

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Kenneth Theisen
Radio Technician, First Class Petty Officer, Navy, World War II

2005

OH
682

OH
682

Theisen, Kenneth, (b. 1923), Oral History Interview, 2005

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Theisen, a Madison, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service in the Navy as a radio technician, first class during World War II with the Mine Warfare Test Station. Theisen speaks at length about his family history: his mother was an orphan who lived with several foster families, and his father was a farm boy who moved to Madison and became a submarine tender during World War I. Theisen also touches upon his teenage years and part-time jobs. He recalls hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor while working at his friend's farm and listening to President Roosevelt's speech with his boss. In 1942, Theisen reveals he tried to enlist in the Navy, but was rejected because he had athlete's foot. Soon after, Theisen was drafted. He details his physical exam and the enlistment process, explaining he chose the Navy because of his brother and father were sailors. Next, Theisen describes going through boot camp in Farragut (Idaho). He tells how sailors in Company 191-43 amused themselves by having a square dance. They dressed in drag and played instruments, blowing a fire hose nozzle like a bugle, but the captain caught them and assigned two extra weeks of boot camp as punishment. Theisen briefly touches upon regional and ethnic differences, describing interactions with Irish-Americans and Southerners. He characterizes his company as "a great bunch of guys," telling how other sailors helped him pass an electronics exam to become a radio technician. After boot camp, Theisen went home on two weeks leave and got engaged to his fiancée. He states he returned to Idaho to find a mumps outbreak on base. Next, Theisen discusses attending pre-radio school at Wright Junior College in Chicago (Illinois) and Radio Materials School at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington D.C. He emphasizes the competitive and experimental nature of the Naval Research Laboratory, explaining half his class nearly "washed out." He also touches upon interactions between WAVES and sailors, describing how the men broke their marching lines to watch the women pass by. Theisen passed Radio Materials School as a radio technician second class. Next, Theisen describes submarine training in New London (Connecticut), recalling in detail his first descent. Theisen states he was assigned to the Mine Warfare Test Station at Solomons (Maryland) where he improved underwater mines designed by the Bell Telephone company and worked on a top secret electronic torpedo project called Project F. Theisen built Mark 27 torpedoes and participated in full-scale test launches of them from submarines in Key West (Florida). He outlines a typical torpedo trial, highlighting the danger involved. Theisen explains the torpedoes were eventually perfected and dropped from airplanes. Throughout the interview, Theisen speaks about family life in the Navy. He mentions he got married on a two-week leave after submarine training. His wife moved to Washington D.C. to be closer to him and worked as a waitress at the Hot Shoppe. Theisen tells how he rode buses and streetcars several times a week from Connecticut to Washington to visit her on overnight leave. He also tells how his supervisors

initially denied him leave for his daughter's birth in October 1945 because he had gone home recently for his brother's funeral. Theisen also recalls bucking authority several times: he slept on the scrub deck during the mumps outbreak at boot camp because he didn't want to be quarantined and miss radio school; he and a buddy refused a lieutenant's request to work overtime in Maryland, but they later relented and built a torpedo overnight; and finally Theisen stopped a junior officer without the proper security clearance from entering the Project F warehouse. Theisen was promoted several times throughout his Navy career and was discharged on points in December 1945 with the rank of first class radio technician. He recalls he was testing torpedoes in Key West (Florida) during V-E Day and V-J Day. Theisen expresses his support of the dropping the atomic bombs on Japan. He speaks about his younger brother's heroism in the Caroline Islands and his tragic, accidental death aboard a ship docked in Tokyo. After the war, Theisen returned to his old job at Madison Kipp Corporation. He comments that working on a production line was a "letdown" after his exciting electronics work in the Navy. Theisen states he worked at Kipp for fourteen years before quitting and working for Gisholt Machine Tool Manufacturing in an engineering capacity. The interview trails off abruptly with Theisen explaining his difficulties finding work at factories in the Madison area, presumably in the 1970s.

Biographical Sketch:

Theisen (b. 1923) was born in Madison (Wisconsin) to parents of Norwegian and German descent. His mother, an orphan, lived with several foster families on Wisconsin farms, and his father was a submarine tender with the Navy during World War I. As a teenager, Theisen worked on a friend's farm and at Stein's Department Store in Madison. He joined the Navy in 1942, following two brothers and two cousins already in the military. Theisen went to boot camp in Farragut (Idaho), pre-radio training at Wright Junior College (Illinois), and Radio Materials School at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington D.C. During the war, he built and tested mines and Mark 27 electronic torpedoes at the Mine Warfare Test Station in Solomons (Maryland) as part of "Project F." He also completed submarine training at New London (Connecticut), where his father trained years earlier. In December 1945, Theisen was discharged on points and returned to his old job at Madison Kipp Corporation. He worked there for fourteen years. Theisen got engaged on leave following boot camp, and he was married on leave after submarine training. His wife moved to Washington D.C. during the war and worked as a waitress at Hot Shoppe. They had five children together.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives. Today is July 21, 2005. And this is an oral history interview with Ken Theisen. And Ken is a veteran of World War II, in the United States Navy. Thanks for agreeing to the interview, Ken. Coming down and that. And why don't we start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Ken: Okay. I was born right here in Madison, in a little hospital just on Wisconsin Avenue a few blocks from here. October 28 of 1923. My, I feel that my parents were, they were not only wonderful people, they were courageous people, because my mother was orphaned. Her mother died when she was six years old. And her father was not able to keep the family together. There were four children. There was a girl, a boy, and my mother, and another girl in the family. First off, she was left to a Scandinavian couple. By the way, my grandfather, my mother's father, came over from Norway. He married a full-blooded German girl. But, anyway, the first place that she was left off to, a Scandinavian couple, she was six years old and she was placed with them. They were good people but the woman had a terrible temper and she would abuse my mother frequently. Beat her, and so forth.

