

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE , NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

WORLD WAR II VETERANS

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ROBERT DENNIS

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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

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Naval War College
Newport, Rhode Island
World War II Veterans

Interviewee: Robert Dennis

Interviewer: Evelyn M. Cherpak

Subject: World War II Veterans

Date: September 30, 2003.

EMC: This is an oral history with Mr. Robert Dennis of Middletown, RI., who served in the Coast Guard in World War II. Today's date is September 30, 2003. My name is Evelyn Cherpak. I am the curator of the Naval Historical Collection at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The interview is taking place in my office in Mahan Hall. Mr. Dennis, I am pleased that you were able to come in today for the interview on your career in World War II. I want to begin the interview by asking you where you were born and when you were born?

RD: I was born right here in Newport on November 2, 1915.

EMC: What did your parents do for a living?

RD: My father was a carpenter and a painter.

EMC: Where did he work?

RD: Right here on the island, for different jobs, different contractors.

EMC: Here on base?

RD: No, in Middletown, Newport, Portsmouth.

EMC: Did your mother work?

RD: No.

EMC: Did you have any brothers or sister?

RD: No.

EMC: You were an only child?

RD: Yes.

EMC: Where did you receive your education?

RD: I went to Middletown schools and Rogers High School.

EMC: When did you graduate from Rogers?

RD: I didn't graduate. I left two months before graduation.

EMC: Why did you do that?

RD: My father had a house to tear down. So I just got out of school and helped him tear down the house.

EMC: Oh, I see. Did you work after you left high school?

RD: Yes.

EMC: What did you do?

RD: I worked on some farms and I spent most of my time working as an auto mechanic.

EMC: Where were you trained as a mechanic?

RS: I took it in high school.

EMC: So you were an automobile mechanic here in town, I presume.

RD: Yes.

EMC: When December 7, 1941, rolled around where were you and what was your response to the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

RD: When we first heard about it nobody would believe it. My ship was in Baltimore and we were getting a degaussing cable put in. The one we had was obsolete.

EMC: Had you joined the Coast Guard by that time?

RD: I joined the Coast Guard in 1940.

EMC: Did you join or were you drafted?

RD: No. I was in the Light House Service.

EMC: You were. Tell me about that.

RD: I was on a tender, the USS SHRUB. It was separate. That was before the Coast Guard took it over. We were stationed in Bristol, Rhode Island. The Coast Guard took over the service. The Coast Guard gave me a Third Class Electrician's Mate rate for signing on the Coast Guard, so I took it.

EMC: Was the pay better?

RD: Yes. A little more advantage, too.

EMC: What was the advantage of the Coast Guard over the Light House Service?

RD: I was working with the mate. The mate was teaching me navigation, which was interesting. In the Coast Guard, I had a chance to go from Third Class to Chief; and I did make Chief.

EMC: What was the purpose of the Light House Service?

RD: We repaired and took care of all the navigational aides. We furnished lighthouses with their yearly, monthly and quarterly supplies, those that you couldn't get to by land. There were three men on each light with one man on liberty at a time.

EMC: You must have traveled along the coast of New England, didn't you?

RD: We had everything from here to the Merrimack River.

EMC: Up to New Hampshire. Everything from Newport to Merrimack, New Hampshire.

RD: It was busy.

EMC: How long were you in the Light House Service before you joined the Coast Guard?

RD: I was in there about a year or two.

EMC: You joined around 1938 then.

RD: Around then, yes. I was lucky to get a job.

EMC: You decided to join the Coast Guard in 1940 and you had the opportunity because there was a chance for advancement. Did you have to receive any training and indoctrination in the Coast Guard when you first joined?

RD: No. I went right straight aboard ship. I signed on the SHRUB and I was there maybe about a month and they sent a replacement up and they transferred me to the ARGO.

EMC: The ARGO.

RD: Yes. She was a class B cutter, 165 foot diesel.

EMC: Where was she out of?

RD: Newport.

EMC: What did you do on the ARGO.

RD: I was an engineer.

EMC: What did that entail?

RD: Taking care of the engines and running the main engines. I was the only electrician on the ship. They kept me busy.

EMC: So you were kind of an electrician engineer.

RD: That's right.

EMC: Oh, I see. Do you remember what your pay rate was?

RD: A lot of the service was \$62.50. When the Coast Guard took over, they couldn't cut our pay.

EMC: At first when you joined?

RD: Yes. They had to give us the same pay that we got in the Light House Service. The \$62.50 was pretty close to Third Class Petty Officer. It was close together.

EMC: How large was the SHRUB? How many in the crew on the SHRUB?

RD: There were six deck hands, six engineers and fireman, one mess cook, a captain and a mate, chief engineer and a quartermaster. We had a nice little crew on the SHRUB.

EMC: Where did you go on the ARGO? Where did you sail to or patrol?

RD: The ARGO was good duty. We worked one week out, two weeks in.

EMC: Oh, that's great. Where did you go when you went out?

RD: We patrolled from Block Island around the Cape to Maine.

EMC: What determined where you went? On each patrol did you make that circuit from Block Island to Maine?

RD: We made the circuit and then if we got a call for something, Georgia Banks or the Grand Banks, we would go.

EMC: Did you ever have to perform any rescue missions?

RD: We picked up a lot of sick fishermen. They'd get hurt and maybe a bad cut on their hand or something and couldn't do something with it, then we'd have to pick them up.

EMC: How did you hear about this? Was it radio?

RD: Radio. Then we would have to go take them into Boston. There were no helicopters in those days. The minute you got sick, you went by ship. They were taken to the Marine Hospital.

EMC: Boston was the place where you took these people who were sick and you had rescued.

RD: We would come in on Friday. Now we were in for two weeks.

EMC: What did you do during the two weeks you were in Newport?

RD: Two weeks we would be on maintenance on the ship. No matter what happened we didn't go out. In two weeks the crew would do their own work. Then we'd go on another patrol and when we'd come in that Friday we were on standby, twenty minutes. So we left the ship and had to be back in twenty minutes and we had to call and tell the ship where we were.

EMC: Oh, for heaven's sake. That didn't give you time at all. Hard to get ashore.

RD: It worked out pretty good.

EMC: How far out were you in the bay? Where did you tie up?

