

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Donald F. Kaiser  
Technical Sergeant First Class Diver, Army, World War II

2006

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**Kaiser, Donald F., (b. 1923)**, Oral History Interview, 2006

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

Donald Kaiser, a Madison, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service as a diver in the Army with the 106<sup>th</sup> Engineer Port Construction and Repair Group during World War II. Kaiser briefly covers his early life in Burkburnett (Texas), a town made famous by the Clark Gable film, *Boom Town*. Urged by his father who was a Lutheran minister, Kaiser was attending pre-seminary school at Saint John's College in Winfield (Kansas) when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. Kaiser remembers he was playing tennis when he learned about the attack. He reveals he enlisted in the Army in 1943 because he decided the seminary was not his vocation. Kaiser discusses attending basic training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), Mechanical School at Fort Lewis in Tacoma (Washington), and Bertram School of Gases in O'Fallon (Illinois). Kaiser depicts himself as eager to see combat and tells how he saw a flyer for deep sea divers and volunteered, even though "I was from Texas and I don't think I'd ever seen...anything bigger than a cow pond." Kaiser was sent to Fort Screven (Georgia) for an intensive, twelve-week diver training session. He discusses at length his diving gear and standard diving procedures. He comments that many soldiers became claustrophobic and failed diving school, becoming onshore tenders instead. Kaiser passed, earning the rank of Technical Sergeant First Class Diver. In 1944, shortly after D-Day, Kaiser arrived in Normandy (France) with the 106<sup>th</sup> Engineer Port Construction and Repair Group. Kaiser describes being shocked upon his arrival in Le Havre (France) by the destruction of the city, which he suggests was both the fault of the Germans and the Allies who had bombed the city heavily. Kaiser explains his duties included clearing debris from the canals and sea-gates of Le Havre so ships could get through with supplies. Kaiser often had to repair docks as well, which he characterizes as "slow, hard work." He recalls an incident in which a Victory Ship carrying munitions hit a mine just outside Le Havre and sunk. Kaiser's unit had to dive down to the ship and retrieve the ammunition. He also addresses the challenges of diving: their suits were nearly 100 pounds, they had no lights underwater, and their only communication with the surface was to tug on the "life line" cable. Kaiser also suggests how to avoid getting the bends on the ascent back to the surface. Next, Kaiser tells of a difficult mission to Rouen (France) where he had to remove debris from a bombed railroad bridge that had fallen into the Seine River and was blocking barges from getting through to Paris with food, supplies, and munitions. He explains that "while the water was not deep, it was the toughest diving we had to do, because there was such a strong current." On May 7, 1945, while working in the Seine, Kaiser felt a tug on his life line; when he surfaced, he learned Germany had surrendered. Kaiser frequently makes fun of his own ignorance of history and geography, stating that he passed the square in Rouen where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, but at the time he did not know who Joan of Arc was. Kaiser touches upon interactions with the French. He states the citizens of Le

