

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans

Personal Experience

O. H. 1155

JOHN HELLWIG

Interviewed

by

John Demetra

on

November 9, 1988

## JOHN HELLWIG

Born in New York in 1923, John Hellwig is a Navy veteran of the Pacific theater of World War 2. He and his wife Irene, have raised a son and three daughters in the Boardman area, and moved to Canfield two years ago. Mr. Hellwig served at Guadalcanal and several other very important naval actions in the South Pacific, earning five Bronze stars and the Purple Heart. After the war he worked for Southern California Edison for three years, Ohio Edison for ten years, and has been self-employed since 1960.

He enjoys gun collecting, flying and most outdoor activities.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN HELLWIG  
INTERVIEWER: John Demetra  
SUBJECT: Pacific theater, depression, combat  
DATE: November 9, 1988

D: This is an interview with John Hellwig for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II Veterans, by John Demetra, at Canfield, Ohio, on November 9, at 10:35 a.m.

Okay John, can you tell me a little bit about growing up in the Depression?

H: Yes. I was born and raised in North Pelham, New York. That is just outside of New York City. Just north of the City in Westchester County. When the Depression hit my dad was in the contracting business, building small roads. He had purchased a new white truck and we had the Mac, which was a chain driven truck. The Depression hit and the most startling thing to happen to me then was we were coming in town and the mailman stopped my dad and gave him a check from the government for building the roads on Fort Salonga in Long Island Sound. My dad stopped at the bank and deposited it and when we got home my mom said, "John," that is my dad, "the mailman didn't drop the check off." My dad said, "I already deposited it." My mother started to cry and she said, "The bank closed at 1:00." We lost all that money and that was a considerable amount of money. I learned later in life that it was \$10,000 in 1929. So, we lost our trucks and everything. My dad went into handyman work, repairing screens, anything, windows, cleaning sewers; anything that was required to keep us going he did.

D: Being a contractor.

H: That is how we made our living in the early 1930's. Dad made the living for the family.

D: Were you forced to go to work?

H: No, but I helped him. When I wasn't in school I helped him.

D: Did you have a pretty big family?

H: No, we only had three sons, three of us. I was the oldest. I am German and Italian by descent and the oldest son was the one they rely on most.

D: How did you go about getting in the Armed Forces? Were you drafted or did you enlist?

H: No, I enlisted in the Navy. My dad was Navy and I always had that in my mind that I wanted to be a sailor. For some reason in 1941, . . . In high school I decided to join the Navy. I just went.

D: You graduated?

H: No. I graduated after I come out of the Navy. I lacked one . . . We had to have seventeen credits to graduate back there and I lacked English and English II, I think they called it. It was about Shakespeare and I couldn't cut it. So, when I come out of the service I knew I had to have at least a high school education and I was married. I wrote to my principal in school back in New York and he told me that I could take an ICS course. I took the ICS course in Shakespeare, or in English II as we called it back there.

D: A correspondence course?

H: Yes, and I took it. I passed it and I got my graduation certificate and I was twenty-four years old.

D: So, you enlisted in the Navy while a junior in high school. What was the enlisting and the induction process like?

H: It was just a question of going down to the recruiter and filling out the papers, taking them home and having my dad sign them. Then I went to Norfolk, Virginia for the boot camp. They called that boot camp for training. I think it was sixteen weeks. They taught us how to take care of our clothes, we had to roll them, and fold them properly. We got a butch haircut. We had to learn how to tie knots and general nomenclature about handling small boats: rowboats and things like that. Had to go through a tear gas chamber without a gas mask. It just proved that the gas mask worked. They

would send you through the first time with the gas mask, the second time you went through without it and we knew it. Cried like a baby. The rest of the time at the camp you learned how to shoot a 30-06 Springfield World War I rifle and you had to qualify for marksmanship. You learned a lot, as I said before, in watching. Then you were assigned to ship.

D: Was the training physical, was the training also?

H: Calisthenics, marching, you had the . . . The blue jackets manual you had to go through that. They had actual classrooms.

D: What is a blue jacket manual?

