RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM L. AGRON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron on October 21, 2005, in Montville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth …

Todd Schaefer: … Todd Schaefer.

SI: This is our second interview with Dr. Agron. Thank you again for having us in your home and for being so hospitable.

TS: Thank you very much.

Sam L. Agron: You're very welcome.

SI: To begin this interview, which will focus on your World War II experiences, could you tell us a little bit more about your job in the shipyard? Was there a reason why your team kept getting these complicated jobs?

SA: Yes. The ship was a submarine tender, that we built. The reason why I got those jobs? Well, I had received training in Chicago at Lane Tech High School. The federal government sponsored programs to quickly train people in the different aspects of defense work. … At that time, we lacked sufficient ship workers, people who knew how to build ships, because, after World War I, it became an almost dead profession here, and the Depression, of course, helped achieve that. I took a course for several months that ran from … late afternoon until maybe ten PM, five days a week, and we studied ship drafting, ship lofting, L-O-F-T-I-N-G, and other aspects of ship construction. Now, ship lofting is done on a floor the size of a gymnasium, where they take the blueprints of a ship, the decks or the sides of the hull or other structural part, and lay it out, full-scale, on the floor, which is like a gymnasium floor. … Then, make patterns out of wood, analogous to the patterns a dressmaker may make to make garments of cloth. Well, these are objects to be fashioned … of steel, but the patterns were wood and they were labeled for every part of the ship, every steel plate. It might be so many feet long, so many wide, and, as you can imagine, every piece of steel on a ship is different from almost every other, because the shape of the hull varies throughout its length and height, and then, there are decks and so on. So, everything has to be custom-made in that sense and, also, all the steel beams and the ribs, what we called [them], inside the ship have to be prepared in sort of a pattern form, and then they are fashioned in the steel shop. The steel beams are bent by huge machines to precisely fit the right curvature … where they are to be installed. I first worked in the ship loft for … maybe several months, and then, was transferred to the ways, W-A-Y-S, where the ships were actually put together, built, assembled. … They were built on an inclined, supported by keel blocks. After the hull was completed up to, say, the main deck, the ship was launched. It … slid down the incline, into the adjacent waters. My background in mapmaking, … drafting and other aspects of technology, plus the ship building course that I took in Chicago before … I got out there, … gave me an advantage over most people who arrived with no preparation for this kind of work. So it was just "duck soup," as they say, to move right up. … Management above me saw that they could give me very difficult tasks to perform and my crew would get them done efficiently and correctly and they could rely on us. So, while there were a number of crews on a large ship like this, my crew, up to about twenty or thirty men at times, was given the rather difficult tasks that

presented a lot of risk if any errors were made. They felt they could rely on us to get it done right.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about the backgrounds of your crew members? Were they mostly men? Had any of them had any experience as shipbuilders? Were there any women workers?

SA: Yes. I believe I mentioned one or two instances last time. … There were no women on my crew. They did put one or two to work in the ship loft. I saw women welders on the ships. There may have been women [in other jobs] after I joined the Navy, later in the war. These were men ranging in age from [the] late teens to, maybe, mid-forties, mid to late forties, and they lived in the Bay area. The shipyard was in Oakland and some commuted from San Francisco. … One person, … commuted from Fresno, which was quite a drive in those days. … They had to have … special permission to purchase additional rationed gasoline to make the commutes. Other people were from different parts of the country. There were some immigrants, well, I shouldn't use that term, migrants, who came in. I came from Chicago. There was another chap who was born in Oklahoma when it was called Indian Territory, before it became a state. … He lived in one of the nearby towns on the East Bay and, I think, had a little, small farm or ranch at Walnut Creek, which wasn't too far away. He may have been part-Cherokee and had many interesting tales to tell in the days when Oklahoma hadn't become a state yet. It was quite wild. Others were from the surrounding towns, Berkeley, Alameda, Richmond and so on.

SI: Where were you living then?

SA: …When I arrived by train, after a three-day trip from Chicago, I had never been to California before. Of course, the first thing I did was check-in at the YMCA, where you could count on getting a room that was clean and [that] would suit your needs. … I thought, until I got oriented, I would stay there, and I did, for about a week or so, and then, found, … on Telegraph Avenue, one of the main streets in Oakland, a hotel, a small, family-run hotel. … On the street floor, there were some stores, a restaurant, where we could eat meals at a lunch counter, and [there were] rooms upstairs. … The owner and his wife, who ran it, had also … come to California, during the "Dust Bowl" days, from Oklahoma. I had my own room with a little sink basin and the bathroom was down the hall. … I remember having breakfasts at that restaurant, and taking public transportation to the shipyard, which was in the same city. It wasn't very far away. … Outside the shipyard gates, there were vendors who sold box lunches to the workers. … They contained two sandwiches, an apple or orange, and a piece of pastry. … Then, we would also buy, at least I did, … a quart of milk, and that was eaten for lunch. Today, I don't think I eat that much all day, [laughter] but we worked hard. I worked an eight-hour day, but there was overtime work, a couple of hours a day. So, they were ten-hour days, six days a week, and I walked miles on that large ship, climbing ladders down to the bilge and all the way up to the uppermost decks, from stem to stern, out on the ways and to the office, … on my feet all day. … Walking on steel is rather tough on your feet. So, we burned calories and needed a pretty hearty lunch. Again, … after work, I remember, I frequently ate at that little restaurant in the building in that hotel, … sitting at the counter; working people patronized it, nothing fancy. … I remember, you got about a four or five-course dinner for ninety cents, and, if you wanted a steak dinner, it was a dollar. … They didn't have salad, they served a half a head of lettuce with dressing. [laughter] … This was kind of new to me, coming from Chicago, but I guess

California had a lot of lettuce to dispose of and that's the way they served it. I didn't have a car. There was no need for it and no place to park it, anyway. I made a few friends and there were two chaps who came out from Chicago soon after I did. They had attended the same course that I did. … I knew them both and one became a very dear friend. … For entertainment. I remember going to San Francisco frequently on my one day off, Sunday. I would spend the day there. … My first trip over, I took the ferry from Oakland and arrived at the ferry terminal on the eastern side of San Francisco, facing the bay. It was an early Sunday afternoon. This may very well have been my first weekend (Sunday) there, or maybe the second. … It was … December 1941, I knew what Chicago was like in December; the weather was cold. … In those days, they didn't burn oil for heating homes, they used coal, particularly in Illinois, where they mined it. … I remember, in Chicago, especially in wintertime, there was a lot of soot in the air from coal and the curtains got gray very quickly and you found, like, grit on your windowsills. … The weather was dreary in the wintertime, a lot of cloudy, dull days and cold. In San Francisco, the sun was out, blue sky, and I started walking west across the city, and it was a wonderland to me. The homes, the buildings, were a spectrum of pastel-colored paint. There were flowers everywhere, in bloom, in December! … I was just staring at everything as I walked, enjoying myself immensely. … Before I knew it, I had traversed the whole city, east to west, and was at the ocean, at the beach. That's about seven miles and [I] walked onto the beach and … dipped my feet in the water of the Pacific, much as, I thought, Balboa or Cortez … centuries earlier, [Vasco Nunez de Balboa, in 1513], … dipped his feet into that ocean. [laughter] … I would frequently go to the city and learn [about the] wonderful things that it had to offer, beautiful parks and museums…, but there was only the one day, Sunday, that I had available to me. There were some social occasions. I can remember, that was the era of Big Bands … and they had, probably, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and those kinds of things. I attended some of those dances in Oakland on Saturday night, made some friends and it was fun. …

TS: During your time in California, did you keep in contact with your family back home?

SA: Yes, yes. Telephone calls were less frequent [in] those days. [There were] … many people without phones. My family had a phone in Chicago, but it was mostly used in a kind of emergency occasion. So, we would write letters and I may have written a letter a week, I don't recall, and also corresponded with some friends back east and with some nice friends in the San Francisco area.

SI: You arrived just after Pearl Harbor had been attacked. How did the San Francisco Bay area react to the war? How did it impact the area?

SA: Well, you know, I wasn't somebody at large in the area. I was busy six full days a week, and so, I had, you might say, just a few free hours a week to be concerned with other matters than my own needs and family considerations and so on. I don't think I read a daily newspaper at that time. There wouldn't have been time. … When you came home from work, let's say you worked until about seven PM, and then, you had your dinner, and then, you had to shower and wash and so on, because this was fairly rough work, you were exhausted. You fell into bed and might not have gotten up until the next morning. It was hard physical, as well as mental, labor. [There was] a lot of stress, because of the nature of the assignments that were given to my crew. … We listened to the radio and I remember there was a woman singer, Connie Boswell, who

sang at that time. … I enjoyed very much listening to her songs. Maybe it was in the early evening, when I came home from supper or so on. I did take a brief course, and I'm trying to think what it might have been in, at [the] University of California in Berkeley. It may have had something to do with the work I was doing, maybe about welding; I'm not sure. It was given on the campus. It was one of these defense courses, you might say, and, I'm sorry, I have no recollection of any more about that. I didn't have a car, and so, I couldn't get around very much on my own. Distances there were pretty big and one of the people I knew in San Francisco who had a car, because he commuted, would invite me for a drive somewhere on a Sunday. I would join them [with] some friends. Of course, gasoline was rationed, but people commuting to defense industry jobs were allowed to purchase more than the average person. You had to drive with your headlights out at night. I remember, when I left my job after I had signed up for the Navy, the men on my crew … took me to dinner at, I think it was the Hungry Eye Night Club, in San Francisco. … I drove into the city with some of them. Going over the Bay Bridge, from Oakland. … The driver … was stopped by a police car and given a ticket because he had his headlights on. He had just forgotten. … We had been talking about so many things, he just forgot about them. So, that was carelessness. [laughter] They enforced this, and I guess windows had to be blocked out, shades drawn, particularly as you got nearer the ocean.

SI: Were there any fears of a Japanese invasion or attack on the West Coast?

SA: I believe so, yes. They may have spotted a submarine out there, too, soon after Pearl Harbor. I regret [that] I don't have the specifics on that. … They sent balloons over from Japan, which … carried ballast, sand, from one of the beaches in Japan and the westerly winds carried the balloons across over the Aleutians, and then, down towards the West Coast, Pacific Northwest States where … they were intended to fall and, … carrying incendiaries, … cause forest fires or do other damage in the Northwest. … They weren't much of a success. One of these fell into the government's hands here and they turned the sand over to the US Geological Survey in Washington. They studied it and were able to determine the rocks from which that sand was eroded, was derived. … They studied the geologic maps of Japan, were able to determine the place where that rock occurs in Japan. So, they told the Army people to scout this-and-this location. … The airplanes soon found the gas facility, with round gas storage tanks and [from] where these balloons were launched. … They bombed and destroyed them. So, here was an application of geology, too, this is called "military geology," (application of geology to military undertakings). We never knew what might happen. … After the Japanese fleets were given some very, very decisive defeats, we felt more secure.

