

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Walter Whitehorse
U. S. Navy, World War II

2006

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Whitehorse, Walter R. (b.1926), Oral History Interview, 2006.

User copy : 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy : 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript : 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Walter Whitehorse, a Native American of the Ho-Chunk Nation, tells of his World War II service as a radar man in the Navy. Whitehorse portrays his father as a medicine seller and his mother as selling beadwork and baskets so the family traveled during the summer months of the Depression and went back to Black River – to Wittenberg (Wisconsin) in the winter, where they stayed with extended family, to make baskets. He recalls being in Tampa (Florida) at age fifteen when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred and wanting to join the service “in the worst way.” The family went back to Madison where they had been staying during summers with a basket stand on Highway 12. He remembers trapping and fishing behind the stand in the big marsh with people stopping off during their travels from Chicago to Black River and back. His mother would read a lot of their letters because she could speak and read English. His father eventually bought the place and, Whitehorse, operated Chief Auto Parts there, later, after getting out of service. He tells of his fascination with his cousin’s CCC uniform and then his Army uniform and of his eagerness to join the military. One of seven children, all delivered by his father, Whitehorse was born in Chicago during their travels and explains that he was finally able to enlist at age sixteen because he had no birth certificate and the Indian Agency wrongly reported his year of birth as one year earlier, thus making him seventeen. His mother, hesitatingly, agreed he could go in. Whitehorse relates that many American Indians, especially Ho-Chunk, wanted to be in service, out of loyalty to the country—to the land—and wearing his uniform gave him a strong feeling of pride. Basic training was at Great Lakes Naval Station (Illinois) and Whitehorse comments that when they gave him all of clothes that he had never had so many clothes in all his life.

Whitehorse also relates that he so loved the military that he didn’t realize that he would get paid.

Assigned to the USS Herndon, a destroyer – DD 638, he tells the story of how he ended up in radar school in Virginia Beach. Stationed out of New York, Whitehorse tells of traveling home on leave using trains and hitchhiking, getting to Madison for one day before turning around to go back. He speaks of the convoys the USS Herndon took; escorting transport ships to Great Britain and taking empty ships back. He comments on life on board ship, Whitehorse explains that during the invasion of Sicily, they took a big convoy over and mistakenly began to fire upon friendly airplanes and he tells of picking bodies out of the water the next morning. Promoted to second class radar man. Whitehorse was transferred to the USS Catoctin, which he portrays as less interesting because the ship went someplace as the communications ship and sat. He discusses on the ship’s involvement with the invasion of Southern France where they got hit, men on either side of Whitehorse were killed, and he was slightly wounded. Returning to the States, Whitehorse was again promoted to first class and given another ship, the USS Pocono,

which was headed for the Pacific theater. About to sign up for another four years, Whitehorse got in trouble with “a ninety-day wonder” officer and decided to get out of the service. After service, Whitehorse tells of getting his high school degree, working as a projectionist in a Chicago theater, attending Madison Vocational School for auto body mechanics, and working for various auto service businesses before starting his own business on his father’s land.

Biographical Sketch:

Walter R. Whitehorse (b.1926) served as a radar man with the United States Navy during World War II, enlisting at age sixteen. He was involved in convey missions in England, Italy, and Western Europe. He also saw action during the invasion of Southern France.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcript edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2008.

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and today is March 24, 2006. And this is an oral history interview Walter Reuben Whitehorse. We are at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives conference room. Did I say the date? This is March 24, 2006. Walter is a veteran of the United States Navy. And, Walter, thank you so much for agreeing to the interview and for coming down.

Walter: I am certainly glad to be here this morning.

John: Why don't we start at the very beginning? Where and when were you born?

Walter: I was born in Chicago, Illinois. Now that might seem kind of strange because I am a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation.

John: Okay.

Walter: And, in the early days, back then, my dad was a salesman, and my mother was-- they used to make baskets and souvenirs, and that type of stuff. And the best market at that time was in Chicago. So you are looking back to the year 1925, '26, '27. Back in there.

John: When were you born?

Walter: I was born in 1926.

John: The day?

Walter: 3/28/26.

John: March 28. Okay.

Walter: And that will be kind of important later on. I'll tell you why. So my dad delivered all of us. I had, there were seven of us. Seven children. Four boys, three girls. And he delivered each one of us. And each one of us were born in a different town because of the occupations they had. My dad sold medicines, my mother sold beads, and that type of stuff. So wherever we went. So these were the days of the Depression. You know, in the days of the Depression.

John: Oh, yea.

Walter: Things were pretty hard to come by. A lot of poor people, and most of all, the Indians were probably poorer than anybody at that time. So it was a struggle from

then on. That's why there was no hospitals involved with us. And my dad delivered us. Even most families were delivered by their midwives, and things like that. Okay, so happened to be in Chicago when my time came, and my dad delivered me, of course. And so as the years went by, we got used to living in that type of thing. In summertime, we would, our dad would travel around with my mother and, of course, I was a baby at that time. But they would go to different places to sell what they had. And in the wintertime, we would be up north, in Black River. We had a homestead in Wittenberg.

John: Wittenberg. Okay.

Walter: And we stayed there with my mother, my mother's three sisters, and her brother. She had two brothers. And all along they would prepare for the next summer by making baskets and the men would cut these logs. These oak, not oak, ash, white ash logs. And the way they would get the strips off, they would have to pound them with an axe. The flat end of it, you know. And the strips would come off, and things like that. Then the women would sort of plane them off with a good sharp knife, on their knee. But they had a piece of leather there. And they would size the strips. And then they would dye the strips in different colors, and proceed to make baskets. Well, anyway, to make a long story a little shorter, as I grew up, I was always fascinated by an army. I always liked the thought of that. And I had a cousin who lived with us for a while, and he joined the CCC at that time. And they had sort of a uniform, you know. And he would come by and I really loved that. I liked the looks of that.