H: That is . . . There is one here somewhere. It is the instruction manual on how to become a sailor basically. It is a training manual.

D: That took sixteen weeks?

H: Yes.

D: Where do you go from there?

H: From there I was assigned to the ship.

D: At the rank of?

H: Seaman apprenticing, \$21 a month.

D: What did you do with it all.

H: Believe it or not, since these were coming in the Depression days and they were, I was sending \$10 a month home to my mom dad on what we called an allotment in the Navy. They took it out of your pay automatically and the check went home every month, or wherever you assigned it to.

D: That was of your own wishes?

H: Yes, it was my own wishes.

D: I have talked to people that were in the Civilian Conservation Corps and it seemed like a lot of the money they made . . . Not that they made a lot but the money they made, a certain amount of it did go home automatically. They had no choice involved.

H: No, this was you volunteered what you wanted to go home. I had a total of over six years in the Navy and all that time I had an allotment coming home to New York. It never stopped.

D: When you enlisted in the Navy did you anticipate fighting in the war?

H: No, I never realized there would be a war.

D: Just because your father had been in the Navy?

H: Maybe I wanted to be in the Navy.

D: Did you make it into a career?

H: I wanted to make it a career. In 1945, after World War II ended, I was still in the Navy and I was at San Diego where I had met my wife to be. I wanted to stay in the Navy because at about thirty-seven years of age I would have retired. I was chief petty officer at that time and I turned down the warrant officer commission because the warrant officer commission was not permanent. It was a temporary commission where the chiefs was permanently . . . Could never reduce your rank. If you were a warrant officer when they had to many of them they could say, "Okay, you are going to go back to chief." You couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't get a shore station. If I could have gotten a shore station for duty I would have been more than happy to stay in the Navy and retire from there. I liked the Navy.

D: You wanted a shore station because of getting married and all?

H: Yes, I was getting married. I had six years in the Navy and almost five at sea due to the war.

D: So, when you enlisted it wasn't like you enlisted for one year or two years?

H: It was a three year enlistment.

D: Which it was extended because of the war?

H: I voluntarily extended it three more years when the first three years was up. Then I did not extend it when the last enlistment was up because I didn't stay in.

D: I guess after you finished boot camp then came your first sea tour?

H: Yes. I was on 264 U.S.S. McClennahan, a four stacker destroyer from World War I. I was assigned to that. We just cruised around and you had a home port. Then we would come back. Then we went down to South America to Rio--as far as we went--and then we stopped as such islands as--which is now I understand quite a

resort--Antigua, and came back up to Puerto Rico and Hamilton, Bermuda and into Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and then up into New York. While we were in New York is when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and I was on leave up into Pelham, New York. I lived there three days. Suddenly a man to me called and told me to get myself back to my ship, because they had bombed Pearl Harbor. Which I did and we took the four stacker up to Halifax, Nova Scotia and turned it over to the English. We came back and I was assigned to the U.S.S. American Legion which was an A.P.A. . . . No it wasn't an A.P.A. at that time, it was Army transport and it had a sister ship the Hunter Liggett. They were both the same types of ships. When you say sister we mean two identical ships. They were both converted to A.P.A.'s, which means Attack Personal Amphibian and we went through the Panama Canal past Christmas Island and into the South Pacific. We made a training beach head at American Samoa and then we went down into New Zealand and picked up our Marines, ammunition, everything for combat.

D: You had Marines in New Zealand?

H: Yes. The United States had a big operating base in New Zealand and in Australia. As you look back at it now Guadalcanal was only a day's--twenty-four hours basically--sailing time from Australia, from New Zealand, to where the Japs had their base. People don't realize that but it was that close.

D: Going back a minute, you mentioned about taking that four-stacker up to Halifax, was it a World War I destroyer?

H: Yes.

D: What was your job on that and what was it like?

H: I was a seaman.

D: Okay.

H: Anything I was assigned to I would do, including wheel watch. Wheel watch is steering the ship as we would call it; civilian nomenclature. We would have a three hour watch. I would be assigned simply to that, where you would stand at the wheel and you would get orders from the skipper, or officer of the day, and he might give you a heading of three-six-five. Then you would acknowledge and say, "Steering three-six-five sir." And you had to be on that course and then you just watched the compass and kept the ship on the heading that you were assigned to do.