SI: What was security like at the shipyard?

SA: Well, everybody had to have a badge, of course, and only authorized people could come in.

SI: Were there military guards?

SA: I don't recall seeing them. There … have been civilian guards. There were military liaison people, that would be naval architects or whatever, working with the company, probably. … Later, when I was in the Navy, a ship I was on entered the ship construction facility of the Bethlehem Steel plant … near Quincy, Massachusetts. … My ship tied up there for a little bit of

work and I saw [that], up and down the waterway, they were constructing ships. … I thought [that] I would enjoy looking at some of them, … because I knew ship construction intimately. It's like an art connoisseur looking at paintings. You get as much of an emotional thrill out of it, an aesthetic thrill, as those people would. … I was a naval officer. … I went to the, security office in the shipyard and asked the security officer for permission to go aboard one of these ships. … I don't think they were even naval ships [that] they were building, cargo ships maybe, freighters. … The security officer was a WAVE ensign, [a woman enlisted in the US Navy's Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services (WAVES)], and she wanted to know, … questioned me at length, why I wanted to see the ships. I tried to tell her [that] I used to build ships and [she] heard me out and said, "Permission refused." You know, you give some people a little bit of power and … it goes to their heads and, irrationally, they abuse it. I went back to my ship, … had the boatswain's mate lower a motor launch. I got into it and I sailed up the ways and examined all of the ships to my heart's content. [laughter] I went back, and had the boat but back on our ship.

SI: You mentioned last time that, after spending so much time building the ship, you wanted to serve on it, and that led you to the Navy.

SA: Yes. I left Chicago for California … on December 8, 1941, and I worked on the ways. … Then, about March of '43, the ship was almost ready to go for outfitting, and then, to join the fleet. … You develop an attachment to something like that and I don't think a person who hasn't had this experience can understand that, but you know every nook and cranny of the vessel and you get to love it. … I thought, "I would like to serve on this ship in the Navy." … On a Sunday, … in San Francisco, I was walking west on Market Street and I saw a … sandwich sign on the sidewalk that said, "Office of Naval Officer Procurement," and I said, "Why don't I go upstairs, … I don't have to commit myself right now, but will find out more about serving in the Navy?" So, I did. I went upstairs and, when I came down, I was signed up. [laughter] I thought I would … be a little more deliberate when considering it. … I asked them, "Now, I haven't been home in a year-and-a-half," whatever, "and there are midshipmen naval schools;" there were three of them, they explained to me: at Columbia University, at Notre Dame and at Northwestern, (Abbot Hall, in Chicago). I said, "Could I request that I be sent to the one at Northwestern? Because, during the four months I'll be at the school, … I'll have an occasional opportunity to see my family on weekends. I'd appreciate that very much." They said, "Oh, sure, yes. When you sign up, just send your request to Washington, Bureau of Naval Personnel … and they'll take care of it." … That's what I did and the reply I got … was, "You will go where we send you." [laughter] … I heard from the Navy Department that there was an inconsistency in the date I gave for my birthday. … They said, "How come? You said your birthday's the 27th of November and … we checked in the public schools of New York City. When you were enrolled in school, your birthday was dated as November 5th. How do you explain that?" I said, "I have no idea. I'll call my parents." I called them on the phone. I asked, "What happened? How is this?" … They thought, and then, they remembered. "Oh, yes, at that time, when you had to be enrolled in school, mother was sick. She couldn't take you to school and a neighbor in the building took you. She knew who your parents were, your address, your age and so on. … When she got there to enroll you, they asked [for] your birthday; she didn't know that. So, … rather than go home and get the information, there wasn't a phone she could use, she just told them this date." [laughter] … This was the certified statement my parents gave

and they had to accept it. … This came as a surprise to me, but, you see, sometimes, other people can get you into a bit of a jam that you're unaware of, but the thing went through. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

I soon got my orders to report to midshipmen's school at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, and I made my good-byes to friends and fellow workers at the shipyard. The first month, we were apprentice seamen. This is the lowest rank in the Navy. It's like buck private in the Army. At that time, I believe we were paid twenty-one dollars a month as salary. … We wore a special … uniform, with sailor pants … having thirteen buttons around the flap, around the front, and a sailor hat and the pea coat the sailors wear. … Discipline was rigorous, the same as it would be at boot camp. Line up was maybe ten minutes after reveille; you had to be out on the parade ground, lined up in formation, dressed and so on. … We started our naval training and, at the end of a month, were tested. … Those who didn't pass … washed out. They were sent to boot camp. … Those who survived had three more months of training as midshipmen. … As, we were all college graduates, we didn't have to take courses of the regular college curriculum. … They gave us, essentially, everything the midshipmen at Annapolis study. It was a very, very jam-packed curriculum, … including seamanship and navigation, communications and … gunnery, the ordinance used aboard ship, and naval law; big, thick textbooks. … We had classes all day, and then, physical workouts, which were strenuous. [We learned to bark orders like a drill-sergeant as we marched in formation with rifles over our shoulders. Also, in the swimming pool we practiced how to try to survive in the ocean if an oil fire was burning on the surface of the water.] … Then, we had to study in the evening, until perhaps ten PM, and then, lights out. … We were two in a room. My roommate, … a chap called Adams was from Columbus, Ohio. … We slept in upper and lower bunk beds; had to keep the facilities meticulously clean, everything just so, on shelves and drawer contents arranged perfectly, and every garment, uniform, hanging just right. … We had to make our beds in the morning … with the corners of the sheets folded at forty-five degree angles. … Everything had to be just perfect. … On Saturday morning, there was captain's inspection. … The commander of the base, or his representative, would inspect the dormitories. … The roommates would … stand at attention at their open door, waiting for the captain to arrive at their room. … Everything was looked at very, very carefully. … One Saturday, one man would take responsibility, the other Saturday, the other; we both did the cleaning, but we alternated [the] responsibility. … This week, it was my turn to be room captain. … The Captain, wearing white gloves, came in, inspected everything. … His lieutenant, with a pad, ready to write down infractions. … Everything seemed to be fine and we stood at attention, … holding our breath most of the time. … He was about to go out through the doorway and I felt, "What a relief." … Then, he turned and looked … at the door, raised his white-gloved hand and ran his finger over the top of the door, and there was dust on his fingertip! Well, since I was responsible for the room that week; I was to be punished. I lost liberty, … (Saturday afternoon until Sunday, late afternoon.) If I had liberty, I could have gone to Chicago, … taken the train from South Bend, and then, the El in Chicago, … so [that] … I'd have overnight with my family. Now, I was to be punished, I couldn't have it. … I had to spend the weekend with a bucket and brush, scrubbing bulkheads instead. This is the discipline they wanted to instill. … Well, that weekend was a big disappointment. But, later, I realized … there was logic in all of this. If you're going to be an officer, and … demand discipline from the men and expect them to keep a tidy ship, you should be taught properly how

to do it yourself. Otherwise, you may not … be able to keep them at the level they should maintain. Another thing about the campus that I remember, which you probably didn't have at the other two midshipmen's schools, we had to salute the nuns and the priests, because they were in uniform, as it were, and they had to be treated as officers. As the months went on, we'd have cross-country running, several miles, and, sometimes, it would get a little difficult. I'd get stitches in my side, but you were not allowed to drop out. You had to run. [I recall] the swimming pool where we had to practice, surviving in the water if your ship were torpedoed and there was an oil fire. How would you survive?" Well, you'd have to spend as much time under the water, under the fire, [as possible] and, occasionally, just break the surface, gasp for air and [go] under again, [laughter] drills of that kind. We had the rifle drills, with the close-order formation, marching, that kind of thing, just as any military organization would. You'd have your rifle over your shoulder and march in formation and we took turns being the, whatever they called it, drillmaster, or lead the squadron in marching, shouting, "Left flank" … "Right flank," and learning how to shout orders. The work was moderately interesting, yes. We also had navigation, and celestial navigation and used all of the … techniques then available, plus spherical trigonometry, which was a branch of math that I hadn't previously studied. In fact, they don't study it, much except in, I guess, navigation courses. … Today, it's all automated. … We also had to use a sextant and other equipment. … This is the trigonometry that has triangles on curved surfaces, like … a triangle on a globe of the Earth. Each side of the triangle is itself a curved line, an arc, and its three angles could add up to more than 180 degrees. … They got us started and it would be up to us to continue further, knowing about naval correspondence and all the forms. Then, as [the] time approached for the completion of our work, we eagerly awaited our assignments. … By that time, I realized the chances were nil that I would be sent to a specific ship and I gave up on that. … It depended on the fleet requirements. …

SI: For the record, do you know what the name of the submarine tender was? Was it a name or a number?

SA: … These ships, there were several of them, had names of constellations, like, one was the USS *Orion* and mine was, I think, the USS, it may have been *Perseus*; I'm not sure. … If I come across it, I'll let you know. … It was AS, stands for Auxiliary Submarine (Tender) … I think it was the USS *Perseus*, sister ship to the USS *Orion*. … I would like to pick up where I was when I broke. What was that point now?

SI: You were saying that you had given up hope of going to the submarine tender and you were awaiting assignment to a ship.

SA: … Because that was a specific ship; … and probably, its complement was already filled, I requested … duty on a light cruiser in the Pacific. [laughter] I knew I'd see a lot of action there. Well, they had other plans for me. I was to go into the minesweeping service and that didn't have a good reputation, because the word got around that a lot of minesweepers didn't last very long. [laughter] …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: My assignment, then, was to the naval diesel engineering school at North Carolina State College in Raleigh. At that time, most of the ships of the fleet were powered by diesel engines. So, they needed, probably, several thousand … diesel engineering officers, and they didn't have them. They had to train them. … North Carolina State had a four-year program in diesel engineering and the Navy then took over part of that program. … They would send forty ensigns at a time to spend four months being trained in diesel engineering. …

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SI: Please, continue.

SA: At North Carolina State College, [in] the diesel engineering course that the Navy ran, we already were … college graduates, so … we didn't have to take all kinds of subsidiary college courses to this diesel engineering curriculum. Instead, we studied all about diesel engines. We studied steam plant, because we might very well have to serve on a ship with that, and we studied electrical engineering and similar topics that would be useful to us. The four months were hot … as hot as … 107 degrees, Fahrenheit, in Raleigh that summer. … The officer in charge of our unit was a Navy lieutenant … but a stickler. ... He was an administrative officer. He didn't do any of the teaching. That was done by regular college faculty. … He insisted that we wear khaki uniforms, with a black tie [pulled] up to the neck and our jackets with the epaulets on them, khaki. There was no air conditioning. Sometimes, in the steam-plant lab, the temperature would be close to 120. I don't know what this ridiculous man thought we would get out of being so meticulously in uniform, but this is what he insisted on. We would sometimes have to take showers during the day and change clothes. Well, we survived that training. I stayed at a private house, renting a room with a local family in Raleigh, a block or two from the campus; very nice people, but I learned about some of the poorer aspects of the South there. They had a black woman who would come in every morning, fix breakfast, serve it, and both adults would go off to work and the children to their activities. … She would, then, prepare the dinner meal and have it all cooked and ready when she left, about one PM. If she had to do shopping, she would, and then, she'd have to go to her own home, at the other end of town, and she had her own children to take care of. … She would have to stand on the main street, alongside the campus, and wait for the bus which ran once an hour. … There were days, … when the bus driver passed her by, wouldn't pick her up, just because she was black. … She'd stand in the sun for another hour, waiting for another bus, and this was her life. This was one of the bad parts of their customs down there.