RD: We tied up at Briggs Wharf, right across from the Torpedo Station. Actually where the causeway is now.

EMC: The causeway to what station?

RD: Where the old torpedo station used to be.

EMC: Near Goat Island.

RD: That dock is where we use to tie up.

EMC: Ok. You could just run on shore.

RD: It was real handy.

EMC: Not do too much, obviously.

RD: It worked out very well. Other fellows were married in Newport.

EMC: But you had to stay on the ship?

RD: We lived right onboard.

EMC: You lived right onboard. You didn't have any free time in the town, more or less.

How many other Coast Guard ships were stationed here in Newport at that time? In 1941?

RD: We were the only one.

EMC: You were the only one? The ARGO was the only one.

RD: The General Greene was in Woods Hole. The DUAINNE was one of the big ones.

She's in Boston.

EMC: Were they a happy crew?

RD: Yes. We had thirty-five on the crew on the ARGO. That was before the war. When they got us all ready again, we had eighty-five.

EMC: Eighty-five on that ship?

RD: Yes. They doubled up everything.

EMC: Must have. Do you remember any outstanding events during your time in the ARGO? Any rescues at sea?

RD: This would be in January or February, 1941. We went on patrol on a Friday out of Newport; it was snowing. It kept snowing. We went on patrol and that next Thursday it had stopped snowing. Lo and behold this dory with a man in it went right into the side of the ship. Bang, like that. He wanted us to see him. The story goes he was from Nova Scotia on one of the big fishing schooner. They had two men in the dory. That Friday when the storm hit him and his buddy couldn't find the schooner. The first night his partner was washed over board. So what he did was throw out all the bait in the bait tub and all the snow that landed on the seats, he scooped it up for drinking water. He lashed the steering to his arm and he sat in the dory from Friday to Thursday.

EMC: He hit your ship?

RD: He wanted to make sure that we saw him.

EMC: Did you see him before he hit the ship?

RD: A little dory out there is hard to see. But he made sure.

EMC: But you rescued him.

RD: Oh, yes. We took him into Boston. He was in not too bad shape, because he had those heavy woolen trousers on and oil skins and everything else. He told us the nights were ungodly long.

EMC: I bet.

RD: He says he was beginning to get cold.

EMC: Sure. Frost bite.

RD: I remember we cut the line on his arm. He said I did that because I knew I would lose the oar.

EMC: Right. Isn't that something.

RD: The funny part was he was not a fisherman. He was a carpenter out of Nova Scotia who went fishing during the winter.

EMC: Had two different professions and two different jobs. Well, that was quite hair raising. What was it like being out in the storm in the ARGO?

RD: We just stood watches. We had two good cooks and we got a good meal no matter how rough it was. We got a meal on the table.

EMC: Were you ever sea sick?

RD: Yes. But once you get over it you're alright.

EMC: But you had experience in the Light House Service, so you had been to sea before in a ship.

RD: Yes.

EMC: When the war began or when war was declared on December 8, 1941, how did that affect your service in the Coast Guard?

RD: Not a whole lot. The only thing we did was we made more patrols.

EMC: Oh, you did.

RD: Let's go back to early '41. We were sent to Merrill Stevens Shipyard in Jacksonville, Florida, for a new propeller shafts overhaul, new gun mounts, sound equipment and everything. They installed the sound equipment and we finally, after six weeks, we got our shafts. Then when we left there we came into Baltimore. Then we came back to Newport and we started patrols. We were ordered to go out and find German subs. Find them, don't shoot, send back to location. We found a lot of them.

EMC: Oh, you did.

RD: Oh, yes we did with the sonar.

EMC: With the sonar, did you say?

RD: Yes. We finally got our sonar, so we can trace them. You could hear them going along.

EMC: That was quite a mission.

RD: They could shoot you, but you couldn't shoot back.

EMC: Were you ever shot at?

RD: No. A little bit later on we had a convoy going to South America. We would stop in Key West and take our fuel and stuff, what we needed. And one of the other ships the same class that I was on, I think she was out of Boston, had orders to go to Merrill Stevens and get rebuilt the same way we were rebuilt. She passed us going down by South

Carolina. Lo and behold she ran right smack into a sub and she got the sub. They captured seven or eight men off it, including the captain. They came into Key West quite happy. I heard this from some of the crew members we met. The captain said, "You Americans build awful small destroyers." Course that model ship did look like a DD, only smaller. It had two stacks, very similar, but smaller, 165 feet.

EMC: One hundred sixty-five feet. I see. Did you spend most of 1941 going out and trying to find German submarines?

RD: Mostly. Finally, we got transferred to New York, then down to Norfolk where they started the convoys.

EMC: The convoy system.

RD: The German had a hey day. They were sinking ships. You could go in early '42 that spring, New York City to Key West, Florida, without a compass, due to the ships that were sunk along the coast, because if you come out of New York you might find a bow of a ship sticking out. You go to another, you see a smoke stack, you go to another and you see a couple of masts. You'd see another bow. You could navigate by sunken ships all the way down the coast.

EMC: Isn't that awful.

RD: Nobody's ever written about that. I never heard any stories about it. There must be records somewhere.

EMC: There must be.

RD: All within ten miles of the coast.

EMC: Oh, that's pretty close.

RD: Yes, very close.

EMC: That's for sure. The Germans did sink a lot of merchant ships.

RD: From the time we'd get to go where they were, they were gone.

EMC: In 1942, you were transferred to Norfolk, New York and then Norfolk, Virginia?

RD: We got out of Norfolk and they sent us to New York. They tied us up at Pier 18.

EMC: What did you go to Norfolk for?

RD: That's where they had the convoys making up.

EMC: Oh, alright.

RD: Then finally they changed to New York. Everything went out of New York.

EMC: What did you do? How were you involved with the convoys?

RD: The ships would line up, maybe three or four abreast. Then we might have forty ships, and there would be five escort vessels. We would escort. One would be in the lead, there would be one on each port and starboard side. We'd go all together. If we got contact with anything, the whole convoy would make a ninety degree turn in a certain direction.

Always one vessel would stay back to try to get the sub.

EMC: Oh, I see. Were you part of the convoy as a Coast Guard vessel?

RD: Yes.

EMC: You were not armed, were you?

RD: Yes.