Havre were not very friendly to Americans because their city was bombed out. However, he describes being offered champagne and brandy in Rouen on V-E Day. Kaiser also mentions a conversation with a German prisoner, an officer, who claimed that Germany had a “secret weapon,” the atom bomb. Shortly after V-E Day, Kaiser was shipped to the Bay of Manila (Philippines). He describes how his unit repaired the docks in Manila Bay but left sunken boats to be cleared out later. Next, Kaiser tells the story of an unusual dive: the Philippine government buried much of its national treasury including coins and silver in the bay near Corregidor. Other divers in Kaiser’s unit brought up the money, and he recalls a photograph of his buddies standing next to “mounds of silver pesos” on a barge. Kaiser was in Manila when he learned that Japan had surrendered. He continued to work as a diver in Manila Bay for several months and was discharged in January 1946 at Fort Bliss (Texas). Kaiser mentions the pay for divers was better than the average G.I. or Private because in addition to technical sergeant salary and war zone pay, he received a stipend for every hour spent under water. Kaiser admits he often thought this was unfair, given he did not experience true combat. He contrasts his experience with that of his older brother who fought in the Battle of the Bulge (Belgium). After the war, Kaiser used the G.I. Bill to attend North Texas State University where he majored in Journalism. He mentions his uncle, Waldemar Gallman, who was a U.S. ambassador to Poland, helped get him a job reporting for the *Congressional Quarterly* in Washington D.C. while Kaiser attended George Washington University. Kaiser states he never dove again, although he came close once when he was living in Anchorage (Alaska) in the 1950s. In 1956, Kaiser entered a PhD program in English and American Literature at the University of Wisconsin, and he later went on to work for University Extension. He comments that he was never under fire or bombed but that over time he has come to realize how important his diving work was to the war effort.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Kaiser (b. 1923) was born in Burkburnett (Texas). He attended Saint John’s College (Kansas) and considered becoming a minister until he realized it was not his vocation and enlisted in the Army in 1943. Kaiser volunteered for deep sea diving school and became a Technical Sergeant First Class Diver with the 106<sup>th</sup> Engineer Port Construction and Repair Group. He served in France and the Philippines, clearing debris and repairing docks so supply ships could get through. After the war, Kaiser graduated with a bachelor’s in journalism from North Texas State University, did some graduate work at George Washington University, and received a PhD in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin. Kaiser taught for many years with University Extension in Madison.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

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

**Interview Transcript:**

John: Okay, today is August 2, 2006, and I am John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives. And this is an oral history interview with Donald Kaiser. Donald is a veteran of the United States Army in World War II. And this interview is being taken at Donald's home in Madison. Thank you so much for agreeing to the interview.

Donald: Very happy to have you.

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

Donald: I was born in a rural area near Burkburnett, Texas. Burk Burnett, Texas, became a little famous shortly after World War I because that was known as *Boom Town*. They struck oil and they made a very famous movie with Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamarr.

John: Okay. Sure.

Donald: Okay. Well, anyway, I was born near Burkburnett, Texas, on September 19, 1923. I am now eighty-two years old. Now, my father, I actually lived in a rural community called Clara, like the lady's name. And my father was, it was a German - Lutheran community. My father was a Lutheran minister there. And they were from up north, though. My mother was from New York, Wellesville, New York, and my father was from Jonesville, Indiana. Now, I attended high school in Clara. There was a high school there, then. No longer exists. But, when I finished high school, I was sent to St. John's College, which was a Lutheran school in Winfield, Kansas. And it was a kind of pre-seminary college that prepared one to go to the seminary in St. Louis to be ordained.

John: Okay.

Donald: This was my father's hope. But I didn't feel it was my avocation. I didn't really want to do that. So, when I had about a year and a half of college when Pearl Harbor came on, what was it, December 14th, 1941.

John: December 7th.

Donald: On December 7th.

John: Do you remember what you were doing?

Donald: This was interesting. Winfield, Kansas, where the college was, was southern Kansas. And although this was December, it was warm enough to be playing

tennis. I was out playing tennis with a friend, and someone came on the court and said they had just bombed, the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. I was incredibly ignorant because I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was.

John: Exactly. I remember my dad, "Where's Pearl Harbor?"

Donald: Yeah. Yeah. It was later I found out it was Hawaii. Well, actually, I went through a lot of the war, being ignorant as to places and what was going on in the larger scenes. I decided there that I would volunteer for the Army. You could say patriotism but there is another interesting part about this. If I had stayed, I would have been deferred. All seminarians at the time were deferred but I knew, to be perfectly honest, that this was not my vocation. So I entered the Army. I volunteered, and I entered the Army on March 4, 1943, at the age of nineteen.

John: Okay. Where?

Donald: Where? I went to, I think it was Leavenworth, where I was drafted. Where I went. I don't know if you are interested in this. Do you want the basic training?

John: Oh, yes. All of it. Oh, sure.

Donald: Well, after I was inducted at Leavenworth, I went to basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, in Missouri.

John: Oh, yeah, near Rolla.

