

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LEE WISKIRCHEN
Radioman, Navy, Cold War.

2003

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Wiskirchen, Leroy C., (1947-). Oral History Interview, 2003.

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:

Leroy “Lee” Wiskirchen, a Port Washington, Wisconsin native, discusses his Navy service during the Cold War as a radioman aboard the *USS Shenandoah*. Wiskirchen talks about joining the Naval Reserves during high school and being called to active duty in 1966 while attending college. Assigned to the *USS Shenandoah* (AD-26), a floating repair ship, he speaks of starting duty as messenger of the watch, which was unpleasant because he often had to wake up sleeping officers to deliver messages. Wiskirchen tells of being promoted to radio operator and later to communications watch supervisor. He discusses encountering Russian ships in the Mediterranean Sea and the Cold War “games” they played. He mentions being attached to Commander Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 12. Wiskirchen touches on the *Shenandoah*’s activities repairing destroyers, reflects that the fleet was aging, and describes the Navy’s efforts to develop a nuclear fleet. He tells of installing anti-submarine rocket launchers on old destroyers. As communications watch supervisor, Wiskirchen describes his routing messages and the difficulty of also routing messages for ships that were tied up for repairs. He highlights his ship’s mission statement, “We Serve the Fleet.” Due to military code changing every twenty-four hours, he details having a fifteen minute window every night to find a signal and reset the ship’s cryptographic equipment. After three months in dry dock for maintenance at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyards, New Hampshire, Wiskirchen talks about having “man overboard” drills and other tests during a shakedown cruise in Guantanamo Bay. He remembers some of the “flash zulu” priority messages he received: one about the fire aboard the *USS Forrestal*, and another about the *USS Liberty*’s being attacked by Israeli jets. Wiskirchen touches on forming friendships, the camaraderie among the crew, having liberty in Valletta, Malta, and other ports, and flying to landlocked places on military transport planes. He recalls being put on “water hours” when the ship’s water supply ran low and having to take cold seawater showers. Wiskirchen recalls worrying about being attacked and about Russian submarines. He discusses using the GI Bill to finish college, his career as a teacher and middle school principal in Grafton, Wisconsin, and his service as post adjutant in the Rose-Harms Post 355 of the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch:

Wiskirchen was called to active-duty service in the United States Navy from 1966 to 1968 in the Mediterranean and served as a radioman aboard the *USS Shenandoah* (AD-26), a floating repair ship. During the Cold War, he encountered Russian ships in the Mediterranean Sea playing “games.” The *USS Shenandoah* (AD-26) was attached to Commander Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 12 (COMCRUDESFLOT 12). In 1998,

Wiskirchen became the principal of John Long Middle School, and he eventually settled in Cedarburg, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Cynthia Schaefer, 2003
Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Schaefer: This is an interview with Lee Wiskirchen, who served with the Navy during the time of the Vietnam Conflict. This interview is being conducted at 1542 Lake Shore Road [Grafton, Wisconsin] on March 27, 2003. This is Cindy Schaefer, and I will be doing this interview.

Now, Lee, could you please tell me a little bit of your background and what your life was like before entering the military service.

Lee: I spent most of my life growing up in Port Washington, Wisconsin. I went to Port High School, and it was actually [during] my senior year in high school that I joined the Naval Reserve. And I was a reservist up until being called to active duty in April of '66. I graduated from high school and went to college. And during the second semester the Vietnam War started to heat up, and they started to see some real shortages in areas and, what they considered a critical rate, radiomen. I lost my deferment and they called me to active duty.

I reported to Philadelphia, the receiving station at Philadelphia, April 28, 1966. Spent about a week there being processed and was assigned to the *USS Shenandoah* on Hull Number AD-26. It was a destroyer-tender based in Norfolk, Virginia. And again, reporting aboard there, [I] spent a couple of, actually about a week, being processed there, was assigned to Radio Central and began, as most new seamen aboard a ship assigned to Radio Central, I started as a Messenger of the Watch. Messenger of the Watch is, basically, oftentimes on your watch you'd have important messages come in that were beyond "Priority" messages.