John: Okay.

Walter: So, when the war came, he joined up. He came in 1940. He joined up in 1940. He was about four years older than I was. And someplace, maybe 1941. Right in there. And when he had his Army uniform, oh, I just thought that was as much as you could get. And I really wanted to be in the service. And at that time, well, as it turned out, the war came, of course, on December 7, 1941. And at that time we were, we had gone to Florida. The whole family. Things were getting a little bit better with us, but not much. But, anyway, I remember, still remember, on Sunday, December 7, we were in Tampa, and we heard on the news that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. And I was fifteen at that time. And I thought there has got to be some way for me to get in the service. You know, I wanted to get in the service in the worst way. So, of course, at fifteen, you are not going to do it. We got back to Madison again and then my dad bought a place in Madison, here. In fact, there were several places we used to sell in Madison. Because when they finally put the roads through, a little better roads, we'd stay in the summertime in Madison. On Highway 12, there is an animal hospital there today. But we had a basket stand there, and we'd stay there all summer long, and my uncles, we would

trap out in the back. There used to be a big marsh there. So we would get muskrats, we would get fish, ducks, a lot of the stuff. Of course, we would do it the year round. We would spear fish and stuff like that. And it was a big help as far as the food bill was concerned. Because we always had people coming from Chicago to Black River, from Black River to Chicago. And they would stop at our house. We were half-way. And we would feed them, and family members. My mother would read a lot of these letters these people had, the older people, because they couldn't read English, and she could. She went to a mission school, until she was...

John: Where?

Walter: Up near Neillsville.

John: Okay. Sure.

Walter: It was a Lutheran mission school. And as we stayed there, because my dad bought the place out there. I happened to have that Chief Auto Parts, that business out there. I've had it since I got out of the service in '46. And a good business. I've done pretty well at it. But, getting back to the story of where I joined up. We didn't have birth certificates. My dad delivered us all. So we were registered with the Indian Agency. So I asked my mother, when I was sixteen. I went to East High School, for less than thirty days. We lived out there and we had to drive back and forth, and this car that I had wasn't much of a car. And it finally crapped out. And I didn't take very good care of it, either. So my mother wrote to the Indian Agency in Black River and we got a letter back. And in that letter, they made a mistake on the dates. They had me born in 1925, instead of 1926. Which made me eligible to join the service. So I begged my mother to go with me so I could join up. And, of course, she hesitated. And I kept after her. It is amazing. All of my brothers, all of us served in the service at one time or other. And that was a big thing with Indians, especially Ho-Chunk. They all wanted to be in the service. There is a loyalty that we have to the country, to the land. Even though a lot of it now we don't own, or anything like that. But there is an appreciation of it that we have.

John: From what I know of life back then, it was pretty tough.

Walter: It was a tough life, yea.

John: And such an outpouring.

Walter: You used to hear a phrase, "You found a home in the service." Well, I did. No two ways about it. Because just before I went in, when my car crapped out, I went back to work for these farmers that I lived around there with. Oh, I hated that. I

milked seven cows in the morning, seven cows at night. And the farmers weren't really well off, either. They made do with what they had. But I took the place of the mother of this farmer, to milk the cows, so she could stay in the kitchen with her home duties. The Luder farm outside of Madison was one that I used to work with. Got a lot of farms that I used to work on. So, you'd work there. This was in eighth grade.

John: Oh, wow.

Walter: And I know darn well, because from eighth grade to ninth grade, a few days in ninth grade. Oh, I didn't want to go back to work there. But I did. So, when my mother finally got the letter back and we saw that I could join the service, we didn't waste any time. I went up, this was in October, October 10, I believe.

John: In 19?

Walter: '42. So, I joined up, and that same week I was in Milwaukee taking the final physical. You know they had no physical here at the post office. Not in that size town. And then I went to boot camp in Great Lakes. Boy, did I love the service. But, anyway, I thought so much of it I used to pray at night that I wouldn't be found out. Oh, man, I didn't want to leave the service. I was always scared that they were going to find me out. But nothing occurred. The last time they come close to it was when I was finally aboard ship one day. But, anyway, we, I had a good time at Great Lakes, even though it was supposed to be training. That didn't bother me, but I just loved it. You know, from the very beginning. And those hikes, there were nothing to those hikes, as far as I could see. When you take into consideration, there was guys who were thirty, forty years old, in our company. And that was tough going for them, you know.

John: Yea. Sure.

Walter: Guys were overweight, and all that kind of stuff.

John: How long was boot camp?

Walter: At that time it was a little better than thirty days. I think it was thirty days and a week. Time enough for your shots to get through and all that kind of stuff, and make sure they were going to work. I enjoyed the first day, of course, when they give you that big hair cut. And then they walk through this line and they give you all these clothes. I never had so much clothes in my life. There is a Navy jumper right there. Yea, they give you all those clothes. I never had so much clothes in my life. I had two pair of shoes, pair of galoshes. Two pair, three pair of underwear, long johns. Three pair of tops and I think you had about four pair of shorts. And

about three or four pair of socks. And then you had a P-coat and a rain coat, and you had, oh, geez, so much stuff. I couldn't believe it. I never had so much stuff like that in my life. I couldn't believe it. Could not believe it. So I never had so much stuff like that in my life. So come the training, well, that was just a snap, the training. No problem at all.

John: What was the training?