Donald: Yeah.

John: And I have never heard anything good about Fort Leonard Wood.

Donald: It was really hot. I remember those twenty mile marches with packs. It was in July, I think, we took those things, and that was killing. Well, after I finished there, they had given us tests and, for some reason, although I'm not very good mechanically, I made high on their mechanical test. Lo and behold, they sent me to the mechanical school in Tacoma, Washington. That would be Fort Lewis. And I was there after that. And, I thought, well, after that I would be going overseas and seeing a little action, and fixing mechanical things for the Army. Well, that didn't happen. Hung around, and then they sent me to a place called the Bertram School of Gases. In O'Fallon, Illinois. Which is just outside St. Louis. That was for, they taught you, they had these big machines where they taught you to make gases, like oxygen and acetylene.

John: Okay.

- Donald: Which is very important to have on the battlefield. But, you know, after that, weeks of that, and then finishing, we sat around and sat around, and nothing happened. One day I saw on the bulletin board that they wanted volunteers for deep sea divers. I was from Texas, and I don't think I'd ever seen an ocean, or anything bigger than a cow pond. I volunteered.
- John: Wow.
- Donald: And they, there was a simple intelligence test, and a very thorough physical. And the intelligence test was no problem, and the physical test was mainly for heart and lungs, just to make sure you were healthy. I passed that. And then I was sent to a place called Fort Screven, Georgia, which was a really small place. It was on the island of Tybee, outside Savannah, Georgia.
- John: Okay.
- Donald: And there I had a very intensive training in diving for twelve weeks. It was very intensive. And that's where I learned how to do it. And we were put through everything. It wasn't just a question of suiting up, the science of it, and going under water. We had to go underwater, you work. We were in construction, and we had to know how to handle tools underwater, hammers, all this equipment underwater, of getting the job accomplished. And that was not easy, but, you know, we learned. And we to pass all that. Many of our people didn't pass. Some even, as they were suiting up, and the helmet was put on their head, and then they closed and locked the face mask, the little port, then they would go nuts with claustrophobia.
- John: I would.
- Donald: I had, and these guys didn't graduate then as divers, they became tenders. And my tender was a guy who just was claustrophobic. He couldn't stand it. He was a great guy, and he became my tender. And I got through it, and I got out with the title of Technical Sergeant First Class Diver. And that was as high as the rating went. And I remained a technical sergeant, and all the other guys, through that time.
- John: Claustrophobia didn't bother you?
- Donald: Well, I don't believe so. I was a little bit. There were a lot of scary things in diving. You go down there, you are pretty helpless. And you can't see anything. You are in there like an insect with your sealing hat. In this picture it shows that I had gloves. You had gloves if the water was really cold, but we generally didn't use the gloves. The sleeve would come here. There would be a rubber band here, because you needed a sense of feel down there. So, after that, after graduating

there, things began to happen. I was never in combat, but I wasn't really too far off. We were, I think, providing a very necessary function. They needed to keep those ports open. Now, I just want to tell you what happens here. As you know, D-Day was on June 6, 1944, the invasion of Normandy. Now, I wasn't there. But I departed for Europe shortly after, and on July 25, 1944, like a month or two after D-Day, I was in on the Normandy coast, in France. And the first place that I was sent, my driving group and my whole company, the whole group.

John: You mentioned before we started, the designation of your group was?

Donald: The 106th Engineer Port Construction and Repair Group. So we were really along the coast repairing harbors. Salvage work to clear pathways for our own ships with supplies to get in. Now, our first place was in Le Havre, France. That is right on the coast there. And Le Havre was a very prominent port. And there was, evidently, a German submarine base there. It had been heavily bombed. It was heavily bombed by the Allied forces, the British and the Americans. And that was my first real tough of looking at destruction. And when we entered the city of Le Havre, I couldn't believe the blocks and blocks almost flattened, you know. The people weren't particularly friendly, either. Because there was a lot of deaths in Le Havre from the bombing.

John: Yes, I can imagine.