John: Oh. Oh.

Ken: She passed away while my mother lived there and on her dying bed, she said to my mother, she apologized for the mistreatment that she had given her. And she went from there to another place where the husband and wife seemed to be at war with each other. They were always battling it out with each other. And from there she went to another place. She was thirteen years old and she ran away from that place. When I was a teenager, so I was old enough to understand what it was all about, I talked to my mother one time in private, and I said, "You know, I can't believe it. Here you endured these terrible people that beat you. You endured these people that were arguing and fighting all the time, but you ran away from this place. What happened, you know?" Well, she told me. Well, there was two older boys, two boys older than her, and they were starting to get fresh with her. And she was not about to leave anything happen to her. Now, so one night, she went to bed as usual, and when everybody was asleep, she got up and dressed and walked out of the house. And walked down the road. Now, this was farm country. Farm people. And this is about 1910 or '11. There is no lights, no nothing. There were wild animals in the area. And this thirteen-year-old girl walked down the road. And I said, "How did you know where to turn off?" She said, "Well, I had heard these people were good people, so I turned up into this farm house. And I rapped on the door. The farmer came to the door with a lantern." And so she explained her situation. He let her in and got his wife up. They put my mother to bed, and the next day the farmer took my mother back to where she had come from. And

talked with the people. And, of course, they were very put out that my mother run away from their place. They heaped abuse on this farmer. But he stood his ground, and when he left, he had my mother and the very few things that belonged to her. She lived with these people for nine years, until she married my father.

John: Oh.

Ken: To me, that took tremendous courage. Then my father, his mother died when he was twelve years old. And so, they lived on a farm and he was farm-oriented. About twenty-one years old, the way the Theisen family went, even later, generations after that, when you are twenty-one years old, you are on your own. And so he came to Madison and made his living. He volunteered for the First World War, in the Navy. And he was, he went to submarine training at New London, Connecticut. But in those days, the submarines were very small. And they had to have tenders to cross the ocean. He was a seaman aboard the tender. They had five subs that they were tending. And one of the seamen on the 06 became ill, and had to be transferred to the tender for medical, so they had to have someone take his place, and my father, I don't know if he volunteered or if he was selected. But he was the one that went down there. And this was out in the middle, they were two or three days out in the ocean. There was no, the way you go in the Navy, they call it a bosun's chair. A series of ropes, to transfer from one ship to the other. So that took a little courage. And the 06, this whole flotilla ran into a storm and my dad said the way they figured the best way to survive the storm, they made right up to the top of one wave, and go down into the valley and through the next wave, and up on top. That took a little courage to do, doing these things. So, anyways, that was my parents. I had a brother that was two and a half years older than me, and another brother two and a half years younger than myself. And a sister that was twelve years younger. And in 1940, one of my cousins, Vern Theisen, came to live with us. We really enjoyed—he was a real nice guy. And we enjoyed his company. And then a couple years later, his brother, I can't remember the date for that, came to live with us. So there was five boys. And we had a ball. Then, December 7, 1941.

John: Do you remember what you were doing?

Ken: Yes, I was on my, I had a best buddy that lived kitty-corner in back of us, in the city. But his father and mother had bought a farm, and he was out there. And he was very interested in farming. They had only been on it for about a year. And I was out there with him. We were cleaning the barn.

John: Okay.