The Navy had a way of organizing messages. "Routine" messages had a certain amount of turnaround time. A "Priority" message had a little less turnaround time. What they called an "Operational Immediate" was even less turnaround time. And then something called a "Flash Zulu," I think you had about ten minutes to turn around. And oftentimes during watches you'd get these important messages, Operational Immediates and Flash Zulus, that had to be given to the captain or the XO, or whoever the officer it was intended for, immediately.

And it wasn't a fun job. Nobody likes to wake anybody up at three o'clock in the morning, or two o'clock in the morning. And so being Messenger of the Watch, it was [laughs] a lousy job [laughs], because you had to wake people up. You had to make them uncomfortable. I can remember many times having to wake Captain, and we had an Admiral aboard, and waking these guys up at two/three o'clock in the morning. And as accommodating as they tried to be, sometimes they were kind of grumpy, and being

startled and forced to wake up and process some important information in the wee hours of the morning.

Uh, following that normal time, I then passed my Third Class test. And, again, radio being such a critical rate—normally billets for a lot of other rates didn't open for months—and it was within several weeks after passing the test that I got Third Class and became a Third Class Petty Officer. And then I became a Radio Operator, which was the next level that you moved into. And—I'm trying to think—it was about three, well it was a short period of time, and we got our first assignment.

The tenders—there were three of them in Norfolk. The *USS Shenandoah*, which was mine, the *USS Tidewater*, and also the *USS Sierra* were the three “Lant Fleet,” Atlantic Fleet, tenders. And we would take turns serving six-month tours of duty with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. And nowadays everybody kind of thinks the Mediterranean is a really nice place to be. But during that time, as scenic as it was, it was not a real nice place to be.

We had many encounters with the Russian Navy there, who would play games with us. They'd play games, especially with the aircraft carriers and our larger cruisers. And they'd weave in and out in front of them and come awfully close to ramming them, just more or less to harass us than anything else. And so, again, the Russians were—this was during the real tough times of the Cold War—and so it was not a real good place to be, in terms of the Russian Navy, at least.

In any event, in that first tour of duty, our job was to move from port to port. And then we'd stop and we'd wait as destroyers would send radio messages, what they called “casualty reports.” They'd either have lost an engine or their radio communications were down or their radar was, whatever. You know, we were a floating repair ship, and our job was to fix destroyers. And oftentimes we also fixed cruisers.

I remember two cruisers that were in the Mediterranean, two very handsome-looking ships—the *USS Columbus* and the *USS Springfield*—had some problems, too, that we were able to fix for them. But it was not uncommon for us to have anywhere from four to six to seven to eight destroyers tied up alongside of us. And we'd be working on fixing all seven or eight of them to get them back into battle-ready condition.

And after the first tour of duty, came back, and shortly after that a COMCRUDESFLT 12 [Commander Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 12], which was, he was an Admiral, he came aboard. And he took the ship's radio off the ship's company, and he made us part of his flag. And so the

radiomen communications was all through COMCRUDESFLOT 12. We were no longer attached to the *USS Shenandoah*.

And then it was shortly after that--I had done a fairly decent job as a Radio Operator, and I seemed to have a good sense. At least, the Chief of Staff thought I had pretty good sense of what was going on in Radio Central, and I was appointed a Communications Watch Supervisor. And my job was to run a watch, and so I was a supervisor of a watch, and I did that.

We had a motto—I shouldn't say "motto"--but a mission statement. I can't even remember if it was really called a mission statement then, it was just the ship's mission. It was real simple and it was real clear. And it was, to me, it was very eloquent. Our job was "We Serve the Fleet." And we did whatever we had to do to make sure that destroyers that tied up alongside of us were in the best possible condition, ready to join the fleet, as possible. We did that both over in the Mediterranean, and we did that at the D&S piers in Norfolk, Virginia.

Again, it was not uncommon with Second Fleet or returning Sixth Fleet destroyers that things go wrong. This was an aging fleet. We were starting to build new destroyers, but we still had a lot of destroyers from World War II. Affectionately, they were called "tin cans." And a lot of those still needed to be repaired, and broke down quite readily. These were ships built, oftentimes, during World War II. And here we're looking at twenty-some years later, and these had seen a lot of service and put in a lot of duty. So they were hurting.