Donald: But the important thing, if I am going into detail you do not want...

John: Please, no. All the detail you can give. It is just great. That is what makes this so valuable.

Donald: Soon Le Havre had a system of canals. These were quays. And these had sea-gates that could be opened and shut. When the tide came in, the gates were opened, and ships could come in. Then, while they unloaded, they'd have to shut these sea-gates to keep the water at a level so the ships wouldn't go down while they unloaded.

John: I've never heard of that. That's great.

Donald: And so there had been a lot of damage done on a lot of these sea-gates, which, I thought about this and I don't know whether, you know, the Germans in many instances before they retreated, they would blast everything. They would blow up everything. However, some of this damage might have been done by our own forces. Because we did bomb the city. So, but I can tell you what we really, what we did in those quays, and this wasn't deep diving, maybe thirty feet or so. But there was so much wreckage, there was all along this in the city along the quays were dockings for ships. They had heavy equipment. Big cranes, railroad stuff.

All that was blasted into the water where ships could not really get into the quay. The dock. And we spent a lot of time under water cutting apart massive chunks of machinery and steel, and brought up by our engineers with their cranes, so the ships could come in.

John: How many of you in your group worked together?

Donald: Well, I would say that we had a lieutenant officer, and we had at least eight, maybe ten divers. And we had at least that many tenders.

John: Okay.

Donald: Each diver had a tender. Now, the tender would be the guy who helped you dress up, and helped you get into the water, and he held your lines.

John: He would be an important guy.

Donald: And there are, well, it was important because we really didn't have telephone systems.

John: I was going to ask how did you communicate?

Donald: That, that, I think we started off with some of that stuff, but it didn't last long, and we couldn't get replacements. So, what happened was, you know, we had signals. And one of the things that the tender would do is, more than that, he would be yanking on the thing, to see the line was clear, because we were down in that debris. And if that line, if he is tugging it, then you give three answer tugs back. Well, if you get tangled up down there and he is pulling, and he doesn't get a response, he'd see we had gone through debris and our life lines were entangled. Which wasn't always that big a problem because we always had another diver there.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: And the other diver could go down, follow the lines on down and unhook it.

John: Okay. While you were down, you were breathing compressed air?

Donald: Oh, yeah, and the compressor was a mechanical compressor on the barge, or the ship, and everyone kept an eye on that. And oxygen would come down. There are two lines that the diver has. The diver has an oxygen line, a hose, and they have what they call a life line, which is nothing but a heavy kind of cable. And so you have both of that. I might want to go into, you want me to hear the nomenclature of diving?



John: Yes. Yes. This is great. Yes. Sure.

Donald: Well, this is not like the people who get confused about frog men. Frog men are not in the same-- they don't do the same thing. They have smaller gear, they have a tank on them, and they are the people generally swimming pretty free in the ocean or along the coast looking for mines, and so forth. In deep sea diving, you have a heavy suit. In those days you had a canvas suit. The canvas suit at the top had a breast plate, that is screwed to the canvas thing. Then, if you do down the thing, you put on lead shoes. These are very heavy, at least fifteen pounds each. You have a belt that had lead bricks around it that you fasten around your waist. And that is heavy. And the breast plate is heavy, and then you have the helmet that goes on top of this. Now, there is straps that go over the shoulders and the belt that to make sure the helmet, when you are inflated, doesn't rise above your head. It keeps it down on the breast plate. The whole breast plate. So they have to tighten that. You have to bend over and they really cinch that up tight, so that when you are ready to go into the water, you are kind of bent over like a horseshoe. And you got this hundred to two hundreds of pounds of weight on you. And so, it is really heavy. So you get down into the water, you are turning on your oxygen, and as soon as you hit the water, everything becomes quite blind. The air fills up in the canvas suit, and the weight lifts, and the big thing about diving, as you go down, you don't want to be buoyant, because you could lose control of everything.

John: Okay.