SI: Was that the first time you were exposed to segregation, in the South?

SA: I think that was the first time I was South, yes. … Well, I can't remember whether; there may have been some aspects of segregation in the '20s. It's not clear in my mind. A child, you know, doesn't assess all these things if it sees them rarely, but an adult should understand better. I remember, before we graduated the diesel engineering course, the Governor of North Carolina sponsored a ball for us in the governor's mansion, at the state capital. … The forty ensigns, in our class were there in white dress uniforms. … They had very pretty Southern belles … hosting us and serving punch. There was music, but I don't recall dancing. I met a few friends at this school, nice chaps, but I also remembered two very, very nasty ensigns. They happened to be

from the Detroit area and one of them tried very hard to pick a fight with me, just wanted to fight me. His brother had been in the Navy before him … [in] the earliest days of the war. He was on one of the destroyers … we gave to England, lend-lease destroyers, and his ship was sunk. He drowned and this chap was very bitter about that and blamed his brother's death on the Jews, "They got us into this war." … Being the only Jewish ensign among the forty, I was somebody he just wanted to beat the hell out of. I probably would have boxed with him, except for the fact that he was a Golden Gloves champion. [laughter] I mean, you know, the man's crazy; wasn't going to [fight him]. So, I just avoided him. … It's sad that you've got such demented people salted around society. I understood that these two chaps, later … in the war, found themselves in England. … One of them was recklessly driving a Navy vehicle on an English road and killed an English girl. So, I wasn't surprised when I heard that. These were not very fine people. Now, my first assignment … after Raleigh, for some … training aboard minesweepers, was on a small … AMC. This is Auxiliary Minesweeper, 'C' for Coastal. These were the smallest … minesweepers, made of wood, and they operated out of harbors, like Portland, Maine, near the Boston area. … We would sweep … the channel out from the harbor, seaward. Sometimes, we'd go tens of miles, if the channel was that long, because … German submarines were known to drop mines in these channels, particularly if large ships or naval ships were … to move in or out. … We would have to sweep the channels before the ships could move safely through them. So, the earliest training was on that … really small, diesel-powered, ship. … We would go out just for the day, sweep the channel, come back. … I received, probably, several weeks of training on that. … Then, I served on a YMS minesweeper, [in] which 'Y' stands for Yard Minesweeper, they're associated with Navy yards, perhaps. … They were larger than AMCs, also made of wood. They also served in Europe and the Pacific.

SI: Yes.

SA: … And they were in Europe, at the invasions, … but they were wood … and they were smaller than the larger fleet minesweeper that I was on later. I remember one experience on this small AMC minesweeper. … Before we left the dock in the morning, … I had my breakfast, and as we went out and the water became very choppy. More so, and the ship began to roll. … Soon, it was rolling … close to sixty degrees, if you can imagine that! The side was almost touching … the water. The clinometers in the engine room broke, so, we don't know how far over it went, but it was at least 64 degrees. … I felt I wasn't going to hold my breakfast. … I dashed to the head, stood there over the bowl, about to throw up my breakfast. … But in the time that, … (I hate to speak this gory way), it left my mouth, the toilet bowl was no longer beneath me; the bulkhead was beneath me, and the toilet bowl was up on the side, vertically. … Everything splashed on the bulkhead, because that was under me. [laughter] This could go on sometimes for days, on longer trips. So, this was a quick initiation [laughter] [in]to what you could … expect. Later, I was assigned to the USS *Merganser*. Merganser is a type of duck and a number of … minesweepers were named after various ducks, for some reason. … [There were] a bunch of names available and they found that useful. Now, the *Merganser* had about four officers and maybe thirty men; I'm not sure. … I was the engineering officer on this [ship], as well as minesweeping [officer]; you had to combine duties on small [ships]. … We operated out of Boston and out of Newport, Rhode Island, on this … converted trawler. … There weren't enough … steel minesweepers to do the work that had to be done, so, they converted this … trawler, (a fishing vessel). It was made of steel. The tonnage, I'd … guess, [was] maybe 120

tons. A YMS is maybe sixty tons, I don't know, exactly a really small ship. … The fishing gear was ripped out, and minesweeping equipment as well as armament and communications and other equipment was installed. Everything necessary to do the job was installed. … We would go out into the Atlantic, patrol a couple of days' and sweep. … We had antisubmarine gear to listen for subs and attack them. … The ship … wasn't even watertight. I understood shipbuilding and I worried when I saw that; … in the engine room, [at] the top of the … transverse bulkhead, the welding was broken. It wasn't even welded to the deck. … We had a depth charge [launcher] on each side to hurl the depth charges off … the side and I believe we could roll them off the stern. … There were long cables, electric cables, that strung out behind us, to be towed, and we had minesweeping gear to cut mine cables and we could detonate acoustic mines and so on. I might … touch on that later. … My … cabin there was a small room, perhaps eight feet long by four wide. … (I don't think it was as much as five feet wide), and it was just … on the other side of the bulkhead from the engine room, so that my head, as I lay in the bunk, was against this quarter-inch, steel bulkhead. … On the other side of that was the engine room. … It had a ponderous diesel engine, real old, that had been there when it was a fishing boat. … It was a four-cylinder diesel engine with cast iron pistons, … twelve inches in diameter. … It would pound, pound, pound. ... [Editor's Note: Dr. Agron imitates the pounding sound.] One piston was cracked, but that didn't matter, it just kept [pounding]. … If I tried to rest in my bunk or tried to sleep … I heard the pounding in my head all the time, just on the other side of the bulkhead from me. [laughter] … I remember, … one occasion, we were out at sea, it was early in the morning, and I was in my bunk. … I heard a "Thump, thump, thump, crash. Thump, thump, thump, crash," and I immediately realized [that] a depth charge, about seven feet over my head, had torn loose and was rolling on the deck and crashing, into stanchions … right over me. … Without hesitation, I dashed out, and raced up the ladder on the bulkhead at my door. … There was a round hatch with a wheel. … I scrambled up as fast as I could, opened the hatch and jumped out on the deck. … I tried to wrestle with this thing. It was several hundred pounds, the size of a small … garbage can, you know, full of TNT, [laughter] just rolling and crashing. … I remember in the few seconds it took me to mount that ladder thinking, "Will I get there, or will the thing explode while I'm trying to get to it? Will I be aware of the flash or not?" [laughter] You know, in one second, these kinds of thoughts can go through your mind. … Very shortly thereafter, the chief boatswain's mate came running from the fo'c's'le and the two of us grabbed it and … rolled it back into its frame and lashed it with rope to keep it secure. Well, [that was] just part of a day's work. On one of the patrols out of Boston, on the USS *Merganser,* we were, perhaps one hundred miles out at sea on patrol for submarines, … as well as mines. … This would have been on the four AM to eight AM (0400 to 0800) watch and I was the OD on the bridge. It was my watch. It was a very cold January morning; I believe January. It was winter. … In the pre-dawn darkness, you could see … vapors rising out of the sea. It was the moisture condensing in the cold air; … During the war, ships sailed with no lights. You were blacked out. … When we left port on a patrol, we were told at what time [and] at what place we might expect friendly ships, American or British. … Then, in the distance, way out, … a little up off the port bow, (it was hard to make out the horizon, because it was still not light enough), I saw a tiny light, a tiny light, and then, it disappeared. I saw it again. So, I told the enlisted man there to call the Captain and he came on to the bridge and looked at it with the glasses. … Sure enough, it was a light, just above the horizon, almost right on the water. It was several miles ahead of us. … It seemed to be slowly going to the right, from port towards starboard. … Then, we could make out another white light and it seemed to be just the tiniest fraction of an inch

below and to the left of the first light. You wonder …"What could it be, a submarine? Maybe." … Then, it came right in front of us and we could see his green starboard light to the left, his red port light to the right, as well as a white light over them. All this added up to a submarine crossing our path from left to right, several miles ahead. The first light sighted was his mast light, the second light, also white was his stern light, lower in the water. When he crossed our course line, he turned directly towards us, showing his red and green running lights and the white mast light to our view. We were not expecting any friendly ships to be there, so, we thought, "Probably an enemy sub." Now, the trouble is, a submarine has a five-inch gun that can … blow you out of the water from miles away, but we had, at that time, two saluting guns on the forward deck, not much more useful than to put a couple of firework salutes in the air. We also had several machine guns, .30-caliber or .50, and we may have had two antiaircraft guns, which would be twenty-millimeters, and the depth charges, of course. Now, there was no point in shooting at him; we couldn't even reach him with our little popguns. But he was closing in. … The Captain had to make a decision. What do you do? … He's lining us right up. Now, if he's a sub, he may be lining us up for a torpedo shot or maybe [a shot] from his five-inch gun. The Captain made the right decision. We couldn't touch him with our armament, so he broke the blackout rule. We put on our running lights, red and green on the sides, and then, … three green lights, one on top of the mast, and one at the end of each yardarm, … that's the signal for a minesweeper operating at night: three green lights. … He reasoned, "If he's friendly, we would be identifying ourselves and he wouldn't think that we were an enemy. If he's enemy, we don't have a choice anyway." As we got closer and closer … the stress level rose pretty high there on that bridge. … We knew he could have blown us right out of the water and we couldn't have done a thing about it. … Then, he veered off to the side and went to the right. … When we got back, we reported this. We never heard from [the] higher-ups, who he was, what he was, why he was there, why we weren't told. Somebody I met wasn't so lucky. In Boston, while I served on the *Merganser,* one Saturday night, I was at the naval officers' club. … It was wintry, rather bleak, spirits weren't too high. … At one end of the bar was this very sad-looking fellow. He was a lieutenant commander in the Royal Canadian Navy, a man, thirty-ish, and he seemed so depressed. I thought I'd maybe cheer him up, or at least find out what's troubling him. So, I went over and started a conversation. … He told me that he was in command of a corvette. A corvette is smaller than a destroyer, but it does similar tasks, convoying work, and it can engage in, you know, fire [operations]. He worked out of, I think, St. John's, Newfoundland, could have been Halifax; right now, it eludes me. … He had been doing antisubmarine patrol in the North Atlantic. ... The convoys used that route back and forth to England and to Murmansk, [Russia], and so on. He would go about halfway across the Atlantic Ocean, [it would] take him several days, and then, he'd return. On the other side, it would be the British antisubmarine patrols who would patrol to that point, and then, return to England. Now, when he would leave on these periodic trips, he got his information from the communications officer at the naval base, … telling him where and when every friendly vessel was to be expected along his path and which friendly submarines he might cross, … so that if you encounter one that's not on your list, you assume it's not friendly [and] you go after it. This is the doctrine. … [Incidentally, according to doctrine, we should have opened fire on those lights that we saw, because we were not told they'd be there, but we had no way of reaching them … with our fire. It was hopeless. So, my Captain did the right thing.] Now, this guy was out there several days east of Newfoundland and he contacted an enemy sub. … They went after it, as it wasn't on the list, and they depth charged it; sent it to the bottom. Oil came up, a mess, and the men cheered. They were glad and, in a

happy mood, when they returned to base. When they got back, things were rather morose on base and when he … reported to the communications officer, he learned that an English submarine was overdue! So, he had sent to the bottom a hundred English young men. You can imagine how he must have felt the rest of his life. … They court-martialed the communications officer and the commander of the base. It wasn't the corvette commander's fault. … The communications officer had failed to give [the corvette commander] the information: expect an English submarine at that location.