EMC: You were armed at this point.

RD: We had a three inch C-23 before the war. Then after being rebuilt we had two 3 inch 50's, 20 millimeter depth charges and hedgehogs.

EMC: What's a hedgehog?

RS: They are like a little bomb. They are about that long, with fifteen pounds of TNT, with a solid booster rocket engine installed on the bow. They set it at forty eight degrees, which was the best angle due to the rise and fall of the bow. They would fire it out ahead. Then there was a little propeller at the end of the bomb that would set it, activate it and it would go down. They hit the sub with a bang. It didn't do that much damage, but you could find them. It told us right where they were.

EMC: So you were armed to the teeth to attack the subs and to protect the convoys.

RS: Yes.

EMC: The convoy ship.

RD: The convoy only went as fast as the slowest ship. Some of them were six knots. Others were eight knots, ten knots or eleven knots. If you had a ten or eleven knot convoy, you had a fast convoy. A lot of the ships were five knots or six knots then.

EMC: So you had it up usually along the coast towards Newfoundland or Nova Scotia.

RD: Key West up to New York and out towards the other side of Newfoundland. We would pick them up and we'd come back in and there would be some other empties.

EMC: So you went to Key West?

RD: We use to stop at Key West to get supplies.

EMC: Were there convoys in Key West?

RD: Sometimes. Most went and spread out. They went to South America.

EMC: Did you ever escort any to South America?

RS: Yes, a couple of times we went.

EMC: Rio, maybe?

RS: No. There was a port down there.

EMC: In what country?

RD: One of those countries at the north end of South America

EMC: Was it Brazil or Recife?

RD: Right around Brazil up on the north edge.

EMC: Maybe Caracas?

RD: Along in there somewhere. We pick up some ships.

EMC: Oil in Venezuela. So you were one of the escorts as far as Newfoundland and then you returned to your base.

RD: We didn't always go to Newfoundland. It was just a regular route. I always had the twelve to four watch.

EMC: Midnight to four a.m.

RD: Yes. It was a good watch. I had a Polish fellow working with me and we sat down one night and figured out how much time we spent at sea and how much time we spent at shore over the course of a year. It came out eleven months at sea and one month ashore.

EMC: Wow. You better like the sea or you would be in trouble. You better like being on a ship.

RD: You would tie up in New York with an empty convoy and we'd only be there three days and be gone again.

EMC: So you were at sea most of that year.

RD: Yes.

EMC: Did you ever have any harrowing experiences during your time at sea on these convoys?

RD: Not really. We dropped a lot of depth charges. I won't say whether we got the sub or didn't.

EMC: You dropped them when you knew a sub was near by and you had the soundings, the sonar.

RD: Yes.

EMC: That's good.

RD: I did that for two and a half years.

EMC: Two and a half years.

RD: Yes. In the North Atlantic.

EMC: What was it like being in the North Atlantic in the winter?

RD: It's cold, it's wet, and it's miserable.

EMC: Right. It certainly is. Did you ever have any ice storms or snow storms that slowed you down?

RD: I got a picture of all of us in an ice storm. You can't even use the guns. They were frozen solid.

EMC: I bet.

RD: A mass of cold ice. In that cold weather.

EMC: That must have been miserable. How was the crew of that ship during this time period? How did they get along?

RD: We got along fine. I don't recall any arguments or disagreements in the crew.

Everybody got along fine.

EMC: How was the captain?

RD: Good. We had Mr. Muzzy. He was an academy graduate. He was our captain before the war and then he was transferred. We had a gentleman whose name was Easterbrooks. He was good and from Maine.

EMC: So they knew about sailing. You really had a happy ship, no problems.

RD: No problems.

EMC: That's great. In the meanwhile, were you doing the same kind of work? Were you in the engine room?

RD: Yes. I was running the engine and when they had an electrical breakdown, they handed it to me.

EMC: Did you ever have an electrical breakdown?

RD: Oh, we had breakdowns. The sonar gear. They put that in there and they handed it to me. This is it. If it breaks, you fix it. I'd never seen one.

EMC: So you had to fix the sonar.

RD: Anything electrical. That was before they had sonar technicians and engineers to take care of them. So you blundered through it.

EMC: It was kind of learn on the job, so to speak.

RD: Yes, in a way.

EMC: What was your rating at this time?

RD: I went to about First Class.

EMC: You were still on the ARGO?

RD: Still on the ARGO.

EMC: That was part of the convoy escort. You said you spent a year at sea. Almost eleven months at sea and one month on shore.

RD: That's the way it averaged out.

EMC: Did you get any leave during this time?

RD: No. I didn't have any leave for four years.

EMC: That's pretty rigorous.

RD: We got orders in April or May 1943. We were going into Bayonne for a major overhaul on our main engines. Everybody figures we will get thirty days leave. I had the watch when we went in. We came to New York and they put us right in dry dock. The Engine Officer told me once we get in the dry dock, measure them, the propeller shafts, to see where they worn, if they are worn and how much.

EMC: What did you call them?

RD: I was measuring the diameter of the propeller shafts in thousandths of an inch to find out how much they were worn. The shipyard went to work right away. They worked twenty-four hours a day, three shifts. They did thirty days work in ten days and the eleventh day we were on our way back out again. No leave.

EMC: You were there on the ship. You didn't get any time off.

RD: The crew didn't like that. Nobody on there liked that.

EMC: I bet they didn't. You spent 1942 then on these convoys? Did you do the same thing in 1943?

RD: Yes, up until November.

EMC: Up until November of what?

RD: 1943.

EMC: You were on the North Atlantic convoy system. What happened to you in November '43?

RD: I got transferred to the USS BAYFIELD (APA-33).

EMC: That was a Coast Guard ship. Where was that homeported?

RS: She was in Brooklyn.

EMC: Where was this ship headed? Where was it going to be sent?

RD: After I got aboard, we had about fifteen electricians. Myself and the warrant were the other two that had been on a ship before.

EMC: So you had thirteen electricians mates on this ship?

RS: Yes. Thirteen, myself and the Chief Warrant were the only two that had been on a ship and it worked out very well. We had no problems and they fell right in line. I explained things to them and that's when I made Chief right after that. I made Chief in March or April of '44. We were laying in at Plymouth, England.