Donald: You have to learn to have the right amount of oxygen coming in, and enough have the balance but enough to be comfortable, and not heavy. There is, in the helmet, what you call a chin button, which you can hit with your chin in case your suit is getting too much air. And you start rising. You don't want to rise because you can get bends.

John: Yes, okay.

Donald: So you have to stabilize yourself down there. So when you begin to feel too buoyant, you hit that thing and then blobs of bubbles would come out and you would settle back down. And so, that is sort of it. I might just say that when you are-- what was kind of tough in the training was that all your gear is on your body. You're strapped down and all that. You are kind of bent over. You know you got all this weight. Then the final step is putting that heavy helmet, and screwing it onto the suit, and then finally, "You okay?" "Yeah." Then he shuts it with a wrench, locks it, and at that point you really feel like you are pretty helpless until you get into the water, and then you sort of feel, I can handle it. But, at the final, sharp impression at the beginning, in training, when they close that door and then

you know it, you depending on a life line, you depending on these people on topside. So I might just mention that was a lot of our diving. We had one interesting thing.

John: Before you go on, light?

Donald: We had no lights. It is absolutely as dark down there, and you are going on common sense and feel, almost entirely.

John: What would you be doing down there?

Donald: Well, you could be down there, we has torches. We had implements that you could go down with that would be, that you could cut with, cut metal with, and it had on it the acetylene and it had an oxygen thing that pushed it through. And there was sticks that went into this sort of thing that would get cherry red at the bottom. And you would sit down there and tediously cut metal and through bridge beams, and things like that. It was slow, hard work. A lot of times you figures that you got this chunk free, and you would come up, and, you know, they would take the crane and find out it isn't clear, there was something else still holding it. Then you go back down and find it.

John: How would you find the same place, without light?

Donald: I think, by that time, we had probably pretty well have cabled that part of it, and we would have a cable that would go down to that area that we were working in.

John: Okay.

Donald: We had a, there was a major ship. Would it have been a Victory Ship, one of the big ones?

John: Yeah.

Donald: It hit a mine outside Le Havre, and went down in fairly deep water, a hundred feet or more. And it happened to be loaded with artillery shells.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: And with trucks and trailers. And they really wanted that stuff. So we went out there and dove down, opened up the hatches, and brought up a lot of the ammunition.

John: How deep could you work?

- Donald: Oh, we never, I don't think that I went over one hundred feet. But, you know, there are dives that you go much deeper. But that was about it, for that particular job. Because it was approaching the harbor, it wasn't out in the open sea. It was at least a hundred feet.
- John: Okay.
- Donald: So, you want to know a little bit about the signs of the bends.
- John: Oh, yes. This is fantastic. Take your time.
- Donald: When you ascend, you do it by degrees. In fact, if you are down a hundred feet, and you are down there two or three hours, you are going to have to compress as you go up to avoid the bends. So that is where the tender comes in. You signal you are coming up, or he signals, and he is counting the feet. And he is signaling he is going to stop. There is usually a line with an anchor that you went down on. So you stay there, just sort of very easily. You are buoyant to that line, until so many minutes go by. Then he signals again, and he brings you up so many feet and signals, stop. And you just work your way back up. We never had anyone with bends.
- John: I've heard about the bends.
- Donald: Well, the bends is a deadly thing, if it happens. So that ship at Le Havre. Then, an interesting thing was that we were called to Rouen, France. Rouen is very famous. And it is down from the coastline. It's on the same river. There is a major passage of freight coming down, in those days during the war, from Le Havre, the port, through Rouen, on into Paris. And the Germans, or our own bombing, I don't know, blasted this big railroad bridge down across the Seine, and it was blocking barge traffic and so forth. And they wanted us to go in there and cut out, and remove a span of this, so the smaller boats and the barges that carried military supplies to the Army, could get through. And while that water was not deep, twenty - thirty feet, it was probably the toughest diving that we had to do, because there was such a strong current. And you'd almost, when you are down there working, you are kind of hanging with one arm onto some strut or something while you are working with the other. So you don't get swept down the river. I happened to be diving on that bridge when I got a signal to come up. And I came up, and that would have been May 7th, 1945. They said Germany has surrendered.
- John: Oh, wow. Oh, man.
- Donald: Germany has surrendered. Now, so we decided to call it a day. I want to tell you a little bit about how, I never had any sense what was going on in the war, myself. I

just never knew. We just never seemed to have anything to read about, and we were young. I was, in a sense you could say, so ignorant that in Rouen, this was a historic city, I hadn't realized it but I was in the market place and there was the statue and a little altar, and that was where Joan of Arc had been burned at the stake.