Ken: And they had an old radio they put out in the barn, and here came the

announcement, “Pearl Harbor has been bombed. There is a terrific battle going on there.” And so forth. It was really amazing but we didn’t realize the full scope of it, really. Because I had, when I, the day after my sixteenth birthday, I started working nights after school, Saturdays, eight hours, and four hours on Sunday morning at Stein’s Department Store. And I never forget, Pearl Harbor was on Sunday. And President Roosevelt talked, “This day will live in infamy.” That is the only time. Now Paul was a very good man to work for, but [that was] the only time that I ever worked for him that we sat down together and listened to the radio. And we listened to the president’s speech. And it was very uplifting to hear him. We knew we were in big trouble, and the only way we were going to get out of it was to fight. So, the way it happened then, is that my older brothers enlisted in the Navy and my cousin, the oldest one, worked at the Gisholt. And they got deferments for him. But after the second deferment, see, my brother went to the Navy and the other cousin that was living with us, his draft number came up and he got into the Army. And so the older cousin felt that he wanted to support his government. That he wanted to serve with honor. And if you went to the draft board and told them “Don’t give me any more deferments.” And so he was taken into the Armed Forces, the Army, then, too. And December of 1942, I tried to enlist in the Navy. There was a hospital corpsman there that gave you a real quick physical check up. He got to my feet, I had athlete’s foot. And he said, “We couldn’t take you in the Navy, why you would infect the whole fleet.” And I couldn’t believe it. So anyway, I went home and I waited for my draft number to come up. Like everybody else, there three bus loads that went to the Plankington Building in Milwaukee. And the doctors had a production line set up there. You stripped down to everything but your shoes and socks, and you carried them, and they showed you a way to hold them, and they put a clip board on top of that. Each doctor got his cut at you. When you got to the back, and he looked at my feet, I thought, “What is going to happen now? The Navy don’t want me because I got athlete’s foot. Am I going to be 4-F, or does the Army take people with athlete’s foot? What is it?” And but then they told me to get dressed, and I get dressed up, and the guy looks at my feet, and he says, “Wow, you are in perfect physical condition. Behind that door is an Army officer. Behind that door is an Army officer. And behind that door is a Marine. You go through any door you want to.” So naturally I go through the Navy door. Here is a full lieutenant sitting there. He is just in his glory because he has nothing to do but tell us young kids, “You can be in the Navy, or you can’t.” And so I get in there, and he says, “What makes you think you want to be a sailor?” I said, “Well, my dad was a submarine sailor in the First World War, my older brother is on a submarine right now. It’s kind of a tradition in the family, and I’d like to keep it going.” “This is the best I’ve heard all day. You’re in. Just like that.” So, I was in the Navy.

John: Okay.

Ken: So, Great Lakes is only about a hundred and fifty miles from here? So they ship me to Farragut, Idaho. The heart of the Bitterroot Mountains. And that was kind of an experience. Of course, everybody who goes to boot camp, it must be a twelve week course. It took our company fourteen weeks, and I kind of worked out a little bit of the problem there. What happened is, on Saturdays, they had captain's inspection. So the first part of the morning, you spend your time getting everything in perfect shape. All your gear has to be in perfect shape. The barracks has to be in perfect shape. Everything has to be perfect. And when them officers come through, they really checked. So, as far as the barracks was concerned that day, my duty there was to polish all the brass. Well, the fire hose had a brass nozzle on it. And so, I tried polishing it and I couldn't get it to shine the way I wanted it to, so I ended up, I took it off, and I really polished it up. And looking at it, I realized that the nozzle resembled the mouth-piece for a horn. So I picked it up and I blew a note through there. But just briefly. And, unfortunately, one of our, my crewmen, or whatever, he was a big wrestler from Chicago. An evil fellow. A real nice guy, but he was so strong, so tough, he could have bent any two of us into pretzels. He saw me to that, and he kept on polishing the floor. And we passed our inspection perfectly. And that evening, though, there was a fellow in Company 191-43, that was my number. There was a little area in the front of our barracks where we could, for recreation, they had a table and a couple benches. And one fellow had an accordion, another guy had a guitar. And they had given us a bale of rags to use for cleaning. They didn't have shop towels, or anything. They had bales of rags. And then, you know, those bales, there was a couple of like farmer's bib overalls and a couple of shirts, checkered shirts. And there was a couple of dresses. And so a couple of sailors put on these farmer's clothes, and a couple put on these dresses, and they actually had a square dance going. This was about eight-thirty in the evening. And there was supposed to be a guard posted at the door. Well, this big wrestler, he went and he got the nozzle from the fire hose, and he started blowing through there, making a sound. Regimental headquarters was just down below us. The captain of the whole darned area just happened to want to go to his office and look up something. He heard this, and he thought it was a bugle. Somebody practicing on a bugle. And in the Armed Forces, according to the Navy, there is only two people, in the Navy, only two people blow a bugle. And that is the bosun's pike and a damned fool. Well, anyway, he is blowing it and the captain heard that. He charged into the barracks. The guard, instead of standing, he was in watching the proceedings, the fun we were having with the square dance. The captain got right into the middle of the dance before anybody knew he was even in there. He said, "Who was blowing that bugle?" Well, there was no bugle. It was the nozzle of a fire hose. He had us standing at attention for half an hour. Nobody was going to tell him. First of all, it wasn't a bugle. The captain said, "Who was blowing the bugle? Okay, you guys are going to get two extra weeks of boot camp." So that is how we got our fourteen weeks. But, anyway, then, I did fairly well on my general

classification test and they, we were in ships service. One of the few times we got to go to ships service. And there was a notice posted there that they were going to give a special test to people who thought they wanted to get training in electronics. So, by God, I decided I was going to take that test, and I signed up for it. And I went back to the barracks and I was telling these guys that. You know, they were really a good bunch of guys, because they started training, teaching me. One guy says, "I am sure they are going to ask you the speed of light. 186,000 miles per second." And I had known Ohm's Law, but they brushed me up on that, and a number of other things. And I took that dog-gone test and you know, almost everything that some guys proctored me up on was in that test. So I passed the test. And when we got, because we were fourteen weeks instead of twelve, we got the outgoing, they had to put other people in places that they had put us in originally. They didn't know what to do with us. So they sent us home for two weeks. That was hard to take.