EMC: The BAYFIELD must have been a bigger ship.

RD: Yes. She was an attack transport.

EMC: About how many on the crew?

RD: We had six hundred in the crew.

EMC: Very big ship.

RD: That included the crew of the ship and the boat crews.

EMC: What do the crews do?

RD: We carried twenty-eight landing boats.

EMC: Oh, I see.

RD: They were like a separate division on the ship.

EMC: That was a big, big ship.

RD: Let's go back to '41.

EMC: Okay.

RD: Actually it all started in May of '41. There was a lot of sabotage going on in the water fronts in this country. We in the Coast Guard got wind of it. We were in Jacksonville, Florida, waiting for propeller shafts and there was an Italian freighter in the St. Johns River. I don't know how they found out, but they found out that they were sabotaging their ship, the Italian crew. Myself, and nine other fellows went on board about three o'clock one morning. We went aboard and took the ship over and they had made a mess of that thing. They ruined the engines. They put hammers through all the gauges, the generators. They put axes to the landings. They put iron bars into the steam turbine. They destroyed the boilers. It was really a mess.

EMC: So the Italians did that themselves?

RD: They did not want the United States to have that ship.

EMC: Oh, I see. They destroyed it before we took it.

RD: When we got on there, they had done the damage. Because they couldn't come ashore.

EMC: Right.

RD: That afternoon around two o'clock, myself and a marine and the captain went up in the state room and he opened the safe and he took out forty thousand dollars in American money and all the books and papers. We brought them down and went to a district. That's the last time I saw him.

EMC: Yes, he went to court.

RD: Then they took them all off. We had to stand watches on the stupid thing.

EMC: That's quite an experience.

RD: We couldn't go anywhere.

EMC: Right the ship was moored in St. John's River.

RD: That was May of '41.

EMC: Let's get back to the BAYFIELD. You were in Brooklyn, you said. You had six hundred men on the ship, plus the boat crew, and where were you slated to go on this ship?

RD: We went from Brooklyn to Chesapeake Bay and there we trained the crew. We had a brand new crew and they had to train the boats and train everybody.

EMC: Shake down cruise.

RD: That's right. We rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed. It would be two o'clock in the morning. We'd call everybody, "put the boats over". They all had their specific area, in a circle, then you'd call them all back, put everything away. Two hours later, do it all over again. They drilled and drilled and drilled. Then we went to New York. We carried two thousand troops.

EMC: You were a troop transport.

RD: Yes.

EMC: It must have been huge.

RD: An attack, APA, attack transport.

EMC: So you had guns.

RD: We had a few on there. They loaded up all their equipment. Do you remember Admiral Moon?

EMC: Yes. I heard of him.

RD: I knew him. He was a very nice fellow. We had all his stuff aboard. His automobile, and everything else, and we started. It got a little rough. Our crew was 90% sea sick.

Anyway, that's beside the point. What happened was one of the six army trucks had broke lose from its cables. It started to go back and forth with the roll of the ship. It was right below the electric shop. We could get right down there and every time she rolled the army truck would move this way. When I came back the admiral's car kept getting smaller. It ruined that car. Anyway, they finally got some guys down in there and get a line on that thing and tightened it secure.

EMC: That's what I think.

RD: It destroyed Admiral Moon's car. Admiral Moon lost his car.

EMC: Yes, they should have tied it up sooner rather than let it move around. Was your trip to England uneventful?

RD: Twice we picked up a sub. We got orders they found a sub. We changed course. We just changed course. The escort vessels took care of all of that.

EMC: Ok.

RD: It was kind of good to do that.

EMC: Right you were carrying the soldiers. Where did you dock in England?

RD: We went into Falmouth and we went to Plymouth and unloaded. It put us up the river in Plymouth just outside of the railroad bridge. We anchored out there and there we sat. We were waiting for Normandy. We knew it was going to come, but we didn't know when.

EMC: Probably May of '44.

RD: April. We were already to go. We loaded up everything they wanted us to take. Finally, we did load up and we got underway.

EMC: Did you load up with supplies?

RD: Equipment .

EMC: Were you going to take them to France?

RD: We were going to take them to France. What happened was it was kept very quiet.

We went out and it was us and several other ships, a very small group. This was a practice run. A practice run for the invasion of Normandy up the coast of England near sandy beach. It happened to be a rough night. They lost eight hundred soldiers and sailors that night.

EMC: Americans.

RD: Yes. They lost them.

EMC: How?

RD: They drowned most of them.

EMC: In the practice landing?

RD: Right.

EMC: That's terrible.

RD: That was hushed up. The only article I ever read about on that was a little girl from England. She and her father, they had a house above a cliff, right above where they came in. In her article, she said, "The next day we came out and there was all these dead men on the beach. "She said, "those officers came over to us and told us that we never saw a thing. We have never seen this. Don't ever say anything."

EMC: Wow.

RD: The article she wrote. She was about forty years old. She finally said, "I am going to tell someone," and she wrote what she saw that next morning, but it was very hushed up. While they were trying to get to the beach., the German E-boats broke through of our

destroyer screen. We were in trouble so we took off and left. That was in April, something like that, before Normandy.

EMC: I can see why they wanted to keep it quiet.

RD: They kept that quiet.

EMC: Even though it was a horrible thing. I have never heard of it before your telling me.

RD: You might come across it sometime. I don't know where that article was published.

EMC: You don't what magazine it was in?

RD: I don't remember. It was a two page article this woman wrote from England. That brings us up to Normandy.

EMC: Right.

RD: We left in the evening the night before. We left Plymouth loaded. Everybody left.

EMC: June 5th.

RD: June 5th. While we were in Plymouth there were two of the big sea going mine sweepers. We used to talk to them guys who were along side of us. One of them was the first ship blown up that morning. They went ahead of everybody.

EMC: I bet, sure. So did you successfully deliver your soldiers?

RD: Yes. We got them all there.

EMC: Where did you land them?

RD: We landed them on Utah beach, right next to Omaha. You could see both beaches. Utah is like Second Beach.

EMC: Oh, really.

RD: Big sandy flat beach. It runs straight back, all sand dunes. Flat. Then off to the left there was these cliffs and this is where Omaha beach was.

EMC: Oh, I see. You saw the soldiers land. Did they get off in landing craft?