We were starting to build a new fleet. It was another mission of some of the important players that we become a nuclear fleet. And so there were a number of nuclear destroyers being built. They were called guided missile destroyers, and they carried guided missiles as opposed to what we supplied with the older ships. The older destroyers often went to the yards, and they were outfitted with what were called ASROC launchers. Those were anti-submarine rocket launchers, and those were pretty much conventional weapons. And [coughs], we stored those; oftentimes, we stored those aboard.

And when I think of the antiquated way that we would transfer those ASROCs over to the destroyers—we'd just, basically, tie them up in chains and then hoist them over and load them aboard the ASROC launchers. And if I had a dollar for every time I heard, "General quarters; general quarters. All hands, man your battle stations. Weapon drop in the weapon spaces." These things would slide through the chains--and they'd fall down, and if they fell just right, I mean, they could conceivably go off. I doubt whether they would go off to the extent that the entire warhead

would go off, but still could make a mess. So that was a common-occurring thing.

And our job, again, as a tender was to carry not only supplies, but to fix these ships. So we had all kinds of things, all kinds of ammunition. There was a lot of cheating going on in those days, you know. Only ammo ships were supposed to carry ammo, but oftentimes there weren't just enough of them to go around either. And so they would load all kinds of ammunition for destroyers aboard a tender. We weren't outfitted, nor were we supposed to be doing that, but they did it. I don't know if I should be saying that, but it doesn't make any difference after some forty-some years. I don't think anyone's going to come back and say anything. But, in any event, that was our mission. That was our job.

My job in Radio Central as Communications Watch Supervisor was to make sure that during my watch all incoming messages, first of all, were picked up. What would happen is, you'd copy a broadcast, depending on which part of the world you were in, and we would call it Kilo Romeo and November Romeo. It was a broadcast from a Naval Communications Station. And it would just continually broadcast over old--what we would call "old"—teletypes. They were kind of antiquated, but it was fairly modern in '60s teletypes, about a hundred words per minute. And those messages would come in twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year or 366 days a year.

And we would check to see who the addressees were. That sounds easy, but there were some messages with two to three pages of addressees. The Navy had just a million addressees. You could be part of CRUDESFLANT, part of Lant Fleet, part of CRUDESFLLOT 12, part of All-Mail[?] Fleet. So you had a list of addressees you guarded against. So any messages that came in that you had to guard for, these messages had to be pulled and then typed. And then it was my job to make sure that those messages got to the right people. My job was to route them.

On the *Shenandoah*, I believe, there were as many as twenty-eight to thirty different departments that you had to route these messages to. You had to be real careful, especially with these priority messages which only had a twenty-four-hour turnaround time, that you got them to the right department. If you didn't get them to the right department, sometimes they didn't get to the right department until after that twenty-four-hour period.

So my job was to make sure that all of these messages were, first of all, found. Of all the messages coming through in a given watch, only maybe thirty-five or forty might be for you. But there might have been two hundred messages coming through on the teletype at that time. And so what I would do as my job, too, is all of those messages weren't addressed

to you, they would go into the binders, what they called “skeds.” Then before I got off watch, I would have to go through all of that to make sure we didn’t miss any addressees.

Where it got complicated is when we’d have these ships tie up alongside of us. Whether it was a communication problem or whatever, oftentimes you’d have to protect for their addressees. What that meant was that our job was then to assume communications for all those ships. Then you had these other six or seven ships which were part of a different addressee list, so when all these messages came in, not only did you have to guard for your addressee list, but you had to guard for theirs too. You couldn’t skip that.

So the watches we stood in port were three sections of watch. The Day Watch which was eight hours, the Eve Watch was eight hours, and the Mid Watch was eight hours. The Day Watch was from 8:00 [a.m.] to 4:00 [p.m.]. Eve was 4:00 [p.m.] until midnight, and then the Mid Watch was from midnight till 8:00 [a.m.]. But when we were overseas, we stood twelve on, twelve off. I shouldn’t say that, because while in port you served eight hours. But while you’re underway, you stood twelve on and twelve off. And for all twelve hours underway, we didn’t have a rough time. But when you were in port all of those eight hours you were, you couldn’t, you were just overwhelmed.