John: Sure. That makes sense. Sure.

Ken: So, that is when I gave my wife her engagement ring. We knew we were going to get married before that, but that is when it became official.

John: Okay.

Ken: So then I went back. That was quite a deal there, too. I went back and everybody had mumps. I went to the barracks that I was supposed to go to, and I was going to sign in with the yeoman there. And just as I was going to sign up, a messenger came in, "This barracks is quarantined. Mumps." So I had them on both sides when I was a kid, so I wasn't worried about that. But if you are quarantined, you are quarantined. You just don't get out of there. So I said to the yeoman, "Boy, what am I going to do? I don't want to get messed up here." He said, "I'll call up my buddy a couple of barracks down the way." He called him up and the guy said, "Sure, send him down." I went down there and I was just going to sign up there and another messenger came in there, "This barracks is quarantined." So, what do I do? You know what I did? At Farragut, Idaho, at that time, they had just quit giving you hammocks in the Navy. They had given us sleeping bags. Also, they had scrub decks. You didn't clean your clothes, you didn't have laundries, you scrubbed with a Kiyi brush. So I went and I found a scrub deck, and went down there and I laid out my sleeping bag, and I slept in there. And the dog-gone junior officer of the deck caught me. And he was really a good Joe. And so I explained to him that I wasn't worried about mumps, because I had them already and I couldn't pass them on to anybody. And I wanted, when my call came up, because I had passed this special test, I wanted to be there. And he let me sleep there. And he told me, actually, he even told me where I could find it posted. Be sure I didn't miss. And so I got out, and got to go on the troop train. We didn't know where we

were going. One of the fellows, and the Navy always traveled in Pullmans. Just two guys in the lower bunk and one guy in the top.

John: Oh, boy.

Ken: And so I made dog-gone sure I got in that coach that was assigned to one of the first ones and got a top bunk. I didn't want to sleep with a stranger, for Pete's sake. I don't think they could do it now, nowadays.

John: Yeah.

Ken: But anyway, we went all over the United States and we finally ended up in Chicago. And that is where I went, they assigned me to Wright Junior College. That was pre-radio. That was for four weeks. I never got enough time off. What is it, from Chicago to Madison? I never got enough time off to come home. So, Dolores, I was engaged to her. She came to Chicago to spend one weekend.

John: Oh, great.

Ken: But from there, they sent me to the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C. The full course was supposed to be, they called it nine months. Actually, four weeks was considered a month. So it should have been thirty-six weeks of training. And after the first three, well, the whole course was extremely difficult. Your time was programmed. Every minute of every day was programmed. You were either studying or working or exercising. And so many flunked out the first three months that they had a parallel school, Bliss, which was a junior college in Washington, D.C., where they taught the same course. At the end of the three months, the people who were left came together at the Naval Research Lab. Radio Materials School. The first two months, I passed without any problems but in the third month, I flunked the electrical course. And what happened then. They would have a meeting and everybody that failed a course, they would talk to them to see if they would repeat it, or flunk them out, or whether they would pass them with whatever score they had, see. When I got in the room, over half the kids, over half the people from that course were there. So, it was the teacher, not the participants.

John: Yes.

Ken: So they shipped the teacher out to sea. And I got my turn to go and talk to them. My lab instructor came to my rescue and he said, "Boy, this guy is just expert in lab. I would sure hate to see him washed out." So they said, "Well, what do you want to do?" So I said, "Well, I'd like to repeat that course, so that I get it down pat, so I know what I am doing." And they said, "Okay, that is what you do." So, after I completed that, I got an increase in rating. I was a third class radio

technician. Third class petty officer. The thing that I remember the best of that whole school deal, when we marched, the Marines always marched us. The Marines went to the same radio school, too. And they were good at marching us. But this one particular day, a lieutenant, a full lieutenant, marched us. That never happened before, or since. But, anyway, he marched us right out the main gate and right down the road, and when we got done, half the company was on one side of the road, and half on the other side. Chasing each other, and there was a company of WAVES doing the office work on the base. They come right down the middle. I am telling you, did those ladies ever strut their stuff. They looked good. And if he had marched us into the Potomac River, we'd have gone after that. Anyway, I got, I graduated from the last month, I got a second class radio technician's rating. And I was right away assigned to the Mine Warfare Test Station, at Solomons, Maryland. So I worked out of the station lab a while there, six weeks, a couple months, I guess. And then I was assigned to Project F. Project F was a top secret project. What it was, the Bell Telephone people had engineered what started out to be a mine. This mine could be, it was shaped like a small torpedo. It could be shot out of a torpedo tube on a submarine torpedo tube, or it could be dropped from the air. And they put these mines in harbors. They would go down to the bottom and lay there, and when a ship passed over the top, the sound of the ship's screws in the water would energize them and they would come and hit the ship in the screws. And knock it out. And it was highly successful that way. And then they fixed it up to use against surface vessels. Like it was a small, it was slow. If a vessel could do twelve knots, it could run away from it. So the Project F that I worked at with the officer that I worked under, the idea was to speed this up so that even if the vessel could do fifteen knots, it was still going to catch it. That was so interesting because, well, first of all, they sent us to the Bell Telephone class. Talked to these people who engineered it. We were there for a week, and then we went to the people that make Bell Telephones.