RD: Yes. Most of them landed in water. It was four to six foot sea running that morning when we first got in at half past six.

EMC: But when they got off your ships, did they get in smaller boats?

RD: They got into the landing craft. Then returned to the point of departure for the beach.

EMC: Landing craft. That's what I mean. After you let those soldiers off, where did you go?

RD: The boats made a circle, came back and got another load.

EMC: I see. So you were constantly delivering soldiers.

RD: Oh, yes.

EMC: How far was it between Utah beach in France and Plymouth.

RD: The width of the English Channel. To Plymouth the width of the English channel.

EMC: Oh, it's just a mile?

RD: About a mile.

EMC: To England?

RD: From France.

EMC: From France to England was only a mile?

RD: No, where we were anchored. We were only a mile off the coast of France.

EMC: Right, but when you went back to get another crew how long did it take you to go from that landing point back to Plymouth?

RD: We didn't go back.

EMC: Oh, you didn't.

RD: The small boats came back to us. They loaded and went again.

EMC: Oh, I see.

RD: We carried everything. We were there twenty-one days.

EMC: I see. So you were there.

RD: Twenty-one days.

EMC: Which is the whole month of June.

RD: Just about.

EMC: What did you do after the operation was over?

RD: It was still going on when we left in June and we went back to England to get another load and then to Italy.

EMC: What did you take to Italy? Did you take men or supplies?

RD: Men, supplies and all their gear. We went to Naples, Italy, for a little while and then we went up through in between Corsica, two islands there, up to southern France.

EMC: What operation was going on in Italy?

RD: It was the invasion of Southern France.

EMC: Right. Yes that was in August of '44.

RD: August 15th.

EMC: Mid-August of '44, I believe. You dropped men off in Italy, as you said.

RD: Once they came aboard they stayed.

EMC: Okay. You homeported in Italy.

RD: They stayed right there. Now when they get to the beach that's when they would leave.

EMC: When you got to Southern France. You just made a port call in Italy. You didn't let anybody off. So you deposited them in Southern France for that offensive and that operation.

RD: Yes.

EMC: Did you stay?

RD: Twenty-five days.

EMC: Twenty-five days in August in the Med.

RD: Yes, through September.

EMC: Did you ever talk to the men that were on this ship that you were delivering?

RS: Yes. We all used to talk. They come down to the electric shop. They didn't have anything to do.

EMC: How did they feel about this? Did they ever express any fear?

RD: No. They just kind of wondering what was going to happen. One thing about Normandy it was such a huge operation and there was so much going on at the same time. The only thing that you could remember is where you were. Something a hundred feet away you wouldn't know. It was so huge.

EMC: How was Southern France in comparison?

RD: That was a picnic.

EMC: You said it was a picnic. In what way?

RD: We had three beaches, red, green and blue. Blue and green beaches. The soldiers walked up on the beaches. It was like a summer's day. But red beach we never took the beach at all. They left openings so only one man could get through at a time. Behind that was mine fields, barbed wire and everything else. They never did take that beach.

EMC: They had to try to avoid the traps.

RD: They tried, but it didn't work.

EMC: You were there probably a mile out or so.

RD: We were right in close. We were in deep water. We were only five hundred yards from the beach.

EMC: Wow.

RD: Very close.

EMC: What did you do when you stayed there for twenty some days?

RD: All we did was maintain the ship.

EMC: Because you had landed your soldiers. Did you ever have a chance to see Admiral Hewitt who was involved in that operation?

RD: No. Admiral Moon came aboard the BAYFIELD about two weeks before Normandy. We were flagged on the whole operation. Admiral Moon left the BAYFIELD before we went to Southern France.

EMC: Oh, that's important. He was Navy.

RD: He was in charge of it. We had three operating rooms for the wounded and we had three radio rooms for communications. The Germans knew it. All the time we were in Normandy they would come over. You could set your watch at 3:00 p.m. You could see them come over, way, way up.

EMC: The Germans?

RD: Yes. They would come way, way up at three o'clock. Ten o'clock that night they would be back, dropping bombs. Because they knew we were there and we would move. After they went off, we would move a hundred yards this way or that way.

EMC: Did they hit you?

RD: They came close one night, broke everything up in the engine room. They put all the lights out, but we got things going again right quick.

EMC: That's good, because you were under assault as well.

RD: That was the night that the skipper decided we were not going to move. We always used to move. He said, "We aren't going to move tonight." He wished he had the next morning.

EMC: Right. Oh absolutely. That's awful.

RD: We didn't get any major breaks in the engine room, but we had breaks in the engine room equipment that we could live with and keep things right.

EMC: That's good. Were you under assault in Southern France at Operation Dragoon?

RD: Yes. German fighter planes used to come along, but they put up barrage balloons.

This is the oddest thing. I never saw anything like this before. It was a thunder and lightening storm, but no thunder, and there was no rain. It came over that day it got black, and we were all sitting on deck, watching and it was lightening. Tremendous lightening and it would hit them barrage balloons and most of them were British. So they were filled, with hydrogen, but an explosive. Then you would see the cable get red hot. They must have knocked down twenty balloons that night just with lightening.

EMC: Oh, for heavens sake. That's amazing.

RD: That afternoon they came over and there were seven big LST's all in the beach, all lined up and unloaded. They come over and started to bomb. They bombed two or three of them. Then they got at least four of the seven and the one in the middle which was loaded with ammunition, they missed.

EMC: Luckily.

RD: The whole place would have gone.

EMC: Oh, it's amazing

RD: Yes.

EMC: You were lucky that you escaped relatively easily.

RD: We done very well.

EMC: You did well all right, because the Germans were attacking both big invasions.

After Operation Dragoon was over in early September, where did you go with the ship?

RD: We came back to England and came back to the States.

EMC: Did you stay long in England then?

RD: No. We didn't stay long.

EMC: Did you just have your crew then?

RD: Just our crew and the boat crew. We came back to Norfolk. I think we had some work done and we headed for the West Coast. Then we went over right straight to Hawaii.

EMC: You went to Hawaii?

RD: Yes, right straight through to Hawaii.

EMC: Through the Panama Canal?

RD: Yes. That's when we picked up Commander Flanagan. He was in command of Transport Squadron Fifteen.