SI: That obviously weighed heavily on him.

SA: Oh, yes. Well, there's nothing he could do. A couple of very small unrelated, humorous items on my ship, the Merganser, … it was off New England, the Captain was very fond of lobster. … We were not far from shore and he saw some buoys from lobster pots … in the water. He had ordered ship stopped and they pulled a lobster pot aboard and retrieved a fine lobster, which the cook prepared for him. He then put a five-dollar bill into an empty bottle, corked it, … put it into the lobster trap and lowered it to the bottom. … At least, the lobstermen were reimbursed. ... I also remember a little incident when we … sailed … from Buzzard's Bay through the Cape Cod Canal, up towards Boston. … It was night and I was … in my cabin. … The side of the bunk was the wall of the ship, the skin of the ship, just a quarter-inch-thick steel, and I heard scraping noises. I went up on deck and found we were stuck in the ice; Buzzard's Bay had frozen over. … It was an eerie sight, all white. … There we were, a bright moon shining, and you could seethe shoreline in the distance. … We had to wait for an icebreaker to get us out. … Sometimes you'd have a long wait for traffic to go into a port or through a canal, you'd drop anchor. … At that time, we already had loran, a new tool for navigation positioning. … You … took radio fixes from three known stations on shore and you plotted on a chart your distances and the intersect of the three was your location. … So, while waiting our turn, [it sometimes took] several hours for the ship traffic to go through a canal or whatever, we plotted our position. We were at anchor and, in the course of a couple of hours, right on the map, using loran, we'd traced how the ship swung around on its anchor chain. … We were quite amazed, because, in those days, it was new. Today, the navigation is done by satellites and you can pinpoint your position to a matter of feet, I suppose. That [caused] quite a bit of excitement for us. When you're accustomed to using celestial navigation, using a sextant to locate your position, this method, not dependent on visibility, was much more accurate. On one occasion, I had a weekend liberty and the ship was in Newport so I went to New York City. I hadn't been there in some time and, when I arrived, on a Saturday, I called a friend and we went to dinner. … But, at dinner, I felt too ill to eat and asked to be excused. I called my aunt and asked … if I could come there and … lie down and assess … my condition. I spent the night there and was pretty sick the next morning. So, a cousin was called to help. He was on leave. He was in the Marine Corps and had been at Guadalcanal. He'd seen a lot of action and contracted malaria. … He was in uniform, on brief leave, and he said, "Well, why don't I take you to the Brooklyn Navy Yard? They have a sickbay there." … I was wondering when and how I would get back to my ship in Newport, but I went to the Navy yard. The sickbay refused to admit me. They asked, "What naval district is your ship in?" It was in New England; that's the First Naval District. They said, "New York is the Third Naval District. We can't help you. You've got to report to your naval district." They refused to even admit me. I don't know how I made it to the train. … During the War, the trains were very crowded, [there was] standing-room-only. Somehow I

made it to Providence, and then, had to walk … across the square there to a bus, take the bus to Newport and get to the naval base. … I reported aboard ship and collapsed in my bunk. They took me to The Newport Naval hospital. … I had what they then called catarrhal fever, which is, today, the flu. ... [laughter] I was sick, in the hospital [for] about two weeks, but I … never forgot the bureaucracy, the stupidity, not admitting an obviously [sick] person, running a high fever, who says he can't make the trip. They don't care, you know, as if I'm in the Mexican Navy. ... "You're not in our naval district." [laughter] So, that little incident will never leave my mind, either.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: … I then received orders to report to Little Creek, Virginia, which is near Norfolk, where the minesweeper operations for the fleet were based. … After some further training, I was sent to Chickasaw, Alabama, … assigned to … a larger minesweeper that was just about completed. … The crew was beginning to assemble for it and that was the … AM-278, the USS *Project*. … I arrived by train … at Mobile, the night before I was to report to Chickasaw, which was a little north, up the bay there. … As it was already evening, I checked in at a hotel, the Battle Inn or Battle House, some such name, which was an antebellum grand hotel from the previous century. I remember very clearly, sleepy as I was after the train trip, having to battle a mosquito. … There were very high ceilings. I repeatedly swatted and it would take flight. … Finally, I gave up and accepted that it was going to bite me. Well, I reported the next day and, several days later, I came down with dengue fever, which … sometimes had been endemic to that part of the country. In fact, in Colonial days, they had an epidemic, an outbreak of it, in Philadelphia. … With climate warming, it's going to make a nice comeback further north. … This is sometimes called "back-break fever," because you feel as though every bone in your back is broken, very painful [for] several days. … We had a small, little sickbay there, with a young doctor, a lieutenant jg, [junior grade]. The crew was being assembled for the ship. When that was done, we were to go to Norfolk on our shakedown cruise. I should mention here that, during the several weeks that this procedure was taking place at Chickasaw, I was sent up to Philadelphia for a three-week course in damage control and firefighting, because they already had plans for me to be the [damage control officer]. In addition to my chores as mine sweep officer and first lieutenant, that means head of the first division, that's the deck force, as opposed to the engineering force, I was to be the mine sweep officer and damage control officer. Now, that was a good choice … of duty, because I understood ship construction and I would be prepared to handle that … very efficiently. Now, in Philadelphia, I stayed at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, also a grand old lady [of a] hotel. … They had an officer's club there that was patronized mostly by Navy officers, and some Merchant Marine officers. … It was there that I met the woman that was my first wife and Larry's mother. She was one of the hostesses and she happened to serve me dinner that night at the club. I began to speak with her and knowing there was a music concert at Fairmount Park, I invited her to go. She accepted and the rest is history, That Naval Officer's Club was; well, … how shall I say [this]? composed of the society gals of [the] Philadelphia area, [the] Mainline and so on. Once more, we run into this eternal problem, it seems. They didn't accept Jewish girls to be hostesses, but they accepted Bebe. Why? Well, she was a beautiful, well-spoken lady, highly-educated, and she spoke fluent French and Russian, as well as lovely English. … They had officers from the Free French Navy come there and there were Russian Merchant Marine captains. The other girls couldn't speak to them as readily, so,

they really appreciated Bebe. … So, we met and [I] saw her several times, and we kept in touch and, later, in Norfolk, we were married. After I completed this course, I returned to Chickasaw. We got the ship ready and went to sea. … I think we stopped at New Orleans and had to report to Norfolk. It had a mostly green crew. ... The officers had already served on ships and maybe about twenty percent of the men had. … This was what they call a shakedown cruise, where you get introduced to all the systems and procedures. We had a crew of about a hundred here and ten officers and the ship was about 950 tons. [When you] compare this with, the tenders of maybe twenty thousand tons, or more and big cruise liners, today, [are] more than a hundred thousand tons, you realize that my ship was pretty small, maybe … a third the size of a destroyer, a small ship. … It took us several days of sailing [to] go around Dry Tortugas … and around southern Florida and up to Norfolk, where we were to join … several other minesweepers in our squadron. … We were going to learn how to work together in sweeping operations, as a group, and coordinate things and the whole squadron had to assemble there. Well, several days on, we were several hundred miles east of Charleston, South Carolina, … maybe three in the morning, we got a radio message, "The SS *George Ade*," (that's a Liberty ship), "torpedoed." … We were the closest ship to it, so, they told us to, … "Steam towards it right away." This was a brand-new Liberty ship on its first voyage. … You may have heard of the *George Ade*, A-D-E; he was a writer in the nineteenth century, … a somewhat humorous writer, I don't know if he was in the style of Mark Twain, a journalist. … On a trip to Mexico, he disappeared, no further record. Nevertheless, he was thought highly enough of [that a ship was named in his honor]. …

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron on October 21, 2005, in Montville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

TS: Todd Schaefer.

SI: You were telling us about coming to the assistance of the *George Ade.*

SA: Yes. We were a minesweeper proceeding on our own from Alabama to Norfolk, a several days' trip. … During the night, when we were several hundred miles … east of Charleston, we got a radio message that the Liberty ship SS *George Ade* was torpedoed and we were the nearest ship to it and we should head right for it. But minesweepers don't travel very fast. They're not built for speed. So, we traveled top speed, … twelve knots, fourteen miles an hour. Just about dawn, we saw a blimp overhead, … [that had] flown out from the Charleston Naval Air Station. … From his height, he probably could see the *George Ade* below our horizon. … He circled us, and then, pointed straight for where we should go. That would save us some time by avoiding veering aside and we got there in a couple of hours. … We passed off his starboard side. … He was wallowing in the water, just … wallowing. The captain of the Liberty ship used a megaphone to shout over to our captain, "Torpedoed. Rudder jammed. No power. No electricity. Hold two flooded." … As he gave his quick report, … we heard gunfire coming from his port side and more guns on his ship began to fire. … These new Liberty ships carried a five-inch gun at the stern, … and they had … antiaircraft and machine guns. … They carried a Navy detail of gunners, maybe a dozen … to man the guns. … As we passed on his starboard side, talking with him, we learned that they had seen a periscope come up on their port side. The