John: Western Electric?

Ken: Western Electric. We went to Western Electric and we were there for a week. And they treated us like we were captains. You couldn't want better treatment than those people gave you. They were really good for us. Then we went to the Submarine School, at New London, Connecticut.

John: Okay.

Ken: And that was very interesting. And that is where, the first time I went under the sea in a submarine. The 010, which was the sister ship...

John: The 06, that your dad...

Ken: The 06 was nowhere to be found. Never heard what happened to it. But that was kind of an experience. We had to be sure you are not claustrophobic or anything.

John: Oh, yeah.

Ken: So, with they loaded us up, we had a small bus load of fellows going to the 06. An old chief petty officer was in charge, and he was chewing us in on the way to the sub, and he was telling us, "When you guys get there, you got to do what you are told. Because your life depends on it." And he knew what the ropes were. He had hash marks up the sleeve, and I think he had retired and they called him back in because on account of the war. So we were all quiet and reserved. We were listening to their instructions and all that. We got on the 06 and we went out to sea, and by golly, they were also at that base, they had an officer that was going to be a submarine officer. We submerged the boat. The boats were only supposed to go down a hundred feet. We went to periscope depth and we were running, and all of a sudden, well, I actually I saw, the captain reach over and grab a breaker on the breaker board, and man, everything went dead. It was this officer's deal. He was supposed to take charge then and get us out of this big problem. Well, first of all, then what happened, the captain, he was on the periscope. He says, "Enemy sighted." And he gave us a location where it was sighted, and that is when, right after that.

John: Ken, I am going to stop and flip this over, all right?

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

John: Okay.

Ken: Okay. So, anyway, this young officer was supposed to take over and get the sub out of this big problem. So he started giving instructions for blowing tanks. Now, we didn't have any power, see. So we had what we could control, valves and so forth. And so he was blowing different tanks and the submarine kept settling and settling. We went way down, way over a hundred feet, and they were only supposed to do a hundred feet. Actually, we got to a hundred and twenty-five feet. But we didn't sense that. We weren't in any danger. I was in the control room with some of the other fellows from my class. And—but he managed to get us back up and when it was all done, why they evaluated the officer, and, of course, us too. Nobody got frightened. We were all scared.

John: Oh, sure.

Ken: But nobody freaked out, or anything like that. We did our job and we passed the test. Every one of us. When we got back on board the bus, we discovered that the

people that were assigned to the engine room, they were taking on water like crazy. And that is why probably he had to blow so many tanks to get us back up. We, the valves, one valve had popped off its seat.

John: Oh, wow. Oh.

Ken: But we survived that, and we discovered that this old chief really had a sense of humor, too. One of the guys got kidding him, and he said, "You sure were in control down there in the submarine. How is it when you get home? Does your wife mind you like that?" And he says, "When I get home and my wife says, 'Jump,' I says, 'Dear, is this high enough?'" That is the first time I've heard that one.

John: That's good.

Ken: Well, anyway, also, in all the Navy schools, the regimentation, the rules were very strict. They had in that submarine school, they had Spritzer's Navy. And any Navy School, we didn't dare step on the grass. If you did, you got extra duty. And in submarine training, anything, you hewed the line really straight, because if Spritz ever caught you doing anything in his Spritzer's Navy, and what he had you do was clean up the base. You had to pick up all the garbage and all the stuff, and you got the dirtiest details that there ever was. Fortunately, I never got any of them. Anyway, in Project F, and I worked for this lieutenant, and we got this, the Mark 27 electronic torpedo. We worked with them, and we got this thing going pretty good. There was another fellow, his name was Kelly. He was an Irishman with a good sense of humor, too. That Irish sense. It was fun working with them. The officer was a true Southern gentleman. Very few things could get him upset. He never used a cuss word. He was always quite polite, with us enlisted men. And it got to the point where this thing was, this torpedo was working so well, the Bureau of Naval Ordnance wanted to check it out. And so they said, "We want you to make up fourteen units. We are going to take them over to the Naval Air Station, Patuxent Naval Air Station, and drop them on a target, and see how they perform. Well, Kelly and I were working diligently with this lieutenant. And we were getting kind of behind schedule. And so the officer said, "Come to work tonight, and we'll get caught up." And both Kelly and I said, "No." I couldn't believe it, we got away with it. But, anyway, that night at chow, and it would never ordinarily happen, but I happened to be right back of Kelly in the line, and Kelly says, "Kenny, I can't believe it. As good as we were treated, and we were asked to work overtime one night, and we tell him no." I said, "Well, Kelly, I feel bad, too. Why don't we go back there and build up one of those units?" So we went back there, and we started building on this unit. And they had great big batteries, forty-eight volt batteries. We come to get the batteries, there wasn't any. They wanted everything new. There wasn't a new battery available. So they had at