And again, I like our mission statement, our ship’s mission: “We Serve the Fleet.” And there were times when we’d have six, seven destroyers, and we didn’t have room for any more. But we served the fleet, and there isn’t any such thing as turning anyone away. We were the only game in town. They’d tie up alongside of us, and if our job was to take over their communications we would do that, too.

So those were some pretty heavy things, and it was tense in the sense that, while you’re on watch, you just could not afford to miss messages. And then when you had communications for all these ships, and you got some important ones, you had to get all that. That poor Messenger of the Watch had to go to all seven ships and either roust the captain, or the executive officer, or the junior officer or the officer of the deck, whoever was in charge at the time. So I learned a lot doing that.

The thing that was interesting is: the United States military code changed every twenty-four hours. We had what we called crypto-gear, KW-7s and KW-37s. And at midnight you’d have to turn your radio off; you’d have to turn all your gear off. Just turn it off. And then on the crypto-gear, you’d have to open the crypto-gear, and you’d have to put in a code and then you’d have to close it up. And then you’d have to search. What you’d do is, you’d wait for the WWV signal [Fort Collins, Colorado], punch the

“start” on the crypto-gear button. Then you’d close that crypto-gear, and you’d wait as that crypto-gear searched throughout the day for the signal that you lost. And then, when you found that signal, you would be fine.

It’s only a fifteen-minute window, and there was a lot to do. At 12:15 you were on broadcast, and if you didn’t find the signal, or if for some reason you weren’t good enough—. This was a science. It was an art and a science, tuning your transmitters and the crypto-gear, making sure that everything at 12:15 was functioning. Because if you didn’t, it was your job to find somebody else that had communications to find out what you’d missed.

And it didn’t happen too often while you had port watch. Oftentimes at sea, in rough weather--these were balanced gear and equipment—you’d hit a wave or have some bumpy waves, and it would knock the gear out of sync. And you’d have to go back and search throughout the day and try to find it. You hurried like heck, because you could miss many messages. Out at sea that was important, because you didn’t know what you’d missed. So there was a problem, because you had no way of retrieving missed messages at sea. So what happens is, all the messages I received were sent from other people to our ship. And my people, my department, whatever, would send messages too. And my job was to take the transmitters and tune them up and make sure they were ready to send messages.

That was a thing, too. I remember a TE [TRS-80]—I can’t even remember the name of those transmitters--but those were also tough ones. A wave or so could knock them out of sync, and you’d always have to retune them, similar to rebooting a computer. It was a key point of operations to make sure that you got the maximum power out of it, because if you didn’t get it just right, you wouldn’t have enough power to get your message to where it was going.

So a lot of people thought it was an easy job, but it wasn’t. It was clean, in the sense that you didn’t get dirty. But you put in a lot of work. There were times when it was slow and not much going on. The majority of the time on each watch you put in a lot of work, and I did learn a lot. I learned a lot about leadership being a Communications Watch Supervisor. I was only a Third Class, and there were sometimes a lot of Second Classes who were there but, at least the feeling was, they weren’t capable of running a watch. And so, in running a watch you had a lot of things to do, and I felt real good about it. And I think I did a real good job.

Schaefer: Mr. Wiskirchen, could you describe some of your further assignments to me?

Lee: Okay. Well, one of our assignments—the *Shenandoah* being not a brand new ship either—the three tenders in DNS Piers in Norfolk, as I said before, the *Sierra*, the *Tidewater*, the *Shenandoah*, were themselves getting fairly old, and we had some problems. And in order for us to continue to do our job, we had to go to the Portsmouth [New Hampshire] Naval Shipyards. We spent three months in dry dock there, the ship being re-outfitted, repaired, a lot of things, being updated. But, again, during that time, even though there's no way you can get out to sea--you're in dry dock--you still keep communications going. So for those three months we ran---it's as though the ship were either at sea or in port.

But once we got out of the yards, one of the things they want to make sure of is that you're battle-ready. So what they do is send you to Guantanamo Bay, or what's called Gitmo Bay, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. And you go through a two-week shakedown cruise. And what a shakedown cruise is, is they test everything out five, six, seven, eight, nine times just to make sure the ship is ready to go back and rejoin the Fleet.