D: Is that what you did most, John?

H: No, that would be one watch you would get. The other time you might have to scrub the decks, hose down, clean compartments guns, etc.

D: Was the ship in good shape? Was it some old . . .

H: Well, it was an old one that was in good shape. We had to keep it painted. We had to scrape it and paint it. If you get into the Navy yard like we did, you get into what they called a dry dock, and actually if you went to a slip that has two sides and two ends--one end opens up--and the water is in there. You get in there and then they start pumping the water out. Everybody, I mean everybody on that ship, is on a raft or something in the water, standing in the water, and you are scraping that ship down while they are pulling the water out. You got to keep up with it. Then you paint it and then they dump the water back in and you float out.

D: So, your impression of that ship was it wasn't junk we turned over to the British?

H: Oh no, the guns worked--three inch fifties is what we had on there, machine guns--everything worked on it because we would use what we call target practice. A plane would come out and tow a target and we would try to hit that with the anti-aircraft guns. They put a target out on the water and they used the bigger guns trying to hit it.

D: Were you involved in the thing?

H: I later learned, not on that ship, but I later learned to do what the Navy called a fire controller. Where you use the tower, where you get the range, and you tell the guns what range you want, what wind deflection and to shoot, and you try and hit a target. I did quite a bit of that during the war.

D: Okay. You mentioned also going through the Panama Canal, what was that like?

H: That was a thrill, a thrill of a life time. Here we were, we were shipped . . . I think we went 27,000 tons. It was big to me, we were in the neighborhood of, I think, 526 people.

D: This is the APA?

H: The APA. It is now an APA; Army Transport that was converted to Amphibious Personnel Attack. There were times going through the canal, when they would actually put up the call "The donkeys on you" and tow you through the locks. You didn't even use your own power

to go through and some of those big lakes all man made and you would see these big, I'm not sure what you would call them, but big snails. I can't come up with the name of them. They were a tropical rodent on the Canal. It was quite a thrill to know that you were going from one ocean to the other. It took, if I remember right, two days to go through the Canal, it wasn't a fast movement. You would go into these man made lakes and then you would wait your turn to go through.

D: A lot of traffic?

H: We had a lot of traffic at that time yes. Most of it was war ships, Navy. It was quite an experience. I would like to go through as a civilian sometime.

D: So you came out of the canal and you said you headed to...

H: Then we headed for the South Pacific. I remember one island I remember very clearly because I was up on the grid house a lot, up on the bridge.

D: Had war been declared at this time?

H: Yes, war was on. When we got on the APA and went through the Canal it was the early part of 1942.

D: So you went into the Navy in?

H: I think that it was 1939, or 1940.

D: Okay. So this was your first ship?

H: I was assigned to a ship prior to this, but this was the first time that I was on an APA and training for Amphibious work. I think that the Navy came up with all these crazy ideas about these ships over night and you have got to bless our engineering and our ability to use these kinds of things because we didn't have them when the war hit.

D: All right, so you were in New Zealand?

H: Yes. We basically ended up in New Zealand--Wellington, New Zealand--the Navy, and the Army, and the Marine Corp. They had a big Marine base there. During the war some how they built a Naval hospital there. That was a place where we picked up. . . Australia had troops too in the outback. Then we would pick up our troops--Army, Navy, whatever it was--and then we went from there north into the New Hebrides and then August 7, 1942, I'm pretty sure, we hit Guadalcanal.

D: Did you just arrive there and go in or was there. . .

H: We knew where we were going, all we knew it was an island and we had three islands that we had to contend with. Our ship was assigned to Guadalcanal. It was Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and Savo. We were told days ahead that we were going in and those of us that were in the landing craft were told about the beach to land on. About 4:00 in the morning we all went to our general quarters station, general quarters is when you are going to go into combat. Then we went in about 6:00 in the morning and we all went to our boat stations, the boats were all up on the ship, now they are not in the water. Then they lowered all the boats in the water. Now we are right in the harbor; cans, destroyers, and what have you, are bombarding.