EMC: That's Coast Guard still?

RD: I think he was Navy.

EMC: What did this squadron consist of?

RD: APA's, AKA's There was fifteen of us. We went on maneuvers.

EMC: You were out of Hawaii now?

RD: Yes.

EMC: What base in Hawaii? Do you know?

RD: Pearl. Then we go out to Maui and make our runs. We practice and practice, as if we did not get enough practice in Europe. We had to practice some more.

EMC: That's the military. Practice, practice, practice, so you respond automatically when the situation arises that you need to respond to, obviously. So did you enjoy your time in Hawaii? Did you ever get off the ship?

RD: I think I got off the ship twice.

EMC: So you were busy practicing.

RD: When I see pictures of it now, it's not the same.

EMC: Oh, no. It's not old Hawaii. Terribly commercialized. It's still nice, but it's not Hawaii in the 1940's, that's for sure. How long did you stay in Hawaii on maneuvers, practice cruises?

RD: Maybe a month.

EMC: Then where did you head for?

RD: Then we loaded up the soldiers and all equipment and we headed for Saipan.

EMC: Now you're still in the BAYFIELD?

RD: Yes.

EMC: So the BAYFIELD is in the Pacific then?

RD: Yes. We went into a little town called Garapan. We went in there and unloaded. We were there maybe a week then the squadron got underway and we went to Guadalcanal.

Actually we didn't go down to Guadalcanal we stopped at Tulagi. They were hauling stuff

out of there and everything was moving north. I was able to get ashore and I just walked around the island of Tulagi. I walked over it. Here is a place, maybe ten or fifteen acres on the top of this island flat. The trees had all been cut down and here was an arrow made of white coral.

EMC: An arrow?

RD: Arrow. Shaped like an arrow, pointing right straight towards the airfield on Guadalcanal. So when the Japs came over, their planes could see, that arrow; it showed them the way to the airfield. But you couldn't see it unless you got up on top of the island.

EMC: Right. It was visible to the pilots alone. Interesting. When you were in Guadalcanal and Tulagi, I assume, you weren't under attack or anything.

RD: No, from there we went down to Espiritu Santu and picked up some stuff down there and then we came back to Saipan.

EMC: You were just delivering supplies, was that it?

RD: We were moving everything out, whatever was needed. We were getting ready for the invasion of Hiroshima.

EMC: So you were taking off supplies that weren't needed there and bringing them to another spot. Did you go to Iwo Jima at all?

RD: We were in Iwo Jima for ten or twelve days.

EMC: Was that during the February 1945 invasion?

RD: Yes, we were there two days, maybe, before we landed.

EMC: Two days before the marines landed.

RD: Yes.

EMC: Off loading?

RD: Yes.

EMC: What kinds of things were you off loading?

RD: Small tanks, trucks, ammunition, communication equipment, whatever they needed.

They all carried their own gear and we would ship it and take it out for them.

EMC: I see.

RS: I was there when they put the flag up.

EMC: Oh, you were.

RD: I remember seeing that flag go up. I was on the beach. I went in with one load to take some communication equipment in. I was on the beach when they put that flag up.

EMC: Isn't that fantastic. The raising of the flag on Iwo Jima.

RD: We call it hot rock. The name of it was Suribachi.

EMC: Right.

RD: The code name was hot rock.

EMC: So many men were lost there. It was tragic.

RD: There was twenty thousand Japs on that island, and they caused twenty thousand casualties.

EMC: It was a huge amount. I have to check the numbers.

RD: On Iwo Jima I was as close to the Japs as you and I are.

EMC: Really. Wow. But they didn't fire at you?

RD: No.

EMC: Had the island been taken by that time?

RD: No. It was twenty six-days getting that thing settled up.

EMC: Right, but if they were so near to you, why didn't they fire at you?

RD: They didn't have any guns with them. That's why.

EMC: They didn't have any weaponry at that time.

RD: We had taken them prisoner.

EMC: I didn't realize that. You didn't say you had taken them. You were taking prisoners.

RD: Yes, there were three of them.

EMC: I see. So did you take them back to your ship?

RD: They were taken back to the ship.

EMC: Ok.

RD: Took them to the brig.

EMC: I wonder what you said when you were so close to them. You know they had reunions of the survivors of Iwo Jima.

RD: Yes, I keep getting letters. But I have never been able to make it.

EMC: We just had one recently in Connecticut, because there's a statue there. The fellows who fought there came to the reunion. That was kind of a historic event that you witnessed. That's amazing. Once the island was taken where did you go?

RD: We went back to Saipan. One night at Iwo at seven o'clock it was still light. We got an air raid warning. We did not go to general quarters. I don't know why. In comes this Betty, a enemy Jap bomber, just about ten feet off the water and we could see it coming. We looked and the AUGUSTA was off portside. That plane was heading for her. You could tell by the angle. You could watch the AUGUSTA. The AUGUSTA turned its guns toward the plane like this. They fired one time and put the guns away.

EMC: That's good. At least they got the airplane. They demolished it with one blow.

RD: The CALIFORNIA got hit by one, on the turret.

EMC: But you didn't get hit at all?

RD: No, we didn't get hit. That when the FRANKLIN got hit so bad. Then we went back to Saipan and got things all straightened out and loaded up again and headed for Okinawa. The short time between the nineteenth of that month.

EMC: Between Iwo Jima and Okinawa. So you were loaded up with men and equipment?

RS: Yes.

EMC: You went down there for the April attack.

RD: Yes, we were there that morning. We went in on the southern end of the island on a fake landing. The others had been around backside and we unloaded everything, all the men, all the boats. They got within maybe quarter of a mile each of the beach.

EMC: So you reloaded them again?

RD: Yes. That held all them Japs down on the island.

EMC: Right. That was a decoy.

RD: Now before that happened when we were going into the beach to unload, I said to Mr. Roundtree, he was an engineer, "It's kind of quiet this morning." "He said, "Yes, they haven't said anything", because they use to call us down from the bridge to tell us what was going on. We lost two transports right along side of us. You could see Japs come in this way, ten feet off the water.

EMC: Were they kamikazes?

RD: Yes. You can't pick them up by radar. They come in and they hit both ships right in the engine room. They killed all the men. We saved all the equipment and the rest of the crew. We didn't sink them. We towed them out of there.