And I can remember one of my assignments was, I had to man the radio receiver on a launch should a man fall overboard. And we went through many, many "Man Overboard" drills. And, I tell you, that's—you have to be on the ocean to realize how big waves can be, even on a calm day. It's not like looking out over Lake Michigan. Even on a calm day, it's not uncommon to have eight- to ten-foot waves that roll through.

And I can remember that they did this Man Overboard drill eight times. They'd do it in the middle of the night. They'd do it while you're in line for breakfast. They'd do it in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of the morning. The middle of the evening and the middle of the night, they would do this. And your job then was, Man Overboard. And you'd report to Radio Central, you'd get your communica--, your radio receiver and transmitter, and you'd hop aboard with people. And they'd lower the launch, and then you'd be out there acting like you're looking for the man overboard.

And they never threw any dummies overboard or anything like that. They just wanted to make sure that you could, in a reasonable amount of time--. And there were people standing around with stop watches, and they would make sure that you could get in that launch, and that you could get, you know--. These launches were at the 03 and 04 level. They were fifty feet, sixty feet off the water, and you had to, you know, you were lowered down into the water while the ship was still moving, and it was pretty rough.

And I was hoping that I would never really have to--and it never did happen, having to go through a real Man Overboard—because it would be

tough to find them. Because by the time you did get that launch in the water, even within a minute, the odds of finding him, you know, would be pretty tough. Especially some of these larger ships, they were just incapable of turning around, you know, within a four-, five-, six-, seven-, eight-, nine-, ten-mile radius. They just, it was impossible for them to turn around and go back. So that's why you had to get in the launch.

Even the *Shenandoah*, it was not a large—I mean, it was fairly good size. We had a complement of about 675 men on it. And, if I remember correctly, it was about a 700-foot-long ship. It was a decent sized ship. But to turn something like that around, you just can't do that on a dime. And so you cannot rely on that being a way of picking up any man overboard.

But it was not just that. As I said, every drill in the book they'd go through, plus they'd test everything out. They'd test your communications gear out. Everything was tested. Then after two weeks you'd either pass or fail. If you failed, then you have to come back again for two more weeks. Before you were allowed to be battle-ready and rejoin the fleet, you'd have to pass the shakedown cruise. And, fortunately, we passed the first time. But those are two really miserable weeks. You're at sea for two weeks, and you're just being put through drill after drill after drill after drill. Whether it's "Battle Stations," "Man Overboard," "Weapon Drop"—every drill, some I'd never even heard of [laughs].

Then after we were considered fleet-ready again, then--. It was not our turn to go back to the Med. But, unfortunately, the one whose turn it was, the *Tidewater*, had undergone some serious problems and so [was] out of rotation. The *Sierra* was just coming back from the Med. *Tidewater* was incapable of going over. So we had to fill their slot. And that was the second tour of duty in the Med with the Sixth Fleet.

And as I said, as beautiful as it was, it was no picnic, no picnic at all. Russia was very famous for its Baltic fleet. And that fleet came out of the Baltic Sea, and they had some pretty darn good ships. I hate to say it, but they were the equal of us in terms of fire power. [I] wouldn't have wanted to have messed with some of those Russians.

Schaefer: During your time in the service, in active duty, do you have any memorable experiences, or did you meet any memorable people, or make any very special friends that you're still in touch with, or anything along those lines?

Lee: Well, one of the more memorable things--one of the important messages that we had received, one of the Flash Zulu--you don't get those very often, as I said. Those are messages that have to be delivered to the person that they're intended to be within ten minutes. It's a *really* high-priority

message. When one of those comes over the teletype, that teletype starts dinging, and all the bells ring. Because oftentimes what would happen if you were transmitting, or something like that, you'd let the skeds roll on the floor, and you might not get back to them for ten or fifteen minutes. And if there were a flash message, Flash Zulu message, in there then you might not see it for an hour or something like that while you took those back and were ready to look through.

