an LCI [Landing Craft Infantry]. That is a little smaller ship.

John: Yep.

Tennis: And that sucker was loaded for bear, with Jeeps and ammo and rifles and God knows what else, and headed for China. And, oh, boy. I am going to have another rough ride across the Pacific Ocean. But, fortunately, the Navy Department came through and informed the ship that I was going to be the recipient of the Navy Cross. And they said, "Well, you are not going to be with us for very long, if you got the Navy Cross." So, last one on, first one off. And I got off that ship, and I was over on the beach for a couple days and then they shipped me back to the States again. And I got back to the States, and they shipped me to Great Lakes and said, "Well, you are eligible for discharge." And I said, "Well, what if I don't want a discharge?" "Well, oh, you want to stay in?" I said, "Well, I want to stay in the Reserve." So, that was the case. I stayed in the Reserve and I put in twenty-eight years in the Reserve.

John: Oh, wow. Oh.

Tennis: And I would have put in thirty-five if I could have got it but, you know, I didn't. That is where I got all my promotions. When I came out of active duty from

World War II, I was a lieutenant (junior grade). And the rest of my promotions I got in the Reserve, and I retired from the Reserve as a commander. And I was the commander of three divisions, surface division, an air division, and a SeaBee division, in the Reserve, in Racine, Wisconsin.

John: Tremendous. Ah, you came out, did you ever get called back?

Tennis: No. I never got called back, and I am amazed because I had never been released from active duty. I had been released to inactive duty with the Navy but I have never had my full discharge from the Naval Reserve. And I pursued this a couple of times and got no luck at all, and I went to the veterans workplace that they had in Milwaukee last month, and they had a booth there of people, if you had any problems with service time. Contact them. I contacted this woman and she said, "Oh, I'll get it for you."

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

John: So, you never did get a discharge?

Tennis: No, I am still waiting for it. I am still waiting for it. Now, that was a month ago, and she said, "Give me six weeks and I'll have it for you." Yea. I don't hold much hope for that.

John: Yea. I know what you mean. Ah, one of the questions I ask most of the guys, veterans organizations? VFW? Legion? Did you ever join any of those?

Tennis: No. I have been approached by all of them and they are very, very disappointed sometimes that I say no, because I belong to the Navy Club of America. And that is my whole focus. I believe if you join a club, you should be active in a club. It ticks me off that these other clubs, like the VFW and the Legion, claim to have six hundred members and then have thirteen at a meeting and call that a meeting. You don't even have a quorum to work with. I can't belong to one of these organizations like that. I belong to the Navy Club in Racine. We have thirty-eight members and we have twenty-eight members there, almost every meeting. You know. That's what I want. I want to have people participate. The only other organizations that I belong to is the LSMR, LSM-LSMR Association, the big one. I belong to the LSMR Association which is the one that my people belong to, and I belong to the Purple Heart Association. That is it. And I go out and talk to kids from second grade to seniors in high school many times during the year. Tell them my story, show them my medals, and they are all bug-eyed. They can't believe that.

John: One of the guys was saying that at lunch today. Hearing that from you, they aren't going to hear that from their text books or their teachers. They'll never hear it if they don't hear it from someone like you coming up and that will leave an

impression on them. That will stay with them.

Tennis: And they ask good questions. You wouldn't think kids in second or third grade would think up good questions and, my gosh, very pertinent, right to the point.

John: Great story. Tremendous story.

Tennis: You know, there were only 1,034 Navy Crosses in World War II.

John: I don't know that I've ever met someone with the Navy Cross. I've seen it going by on people's chests. You can spot it right up at the top. Yea, I see you have the bar up there. But I don't know that I have ever met anybody with it. They always used to say that was when you didn't get the Congressional. But that is not a second-best medal. That is a top medal.

Tennis: Well, I'd rather be a living person than be a Congressional Medal of Honor dead one.

John: One of the questions they ask me and I ask you fellows, looking back on it now, what is your feeling about it? You were just jerked out of your life and sent off into harm's way.

Tennis: Well, at times, the time was right for that, because, you know, the world was in such a terrible turmoil in Europe, and then the Japanese bombed us at Pearl Harbor. Patriotism took over. It just seemed like, all of a sudden, this country just came together and guys who were even conscientious objectors somehow or other got in the service and they got out after a while after bitching about it, but that is still the way it was. The country was really pulling together. And I was interrupted, my college education, as a result of it, but I don't fault that to the service. You know, the service did me so much good. I was a little farm boy, so damned shy I would hide behind my mother's apron strings. I couldn't get up and talk to anybody in front of a group. As a result of being in the service, and as a result of being an officer, and having command of a large group of people, I got to be so I could talk to people, off the cuff, and when I came back out of service, I was prepared to be a teacher. So I went immediately back to teaching school. And I taught school for thirty-one years. Well, I was still going to the Naval Reserve every Monday night. You know. And people, a lot of my friends, say "What are you going to those meetings for?" Oh, boy. Now I can laugh at them. Money is rolling in.

John: I need to get a release from you, so that the Museum can let students and scholars and that--

Tennis: I can do that. I love that museum.

John: That is a world class museum.

**[End of Interview.]**