John: Oh.

Donald: I didn't even know who Joan of Arc was. Until after the war and I finally got a little better essay. But to go back to, back a little bit before we went to Rouen, and we were in Le Havre, we had German prisoners there. And German prisoners would come back, and they were, I think, they were happy to be out of the war, as a matter of fact. And they seemed very decent people, really. But they would help us on construction stuff. And I remember this rather distinguished-looking former officer, he told me. He was sitting there and we saw all these planes coming overhead, heading for Germany and bombing. British and American planes. And he looked up, and he said, he spoke English very well, and he sort of shrugged, and he said, "It's all over. It's all over. A secret weapon."

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

John: Okay, he had mentioned to you something about a secret weapon?

Donald: Yes, he asked me that, and he said, "Have you heard anything about Germany having a secret weapon, a secret bomb?" I didn't know what he was talking about, and I said, "No, I hadn't heard anything like that." But he was referring to the atom bomb.

John: It scares you when you think of them developing it, having it.

Donald: Yeah. But they were after it. But they failed.

John: Well, the scientists came here, who built it, were from Germany. Yeah.

Donald: Are we taping now?

John: Yeah, we're taping now.

Donald: Well, now to bring you up to date, I thought, I told you that the town, the city, of Rouen just opened up overnight with lights, and invited us in and offered the champagne and brandy they had. Well, we thought we would be going home now. Such was not the case. We were put on a convoy, almost immediately, of trucks into Marseilles, France, and they put us on a group of ships. And we ended up, a week or two later, in the Phillipines, in the Bay of Manila.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: And that is when, and I was there, hadn't been there too long, there the same sort of thing that had gone on, because it had been heavily bombed, later, you know, by our Air Force, and the docks and everything had been blown up. So we worked at repairing that sort of thing. We didn't get, there were sunken ships out there. But that is a job you don't do overnight. That's months and months. We never bothered with that. They just had poles sticking up, and a flag that there was these things underneath. And there were a lot of them. A lot of sunken stuff. But we could repair the docks so ships could get in and, you know, supply the people fighting, the fellows fighting the war. One interesting story to this is that, when the Philippine Government knew, when the war first broke out, and they knew that Japan would invade, they took their currency, their national treasury, the coins, the paper, the silver money, which amounted to millions and millions of dollars, and put it in containers, took it out on the bay near Corregidor, and dropped in quite deep water.

John: Wow. Okay.

Donald: Well, I was, to get the sequence straight here, one of the, I was mainly, they kind of, some divers went to this site where the money had been dropped. I was there at the site but I was at Cavite, with a group of divers repairing a dock, a landing place for small boats, and so forth. The others were diving, they decided, by this time, our forces had come back. It was secure. The Japanese were out of there. And they wanted that money. And the divers went down, and they brought that stuff up. And I had my eye on it. I wish I had been there diving. But, you know, you can only do so much. Someone has to do this, and other people that. But these divers, I saw them, and pictures appeared one time in one of the Army newspapers, showed this barge with this really mounds of silver pesos up as they come in. But, mainly, my work was, we also did salvage and stuff, little boats. And fixing the harbor, and get rid of junk, so the ships could come in. I, then, of course, I was in Manila at the time they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. I suppose that I would have been one of the groups, if there had been an invasion of Japan, I wouldn't have been front line, but I would have been there fairly soon.

John: You would have been right there.