So what had happened is the *US Forrestal* was stationed off Yankee, was on what they called Yankee Station just off the coast of Vietnam--had encountered a problem where one of its missiles misfired while the plane was on the deck of the carrier. And fortunately the missile didn't explode to the extent it would've exploded had it been armed with a warhead. But it [cough] punctured a fuel tank. As I said, that JP-5 jet fuel which was the aviation fuel that the Phantoms—those were the big Naval jets in those days, the F-4 Phantom--were fueled by, that JP-5 had leaked out onto the deck ignited. And it was just, was just, an inferno on the *Forrestal*.

And we got a message to that extent, and it was scary. It was very scary. And what happened--again, we didn't have access to any TVs or anything like that--but we were back in Norfolk when she came back in. And she was being led up the river by tugs to go back into the yards and be refitted. But it had looked like--it just was unbelievable—totally decimated. The flight deck had nothing but holes in it. The, you know, the first deck below the flight deck you could just see holes in the side. You could just see it was black from all the fire. And over a hundred crewmen were killed in that accident. And those guys were very brave men to be able save that ship. That's one of the memories that I have.

Also one of the memories I have is another Flash Zulu message that we received—and, ironically enough, its namesake is in Grafton, Wisconsin—was when the *Liberty* was attacked during the Arab/Israeli War in '67. The *Liberty* did not know. This is the closest, this is the closest I've ever seen us to go to War Alert status. In any event, she was attacked by Israeli Phantom jets. There, I think, there were a hundred people killed [34 killed, 172 injured] in that, too. While she was under attack, didn't know by whom or for what, she sent that message out.

And I can remember, we were traveling with the *USS Constellation*, which is now over in the Middle East, I'm not sure exactly where. But the *USS Constellation* was traveling with us, and they were launching two planes at a time off the flight decks. And it didn't take long, and there were about fifty/sixty planes off that deck. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

We didn't know that for many hours after that. And we weren't close to her, so we didn't realize that it was a mistake, and the information didn't

get to us. And so we thought we were going to war. We weren't sure. In any event, when we did find out, the Israelis apologized for their mistake.

The *Liberty* was an intelligence-gathering ship, you know, just jam-packed with electronic gear. Not a pretty-looking ship, they didn't want to make them look pretty. They, you know, just kind of looked like a harmless—they looked like garbage scows, actually. They weren't very well taken care of or very pretty. But they were just packed with electronic gathering information. And, fortunately, that didn't turn out to be anything.

As far as the guys I was with, probably the guy that I'll never forget was a guy named—well, two guys, Cassio[?] and I can't—I told you that story about Cassio—but the other one was Patterson. He was a Second Class radioman. He was an African American and my first exposure to working with them. You know, having grown up in Port Washington for most of my life and there being very little diversity in the area, I didn't have any opportunity to. And I got pretty close, and we developed a really nice friendship. And he still was aboard, he stayed aboard. I think he had just shipped over, and so when I was separated he was remaining behind. And unfortunately we never did, you know, did much beyond that. The same thing with Cassio.

Oftentimes it's tough to develop a really close relationship, a real good friendship, in just two years. Even though you're working in the same place, you're not working at the same time. If he's not assigned to your watch, oftentimes you very rarely see one another, even though we did see a good amount and often went on liberty together.

One of our favorite things, I remember, was Valletta, Malta. That was one of our ports of call. And what we liked to do after watch is go on shore, especially after Mid Watch. You'd get off at eight o'clock in the morning. And the culture there--Malta is a British island--it was a very easy-going culture. In effect, a lot of people on Sundays don't get up until ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. No hurry to get anything done. Nobody does any work or anything like that.

But we used to love to go after a Mid Watch to this one little restaurant and bar. We'd get there about eight-thirty in the morning and have steak and eggs. And that was one of our favorite things, and I mean good, thick steak, you know, and four or five eggs. Um! And it just cost pennies, and it was amazing. I think the whole thing cost sixty-five cents.

And we used to [phone rings]—and it was just little things like that, that perked your life up. Oftentimes, life would be pretty dull and boring in the sense that, when there was no excitement, no important messages, every day was just the same as every other day. Our job was, as I said, to “Serve

the Fleet,” and we’d just be fixing ships and doing our job in communications. Ah, so those kinds of nice things were nice to be able to do periodically.