EMC: If you couldn't pick them up on radar, obviously, could you pick them up by sight?

RD: Yes, but they are pretty close by that time.

EMC: Really. Okay. You can't see a mile away. So you can't protect yourself. That's kind of too late. That's terrible. So the two transports were hit.

RD: Yes, the first two. We were in the middle.

EMC: You were lucky. Very lucky ship. So that was Okinawa. The Okinawa experience for you.

RD: Yes, we were there for ten days. Then we headed for the West Coast. We went back to Saipan, and we headed for the West Coast for emergency repairs and all that.

EMC: But the ship really wasn't damaged in any way?

RD: Not really, but we had equipment that needed repairing.

EMC: Sure.

RD: We got into Frisco and my transfer was in the first mail.

EMC: Where were you transferred to?

RD: I was transferred back to the East Coast.

EMC: Good for you.

RD: Six days by train.

EMC: That's the only way to get back.

RD: I reported back to First Naval District in New York. I was being sent back to Europe for another six months. It's about time I had some R & R, you know. They kept saying no. So I went into the office and this yeoman says, "Give me your RS for now and I'll call you." He turned, standing in the office and I'm right behind him. He gets to the first class and there a chief out there that has these orders. I said, "I'm not out there. I am right

behind you.” He said, “You’re another one of those guys that’s going back to sea. I said, “I guess so.” I said, “Where’s the commanding officer.” He says, “over there.” I picked up all my orders and he said, “I’ll be back.” I knocked on the door and told him the whole situation. He says, if I could give you sixty days leave, I’d give it to you. He said, “but we can’t. We need you on the MONTICELLO. She’s leaving Tuesday.” This was Saturday morning.”

EMC: For heaven’s sake.

RD: I said, “Well, I got a request, captain. “He said, “what’s that?” I said, “Can I have this weekend off.”

EMC: What a concession.

RD: He said, “As long as you get to that ship by eight o’clock Tuesday morning, I don’t care where you go. You just give me the papers.”

EMC: Did you stay in New York City?

RD: Yes. I had no reason to go anywhere.

EMC: So you didn’t want to go back to Newport.

RD: When I got outside the door, others were waiting for their orders. I said, “Wait there, go ahead and get them.” I went in the office. I don’t know what happened.

EMC: Was this May or June? August of ‘45. The war was over in mid-August.

RD: Yes. We got in the day before the Japs quit.

EMC: The day before VJ Day.

RD: Yes. In the Oakland shipyard and we made arrangements for all of us to go home for ten days. I was getting transferred, so I didn’t get any.

EMC: You just had to go to New York and report for your orders.

RD: I reported to New York and Tuesday morning I was on the MONTICELLO. We carried eight thousand troops.

EMC: Can I ask you a question about VJ Day? Victory Day over Japan. You were in San Francisco then. Do you remember what the celebrations were like, and if you celebrated in anyway?

RD: I kind of kept off to one side. I started for Main Street and when I looked down and saw what was going on, I said this is no place for me. So I stayed in a quiet neighborhood and met several people. We talked about this and that. It was a mad house down there.

EMC: Mad house, right. I'm sure you were glad the war was over.

RD: Yes.

EMC: Everybody was relieved. But you were still in the Coast Guard and you had to go to Europe, you said, on the MONTICELLO. Who were you taking over there?

RD: We took nobody over. We took troops back.

EMC: You were transporting troops back.

RD: One trip to Italy, then back to France, back and forth.

EMC: That must have been interesting, at least non-harrowing. How many trips do you think you made?

RD: Let's see, I went on the MONTICELLO.

EMC: How long were you on the MONTICELLO?

RD: From September until February of next year.

EMC: That's quite a long time. Six months or so.

RD: Then the chief engineer called me. There were two chief electricians onboard. He said, "Look, one of you guys is going to go on the MENDOTA, she's at Baltimore. I said,

“Doug, you want to go? “He said, “I don’t want to go.” I said, “I’ll take it.” So I took the brand new ship.

EMC: Can you spell the name of the ship?

RD: MENDOTA.

EMC: Oh, MENDOTA just the way your pronounced it. So you got transferred to this ship?

RD: Yes.

EMC: Was she doing the same kind of work? Troop transporting?

RD: No. She was one of the new cutters 255.

EMC: So that was more.

RD: We were on weather patrol. Half way between England and Newfoundland.

EMC: England. Half way between England.

RD: We had a area in the North Atlantic about ten miles square. We stayed in that ten miles. Depending on how the tide was running, we might go down in this corner, shut the engines off and drift up this way.

EMC: What was the point of all that weather patrol?

RD: We had on our masts, we had a beacon so the commercial air craft could see us, beacon in on us coming back.

EMC: I see.

RD: We also had to carry two weatherman and they took a lot of weather data. Sent up balloons and stuff like that.

EMC: That must have been interesting.

RD: It was, but the thing was this. We put in thirty-five day patrols.

EMC: From one end of this ten mile square to the other?

RD: No. We stayed right there for thirty-five days. We had a fifteen day interim period, which means patrol. Now the fifteen day input took us four and a half days to come in. It took us four and a half days to go back out. Now we got seven left and we'd been in port for about a week and we were gone for another thirty-five days. Nobody liked that.

EMC: What port did you pull into?

RD: Argentia, Newfoundland.

EMC: That must have been pretty dull.

RD: All the icebergs.

EMC: So you got the new cutter, but you got the weather duty way out in the North Atlantic.

RD: Yes.

EMC: Nice and cold way out there. By that time it was 1946.

RD: Yes. The skipper called me up to his office and he said, "Did you know your enlistment run out." I said, "No, I haven't thought about it." He said, "Two months ago."

EMC: Oh, your enlistment was up two months ago?

RD: Yes. I was still getting paid. It was kind of a little thing I did on my own. I said I am going to keep my mouth shut. They won't give me leave, so maybe I will get some more money out of them.

EMC: You didn't tell them your enlistment time was up.

RD: I didn't tell them. The XO asked me if I was going to ship over. I said, "No, sir."

EMC: When did you finally get out of the Coast Guard?

RD: 30th day of May, 1946.

EMC: So you kept on during this whole winter and spring of '46, in the North Atlantic?