Donald: But that didn't happen. And I remember that, because my buddies and I were in a bar, and we were having a drink. And suddenly there was hooting and hollering going out in the street. And we went out there and people, a lot of them military people, out there dancing around, saying, "We've dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima." I still didn't know for sure what it was all about, but we later learned what the atom bomb was all about. And then, you know, it wasn't long, we could

tell, after the bomb was dropped, on August 15th, 1945, Japan surrendered. We didn't leave, immediately. We continued out diving work in Manila Bay for four or five months, because I see by my notes here and my discharge, I wasn't honorably discharged until January 31, 1946. So that was several months after. So I must have gotten back by boat, and then I was discharged at Fort Bliss, Texas.

John: Okay.

Donald: And my records show that I served for three years and one month, and that I had served in two wars, in the European and the Pacific War Zones. Now, this was sort of interesting. I am almost ashamed to admit this, but we divers made money during the war. I'll tell you why. First of all, we got the pay of technical sergeants. And we got on top of that, pay for being in a war zone. Now, on top of that, we were paid, I forget how much, something like a dollar-fifty, or two dollars, I can't remember, for every hour we were under water.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: And that amounted to a lot of time.

John: Yeah, sure.

Donald: And that mounted up. Now, I always thought this was blasphemy, because, sure, we were into dangerous work, and all of that, but here is GIs out there, PFCs and such, and they were making what? \$27 a month or something. I don't know. But here we were. In fact, our colonel, full colonel, chicken colonel, on payday, he hated us. Every now and then he'd say to us, "You sons of bitches make more than I make." So, anyway, I returned to the States and was discharged January 31, 1946. I was probably like twenty-three, twenty-four at the time. And then I returned home to Burk Burnette, Texas, and I used the GI Bill to go to college.

John: What did you do in college?

Donald: I graduated from North Texas State University, in Denton, Texas, with a degree in journalism.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: And this is a little side-light here, I graduated in 1948. My uncle was Waldemar Gallman. And he had just been named ambassador to Poland. He had two sons, aged something like nine and seven. Meantime, my father had died in 1940. And he asked my mother if, he didn't want to take his kids, his children, into Poland. That was a rough time. If she would come to Washington and take care of them for the two years he was in Poland. And he said, "Don, you are ready for graduate

work. We have a some good universities here, be great if you came too.” I was single. And I went. And I went to Washington, DC, and I was there for two years. And I worked for the *Congressional Quarterly* as a writer, part-time job, and attended the university, George Washington University. Now, that is probably all you want to know.

John: You didn’t go back to diving?

Donald: Never did. I never did. But you know, a funny incident: in 1951, I went to Alaska. Anchorage, Alaska. And I was married then. And the old Alaska Railroad was being torn up. That ran from Seward, a port in southern Alaska, on to the middle or center of Alaska, Fairbanks. And the steel rails were purchased by Japan.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: Now, this would be like in 1952. Didn’t take long for everyone to become friends. The tides in Cook Inlet, in Anchorage, in the port are some of the highest in the world. They made the mistake in putting all these steel rails up on barges that, when the tide came in, the barge tipped and all the rails went into the water.

John: Oh, man.

Donald: I was there and I guess I had told some of the people I was a diver during the war. So one night there was a knock at the door. And this guy who is a diver said: “I heard about you that you were a diver. I need help. I can’t do it all by myself. Would you come out?” He had come up from Juneau, Alaska, with the God-awfullest equipment you have ever seen. Beat-up helmets and he said, “Would you? I’ll pay you. Would you do some diving for me?” I said, “Well, I might.” I went out there at one or two in the morning. And it was cold, and the tide was, and I looked at this compressor he had, which kept going out, and some of that equipment. And I said, “Listen, I did this for two years. I really don’t care to go back in.” And so I didn’t.

John: Wow. That is tremendous. What a remarkable story. That’s great. How about organizations? VFW? American Legion? Did you ever do any of that?