sub was lingering around, wanted to have a look before … finishing off the George Ade. … He evidently knew where we were, from sonar, so, he poked up his periscope on the other side of the ship. … Our captain ordered "Full speed ahead." … We zipped around, but it takes a while to make a turn. You're not in a speedboat. We made a big arc left and came back off the port side of the George Ade. … We made several depth charge runs over the area. … It was inconclusive [as to] whether we got him because, after you depth charge, the water becomes very noisy, sonar sounds, echoes, reverberations. It doesn't quiet down for a while. … We did several runs. He may have gone to the bottom; or, if it's not too deep, … tried to wait it out; or, he may have managed to sneak away. We thought there was some oil on the surface, but we weren't sure. … We couldn't pick up any more contacts. Then, we got radio instructions to take [the *George Ade*] in tow and try to bring him into Norfolk. So, we tried. Now, here's a ship of perhaps five thousand tons, we're 950 tons, trying to pull him, and his rudder is jammed; the best we could do was a little better than one knot. So, we were doing maybe a mile-and-a-half, two miles an hour, [laughter] towing him. We did this for a couple of days. So, what did we do, fifty miles? … Not much. … The people in Little Creek, where the minesweeper command was, said, "This'll never do. You're holding up an entire squadron [that] can't operate until you're all there." So, … the Navy sent out a seagoing tug designed to haul large ships and two Coast Guard cutters to escort the *George Ade* into Norfolk. … They told us, to proceed at top speed to Norfolk." … So, the *George Ade* was being towed, now, by a seagoing tug and about a half-mile abeam, on each side, was a Coast Guard cutter for antisubmarine protection. … It took us … another day or two to get to the Norfolk navy yard, where we tied up at the dock. Almost right away, orders came out, "Every ship, get away from the dock and steam up to the north end of the Chesapeake and drop anchor. A hurricane is coming and we don't want ships to be dashed against the docks." ... So, we did that and went up near Patuxent, Maryland where, in shallower water, we dropped both anchors. … Although the hurricane center was some distance from us at this point [and] we were in sheltered water, the wind was so strong [that] we were dragging both anchors on the bottom. … They couldn't track hurricanes as accurately in those days as they do today. Well, we got through … that; the storm passed. We turned … south and headed back to Norfolk.

SI: During the *George Ade* rescue operation, which was also an antisubmarine operation, what were your specific duties? What would you do in that type of operation?

SA: Well, everybody has his chore to do. … The guys in the engine room are doing their job as usual, the lookouts are doing their job, … the gunner's mates are all at their stations, antiaircraft guns and your three-inch, .50-[caliber] gun. … We had two kinds of antiaircraft guns, … the twenty-millimeter … Oerlikons and the larger, forty-millimeter Bofors. … Then, you've got people manning the depth charges and you've got the antisubmarine warfare officer, [who] is in charge of the runs and giving orders everywhere. He's in charge of the attack, unless the Captain relieves him of that duty. … The Captain is …on the bridge, [along with] whoever might have been the watch officer, who would step aside for the Captain to relieve him. … All the men had their assignments. You're looking carefully. A lookout's job is very important and, of course, if you see … a periscope coming up or men, [enemy sailors], … the gunner's got to prevent them making a run for their weapons. … Then, whatever orders the Captain gives, you follow. If you've got to communicate with other ships … you've got signalmen doing that, or, if … the radioman has to send information when the Captain wants to touch base with his superiors. …

SI: What would you be doing during this type of an operation?

SA: If I were on the bridge, on watch, then, I would, together with the Captain or under him, be giving … orders to the crew on the bridge, the helmsman, maybe, the signalmen, … I [would] communicate with the engine room, the lookouts everywhere. … It depends. When you're doing minesweeping, I was the mine sweep officer, I have to be out on deck, depending on the kind of mine sweep gear employed. If we … [were] trailing the [cable], from a huge reel at the stern of the ship, letting out a quarter-of-a-mile of thick electric cable and sending electric currents through there and so on, then, I would work with the men on the stern. I've got a chief boatswain's mate under me working with the deck force. … There are different procedures for acoustic mines … and contact mines, and other types, all these different things. You work with the men under you, giving … orders supervising, encouraging and so on. After the hurricane passed, we were told to steam south in the Chesapeake, and then, … tie up at the docks at the Navy yard. We did, and, miraculously, the seagoing tug brought the *George Ade* in, but one of the two Coast Guard cutters was lost with all hands lost.

SI: Torpedoed or in the hurricane?

SA: No, swamped by the hurricane, and they had about, maybe twenty-five, thirty men aboard. Well, we also did a lot of convoy work. … We would convoy tankers and supply ships … to the Caribbean area, Puerto Rico, Bermuda [and] so on, … and we also did a lot of sweeping. Then, the orders came for us to get ready to go … to the Pacific. … The ship went to the Norfolk Navy yard for overhaul and a little bit of work [that] had to be done. ... Knowing something about ship construction, I realized that there was a flaw, a small flaw, in the design. We had the three-inch mounted gun on a platform on the fo'c's'le. … The platform was surrounded by a steel rim that came up from the deck, maybe a yard high. … In front of it was a fitting, … an air vent, that went down through the fo'c's'le deck …into the ammunition storeroom. … The ship would often take heavy seas. … I've been on the flying bridge when we took green water over our head. You had to duck behind the steel shield, which was almost five feet high. … You ducked not just from foam, but from green seas, way over your head, … over the flying bridge. So, I knew there was an excellent chance that the water coming over the fo'c's'le could go down that fitting and flood the magazine and the handling room. So, I wrote to the Navy Department's Bureau of ships suggesting they put a closure on that air fitting for use in rough weather. ... They agreed and they … retrofit it on all the ships of this kind that had been built. So, that was one of the large and little things … they did at the Navy yard. … Then, while there, I … went to the supply officer of the, Norfolk Navy Yard, and said, "You know, we have a hundred men in the crew and ten officers. We don't have enough life rafts for the crew. [Considering] the kind of work we do, antisubmarine warfare, convoy work, minesweeping, we need two additional life rafts." [laughter] … He said, "Well, … from here, you're going to go through the Panama Canal, then, you're going up to San Pedro, California, and then, you're going to Pearl Harbor. You can get them in San Pedro or Pearl Harbor. … I'm not giving you any." … Now, I'll interject a little humorous incident here that also occurred when we were in the Norfolk Navy Yard, getting ready for service in the Pacific. The ship was in dry dock and among the other ships at the Yard was a Russian merchant ship. … I thought it might be interesting to go aboard and … have a look around. … I was a lieutenant, jg then. At the ship's … gangway was a Russian sailor. …

Actually, he didn't understand English and I couldn't make myself understood. So, finally, I asked, "*Kapitän? Kapitän?*" because I thought he would realize [that] I want to see the captain. He got it and he walked me up, took me into the wardroom, where the captain greeted me, though warily. He spoke a bit of broken English. … Almost immediately, a man in civilian clothes came in, arms folded across his chest, a rather stern look on his face, and he kept his back to the bulkhead and just watched and listened to everything we said. … I said to myself, "Uh-oh. This is the KGB man aboard ship," and they had one, every one did, you know. … "I probably can't ask the captain embarrassing questions." Well, I said, "Have you ever been to the States before?" He said, "Yes, yes. We come convoy, you know. We go back, Murmansk," and so on. … He told me that the young man who met me at the gangway was in the Battle of Stalingrad. He had been a soldier in the Army and he was so badly wounded that they wouldn't take him back in the Army, but he insisted on still going into the war to fight. So, they put him on a merchant ship. … Trying to make a little small talk with the captain, … I said, "Have you ever been to New York?" He said, "Yes, yes." I said, "How did you like it?" "Oh, very, big city, very nice, very nice." He said, "I tell you funny story. I walk in Manhattan, on maybe Broadway. I see in window, store, beautiful cake, beautiful cake, not like we have in Russia." I look at the KGB man; [laughter] he's saying more than he should. So, he continued, "I wanted this cake, but I don't know how to say, 'cake.' I go in the store. The lady behind counter ask me what I want. I can't think of the word 'cake,' so, I say, 'I want sweet bread.' She said, 'Sweetbread? You go to the butcher next door.'" [laughter] So, he laughed at that. His limited knowledge of English … proved embarrassing; he didn't realize what sweetbread meant in English. So, these little memories pop up unexpectedly. Now, if I can … return to the Navy Supply Officer in Norfolk who … refused to give me two life rafts, … suggesting I get them in San Pedro or Pearl Harbor. Some weeks later, … in San Pedro, California. I went to the supply officer at the base, explained the situation and asked, "Could you give me two life rafts?" He said, "Well, you came from Norfolk; you should have gotten them there. Now, you're going to Pearl Harbor. You pick them up there. I'm not giving you any." "Yes, sir," I responded. He outranked me. Well, [the] ship went on to Pearl Harbor. We arrived in about ten days, two weeks. Remember, we're steaming at about twelve miles an hour; top speed, fourteen. … Of course, we saw some of the damage that had been done in the beginning of the war, the *Arizona,* mostly submerged, and you could see oil still bubbling up, and people [were] talking a lot about those days. We took care of whatever business we had there, and managed to get a day or two of sightseeing in. … I hadn't heard from my wife since leaving Norfolk about a month earlier. I was very worried, no letters. At each port, I thought there'd be a letter; there were none. Before we go any further west in the Pacific, I want to step back to Norfolk. I have several little anecdotes, perhaps little annoyances, but I'm surprised at myself that I should remember them. I remember, there was an officer on our ship, an ensign, (Hearst?), his name was, a California boy. I had the impression he was a little irresponsible. One evening, in Norfolk, he had liberty. I had the watch … and had to be aboard that night. … The weather was cold and he didn't have … a heavy officer's coat. … He asked if he could borrow mine. I said, "Sure." … The next morning, when he returned my coat, it had a deep, zigzag gash in the back. Evidently, in going out of the naval yard, maybe the yard area, he wanted to take a short cut and tried to squeeze under a barbed wire fence and ripped the back of my coat, and just matter-of-fact-ly returned it to me, not even … offering to have it repaired. Well, I took it to a tailor and I paid the bill. I thought, "Nothing more need be said about this. I see the kind of guy we're dealing with." Another incident, showing gross lack of consideration, … occurred the night before we were to leave for

the Pacific. My wife had come down from Philadelphia. Sometimes, when in port, … I'd have the weekend free … I wouldn't have the watch, like, I might have two of the evenings free and the third one, I'd be on duty. … The night before we were to … leave, I did have free, liberty. … We rented a room in a lovely lady's house in Norfolk. … When my wife, Bebe, would come down from Philadelphia: … Incidentally, her maiden name was Beatrice Raiziss, R-A-I-Z-I-S-S. … Her father, Dr. George W. Raiziss, was … the first professor of chemotherapy in the United States, in any college, and he was on the faculty of the Graduate School in Medicine at U of P [University of Pennsylvania]. Her mother was a physician; just great people. So, my wife came down so we would have an evening together before I had to leave, for the Pacific. … The executive officer of the ship … made out the duty schedules a month in advance, … showing which evenings which officers would have free. On the schedule, he was to have the duty aboard ship that night. … But, he switched with me, against my will; giving me the duty and he took off that night. … I didn't get to see my wife at all before leaving. I resented this very much and I thought these two acts, you see, I bring them up because they indicate selfish qualities in people; from my point of view, even irresponsible behavior. … I thought [that] these qualities should not be present in an officer. When you deal with enlisted men or officers of lesser rank and you have power over what happens to them and so on, you shouldn't be thinking of how you can use those people and unfairly take advantage of them. You should be a responsible person. … I found no shortage of these kind of people, here and in other venues of life. [laughter] Now, one more incident out of Norfolk; on one of these occasions when my ship returned from a convoy, I would make a phone call from the base to Philadelphia, because you couldn't mention where you went or where you were going in any mail correspondence. That was a no-no subject, but, once we were there, I could let my wife know that if … she is free, I'll be able to see her. I couldn't give any details. So, she would come down occasionally … and we'd have … a weekend in Norfolk. … I want to relate an incident on one such trip, when she returned to Philadelphia, from Norfolk. … She took the sea-going ferry across Chesapeake Bay from Norfolk to Cape Charles on the Delmarva Peninsula.