least twenty used batteries, and I went, and I checked out every battery there. And I picked out the best ones. And we built up this unit. And we put it in line with what we had done, and the next morning, after we mustered in, the lieutenant went down the line and counted them, and recounted them, recounted them. He said, "You guys came back to work last night." I says, "That's right." Okay, I told him. "You wanted everything new, but there wasn't a new battery available. And so I took the very best used battery that we got and I put it in this unit." He says, "Well, we'll check it out." And he checked it out and, boy, it checked perfectly. So, that is fine. Well, when the test came, Kelly and I normally got to go on all these things. But this time there was so many big wheels there that we didn't get to go. And we were back at base, and one of the officers there had a aircraft radio receiver, and he was listening, and he said, "Oh, boy, it sounds like this unit failed." And I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I hope it wasn't the one we made." "Oh, another unit failed. Oh, there it went, that one is all right." When they got back, what happened, after the first two failures, they tried the one we had built up. It worked perfectly. And then they called the rest off. But, on the basis of that one, they allowed us to keep on working on that project. So it made me feel pretty good.

John: Yes. Sure.

Ken: Then, that was such a success, they decided these were dropped from the air. They decided they were going to take us down to Key West, Florida, and get this rigged up so it could be shot out of a torpedo tube. And that is why I was down in Key West. Oh, I forgot, in the meantime, when we got back from the submarine training school at New London, Connecticut, there was a period of two weeks they didn't know what to do with us. So I said, "Send us home." So they sent us home, and I was already engaged. That is when we got married.

John: Oh, great.

Ken: My wife came back to Washington. She got a room in Washington, D.C. and took a job as a waitress in a Hot Shoppe Restaurant.

John: Oh, yeah. I remember the Hot Shoppes.

Ken: When I, every other night, if everything went right, we got every other night overnight liberty. I went ashore. It was fifty-six miles from our base to the Navy Terminal in Washington, D.C. Thirty-five miles an hour speed limit. Took over an hour and a half. I'd be lucky and have to take a street car and a bus, and I'd get home, maybe, oh, about eight o'clock. Eat supper. I had to get up at two thirty in the morning. Take a street car, then a bus, and then a street car to get back to the Navy Terminal, and then get on a Navy bus, and get back to the base. If I got on

the first bus, I might have a few minutes to get chow, morning chow. If not, I went right there. Changed clothes and put on my dungarees, and go to muster and get to work. But it was fun. But, anyways, we got down to Key West, getting this thing to go on a submarine. That was tremendously interesting, again, because there was five crews. By that time, we had been made up into crews, too. And there was an officer in charge, and they were always an engineer, generally an electrical engineer. Then there was a crew chief, radio technician. The officer that I had worked under when we were getting this torpedo going, after the successful test, about two weeks, he came up to me and he says, "Theisen." We had our names right on the back of our dungaree shirts. "Theisen, what is your rating?" I said, "Radio technician second class." He said, "That's what I thought. I put you up for first." And, wow. I said, "That's awfully nice of you, but BuPers [U.S. Navy Bureau of Personnel] just froze all the ratings." He says, "I know but I put you up for a special rating."

John: Great.

Ken: So we went down, there was four crews that were made up, like I said, of an engineer, a crew chief, which was a petty officer, a radio technician, two torpedo men. They were generally third class petty officers, and two electrician's mate strikers. They were first class seamen. And there was four crews, I believe, that went down there. We would build up these units. They had this deal going. We would put dye markers in the tail fins of the torpedoes so you could see the dye streak in the water as it went. Instead of having a warhead on, they had a recorder in the head that would record different movements of this torpedo. We had two blimps that would fly overhead. There was the submarine they shot off of. There was a control vessel with all the brass officers, and that. Then there was the target and there was an enlisted man be on that. Then there was the retrieving vessel. These things were very expensive and they didn't want anyone to get ahold of them. Enemy. So we would rotate. One day we'd be on the blimp, next day on the submarine, then be on the target, and then on the retriever. It was so interesting. It was so much fun.

John: Yeah. I'll bet.

Ken: And it was dangerous. The submarines were new ones that came down from New London, Connecticut, on their shake-down cruise. And there were some interesting experiences. The one time, we'd load these things up at night and then go in the morning. They, the crewmen that were supposed to batten down the hatches of the torpedo loading port, didn't batten them down. Just the latch. And they were under the sea shooting these torpedoes, they vent inside. They vent onboard, that means the air pressure in the sub is building up. Well, when you are down underneath, the pressure of the ocean holds that hatch down tight. But when

you come up to the surface, there is more pressure in the sub than there is on the surface, and it blew that dog-gone hatch open. They thought they had made a mistake, instead of coming up, they came up about five degrees too much angle and that saved them from getting too much water aboard.