Walter: Just drills and marches, and stand watches, and stuff like that. You know. It wasn't hard at all. In fact, during the early years, when we went to Florida one year, my dad, they used to have this WPA.

John: Yea.

Walter: And then they had the NRA. But the WPA had these, they were trying to put everybody to work, and they had these artists that had different things that they put on. And that would include music, you know. So, just from where we were, just a little ways, there was this place. It was in a colored neighborhood but we could go there and take music. So we took music. I picked up trombone. I played fairly well, after a year there. Pretty good. That would come in a little later on. When I went to Great Lakes, this time when I was there, it was getting to the time when I'd see a bunch of guys leave every morning. And I'd think, where the heck are they going? Well, I asked some of the guys, and they said they were going to band. Drum and bugle corps. Oh, well, that is for me. Get out of some of this marching. So I went up and applied and, sure enough, I got in there. And for three weeks, two weeks, I was in the drum and bugle corps. And every day we would get out there and march a little bit. I could read music, so I could read what I had to play. I didn't play, they didn't have trombones. They had those, what the heck did they call them? Well, it wasn't a baritone, either. Well, anyway, the day we graduated, all the bands were going to march on this great big field at Great Lakes. And there was so much noise, with these guys blasting behind you, and in front. I didn't know which end of the scale I was on. Just making noise. So finally got out of there. After the boot camp, you get a short leave to go home. Before I went in, my mother gave me ten dollars, and my dad gave me ten dollars. That is all I had when I first got in there. So, he said, you be careful and you take care of this. So, I came home. I got a bus ticket to come home from Great Lakes. And then from Great Lakes, I went back to Madison, and from Madison to Great Lakes. After my leave was up. And I had my uniform on. And I was just as proud as can be in that thing. I had my watch stripe, and my one little strip around here, you know. And I thought that was great. Well, anyway, and I went to the school and give them the big pitch, you know. That was just great. Had these gals falling all over me. Well, anyway, I went back to Great Lakes, and our boot camp was over with. From there

you had to go out, to wherever you were going to go. So I was laying in my bunk one day and I see everybody make a big rush for the doors. And I think what the heck happened? And I stopped one of the guys and said, "Hey, what is going on?" And he said, "We are going to get paid." "You get paid in this outfit, too?" I couldn't believe it. Get all that food, and now you get paid on top of that. I thought, "Wow! This is great! This is the place to be!" That was when they were still paying fifty dollars. They might have just started that fifty dollars. So I got paid, and my dad told me to make out an allotment. The government would match your pay. If I put in thirty dollars, the government would put in thirty dollars. And send that home. And it was automatic. You sign up for it and it was automatic. And, sure enough, my dad and mother, that was a big help to them at times. So there I was, with twenty dollars that I had of my own. So I went in to, the day came when we were all getting lined up there. And they were going to start shipping us out to different areas, you know. The service. The ones that seemed to graduate high school, they were off on one end here. They were all going to go to service schools and, you know, stuff like that. For some of them, it was OCC. And then the middle group, that is the group I was in. You know, there was a lot of people didn't finish high school in World War II. A lot of them. Most of the guys I was in with. And then the back end of them down here, they were going to the Pacific. And I don't know if we were really categorized there. It just happened to be where we were standing. So this group went here. We were in the last group. The second group was going to go to California, out that way. And I thought, gee, I want to go to California in the worst way. So the last group was going to go out East. And a lot of them went to Norfolk, Virginia. And the guys already had heard how bad Norfolk was. And so here I am, out in Norfolk, Virginia. And I thought, well, I was kind of disappointed but I figured to make the best deal out of it. Got to Norfolk and the ship we were going to be on was the USS *Herndon*. A destroyer, DD638. And so the ship had just been commissioned, in February, I believe. Yea, February. And we were there in January. So they started getting familiar with it. And every morning, I was on the deck force at that time because, you know, I didn't know nothing from nothing. And there you had this old salt chief, and he would really raise hell with us all day long. Couldn't do nothing right, you know. And we had to haul all the stores aboard, and do all the work taking care of the ship from one end to the other, all the time. We heard him barking at us. So one day I got up and we were standing at attention there, waiting for them to come through for our muster. And I happened to see these two guys sitting on this fire plug over there. And I thought to myself, why don't they have to be over here? Kept thinking at it. And so finally I went up and asked somebody, "What the heck is these guys? They don't work." And the guy said, "Oh, they are sonar girls." Sonar girls. What the heck is that? So, I asked, "What do you mean by that?" And he said, "Well, you got sonar girls and you got radar girls." And I said, "Well, what does the radar girls do?" And he said, "The same thing." So I said, "How do you get to be a radar girl?" "You go downstairs, down below decks

there, and strike for what you want to be.” So, I said all right, and I went down and put my name in, “I want to strike for radar.” And sure enough, it wasn’t even a couple of days and my name is called. And I went to school in Virginia Beach, a little way from there. And I know I would have flunked out, but there was one guy that took a liking to me. You know, we were sort of bunk-mates, like. And he was really, really smart. He understood that real well. And I thought, I would have flunked, I know I would have. But he helped me. You know, first of all, you could get in there at seven o’clock in the morning, and those guys, they write so fast on the board, and seem to erase the same, in one movement. You had to pick it up that quick. Oh, I was swimming, not knowing anything. And finally, we had a whole package of homework to do at night, when we got done at five-thirty, or five o’clock. And he’d help me. He’d stay with me until two or three o’clock in the morning.

John: Oh, that’s great.

Walter: Every day, you know. And, Piva, that was the guy’s name. From the Boston area. There was a lot of Portuguese up in that area. Yea, Piva. And, even though we got split up later on. He come from a different ship than I was going to. But this was radar school so we all had different places where we were going to go. So I did pass, and from seaman second, you go to radarman third. That is what I had. That would be the same as a buck sergeant.