SI: …

SA: … The trip was almost two hours, I believe. It's quite a sea passage. … Today, they have a bridge going across. … When you got to Cape Charles, you boarded the … Pennsylvania Railroad, which took you … up to Philadelphia. … My wife boarded the ferry and it was jam-packed with people, a lot of service people, their families and others. … The ferries were racially segregated at that time. There was a black saloon, "For colored only," and one, "For white only." … She went into the white saloon and [there were] no seats; people were standing [during the] crossing, crowded. [She] went into the "colored only" saloon and [there were] plenty of soft chairs, sofas and so on, very few people there. So, she sat down and opened her book and began to read. Pretty soon, a Navy shore patrol came in and said, "Sorry, ma'am, this is 'for colored only.'" … She looked at him and said, "I'm colored." He said, "Oh, excuse me." Of course, she's as white as you and I, [laughter] but, … really, when she told me that, I admired her; the stupidity of segregation, of herding people into one room like sheep and having another one empty. … Now, back to my ship … in Pearl Harbor, I was very concerned and upset that there was no mail, so I went to the telephone building [in] downtown Honolulu to … call Philadelphia. … During the war, you had to make an appointment a day before to make the call, when the censors were on the line. … And then, I had to come back the next day to make the

call. … It was then that I learned for the first time that my wife's father had died, and it was quite a blow. … She, her sister and mother … were devastated and in deep mourning. They were inconsolable. He was to deliver a paper at the meeting of the American Chemical Society in New York, the national meeting, and he had a heart attack and died, at the age of sixty-one. … Incidentally, I diverge here, … during World War I days, the United States was in a bad situation with regard to drugs and medicinals [medicines] that were imported from Germany, and not available anywhere else. … Germany led the world in that field. … Three medical people in … Philadelphia, my father-in-law, George W. Raiziss, a pharmacological chemist, and two physicians, tried to tackle the problem of providing medication for treating syphilis. The only medicine for that was Salvarsan, which was, I think, discovered in Germany by [Paul] Ehrlich in the … late nineteenth century. … During the war years … before we entered World War I, one German submarine made it to the United States with a load of medicines, including this one. … Now, in World War I, we had over a million men under arms … and we didn't have medicines for this disease. … It was a big problem. So, these three people got together and formed the Dermatological Research Laboratory in Philadelphia. … My father-in-law was the chemist, the organic chemist and the other two were MDs, and they set out to synthesize the drug. … He was able to discover what was called neoarsphenamine. It was, I think, slightly different from the original one, and they were able to get it into production. … They produced the entire supply for the United States Armed Forces during the war. … When they formed the Dermatological Research Laboratory, … (I've seen the documents) … the three signed, … that none of them was to profit financially from this, in any way. … [I am] rather proud of that. … He discovered other bismuth and arsenical drugs, including metaphen and a drug that was used to treat Hansen's Disease, you know, leprosy, and so on. … Then, he went to … Abbott Laboratories, the pharmaceutical company, and was their research director for a number of years. So, he did really great work and his daughter, Beatrice, took a master's degree in public health and bacteriology at Penn [University of Pennsylvania]. … She also did work, research lab work, on typhoid and so on. So, that was quite a medical family. Now, back to Pearl Harbor; before we left for points west …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Was there any more to the story of calling your wife and finding out that her father had died? Was that story finished?

SA: Well, … I could say the circumstances of how he died.

SI: That is okay.

SA: … It was a terrible blow. As I say, he was only sixty-one and he still could have had productive years ahead of him. … I met him several times during the war … and my parents met him. … I don't know if this is really significant. … We were married in Norfolk City Hall and I had leave of … five or six days. … We took the train to Chicago, where my family lived, and … she had some family there also. … We had our wedding there. … Then, … [I] had to rush back to my ship in Norfolk and she went back to Philadelphia. I was wondering whether it was wise to proceed with marriage because although we really hit it off tremendously and she was a rare gem of a person, … I thought, "[With] the uncertainties of war, I might not come back, so, why

involve another person?" but we decided to go ahead anyway and didn't regret it. ... Now, in Pearl Harbor, just before my ship was to leave, (the day before), I went to the supply officer. This was my last chance to get those life rafts before leaving for Eniwetok [Marshall Islands], Saipan, Okinawa and Japan. We would be sweeping mines out there. … [I] explained the situation and asked, "Can I have two life rafts?" I've got to try to recollect the scene there. Here I am, a lieutenant jg (junior grade), that's like an Army first lieutenant, okay, and I go into the office of this supply officer for all of Pearl Harbor Navy Yard. … He's a full captain; that's like an Army colonel. His office [was] a huge room, rugs on the floor, I remember, looked like Persian rugs, wonderful, large, mahogany desk, beautiful furnishings. … He's sitting, a rather large man, at the desk, "fighting the war." At four PM, their day's work ended, the officers retired to their officer's club. There's a Navy band playing music for them, their wives could join them, they have drinks … served. A wonderful way to spend the war! Dinner is … served … later. … After the war, he probably got a medal for [the] wonderful service that he contributed. Now here I am, standing in front of him. I salute him, "Sir," and request two life rafts that we need for the crew, "We're going over to do minesweeping and antisubmarine warfare." He looked at me, and said, "You stupid son-of-a bitch." That's exactly what he said to me! "Why the hell didn't you get them in Norfolk or San Pedro? This is a frontier area. Get the hell out of here." That was his reply to me! He couldn't care less if we … drowned at sea. These are the things I saw … in the Navy, as you may see too in public life and private life. … You know, these guys weren't all great heroes. This man was trying to sabotage us, kids … young kids in their teens, twenties he couldn't care less. ... I left, perhaps more shocked and surprised than humiliated. I wasn't humiliated, because he was the villain of the piece, not I. … But we're leaving tomorrow morning and I still have the responsibility for the safety of the men and the ship. This is … my responsibility as damage control officer, (first lieutenant); I have a problem to solve. So, after dark, I got a work crew and we went to the area where … they stored life rafts, acres of them it seemed, stacked maybe ten high. It looked like a football field of life rafts. … So, we resorted to what we called "midnight requisition." We "stole" two life rafts and carried them back to the ship. Now, if I had been caught, I may have been court-martialed. I'd probably have gone to prison. [laughter] You see the stupidity, but I did my duty, as I saw it.

SI: Could you see a class system, among officers, between Annapolis men, Reservists and guys that had come out of the midshipmen's schools?

SA: … Right. Most of the officers were Reservists. Some had said, "The war was won by Reservists." … Annapolis men, well, the Chief supply officer at Pearl Harbor was, doubtless, an Annapolis man. … There were very, very good Annapolis men, on real fighting ships, that did heroic services but, … if we, Reservists, weren't there … an Annapolis man would have had to do the … same job. … In peacetime, Annapolis men were assigned to the jobs that we had. So, there was no distinction as to our responsibility. We had, on our ship, … two warrant officers and while they are not exactly commissioned officers, they're above enlisted ranks. They don't have a commission from the President, they have a warrant. So, it's an officer of a kind and they were career Navy people and, the of two on our ship, one had been in about twelve years before the war started and the other one, maybe eight. They had many tales to tell about their duty in China in the '30s, and so on. … But the Reservists carried the war on their backs and, without Reservists, there'd be no Army, there'd be no Navy, as we knew it. …

SI: Did any of the Annapolis men who you encountered throw it around that they were Naval Academy graduates?

SA: No. You see, … I would meet him, maybe, what? at an officer's club or maybe in an official duty like this, but we didn't see them on minesweepers. You wouldn't see them on the landing craft, you wouldn't see them on other kinds of essential ships. I had a friend, … now deceased, a former mayor of Maplewood, a fine man. … He was in the Navy, in the war, in some big battles, … not an Annapolis man. He was the captain of an ammunition ship, standing just behind the fighting ships in the battles of Leyte Gulf. … If hit, his ship could blow up like that. So, I can hardly think of a more dangerous assignment. Reservists do that, … we were trained sufficiently to do what a regular would do. We had our individual life experience … that they didn't have. That was valuable. … For the most part, we learned or picked up the necessary knowledge and talents that were needed for the job, I'd say about as well as they did. …

SI: Would you like to go on?

SA: At Pearl Harbor, they removed the Captain of my ship. He cracked up, actually, and they had to transfer him to the hospital. He was a lovely, Southern gentleman, highly educated, and had been the executive officer on a wooden minesweeper, a YMS, at Anzio, Italy. Before they invaded, during the night, … he was in a line of minesweepers, one behind the other, sweeping off the beach. … The ships were a quarter-of-a-mile behind each other as they … swept the mines … in front of the beaches for the landing in the morning. So, they worked during the night, in complete darkness, before the landing craft could move in. … He was on the bridge when the ship ahead of his hit a mine. … There was a flash of light and an explosion, and nothing left but smithereens of wood … and parts of bodies. … He had to steam right through it, not stop, not diverge, from the course. … It's experiences like this that probably contributed to his later breakdown. …

----------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------

SI: Please, continue.