It’s not that we never had time to go ashore. We had more than sufficient liberty in our ports of call. Because we gave good communications to the Admiral CRUDESFLOT, the Chief of Staff is the guy who ran everything, and he wouldn’t mind. He’d let us stand by for other watches. So, in effect, if your job was to stand a Day, an Eve, and a Mid, then you’d get forty-eight hours off. If you could get seventy-two hours off, that’s what we’d do. He allowed us to double up oftentimes on watches. Instead of standing three, we’d stand six, or we’d stand eight or nine. Then we’d sometimes have four or five days off.

And it was not uncommon, if there were either an Army air base or an Air Force or a Navy air base in the area and they had flights going to other cities in Europe, all it cost you was a dollar to fly anywhere you wanted that they were going. And the dollar was for the parachute. [Laughs] That’s all it was. And these weren’t airliners or anything like that, these just were transport planes. And we often did that, take a few days off and, oh, go to Rome, or go to—I remember going to Switzerland. I remember going to Austria and Germany. [We] got to visit a lot of places that you wouldn’t have normally been able to have seen. And you weren’t normally--they were landlocked, and they weren’t ports.

Um, what else? You developed a close kinship with the people on your watch, and you kind of protected them, and they protected you. It was a camaraderie that developed. And once you got a good, smooth-running watch, you tried to keep it that way. It was important that you stayed on good terms with everybody. Because often, well, not often, but when you’re underway, I mean, Operations where we slept and lived, basically, except for Radio Central, was in the forward, just below the fo’c’s’le of the ship. And you were sleeping down there with probably--within a radius of ten feet of you--twenty-five guys sleeping with you at the same time. And so you had to make sure that you learned how to get along with people.

And that was very important, because you were rubbing elbows with them, shoulders and elbows with them, all the time, whether it was getting up in the morning and showering or going to the restroom, or whatever. You had to make sure you took care of your business and that you got along with people. If you didn’t get along with people, there’s no place for you. It’s pretty tight quarters. Living on a ship is--every available space is for something other than a person.

That was another thing that we found out. Oftentimes, when we were underway for a while, especially in the warmer climates, we'd run out of water. [Laughs] And when that happened, the ship would go to "water hours," and all the water went to the boilers. Boilers were more important than you, because they could use sea water to flush toilets. But if you wanted to take a shower you had, basically, two hours a day when you could take a shower. And if you didn't take your shower during those two hours, you had to take a sea water shower. And it was cold; that water was cold, and it was not a lot of fun. And you'd just get in there and, "Brrr" get out of there. And that happened a fair amount of time. And so, "water hours" is not something that you enjoy very much on a ship. As I said, all the water goes to the boilers. They are far more important than you are. A ship can't move without boilers.

Schaefer: Now, you did bring up getting a Zulu message about the *USS Liberty* when that happened. Of course, you didn't know for a while what exactly had happened. Did you ever worry about being sent into a combat zone? And, if you worried about that, how did you feel at the time?

Lee: I--that's a tough one. Of course I worried. We didn't, we didn't have much armament. We weren't a fighting ship, but our job was to make sure that the fighting ships stayed fighting ships and were able to complete their mission. So I was worried in the sense that--. There were always these stories that people would tell that the first ships that they'll go after are ships like ours, because we're the ones that keep the rest of them working. They'll go after supply ships. They'll go after tankers, ammo ships, and tenders, because our job is to make sure destroyers keep in fighting condition.

And I'd heard those, but to me it didn't—if I had to go, I would go. Obviously, I was worried, you know. I shouldn't even say "worried." It was scary, because I had seen what could happen. Oftentimes in the artillery, in the ranges where the ships would practice firing, whether it was with their machine guns or their five-inch 38s or the cruisers had eight-inch guns, the damage they could do was just horrendous.

And the ASROCs, too--the anti-submarine rockets--the United States was getting very good at anti-submarine warfare. The Russians were *real* good in submarines. They had lots of submarines. I think their fleet--at one time, they had four for every one we had. And they had a real, really well-established nuclear submarine fleet, too.

I think ours, in those days, were still the Polaris. And they had their own that they called the SSBN ballistic nuclear submarine, and they had a very formidable fleet. And I saw many of them in the Mediterranean. They wouldn't surface very often, but you'd see them surface periodically just

to give their sailors some sun. And so there were many, many submarines in the Mediterranean. And, again, it was scary. But you would just say, you know, this is where we're going, and you do what you have to do.