John: Yep. Yep.

Walter: So I come out of there as a rated person. That was great. A guy who didn’t know nothing from nothing. Third class, already. So we go to sea and it was kind of fun, in that we had our shake-down cruise up in Casco Bay, Maine. The ship, you know. And as I look back at it now, it was just a, like a ship going to a wreck someplace. They had two or three officers there. Maybe one or two that really knew something, and the rest of them were ninety-day wonders. And they’d sit up there and try to make decisions. You know. And you could just see it. See, I was on the bridge force now, you know. Because radar is on the bridge. And so was, yea, bridge, and they all came running to the quartermaster, that first class quartermaster. And he actually was the brains of that bridge. And I could see where he was talking, you know. And radar watches, we stood an hour on the radar, an hour at the helm, an hour looking, look-out, and back to radar. We had two radars. We had SC radar, and SG radar. SC was the sky search, and the SG was the ground search. And so we would have three guys on watch all the time. Four guns. Yea. And we didn’t know what was going on, neither. So supposedly you are supposed to be able to pick up a periscope with the radar. Supposedly. Conditions would have to be right. If it was going slow with no wake, you would never pick it up. And so we, everybody, we finally learned something. We finally

got things right.

John: Radar back then was the expanding thing?

Walter: It wasn't much. It was that there. In fact, there was a unit about this big and about that high. You could crank it by hand. And when every time we would come back to the States, we would get a new set and get new, you had to go to school every time for a couple of days, to get familiar with the set. So we finally got our shake-down cruise in shape and we came back to New York, and well, then, we got leave. So I came home. I got a seventy-two hour leave. A three day. At that time, a train ticket would cost you from New York to Chicago, and back, was twenty dollars.

John: Wow.

Walter: And you could make it overnight. You would get there and catch that one train, the Pennsylvania, or whatever it was. You leave at the right time, and you get to Chicago at about seven o'clock in the morning. And from Chicago you would hitch-hike home. You would never stand out there for more than five minutes, you would get a ride.

John: In uniform.

Walter: Yea. In uniform. There was nothing to getting a ride. In fact, I hitch-hiked all the way from Chicago, sort of missed my train, to New York. Made it in two jumps.

John: That's great!

Walter: I think one guy, he went out of his way to help me.

John: Well, people were like that.

Walter: He was like that. I'd get home, and spend a day at home. And then I had to get back to New York again.

John: You'd spend all your time traveling.

Walter: It was worth it. Those old trains. You remember them? A lot of them were wooden. Those old wooden carriages would shake back and forth, this way and this way. You'd get out. You'd get all cleaned up and, if you wore a pair of whites on that, you would come back looking like a dark gray. From the smoke and soot.

John: I remember as a kid, riding on trains like that. People in seats was one thing, but

you saw suitcases on platforms between them. Yea, the GIs going anywhere.

Walter: Oh, those trains used to be loaded. People on them, soldiers and sailors. So then from there, we went to, our first convoy.

John: You were based out of Norfolk?

Walter: No, New York was our home port.

John: Okay.

Walter: So they would make up a convoy, and we would have to convoy to, well, our first convoy was a convoy to Casablanca.

John: Oh, wow. All the way across.

Walter: Yea. They had all of these landing crafts. That was the longest voyage I ever stood, and I thought to myself, these guys got to go faster than this. Because you would look down and barely see the water go by. And we were on a destroyer, and we had to move around quite a bit, trying to keep the. But this was all Army and landing craft, and they were getting ready for the next phase. Well, anyway, when we came to Casablanca, we could see where the *Richelieu*, well, that was up in Oran. No, it was in Casablanca. The French battleship. The English had sunk this thing right in the harbor, right there. Wow, there were holes as big as this building. As big as this room. Man, they really pulverized that ship. And we saw that there, and we couldn't believe it. We thought the French were on our side, but they weren't at that time.

John: No.

Walter: They were vacillating back and forth. You didn't know who was going to be on your side. And the Germans were going to take that ship over, as they would have a lot of other stuff. And I guess they sunk the Italian fleet, too, shortly after that, over there. So the British, you had to keep your, had a lot of respect for them. Even though we used to fight with them every time we got into a port. Right away, there would be a big fight, you know. And so, we would go to, we came back and then we took another convoy. We took three or four convoys in a row to England. All troop convoys.

John: I am going to flip this tape over, okay?

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: Okay, go ahead.

Walter: Okay, from there, we'd bring back some empty ships which went quite a bit faster, you know. You come back to the U. S. and we picked up another convoy going to, forming up at Newfoundland. And we picked up that convoy and took that to Europe, to England. The first convoy we took was up to Belfast. The second one was over to Londonderry. The third one, I think it was to Liverpool. Another one we took to Swansea, Wales. And then we went, took about four of five convoys again to North Africa.

John: How long a trip, how long did it take to go across?

Walter: On the fast convoys, we could get there in about five days, six days. There were about fifteen or twenty knots. We made it one time in three days. That is kind of a story, too. We were supposed to escort the *Queen Mary*. Back to England. She was a big troop ship. And there was two of us from our squadron, our destroyer squadron. So the first day, we were out there and really humming along, and that thing is moving, you know. And our ship was right out in front of that thing, zig-zagging and we thought we were really doing a great thing. And the other destroyer was on the other side. And really flying along. And about the middle part of the day, we noticed that the ship was catching us, the *Queen Mary* was catching us. And I couldn't figure it out myself. I know what I could see on the radar. And I could see it out there, coming up. So that night, that ship was abreast of us, see. We thought there must be some reason for that. Trying to hide between us, or something. The next morning, we never saw the ship. It was long gone. We burned out a boiler in our ship, and that thing stopped and went way back to about twenty knots, the best we could do. And the other destroyer, they did the same thing. They burned the big shaft, the drive shaft, out of that thing. So, we were going thirty knots, you know. That thing was going flat out. It would go over thirty knots. Well, that was the end of that convoy. I guess that is when we went through Liverpool, and we got fixed up there. They fixed our ship. And we went back out again. We brought some more empties back.