SA: Instead of sufficient rest, and recuperation, they gave him command of a larger ship … with much more responsibilities. … He held the job for, I don't know, [the] better part of a year maybe, and then, eventually, cracked up, had to be taken away. … He was succeeded by Lieutenant Alexander, a Tennessean, another fine Reservist. He had been our executive officer when he took over as captain. … Then, we sailed … from Pearl Harbor to Eniwetok, an atoll in the Pacific. I don't recall how long it took us to get there, maybe, … ten days … or so. We entered the lagoon, inside … a fringe of islands. ... The lagoon is maybe twenty-five miles in diameter, ringed by little islands like sausages, each maybe a half-a-mile long, around the horizon. … There may have been a hundred ships … in the harbor, at anchor. … I looked down; in the clear water, you could see the coral down at least thirty feet deep and the bottom was littered with beer cans! [laughter] So, we saw evidence that many Navy ships had already been there. [laughter] By now, more than sixty years later, I'm sure the bottom dwellers and … corals and so on have obliterated the beer cans. We went on from there … to Saipan, and, en route between the two places, … was the Jewish religious holiday of Yom Kippur, which is the

Day of Atonement, a sacred day. … There were two or three Jewish enlisted men on the ship and I was a Jewish officer, one of ten officers. … I asked one of the boys to check [with] the other one or two and find out if they'd be interested in having a brief prayer session. You know, these were kids, nineteen, maybe twenty, eighteen, and I was all of twenty-four, [laughter] … myself. So, I felt … a little responsible for them. … The guy came back; yes, they would [be interested in having a prayer session]. Now, the question is, where could we find a little quiet and privacy on a ship like that? Every space is accounted for. There's virtually no unused space, … that was a little bit of a problem. So, I went to the Captain to explain the situation. … "Skipper," I said, "several Jewish enlisted men and myself, would like to get together for a brief Yom Kippur service and I just don't know where we can hold it. Any suggestions?" So, he said, "Well, why don't you use my cabin?" Pleasantly surprised, I said, "Well, thanks, Skipper. I'll put in a good word for you." [laughter] We had a hearty laugh at that, and it meant a lot to the boys and I was glad to be able to do it.

SI: How strict was the separation between officers and enlisted men on such a small ship? Was that rigidly enforced?

SA: Well, we had our own quarters, … a small section with several of our staterooms, two in a stateroom. The Captain had his quarters a deck above us, which was nearer to the bridge. … There was a wardroom, … a long table and chairs where we took our meals. … We had a little galley off to the side and a black steward's mate would serve us the meals and prepare them. So, we ate at that, officers' mess. … We would … each pay our monthly stipend into the mess account and buy the food from that. So, the mess was … separate and the off living quarters were separate. We had our separate head, shower, whatever. There weren't any other recreational facilities you can speak of. The men had their mess hall, with benches and tables, and, if they wanted to play cards or whatever when they were off, watch or read or write letters, they could use that room. Their quarters were very tight. You can't imagine, a room this size; how do I describe it for the tape? [In] a room maybe ten-feet-by-fifteen-feet, maybe, ten-by-twenty, you might have forty men living in it, maybe more. They had bunks and the bunks were three high, but the overhead was only … about seven feet above the deck, not much space. … At the end of the rows of bunks, were little lockers, about a foot or so wide and a couple feet high, and that's where all the sailors belongings had to be, in that locker, his change of uniforms, personal gear, shaving gear, writing pad, whatever. … The rooms were not [well-ventilated], no portholes in them and there was no air conditioning at that time. … In the tropics, you can imagine how hot and muggy it got. … One of my duties, as first lieutenant in charge of the hull and safety of the ship and the men, was to conduct Saturday inspection and be alert for sanitary and health hazards. … I would pick up the mattress, which lay on … canvas … over a frame, sort of, and, sometimes, I would be surprised at what I found. … Even in the tropics, the gobs wore black socks. Some might wear their socks for several weeks, and then, placed them between the mattress and the canvas. [laughter] … Well, that smelled after a while and got hard. … Some of these boys … were hillbillies from isolated communities who weren't accustomed to higher levels of sanitation. … We had to teach them acceptable standard … out of concern for health situations. We had a sick bay, it was a small room, the size of a bathroom, and there was a pharmacist's mate, not an officer, not a physician, and he took care of all the medical needs. … Space was very tight, every inch is accounted for just what you need to do the ship's mission; it's not a vacation cruise you're on. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: Then, we sailed on to Saipan, … one of several islands called the Marianas. The southern one is Guam, … the largest one, and then, you have Saipan and, north of it, Tinian. … Each island is maybe thirty miles long … and ten miles wide. … The Marianas people are … related to those of Okinawa and … I think, to people from Taiwan. People from that part of the Pacific, and some of their religious practices and beliefs are similar. They were very interesting, as I learned in Okinawa. … On the beach in Saipan, I found part of … a human lower jaw, with several teeth in it, molars and pre-molars. I took it to a Navy dentist and asked if he could comment on it. He thought it was not a Caucasian jaw bone. So, it could have been a *kamikaze* who had been blown up. … I gave it to him as I didn't particularly want that kind of souvenir. … Then, there was a place where they to blasted … through coral reefs, to improve the harbor, so [that] larger ships could get in, and I took a five pound coral reef sample back. … Saipan had quite a … war history … in World War II, and you can probably look it up in reference books. The north end of the island has a very steep cliff from which many men, women and children jumped. … They committed suicide because they were told … the Americans would do terrible things to them. … There were, I think, one or several Japanese soldiers [who] survived in the jungle there for perhaps thirty years after the war?

SI: Yes.

SA: Yes, after the war, he came out as a very old man, didn't know the war was over.

SI: I think that was on Guam.

SA: I think it was Saipan.

SI: Saipan as well, but the guy who was there for thirty years was on Guam.

SA: … Well, we were there for a while, got ashore a bit, and we then … moved on to Okinawa. … We arrived at Buckner Bay, I think that's at the southeastern part of Okinawa. … In this large harbor … we saw beached and broken ships of all sizes lying on their sides, and strewn about on the rocks. … About a week before we came there, a typhoon had struck, … caught the ships … in the harbor and broke them up a big disaster. … Soon after we arrived, we got word that a second typhoon was coming. … They couldn't … in those days … accurately … track hurricanes or the possible routes they might take. They didn't want a repeat of what had recently happened so all the ships were told to get out at sea. Where do you go? Well, since they had information on where the typhoon was they old us to, "Head exactly for the storm," the assumption being, "By the time we get there, it will have moved elsewhere." So, since you can't predict accurately where it will be, you go for the location it is at now. So, we sailed out of Buckner and Bay it was … hell for three days. The first day, everybody threw up … and, the second day, there was no more food left to throw up so, we spit up blood. ... Blood vessels were breaking. … All the dishes were smashed. … There were racks to contain dishes, but the dishes managed to fly out. Chairs slid and … went banging side-to-side. They crashed into tables; just tremendous damage aboard ship. … I remember, when we steamed out [of] Buckner Bay, I had

to check everything above decks, and tried to … move things inboard, not out near the rails, and lash them as close to the centerline of the ship as possible, to give the ship more stability. … Otherwise, outboard weight can capsize a ship because of leverage … like the principle of the beam. [If] you have a weight at a distance it magnifies the downward force. … We tried to secure everything … inside too, but this was a dreadful, dreadful storm; … it was three days of hell. On the radio, we …heard SOS calls; they were distress calls. Ships were splitting in two, particularly … LSTs [Landing Ship Tank] … the big troop and vehicle-carrying ships. … They weren't necessarily carrying troops, but they certainly had a crew aboard. Like big shoeboxes, they snapped in two and sank. … After three days, we took stations abeam of each other, about a mile abeam, and steamed forward a … number of miles, then moved over to the side and come back on parallel tracks. … We combed an area about half the size of New Jersey, … searching for survivors. … The ocean was littered with debris, smashed boats, parts of ships, life jackets, life rafts, but we never found a survivor. We saw a life jacket with what we thought were dungarees, you know, … sailor's pants or jeans. So, we stopped the ship alongside and, with a boat hook, … pulled it up and a pair of legs slid into the water. The sharks got the rest. Stenciled was, "Electrician's mate, third class," on the life jacket. We also found another life jacket with a man's name stenciled on it, but no remains. The sharks got you if you had to take to the water. … Now, this area was … northeast of Taiwan. It would be … south of Okinawa. … When, we returned to Okinawa, … in the harbor several Army men came out to our ship on a little craft. … They complained to us how terrible it had been and asked, "Did we have any food? Did we have any water?" What a hell it was; the whole base, all the Quonset huts, had blown away in they typhoon. To keep from being blown away, they dug foxholes which quickly filled with water and they crouched in them, up to their neck in water, during the storm. [laughter] … We said, "Well, we sympathize with you, but we'd have gladly changed places with you. You wouldn't have wanted to be on our ship." [laughter] … I did a little bit of sightseeing on a small island in the immediate area around where the ships were and I saw the traditional burial tombs of the Okinawa people. Could you, … imagine something like … the Sphinx in Egypt. You have these two horizontal arms extending forward, or perhaps they are legs, and then, instead of a … head you have a dome or igloo-shaped … structure with a little opening. … You go through the opening into a room with shelves around the walls and bones lying on the shelves. The room was semi-dark and had a musty smell. … It was explained to me that … the tomb is … representative of the female figure; with upper legs and abdomen, and the door is the opening to the abdomen or womb. … The dead are buried and, after a … period of time, … the bones are removed and placed on a shelf inside the tomb to await resurrection and rebirth through the opening. … Similar structures and practices exist on … other islands around Taiwan and the Marianas, as well as here in Okinawa. I remember … being at a little farm that had been abandoned, [because] of the fighting. … I poked around in the ground and found a little teapot lid made of porcelain and a box for holding chopsticks, which I cleaned up and used for pencils. …

SI: How long was this after the battle had ended and the island had been secured?

SA: Several months? … I don't have the date for this. … I've got to do some … research; I probably have it. ... Then, we visited Sasebo, which is on the island of Kyushu, the southwest island of the main islands [of Japan]. … Sasebo is on the west side, facing the Asian mainland. It was the area where the Japanese permitted the Christian missionaries to live in. You know,