John: Yeah.

Ken: The one mistake counteracted the other.

John: Oh, boy.

Ken: But, anyway, that is where I was on V-E Day, and V-J Day. I was also there when the atomic bomb was dropped.

John: Okay.

Ken: Now, when the first one was dropped, and we heard about it. And I thought, wow. These Japanese, you know, they were all wound up. The civilians appeared to be as bad as the fighting men. But this has got to make them submit. And then the second one was dropped, and I thought, man, this has got to be it. And then we heard V-J Day. And man, in the meantime, the one thing I forgot before is that, after I went, my younger brother was called. He was in the Navy. He was on the, the amphibious sailor. I don't know the name of the ship that he was aboard. But what his job was was to, he was a coxswain on the small boats that they put over the side, full of Marines. Now, we hear all about Iwo Jima because they got that beautiful statue and everything. And these men deserved the credit. I'm not, but they were not the only ones. And my brother, he was in the Caroline Islands.

John: Okay.

Ken: Now, and the island that they were supposed to attack, and they did, he was in one of the first five boats that landed Marines on the beach. Only two of them made it back. He was one of them. And he took another load in, and made it back from there.

John: That took guts.

Ken: But then, they, finally the Marines were all unloaded, all their chores were done. They thought they'd get orders to come back to the United States to be refurbished. Everybody was worn out. Their supplies were all gone. And they put in some port there. And they got orders, instead of going back, they were going to Tokyo. Well, the captain divided the crew up into two, one section went ashore that night, and they came back and the next section went ashore the next night.

My brother went to shore the first night and they came back, but the two guys that were in charge of the boat davits, that lowered these boats over the side of the boat, never came back. So the captain said, "We got to train people, then, to man those davits in case they don't show up at all." So my brother and another guy were assigned, and they went up there. Now, they are used to their small boats but they don't know anything about these boat davits. And so they were getting instructions and nobody knows what happened, but whatever, they could be run by power or, in case the power failed, they had hand cranks. The hand crank was engaged and somebody pushed the button and the hand crank come around and hit him in the belly. They said he didn't lose consciousness but they took him down to sick bay. They knew he was hurt. And this was in the afternoon. He went through the night, and the next morning the corpsman, now the doctor was on liberty. That was his night off. And so the corpsman said, "How are you feeling? Would you like something to eat?" My brother says, "A cup of coffee and a piece of toast." So they gave him that, and he ate it, and almost immediately passed out. And they tried to bring him back. The doctor came aboard the ship but it was too late. They never were able to revive him. He died. A tragic accident, after all that experience. So, then on, well, we go back then to the atomic bomb, it really makes me angry that these people are trying to say that they never should have been dropped. If they would have been involved, they would know better. My feeling is that we not only saved American lives, we saved Japanese lives, as well.

John: Japanese lives, yeah. They would have had grandmas and little girls fighting us.

Ken: So, then, well, I got a leave to go home. Dave, his body was buried in the Pacific, after a temporary. But I got to go home on an emergency leave. And, two days. My thoughts on V-J Day. Wow. Five boys left from our house. We were all alive. But we weren't, because my brother was dead by that time.

John: Okay. Okay.

Ken: And, of course, I didn't know, it was after that I got, somehow the Red Cross wasn't able to get ahold of me. And I got a letter from my mother, air mail special delivery. Telling me about my brother's death. So I got to go home for that. And then I went back, and we kept on working with this project, but then people were being discharged according to the point system. My wife had gone home. She could have, she was pregnant. She could have had the Navy doctors take care of her, but we wanted our own home doctor to take care of her. And she, our daughter, the one that brought me here today, was born on October 18th, 1945.

John: Okay.

Ken: So, I asked the officers down at Key West that we were working under, "How

about a leave for that?" "You just got back. You had a leave before. No, nobody has ever had leave from this outfit." I said, "Yeah, nobody from this outfit lost a brother, nor did they have a baby born, but I have." And they gave me leave, and I came home for that.

John: Good.

Ken: From that time on, our project really kind of ended there. I went back to Mine Warfare Test Station, Solomons, Maryland. That officer that we had worked under when we were trying to get the M-70 dropped from the airplane, he tried to convince me to re-up, to sign on for the regular Navy. I said, "No way." And I was discharged, and came home.

John: When was that, Ken?

Ken: The day was December 15th, 1945. I had accumulated enough points because when we were working with the submarines, and all that, actually it happened at two different times. We were down for six weeks, and then we had to come back up to Mine Warfare Test to make some more units up, and get stuff ready to go back down again. That first time, even though we were doing all these things out to sea and everything else, we never got an extra penny of pay for it. And we said that this is not according to Hoyle, you know. So what they actually did the second trip down there, they had us temporarily added to crews, so we were active members, addition to crews in submarines. And then so we got our overseas pay and the whole ball of wax. And I was a first class petty officer, by then.