John: You know, I never thought about bringing empties back.

Walter: Yea.

John: That would be the round trip.

Walter: We also brought some convoys up to the northern part, to the northern part of England. What the heck is the name of those islands up there. Well, anyways, the Russians and the British in their corvettes took that convoy to Murmansk, up around the top. And we had to hand it to those British guys. These were rotten

little ships that they had, those little corvettes they had. Have you ever seen those things?

John: Yea.

Walter: There's nothing to them. Most uncomfortable thing you can be in, I guess.

John: Well, that's a note I had. Do it here, or do it later. How was living aboard like?

Walter: We had comfortable, each one of us had a bunk, and smooth weather we had hot meals. It was only when we got into rough weather, which we did get into a lot of that when you get into the North Atlantic. North Atlantic was really bad. Matter of fact, as a helmsman, and of course, I am just a kid, you know. I'm sitting there, and that big wheel is power steering. You can just twitch it like this and you make the ship wiggle, see. So we were going across the top of these big swells, and I was trying to stay on top of them, see. And move it along a little bit, just so they wouldn't notice over there. I was moving it over a little bit. All of a sudden, when we get to the top, and slide off of it. But they didn't say much at first. Then all of a sudden one of the officers caught me doing that, see. And he read me the riot act. Then the captain came up and he said, "Who's on the helm up here?" By that time, they got me off of that. The first time across in a storm.

John: They say the North Atlantic is pretty out there, but it is sure scary when it is up here.

Walter: Yea. So the swells you made, in a good heavy storm, which they all seemed to be, you'd get on top, and you'd look straight down, looked like you could look down there forever where the bottom was. And you'd get off there and you'd look straight up, and you'd see this big wall of water, a lot of water coming down after you. Yea, we had quite a bit of that North Atlantic convoy duty, when we took over a lot of those merchant ships. And, I am surprised I didn't see it in that letter that I know we were on more than one submarine run. We had got contacts and I don't know if we ever got any confirmation on those or not. One time we did. But it was, these convoys, you can just imagine the size of those things sometimes. Oh, there must have been forty, fifty boats sometimes. But these were good fast ships that we were escorting. We had a whole squadron. I think the squadron was six or eight ships in our squadron. It might be at least a fifteen knot convoy.

John: Well, that's moving, for a lot of ships. They say you can only go as fast as the slowest ship.

Walter: Yea, that's right. And they had a lot of communications between them, you know. The signalmen, and stuff. And then you had high frequency radio that you could

talk back and forth with - tell such and such a ship to get moving, and to get back on station. And stuff like that. I heard them talking. I am on the bridge all the time. And know what is going on a lot of times. And they'd tell such and such a ship to get moving and find out what is the matter with it, and that type of thing. They had to leave some of them.

John: Oh, did they?

Walter: Yea. If it wouldn't be one carrying troops, it would be the ones that were carrying munitions or tanks, or something like that. The troop ships, they kept those really, really protected.

John: I don't think they lost...

Walter: They did lose one.

John: Oh, that's right. That is remarkable. Because they shipped millions of men over there. Says a lot for the destroyer escorts, though.

Walter: That's right. They come out with those little destroyer escorts afterwards. A little smaller ship than we were on. And, well, anyway, we finally get to the time when we were going to invade Sicily. And we took this big convoy over there, in the early mornings, when they started to bombard that place, you could hear these shells coming over from that British, two British battle ships and a pile of cruisers out there. You could hear them come over the top of our ship, you know. And they would, you could hear them whistle. You could feel the air move out. And then we would get in close quarters. Oh, another thing, too, that morning was dark, and there was all kinds of confusion. You got these big boats flying over the top of you. You got all that. Then you see these airplanes coming over. And we started shooting at them, because we thought they weren't ours. We thought they were German planes. Here, they were Dakotas, and I don't know how many of them we shot down that day. Not our personal ship. I know we shot at them too, but the next day, we went around picking up a lot of the bodies out of the water. And that was kind of sad. And I knew that was the one that we were shooting at, I knew it was our plane. And I yelled to the guys. See, my battle station on the destroyer was right in front of the bridge on the 20 millimeters there. And I was the hot barrel man. So I seen that coming up, and the thing went empty. And I took the barrel out of the gun and give it a twist. And you are supposed to save it. They had this little tank there for it. I threw the thing over the side.

John: Put it in the starboard locker.

Walter: Yea. But I don't know if I did it because I recognized that plane, or what the

reason was for it. I know I was supposed to put it in the service hold, but I didn't do it. But that part of it was over. We did get hit with an air raid out there. Not too many because they would come in on the evening, or early in the morning they would come over. And everything would cut loose on the ship. So, that invasion was over with, after we got control of everything, we started making scouting trips through the Straits of Messina. That is between Italy and Sicily.

John: Volcanoes and that.