Schaefer: Are there any other particular stories about your active military career that you would like to share? If not, then at this point tell us about your discharge from the military and what happened with your life after that.

Lee: Well, as I said, I was separated in 1968, and then I returned to college. But before I returned to college, over the summer I met my wife. And we went together for a couple of years while I was in college. I had the disadvantage of being two years behind her because of the two years of active duty. Anyway, we went together, and we got married in 1970, actually, a couple of months before I got my final discharge papers. We got married, and I finished college.

I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in January of 1972. And I was very thankful, because a major financier was Uncle Sam. The GI Bill allowed me to complete my college. It was very generous. And what was nice too is, after I got married, it increased because I now had a spouse. And, as I said, [I] graduated from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1972. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in secondary education with a major in English and a minor in political science.

And, being a mid-year graduate, it was very difficult to find a job. So I spent some time subbing. I spent some time subbing in Grafton and seemed to catch on there. And the principal, Don Krueger, at the time of John Long Middle School, asked me if I wanted to go to work for him. And I went to work in the '72-'73 school year. And then for the next 18 years, I worked there as a language arts teacher. And then in 1990 I applied and accepted a job as the assistant principal at the middle school and also as the district's gifted and talented coordinator.

And during that time, I had gone back to school and earned a master's degree in educational psychology. And then after accepting the job as assistant principal, I went back and got another master's in educational leadership. And I worked as assistant principal and GT coordinator for about three years. And then, fortunately, they saw that that was a little bit too much to give one person, and they moved the GT coordinator to another person. I stayed assistant principal until 1998, when I accepted the principalship, and I've been principal of the middle school since 1998.

Schaefer: Since you had a military career, active and as a reservist, and are now basically a civilian, in this time have you joined or become involved in any of the veterans' organizations that are available? And could you tell us a little about that?

Lee: Okay. Three years ago I joined the Rose Harms Post 355 of the American Legion in Grafton, Wisconsin. And [I] have enjoyed it very, very much, met a lot of really great people. Actually, the last two years, I served as the Post Adjutant, and I'm very proud to be a member of the American Legion. I'm very proud to be a member of an organization that still puts the idea of patriotism and duty to God and country very foremost in their philosophy.

Schaefer: Looking back now over the past years since your military career, how do you feel about that military experience? And, of all that military experience, what would be the one thing that has shaped you into the person that you are that you would like to tell the rest of the world?

Lee: Well, I personally feel—when it first happened, it was a little disconcerting being called to active duty because, as I said, because the fact of being a radio man was a critical rate, and there was a shortage of them. But during the course of those two years, and also the reserve time that I put in, I saw the importance of serving.

To me, one of the higher levels of leadership is service. You can look back throughout history—not that I'm a great leader—but I think that an important element of leadership is the ability to serve. And that serving is probably the best example of, how could I say, serving is the best example of devotion to duty. I think duty is an important thing. You don't ask questions. You don't complain. And I learned that.

There were times when I thought, "Oh, my gosh, not another destroyer tying up!" But your duty was to serve, and you did it. You kept, you know-- You could be frustrated, you know. You could be upset. But you never said a word. You just sucked it up and you did your job. And I'm a firm believer in, if you got a duty, you take care of that duty and you take care of that job so long as that is your job. You just wait for the next one to come along. You "serve the fleet"--I mean, it was just such a beautiful-- And I can equate that, too, now with my job. I mean, you just take "fleet" out and put "children" in, and our job in the middle school is to serve the children.

Schaefer: And before we end this, is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't covered?

Lee: I guess the only other thing that I would like to add is that I'm very proud to have been a part of [dog barks] the armed forces. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It taught me a lot, and I'm very happy to be part of a group of men that have that same feeling. And I think it's taught me an awful lot in my life, and it's something that I'll never forget. And I just

feel a real important sense of pride. I can understand a lot more about the world having done what I did than not have.

Schaefer: Mr. Wiskirchen, we'd like to thank you very much. And have a lovely evening.

[End of Interview]