John: Okay. Then what did you do when you got out?

Ken: You know, I had been working at Madison Kipp Corporation. I went back to work there, and even while I was serving in the Armed Forces, a couple of times I got a check for \$100 from the Madison Kipp Corporation, so I thought they were pretty good people. So I went back to work there, but it was quite a let-down, because here I was working, had been working on this top secret project at the Mine Warfare Test Station. Even the captain of the base did not know what we were doing. And nobody, we had a red button that we had to wear at all times. Like the captain and the officer of the deck, and the junior officer of the deck, they had pink buttons, which was supposed to let them in any building on the base. But as far as Project F was concerned, the only time they could come in there, even with their pink button, was if there was a case of an emergency. And I did have that happen to me. I was standing the watch one night. All of us enlisted men, no matter what our rate, had to take turns standing watch to make sure everything was secured. And we had to have the clearance, so you didn't let just anybody do it. So I was standing watch one night and the officer that was in charge of the

guard had told me that we were expecting a semi in with some material. Have him back up to the loading dock and you make him get back in the cab. And you get the tow-motor and unload his truck, see. So, this building, it was built like a dairy barn but it was four times as big as any one I had ever seen. And so I was on one end of the dog-gone building and I thought I heard the loading dock on the other end rattle. So I ran down there and there was nobody there. And I heard the door rattle around the other side of the building, and I went over there. But I had to secure these doors. I can't leave them sitting. And so I realized that what someone was doing was going around the building and rattling every door. So I skipped a door and I met, here, it was the junior officer of the day, at a door. And he said, "I want to come in and inspect this building." And I said, "I'm sorry sir, but you can't come in and inspect this building. There is no emergency here." Well, he says, "I got a pink button, and I can go in any building on this base." And I said, "Every one except Project F. You have to have a red button here. If there was an emergency, you could come in. But you can't now. There is no emergency." "Where did you get those orders?" My orders were posted right on the door, but they were in a glass case. They were mounted like a picture. And he says, "I want to see those orders." I said, "Sir, I will close this door and I will get a screwdriver, and I will take them off the wall, and I will show them to you. But you are not coming in this building." And he threatened me with everything, captain's mast, dishonorable discharge, everything you could think of. "No, sir, you are not getting in this building." So the next morning after muster, I went to check with the officer that had posted the guard and I just started telling him what had happened, you know. And he reached over and he picked up the telephone. This is before dials, and everything. So he got the operator, and he said, "Operator, I would like to talk to the captain, please." So he gets the captain, and he says, "Captain, this is Lieutenant Johnson, Project F. Tell your JOD to quit harassing my guards." Then he put down the phone. He didn't wait for an answer, or anything. That was the end of it. I never heard another thing.

John: Yeah.

Ken: Another incident, too. Our outfit, there, there was a couple of guys who came from the South, and they were used to handling firearms. And they were good guys, and they didn't take anything from anybody. And we had torpedo boxes stacked up outside the building. There was a lot of things going on here. And even this big building wasn't big enough to hold it all. So they had this storage out there, and they had roving patrols that would run between these boxes, see. And this one guy was on duty this night, and the junior officer of the deck, they came around the base on a bicycle. Gas was rationed then. They did the base on a bicycle. And he seen them come down the road and he started going between these boxes, see. So this guy has figured it out, so he would meet them just as he come around the corner. Well, he was right behind them. He pulled out his side-arm. We had .38

Smith & Wessons. Pulled out his side-arm just as the officer came around the corner and stuck it right in his back, and he said, "Stick 'em up!" This isn't exactly the way you are supposed to challenge anybody. But the officer put them up, and he said, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" And I guess that was the first experience, and that is why when I had that experience, well, the officer that posted the guard was really ticked off. It was quite a let-down to come from being assigned to a special deal, you know, top secret. Even the officer of the base, the captain, didn't know what was going on. And we weren't going to tell him. And he didn't dare ask us. We had the right to tell him no. I mean this is a very unusual situation. And here I get back in civilian life and I am just working on a production line.

John: And did you stay with Madison Kipp them?

Ken: Counting my time in the Navy, I was there fourteen and a half years. What happened then was that I was disappointed with something that happened there. I won't go into that. See, Kipp was a good place. And so I quit and I went to Gisholt [Machine Tool Manufacturing]. And I had a wonderful job there. And it was in a little department that they handed you a piece of metal and a blueprint and said, "Here, make this." That was very interesting work.

John: Yeah. Sure.

Ken: And but I was there fifteen months and when I started they were working fifty-three hours a week, and when I got done they were working thirty-eight. They were laying off people that were there for seven years. And the union finally said, "Hey, somebody else can do this guy's job. He's got to be laid off." So I got laid off. Here I am, by that time I had five kids. And you couldn't buy a job. They were laying off at the Rayovac; they were laying off at Oscar Mayer. So I went back and asked about Kipp, and they laughed at me and said, "We didn't fire you or lay you off. You quit. We are laying off ourselves. We can't hire you back."

[End of Interview]