Walter: So we went through there a few times, and we drew some fire, I guess, but it was pretty quiet. In fact, that was in preparation for the landing to be at Salerno. And the British already had made, they were already loaded and were ready to go up through the boot there. And then, of course, the Americans were going to hit Salerno, to punch them in. But that Salerno turned out to be a real fiasco, too. So we were aware of that. So, after that was stabilized, when they finally did land, we came back to the United States again, and got some more convoys. And about the third trip over, I was transferred to another ship because, after you take your exam for the next grade, you know, if you pass and get rated, well, I come to find out we had such a bunch of rated second class radarmen, you can't have that many on one ship. Especially on a destroyer. So they started breaking us up. And I got transferred to the *Catoctin*. That was a communications ship.

John: Oh, okay.

Walter: And there, we seen all the high muckety-mucks of that area, you know, where we had to be there. And admirals.

John: A whole bunch of antennas.

Walter: Yea, antennas all over the place. And this was our crew at the *Catoctin*. And from there.

John: Those uniforms. You can't tell when these pictures were taken. They haven't changed.

Walter: No, they haven't changed. The same thing. Well, I loved the destroyer a lot more than I did this ship. The destroyer was more action. This one here you just went to a place and you'd just sit because, you know, you were the communications ship. Just like that. And you'd go another place, and you'd sit. Get everything all straightened out. But then on this particular ship we made the invasion of France, and then we came out of there.

John: Northern France, or Southern France?

Walter: Southern France, yea. Well, we got hit there a few times. Strafed, and stuff like that, because they knew we were a communications ship. Because you always get that interference from something like that. And, in fact, out of this crew, there was four or five of them got killed because all of us that were on the back part of the ship, the fantail of the ship, they had just secured us from general quarters. We had been on general quarters, at our stations for, I don't know, six or eight hours. And they thought it was all clear. And what happened was it was this German plane had come through and our radar operator missed the IFF on that plane. Didn't get it, or didn't report it. And here, we were all sitting out there, doing nothing. So there was an area on the back part of the ship that we had just secured, the back radar was shut down. Because we just had the front one going. And about, I think there was six or eight of us, I think there was three of us got wounded. They were all hanging around back there. Funny thing, I saw it. The guy next to me got killed and the guy over here got killed. And I am sitting in the middle. And we were laying on these outdoor, we had our thick mattresses out there, laying on the deck. It was a nice day. And you couldn't tell them after that personnel bomb hit. It pounded all that mattress into those guys, and they looked like all shredded guys. And one guy lost an arm, another guy lost a leg. And all cut up. I got one cut on me, on my leg. And, of course, I didn't realize it at the time. The adrenaline was going so fast. I run, of course, for the CIC, the Combat Information Center, down below in the ship. And there was a trail of blood coming out. And, sure enough, so I put a poultice on it, like a bandage on it. And that was the end of it. And then they said, go down to CIC and get taken care of. Or down to the sick bay, to get taken care of. I got down there and seen those guys all cut up and shot up, and really dead, and I wasn't hurt that bad, so I left. That was probably the extent of our action and that happened in the south of France, there. So we stayed there for, oh, gee, a long time. I think the Seventh Army went up through there. That is what it was.

John: Okay.

Walter: Who was commander of that?

John: I don't know.

Walter: Might have been Clark. It might have been the same guy.

John: He was in Italy.

Walter: Yea, he was in Italy. I think he was the same guy. Yea, we came ashore there and we stayed there in Toulon, Marseilles, quite a while. And then left. Came back to the States because D-Day had already been over with and they were going through

France already. And North Africa was over with. And northern Italy was still going strong, but that sort of stabilized, too. Came back to the United States and I was transferred to another ship at that time, because I was going to go to be first class. So I was in the Fargo Building in Boston. And I had already been assigned to a new AGC, communications ship, *Pocono*. All the communications ships were named after mountains.

John: The one with our fleet was the *Mount McKinley*.

Walter: Yea. That was another one. And that went to the Pacific, didn't it?

John: It was at the Inchon, in Korea.

Walter: Okay. I bet they were nice. This *Catoctin*, here, that was a converted freighter of some kind.

John: The *Mount McKinley* was a German liner that they seized.

Walter: Oh, is that right? That would have been a nice ship. That would have been a real nice ship.

John: I wasn't on it. I went along with it.

Walter: So I got, we were getting outfitted with the *Pocono*.

John: Was that new? A new ship?

Walter: Yea. That was a new ship. That was going to have everything on it. Because I was going to go, everything went to the Pacific, you know. After the Germans gave up, everything went to the Pacific. And I don't know if I should, well, anyway, this Fargo Building, even though I was going to school there. We had to leave every morning to go to school. They had a little school there someplace. One day I was going down, I got to thinking the war was over with now. And I thought, what the heck am I going to do? I don't know nothing but the Navy. Well, I know what I am going to do. I am going to go down and sign up for four years. You could sign up for four years if you wanted to. I says, well, I am going down to sign up for the Navy. On the way down, I am on the third floor, and this yeoman's office was way down on the ground floor. And I come flying down the steps, three or four at a time, you know. Hit the landing. And they had sort of a mixture of officers and enlisted men. Everything milling around. A lot of people. I went by this one officer and he yelled at me. "Sailor," he says, "don't you salute officers?" I thought, I gave him a quick salute. I guess he didn't care for that. So he told me, "You go down and get a hair cut." Here is a ninety-day wonder, you know. First

time he ever seen a sailor, you know. A real live sailor.

John: Dangerous guy.

Walter: The most dangerous kind you can get. I went down and got a hair cut. He said, "You come back and report to me." His room was right there. So I came back and he says, "Go down and get another one." See, I was on my way down to go down and sign up for four more years. And, oh, geez. Well, when he said, that, I just went crazy. I blasted him. He was stretched out there. Oh, oh, there is my Navy career right there. So I went all the way down to the yeoman's office, and I said, "How many points do you have to have to get out of the service?" I think he said, fifty or sixty, or something. I think I had seventy or eighty. I had all kinds, I had been there a long time. I said, "Well, when is the next draft leaving?" He said there would be one going out in forty-five minutes. I ran up there and got my seabag and dumped a bunch of junk in it, come down there, and was on a train and I was out of the service the next afternoon. That quick.