Donald: You know, I haven’t. I contribute. I get a lot of calls from the veterans people, and they are always, I contribute a little amount. Not big, \$50 or so, but I’m very generous with them. I have never been active. I am sorry to say. I believe I am loyal, but I’m not active. I think maybe my life took a turn. I later came out and got my Ph. D. here at the university at Madison. I came out in 1956 from Alaska, with my wife.

John: Okay.

Donald: And I stayed here, and got my Ph. D. in English Literature, English and American Literature. And about 1959, it might have been 1960, I had finished my graduate work. And I thought we would be leaving, but I was offered a job with the university. And it was with University Extension. And I went over there, and I have been here in Madison since 1959. First as a student, then with the faculty.

John: That's great.

Donald: So, that pretty much tells all.

John: Do you ever get in touch with anybody? Any reunions, anything like that?

Donald: When I first got out, I knew the guy who was trying to, I know that they would have a reunion every year of the 106th Engineering Port Construction Group. But, by that time, I was in Alaska, and it was very difficult for me, so I never attended. I never attended.

John: This is just a remarkable story. Let me ask a question I ask in each one of these interviews. You were a young man. You had your whole life in front of you. And then suddenly this thing happened. And you got pulled out of life, and you got sent off, and you were sent into harm's way. What is your reaction to that? What did you think about that?

Donald: I think about it, that I never felt, had any doubts about what I was doing, or why I was doing it. And I never felt, you know, fear in the combat sense. You would have fear. You would get tangled up sometime, and you would have some problem down there and you depended on other people to come down and help you get out of that. So, there was that amount of fear. But I was never under gunfire. I was never bombed. And I don't think that I would have the same kind of, I think, like my brother who was two years older. Had really fought in the part of the war in France, and was also in Belgium, and trapped during the Battle of the Bulge. He saw a lot of action. His experience, in talking to him, he is now dead, but his experience was different than mine. And he would have had more sense of immediate fear. Being behind the lines, in spite of the work, I didn't feel any great fear. We weren't even bombed. By the time we landed, some months after D-Day, the German Air Force was pretty well done. It is always striking to me to see that from D-Day to Germany's surrender, there was only something like a year went by.

John: That's right. Yeah.

Donald: You know, and I didn't realize that until I started looking at the notes here. D-Day was on June 6, 1944, and Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945. So everything



happened in a year.

John: In eleven months. You know, I never thought of that, either. That whole war in Europe was eleven months. Wow. This is a remarkable story. It's, you know, you say you weren't in combat, or that, but you were part of this. I, now that I am retired, I write, and a very good friend of mine was a writer. He just passed away a few years ago. Stephen Ambrose. He was from Whitewater.

Donald: I know Stephen Ambrose. The historian.

John: Yeah. And we'd get together and we'd play some poker, and drink some beer. He was talking to a bunch of World War II vets, a couple of years ago at the Veterans Museum. And in the course of the conversation, a lot of the guys were telling him, "I didn't do anything. I just did my job. I drove my truck, or I hauled my rifle. But I really didn't do anything." And Ambrose, he stopped everybody, and he said, "Just a minute." He said, "Would everybody stand up." And these guys stood up, and they were a little self-conscious. And he said, "You were giants! You went out and saved the world!"

Donald: Well, the fact of life is, every place where I went, I still had my combat helmet. I still had my rifle that I had to take care of. But, you know, who was it said the Army travels on its belly. You know, the amount of guys absolutely fighting is a small group, compared to the lines. You know, when I think back on this, I didn't realize till I was older and became more philosophical, and better informed about these matters, that us opening up the ports, like Le Havre, so they could come in and go into those canals and quays, and unload. And there was a battle going on, you know, in France and beyond. And you can't, when you think of all of the machinery that had to go in, and all the ammunition.

John: Yeah, food, ammo, supplies.

Donald: Yeah. You know, that is important.

John: This is remarkable. This is quite a remarkable story. It really is. Wow. Well, what I will do, I will take this back to the Archives.

Donald: Could I just hear parts to see how I talked?

John: Oh, absolutely.

**[End of Interview]**