RD: Yes.

EMC: I see. You stayed in quite a long time. Did anything eventful happen during this last assignment?

RD: No, more or less routine. The only difference was here was a brand new ship. I don't know how many millions she cost with no fresh water.

EMC: How awful. How did you get drinking water?

RD: We had water rations on a brand new ship with no war going on. Somebody had devised this new type of evaporator on a drawing board. They put it on this ship and it didn't work. It wouldn't make enough water for our boilers.

EMC: Isn't that awful.

RD: That's why the crew kept just enough to cook with. Most of it went to the boilers.

EMC: What did you drink?

RD: We had drinking water and we got a wash basin. Couldn't take a shower. I thought that was kind of ridiculous, a brand new ship. Now the MONTICELLO, she made a hundred thousand gallons of fresh water a day. It was an old Italian liner. You could have more fresh water.

EMC: Isn't that something. It's amazing. When you got out in May of 46, where were you discharged?

RD: Boston.

EMC: Did you ever think of making the Coast Guard a career?

RD: I was going to stay, but when I got that six months back to Europe it kind of turned me around.

EMC: I see. So you didn't want to.

RD: I think I will get out.

EMC: How would you sum up your World War II and prior to World War II service in the Coast Guard?

RD: I enjoyed it very much. I enjoyed all of it.

EMC: So you were glad you served?

RD: Yes.

EMC: Did you feel very patriotic during this time frame?

RD: I think everybody did to a certain extent.

EMC: It certainly was a time that inspired patriotism. When you left the Coast Guard in May '46, did you come back to Newport?

RD: Yes.

EMC: What did you do after that?

RD: I went to work for the civil service.

EMC: Where?

RD: Fort Adams.

EMC: What did you do there?

RD: I worked in a shipyard there.

EMC: Oh, there was one.

RD: Yes. We repaired all the army boats on the East Coast.

EMC: Isn't that interesting.

RD: That was six years before they closed it.

EMC: They must have closed it. Where did you go after that?

RD: I went over to the base and, finally, I went over to work for. I got laid off at the base.

EMC: What did you do here on base?

RD: I was up in Melville. We had twenty ships up there in mothballs.

EMC: I see.

RD: We were taking care of their machines. They closed that up in six years. I went to work for Public Works. There was in Quonset a motor winder, so I put in for it. They accepted me and I went over for a interview. My wife and I went over to meet my daughter. It was in the summertime. I left them at the main gate about one in the afternoon and I didn't get out of that interview until four o'clock.

EMC: Good heavens.

RD: That was some interview. They wanted to know how you did this and that. Anyway I got the job.

EMC: That's good.

RD: It was a good job. I was the only motor winder over there and I had my own place.

EMC: Did you retire from there?

RD: No, I happened to get a phone call one night from. Hey, Bob do you want to come work at NUSC? At the time everything was fine over there. Then I got to thinking about the travel. I said, "Yes, I'll take it," so I got transferred over here at NUWC. I retired from there.

EMC: That's good. When did you retire from there?

RD: Twenty-seven years ago.

EMC: So you were about sixty when you retired?

RD: I was about sixty years old.

EMC: What did you do at NUSC?

RD: I repaired the cable systems for the missiles. The unit that guides the missile where it's suppose to go. That was my job. Fix gyros.

EMC: You're very good at mechanical things and repairing things. So you had quite a career in the civil service after your service in the Coast Guard.

RD: I went to the Navy Reserves after I got out of the Coast Guard.

EMC: You joined the Naval Reserves?

RD: I joined the Naval Reserves.

EMC: That's good.

RD: I said I might as well join them and then I won't lose all this time I got in.

EMC: Right, that makes sense. How long did you stay in the Naval Reserve?

RD: I had to get out when I was fifty-nine, because the deadline they set for age.

EMC: Did you train here in Newport?

RD: No. I was with the Undersea Warfare division. Our headquarters were in Jamestown over here on Beavertail. We had about fifty guys in the unit. We'd drill every month.

EMC: Very close by.

RD: Yes.

EMC: You spent time in the Naval Reserves and you had a pension from that.

RD: The thing was when we had the Cuban crisis they called a lot of retired chiefs back. A lot of them wasn't physically fit and they lost a head count. So that's why they cut the age to fifty-nine. Usually they would stay in.

EMC: But after a certain point, I guess you can't. You certainly had quite an interesting World War II career in the Coast Guard, in the Pacific, in Europe, witnessing some of the

major battles and the invasions, the two major amphibious invasions in western Europe and major battles, Iwo Jima, Okinawa in the Pacific. If you don't have any concluding remarks to make, we can end the interview. Do you have any concluding remarks to make?

Anything else that you we skipped or missed regarding your career?

RD: No. I brought a couple of things with me.

EMC: I want to thank you very much for coming in today, Mr. Dennis. Good reminiscing.

A few additions to the interview, Mr. Dennis. When we were talking just a few minutes ago you mentioned that on D Day, the 6th of June, you took German prisoners back to England. Can you tell us about that?

RD: They were off the beach. Some were moving, some were taken on the ship. We kept them all together by themselves. I assumed we had something available that would take them to England.

EMC: What kind of ships were they shipped over on?

RD: LCT. They run very low, landing craft, with a broad deck.

EMC: Did they put the prisoners on the deck?

RD: Yes. Even American soldiers they carried the same way. Put them on the deck.

EMC: That's interesting to know. You mentioned a second ago about a storm that you were involved in. Where was that?

RD: That was the worst storm they had in about one hundred years.

EMC: Where was it?

RD: Right there in the English Channel. We were dragging our anchor all the time. We had steam up. When we moved we dragged it again. It blew for three days and for three days we never landed supplies or a soldier on the beach.

EMC: Was this before D Day or during D Day?

RD: This was about a week after the invasion started, right in the middle of the invasion.

EMC: June.

RD: In June, here comes this big storm.

EMC: Oh, it did. Did a lot of damage. Weather is so important to any military operation.

It's got to be calm.

RD: It sure helps.

EMC: It sure does. Any other comments that we forgot to mention?

RD: I guess that's about it.

EMC: Thanks so much for your reminiscences. We will have this typed and then we will edit it and get it back to you for correction as well. Thank you.

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