John: Oh, man.

Walter: Boy, if things hadn't went right, I would have been in deep trouble. I hope this don't get back to them.

John: Yea. Well, we never saluted. In the Naval service, you don't salute indoors.

Walter: No, no. But, on the training bases, you do.

John: Just to get the feel for it?

Walter: Yea. That is what this was. And here I was, I was in tailor-mades, and all that kind of stuff. I didn't even look like a Navy guy, you know. Those Navy suits they had, so dog-gone tight and even the colors were off sometimes. You ever see some of those?

John: Yea. Yea.

Walter: And, of course, those guys over in the Pacific now, they had all this trim inside their rolled-up sleeves. You would see all those inscriptions they had. They looked pretty sharp.

John: I went to Great Lakes in 1955, basic electronics. And across the street in the bars, and they'd have those dragon things, and one guy would start and another guy would start, and some of them would fight. And here, some of them had stars and some would have the shield. They were Coast Guards.

Walter: Oh, yea. Yea.

John: And then they would have a hell of a fight.

Walter: That is what we used to do in St. Helena, when this destroyer was getting commissioned and put together. You know, we would go to this one place. It is amazing. I didn't drink. At that time. I wasn't even seventeen yet. And we would go into the bar, and Limeys, a bunch of British. And first thing, there would be a fight going. And I used to enjoy that sort of a thing. Oh, another thing, too. When I was on the destroyer, on this battle station, there was a guy there and he was from the deck force. And, boy, that guy, for some reason or other, he hated my guts. I don't know why. And he used to be after me all the time. And I was probably afraid of him a little bit. So one day we pulled into port and the destroyers tied up to each other, and they had a smoker. So this one guy, tall guy, he talked me into. Oh, no, that guy wanted to put the gloves on with me. Oh, no, I didn't want nothing to do with it. And this one guy sort of shamed me into it. Well, as it turned out, I was so fast, he couldn't hit me. And I got the second, and I climbed all over that guy. They had to pull me off him after the end of it, see. But that sure gave me some confidence. They had these smokers. I always used to be in them. But I think I was kind of miserable, too, because I was always trying to pick a fight. All the time, trying to pick a fight, you know. And this one guy, too, when we got into Naples, he wanted me to take up boxing. He was a boxing manager, like. So I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning to go running with him. If we were tied up for quite a while. In Naples. On that AGC. Every morning I had to get up and run, and I got kind of tired of it, because all the other guys were sleeping in, you know. Finally, I told him, "Nah, I got enough of this." So that was the end of that career. But, you know, another thing, too. I don't know if you are familiar with that but they used to have these merchant ships come into port and you could buy cigarettes for fifty cents a carton.

John: Oh, okay.

Walter: On some of them merchant ships, you could buy whole cases of them. Big case. I would go in and buy every cigarette they had on that ship and I'd have some guy with me. This guy, Tex, he was with me all the time. So we take those and sell them on the black market where you could get fifty dollars a carton. But you always sent home what money you made.

John: Yea.

Walter: You couldn't send any more than that home. We had just piles of money. We didn't know what to do with the stuff. So we took a trip to Rome, and we bought a

taxi cab, and, gee, we were throwing money all over. Had kind of gals all over. Well, anyway, we drove that cab till it crapped out on us, and we drove it into the Tiber River. We got it going and let the clutch out, and aimed it for the side, and it landed out in the river. We were the ugly American, all right. And then this Tex, this guy I was with, he was my companion all the time. He said, "Well, let's buy ourselves a race horse." Because they had races there at Rome all the time. You could tell he was an auctioneer. He knew all about horses. So I said, okay. And we went out and paid some kind of fabulous figure for an old broken down horse. And that thing was a bad thing. Wasn't much of a horse, and the guy kind of unloaded it on us. And we knew it couldn't race, so he said he was going to take care of it, and make it a good animal. Well, we rode on that thing for a couple of days and it was kind of high-strung, but it kind of took to us, you know. So, by the time our leave was up in Rome, and we had to go back to Naples, where our ship was at. And we got to going down that Appian Way, or whatever they called it. Towards Naples. And this horse, well, we got to get rid of this horse. So we stopped by this one little farm. There was a farmer right beside the road there, working. His daughter was there. Okay. So we give him that horse.

John: Good.

Walter: So the next six-by coming along, he took us down the road. Down to Naples.

John: Walter, you wanted to get in, you said. But still, that was three or four years out of your life.

Walter: Well, I didn't finish high school, and I figured that was one of the best educations I could have had. And I did go back to high school after I got out of service. And I didn't really, I couldn't stand being tied up that much. Or enclosed that much. And there wasn't enough movement. Finally, I told, this was the high school in Oconda, Illinois. See, the reason we lived in Oconda, Illinois, was because my dad bought a little place down there in Oconda, so he could be close to Chicago, so he could sell his stuff. So it was only a trip of forty-fifty miles. Something like that. Rather than come all the way to Madison. We still owned the property here. And so I told the professor, or the principal, would it be all right if I took the exams with the seniors that year. I said, I think I've had a lot of this stuff already, you know. He said, okay, if you want to do that. I said, if it don't work, I'll go to school for another year. So, I'll be a son of a gun, when I come to take those finals, of course, I had a lot of help. Bunch of gals on the side of me. I would look over there and see this one and that one. So I did manage to get my diploma.