they banned them from the rest of Japan, and so, it had a fairly good-sized Christian population and churches on the west side, in that sense, Europeanized. … We steamed into Sasebo harbor and saw a mountain in the distance. … On the other side of the mountain was Nagasaki on which the atomic bomb had been dropped a short time before we were there. … The Japanese regarded us as demigods. They were in awe of us. Of course, they'd had the Hiroshima bombing too. … We got very sick there. … At anchor in the harbor of Sasebo, we distilled our own fresh water. … There were farms and settlements on the very steep mountains surrounding the bay, … and I guess we got a mild form of dysentery, diarrhea, from the fresh water … we made from the bay. … In order to increase the production of fresh water, they lowered the pressure, and hence the temperature in the evaporators. … They lowered the pressure (vacuum) so [that] the water would evaporate faster at a lower temperature, but that doesn't kill all the bacteria. Now, it may be all right at sea, but … harbor water may be a little more contaminated. So, there was some discomfort from that for a while. [laughter] … Sailing around Shikoku, we went to the Inland Sea, … at the southern part of Honshu. … The scenery was spectacular, mountains rising right up out of the sea and forested islands and some little steaming volcanoes, little ones, cones. … We were in a squadron of four minesweepers … seeking to spend the night in a little bay, rather than in the Inland Sea. … The passage into the bay was a narrow strait between a quarter-mile and a half mile wide. … It was a good mile long and … opened up into a round harbor, sort of like a flask … with a long neck. … We were the fourth ship in line and once in the harbor, we were going to drop anchor. The four of us … were expecting to swing around our anchor with the tide, as it went in and out during the night. … I did not have a watch at that time, so … I stood on the port side, about amidships … looking to my left at the water and the shoreline. … The sun had begun to set, [there was] a fair wind and the water was choppy and gray, dark, darkish. Visibility wasn't very good. Now, the three other ships went ahead; ours was the last one in. There were lookouts on all side. Nobody else saw a thing but I told the man on the phone next to me, a lookout, "Report to the bridge. Floating object off the port beam." … It looked as if something dark would periodically break the surface and disappear. … Now, I have always had an interest in astronomy and I had a trained eye for astronomical observations. I had also done microscope work for years. So, my eyes went … trained to see things, to look for things. My report to the bridge was sent to the squadron commander on the lead ship, and he ordered our ship to fall back and investigate. So, we stopped the engines and everybody began looking. … Soon, somebody else saw it, and then, others saw it. … The trouble was, if it is a mine, … it may have torn loose from its anchor and may have been … floating for months. It would be encrusted … with barnacles and other growth and being a little heavy didn't float easily above the water. Evidently, the chain or … cable that connected it to the anchor at the bottom had broken. But such a floating mine … didn't have enough buoyancy, due to the added weight on it, a very dangerous situation. So, after we spotted it … they ordered everybody … not involved to "Get over on the other side of the ship. Get behind the deckhouses." … They fired on it with rifles … to no avail. Then, they opened up with antiaircraft guns and, "Boom," a tremendous explosion. [laughter] Well, if the tide had taken that mine into the harbor during the night, as each of our four ships [were] swinging around … our anchorages, on the anchor chains, at least one of our ships would have been blown up and everybody might have been lost. You know, nobody ever said "thank you" to me. [laughter] It was all part of the day's work.

TS: When you were on a mission, which types of mines did you most encounter?

SA: … We swept for … three of the … four types used at that time. … The oldest mines, going back to World War I, perhaps earlier, were spheres, globes … a couple of feet or so in diameter, with several hundred pounds of TNT. … They had a chain … or … a cable leading to an anchor, which was a heavy weight … of steel or concrete lying on the bottom. … The mine was suspended a short distance below the surface, so that if a ship … hit it, "Boom." Then, they developed wire-like … antennae extending out from the mines so that if a ship brushed against an antennae it would set the mines off. It didn't need to hit the mine itself. … We … swept these. … From the ship's … quarters, we towed cables going out … more than a thousand feet. … At the end of each cable … was a float, an elliptical steel structure which … kept the cable … at the surface. … The cable led down to a suspended steel, … shear-like device, about six feet long. … If the mine's anchoring … cable … struck the cable being pulled behind the ship, it was led … back … into the shear's jaw, and was cut by the abrasion. … The mine would then bob to the surface … and be destroyed by gunfire. If you didn't succeed, if it hit you, you're gone. The second kind of mine was … the acoustic mine. These were intended to be detonated by the propeller noise of the ship. … To destroy these, we had, at the front of the ship, at the stem, a Y-shaped yoke … which would be swung down into the water ahead of the ship. At the end … the yoke held … a steel drum … the size of a small trash can, and it had a steel plate, maybe a foot or more … in diameter. … Inside the drum a metal hammer device operated by … compressed air, would bang on the steel plate, projecting a great noise ahead of the ship, and causing the acoustic mine to go off before the ship arrived … The third kind … was the magnetic mine which responded to the magnetic field produced by a ship. … It was anchored … to the bottom … a few … feet below the water surface, so [that] you couldn't see them. … When, a steel ship … passed over them, or … approached them, … its magnetic field would set off the mine and sink the ship. There was one fourth kind, which the U.S. developed … late in the war but didn't get a chance to use it extensively. … It was a pressure mine. If you can picture a very large sausage, weighing maybe six hundred pounds … filled with explosives; … dropped from airplanes … in the shipping channels. They were used in Japan, before the war ended. … When a ship approaches, it produces a bow wave, the pressure of the water being pushed ahead of the ship … (a differential … with ordinary pressure of the sea water). … It is detected by the mine, which explodes after a pre-set delay. … The mine … detects the pressure … but it does not go off immediately … but waits for the ship to be right over it. …Thus it would break the back of the ship. … If a convoy moved into a minefield, the mines could be set so that … the first ship or second ships would not activate the mine. They would set it to go off, say, the … third or fourth. … By then, the whole convoy may well be over the minefield, and … the mines would all go off, very fiendish devices, you see. … Now in Japan, the pressure mines became a problem to us when the war ended. … These mines were dropped to bottle up … shipping during the war, … but now we had to get in. We had to get our supplies and troops … into their best harbors. So, the miners had to be … removed and the only way to remove such a mine … was to blow it up by having a big ship pass over it. So, they took Liberty ships and sailed them over … the mines, using volunteer crews. … Those who volunteered … were sent home. They didn't have to serve any more time overseas. … At that time, the requirement for … discharge from active duty …. was so many months of service, like thirty-six or whatever it was. … Some who had been in the service a short time, [thought], "My goodness, it'll be years before I get out." So they were willing to volunteer to do this. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: They expected our invasion of Japan to take place on a stretch of beach … several miles long, on the south coast. … Japan is so mountainous that almost the whole country rises precipitously out of the sea. They were probably right. We would have had to invade along that stretch [of] several miles of fairly good beach. So, the Japanese planted 2,500 mines in parallel rows off that beach, several years before the war ended. … They thought: "This is where the Americans would invade." God, it would have been a disaster! … But, since the war ended sooner than we expected, instead of anticipating a happy trip … home, we were told, "Now, you go in there and take those mines out." [laughter] So, "Yes, sir" it was. … Each of our minesweepers worked with a couple of Japanese minesweepers, which were very small … boats, and they worked together with us. Our captain gave the orders as we maneuvered in the minefield area. There were two Japanese sailors on our ship. One, a signalman, signaled the orders to the Japanese ships. The other was an interpreter. … My captain would tell him, in English, what to do. He would tell the signalman, in Japanese and he would … signal to them as we … executed our movements. … These two guys were used to eating the dreadful Japanese Navy food; probably, fish heads and rice was all they got in their meals. … The signalman was of slight build, a nice kid … He told me he was born in Seattle, American, *Nisei*. … When he had graduated high school, as a present, his parents gave him a trip to Japan, where he had never been. … Then, the war broke out and he was slapped into the Navy. [laughter] He couldn't avoid it, and he felt so bad. He said, "Do you think I'll ever be able to and go back see my parents again?" I said, "Well, right now, you guys are very unpopular back home, but, in a few years, I think things'll improve. You'll be back to see your family." On one occasion, we were … in Yokohama Bay, maybe forty miles south of Mt. Fuji. … It was in the early morning and [we] were standing on the flying bridge. We started sweeping operations at sunrise. … I looked and there … in the north, from below the horizon, as the shoreline was too far away, … rose Mt. Fuji, … out of the water; the whole white cone with orange ice on top. It was spectacular. … I said to him, "Now, isn't this the most beautiful sight you've ever seen?" and this little Japanese sailor shrugged his shoulders, and said, "No, it's just like Mt. Rainer," [laughter] you know, so blasé. … He said, "I've seen Mt. Rainer many times." … I did not expect to hear that kind of response from a Japanese sailor. [laughter]

SI: Where were you when V-J Day was declared?

SA: We were at sea … in the Pacific somewhere. … We were very glad, of course, but we knew it wasn't over for us. [laughter] "It's not over until it's over."

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: … I remember in one Japanese town where we had pulled in, … I got a sword; I'll tell you that [story]. It was a little harbor and we were the first American ship they had seen since before the war. … At that time, we knew that all … Japanese had to turn in their weapons. … The Americans were going to confiscate them. The rifles were collected in … a huge pile in the town square … to be burned in a bonfire. … The swords were to be turned in to the police headquarters [in] each prefecture or county and the army people from General MacArthur's headquarters … were going to come with trucks to take them back to … headquarters. … Another officer and I got our Captain's permission to go ashore. … The whaleboat … was

lowered for us and we were taken the short distance to the pier by two crew men. … There was a rather rickety pier, about … ten feet wide, extending almost a hundred feet … into the water, and from there … [it was] a little walk into the town. … We came ashore and, immediately, crowds began to run towards us, staring at us, … the first Americans to arrive. … We asked where the police station was, because I wanted to get a couple of swords for ourselves. Nobody understood English. I tried French, German; nobody understood a word. We … walked around feeling like the Pied Piper, people gathering behind us, and then, I found a little building with what looked like a red globe and I guessed, "That's the police station." It was, and we found a civilian head of the police in there. ... He spoke a little English. … He was very courteous, bowed and had us sit down, served us tea and talked a bit of pleasantries. … Then, I told him what we were there for. I said, "I understand all the swords are being turned in to you here at the police station. … We would like to take two swords back with us to the ship." … He replied, "Oh, I cannot do that." "Why not?" "Well … well, Marshal MacArthur's orders," (he called him marshal), "Marshal MacArthur's orders. We have them here in the basement and the American Army trucks are coming tomorrow to take them to Marshal MacArthur's headquarters and they have all been accounted for. I've inventoried them." … I had to think quickly. I knew who would probably get these swords, probably officers sitting at … desks at headquarters. [laughter] So, I said, … "Get me two pieces of paper. We will write you a receipt, each of us, for a sword. … When … the Army… comes, tomorrow with the trucks to pick all your swords, give them these receipts for our two swords and they will accept them." He bowed deeply as I wrote, "Received from Chief of Police So-and-So," the date, "One army sword." The other officer took a Navy officer's sword. … The receipts we signed also [gave] our rank and serial number … and he accepted them. We never heard from Marshal MacArthur about it, [laughter] so, I guess it was all right. So, that's the story. [laughter] … Many years later, when I was at Rutgers, Dr. Herbert P. Woodward, the dean of the college in Newark, [the] College of Arts and Science, was a member of the Newark Rotary. … He was president of his Rotary chapter, in 1964 or so. … As president of his Rotary chapter, he got to go to the annual … international convention of Rotary which … that year was held in Tokyo. … I told him my story about the sword. … I said, "You know, I … don't need it now. At that time, just after the … war, [I wanted it]." I said, "I also have … a slip of paper with the name of the person who owned it. … I will give it to you and, [if you] will meet the head of the Rotary in Tokyo, ask him if he can put you in touch with the people who can get the sword back to the … original owner. … Tell him you know the person who has it. He was in the United States … Navy and he's willing to return it." … He said he'd be glad to do that. … When he came back, he reported, "I did as you asked me to in Tokyo, … and was told, "Thank that person very much. We appreciate his consideration, but we're not interested in weapons of war any more, … and I don't think that family would want it now.'" So, … now, I feel [my] conscience is clear about the matter.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Todd Schaefer 12/1/05
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/22/06
Reviewed by Sam L. Agron 8/6/07 and 10/17/13