John: That's great.

Walter: No whiz at it, but I got what I went in for.

John: Then what did you do?

Walter: I got a job in Chicago, in a theater. To be a projectionist. And that was kind of a plum job because you could not just go into it. Those things are all sort of held, held together. Like being in the union, some kind of, it was a closed union to begin with, see. So a couple of guys that I knew, they had their in and they got me a job in one of these small theaters. As a projectionist. They taught me how to do it. It didn't take long to learn now. But I didn't like it. It was a nighttime job. So I moved back to Madison. And I went to school, vocational school. To be a mechanic, auto body. I finished both of those at the Madison Vocational School. And that was the best thing, I suppose, that ever happened to me. Gave me an insight into the business. I used to work for Schoepe Motors. I worked for Ball Body Shop.

John: Okay.

Walter: And I worked for, what other body shop did I work for, before I started my own? Yea, I was, we didn't get much money.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

Walter: Yea. I was, we didn't get much money. I think it was a hundred dollars a month. For going to school, I think that was what it was.

John: Okay, go ahead.

Walter: Well, to get back to when I was in the service, when we went to Russia. We were at the Yalta Conference. The communications ship. We, I think that was the last trip I made on that trip. We went to the Yalta Conference, and we had all these, we had Franklin Roosevelt, we had the king and queen of England, we had...

John: Did you get to see them?

Walter: Oh, yea, Yea. In fact, we had the two girls, who is now the queen, Queen Elizabeth. She was my age, about. So I was trying to converse with her, trying to talk, stuff like that. So I paid twenty dollars to stand the watch at the door where they would come in and out. She would come by, and you really were supposed to stand at attention. But I sort of whispered hello, or something like that. Sometimes I'd wink at her. Then we had this big banquet there in Yalta, you know. The whole ship's company was invited to the banquet the Russians put on. The building was a big building, a warehouse of some kind. The whole back end of it was blown off. The Germans had gone through there and they had been repulsed.

So they really tore up things. So on this table, they had this real long tables in there. And in between every American serviceman they put a Soviet woman, girl. Service, also. They were in the service. And the meat was raw. They had raw bacon, raw, everything there was raw. Then they had these blood sausages, and all these other kind of sausages. And great big pitchers of vodka.

John: Oh, wow.

Walter: That was the banquet, see. Sit there. Well, it started off kind of slow, you know. Started off a little slow, so we had this gal here, and neither one could understand English, I don't think. Maybe there were some that did. But weren't letting on. So we'd get to probably an hour into it, and we started drinking a little of that vodka. I don't think I ate any of that meat, though.

John: That could be dangerous.

Walter: Well, the more I drank, the more I got interested in the gal beside me. First thing you know, I am all over her. And so, finally, I was going to take her home. I was going to walk her back to her barracks. Well, the main Russian honcho wouldn't have nothing to do with that, you know. So we went back to our ship, and I think that was the first time I ever had anything to drink. That was the first time. That vodka. You know, you don't have a taste for it. I don't like the taste of beer and I didn't like the taste of whiskey. Wine I never did like. I had a few of those in me, and I was starting to go off the deep end, too. When I got back to the ship, and I got back there pretty early. About, how did that go again. I got back there about three o'clock in the morning. They had guys laying back and forth. People sick all over the place. And the next morning when they dragged these guys aboard ship, they put them in these cargo nets. They were all passed out. Yea, that was the big banquet with the Russians. It was kind of a tore up part of the country, all right. That Black Sea. We seen those ships there at the Black Sea. They had a lot of women on them. They were cooks. They didn't make no difference. They had a place for a man, and usually there was a woman hanging around there too. And they were a pretty sad looking lot. The few ships I went aboard, Navy ships, that weren't American. I went aboard British ships. And you know, they cook up their stuff by themselves. And they sit there in these big open rooms, all the hammocks hung up. They would sit there and cook up their soup. And tea. They had to have tea. I don't care what was going on. They had to stop for tea. And, well, I could go on and on, but I think I should...

John: Oh, this is a remarkable story. A question. You had the GI Bill. Did you use it?

Walter: I used it just for that going to that body and what is its name school. If I had a decent education, I would have liked to have gone to college. I have a young

brother that finished, graduated University of Wisconsin. And I have a son who graduated from there. He is a teacher in town here. And had two other sons. One went to Whitewater and was just about ready to graduate, and he got married. And let's see, the other son didn't go to college. My daughter, who is here, she went to college. And she is about ready to retire too, now. She's been with the state for quiet a while.

John: Okay. Well, what a remarkable story. This is, these are so precious. I am going to shut this off, okay?

Walter: When I finally got transferred to that last ship, the last time around, you know, we were prepared to go to the, well, everything was going to the Pacific. Cause we were going to make that big push into Japan. And we had heard stories from some of the guys that had come back from the Pacific, you know. And, boy, this was going to be a real blood bath. And we could tell by the appearance of our ship that we were going on that it was just a great big bull's eye because of the communications. All of the interference we put out because of that. We would be like a marked ship. And a lot of people kind of second guessed that atom bomb, but I think he did the right thing.

John: There would have been a million casualties, on our side. And how many Japanese? They would have had to fight little girls and grandmas. They were right into it. The emperor was god.

Walter: Yea. But we didn't have any experience with the Japanese as far as I was concerned. I hadn't been in that part of the Pacific. And my brother was there. My brother was at Okinawa. And he relates, in fact I think he has got, he was the one put me up to coming up. He's got a piece here someplace.

John: Can I have your address, Walter?

Walter: 4907 Whitehorse Place. McFarland.

[End of Interview.]