D: What is a can?

H: A destroyer, we call it a tin can. They were shelling the beach in the area that we were going into and then they dropped . . . They didn't have the LST's at that time, we would drop big cargo nets over the side and they were fasten to the ship of course. The Marine Corp, we landed Marines, they climbed over the rail and down the rope nets into the landing craft. I ran an LCP at first when they went in there, and that is Landing Craft Personnel and it had a crew of two other people. It had an engineer on board who took care of the engine and I had another seaman on board, I steered it and navigated and what have you, then the other seaman on board had a Lewis machine gun mounted, it was thirty caliber, from World War I and he handled that.

D: This is approximately 6:00 a.m.?

H: Yes, we started in at about 6:00 a.m. I couldn't tell you the exact time that we hit the beach, we were probably guessing at it a half a mile off of the beach a little more. The water was calm it was in the neighborhood of at least six, or eight, maybe ten APA's there and AKA's. An AKA is a cardinal ship, they carry very few troops but they carry a lot of the tanks, and supplies and so forth. We went in and made our beach head then we kept supplying with more troops and equipment, and ammunition, you name it, to the beach head. The beach head was lightly defended. I was scared at the time, but we didn't have heavy Japanese resistance.

D: There was resistance?

H: There was resistance, but it wasn't what we later found out like in Tarawa and so forth. It was after we got in there that we . . . The ship would be in there all day unloading. Then we would leave at night. The Japanese would land at night above our beach head and we would come in the morning. We were taking turns.

D: Same beach head?

H: No. The Japanese were going in further towards the Solomon Islands, then the next day at Tulagi, we had to land people there and in Tulagi from information we heard, we figured we had it made at Gaudalcanal; but Tulagi was more fortified than Gaudalcanal and we didn't realize that we were in deep, we didn't realize at the time that Tulagi was going to be a problem. We lost a lot of guys going in there. I lost a crew.

D: Going into Gaudalcanal, you made just one trip?

H: Oh no, we reinforced Gaudalcanal most every day for three months.

D: So your job then was going back and forth?

H: Back and forth, then I was assigned into a boat pool on Gaudalcanal. After that we got things pretty well established and got Henderson Field secured. The air field that the Japanese had on Gaudalcanal we named it Henderson Field after one of our people, I don't know who he was. Then when we got that secured then it was the question of starting our offensive moves, Prior to that then my job in the fire control tower, which is not a fire but we control the guns, and it is called fire control, my job part of that time was. . . I had a recon major on board who was an intelligence officer and his name was Major McKeen. You have got to remember I'm eighteen, nineteen years old. As the Marines advanced on the beach he knew where they were and it was our job on the ships to shoot ahead of them and move the Japanese out and try to give them some relief. He would tell me that the Japanese are here and I want you three hundred yards ahead of them; the Americans. I was pretty scared. We would put a dye shell in the ocean first, that would color the water then you knew where we were. Well, we would get a tree and we had a split image of range finders and we'd bring the tree together and then that would give us a reading on how many yards away it was. Then we would set our guns accordingly and we had to figure wind in there, that is why we would put one dye shot in first, and we would guess at them then we knew what we were doing. As the Marines would advance they had radio contact with Major McKeen on board and we knew where to move our guns. The first time around we were shooting 300 yards ahead of your own people, 1,000 feet, it scares you especially when you are using anything that you got. Then I got on the boat, the one that had to stay on the beach, I didn't like it.

D: Did you come under fire at that time?

H: What we would do is, say the Marines had at that time--had some resistance somewhere, up the island. I remember we went up the river and there were three boats of us. I was the second boat. We went up the river and dropped these men off. We had orders not to come back under any circumstances. That night the Marines killed over a 1,000 Japanese.

D: So, you would get a load of Marines in a small boat and go up a river and land them?

H: Yes. We had this one river . . .

D: Were you under fire at that time?

H: I think it was Logan Point where Doug Monroe . . . See we had a lot of Coast Guard's men. I would say eighty percent Coast Guard. Those guys knew how to handle small boats. They were trained to do this. Doug Monroe was in charge, he was a Coast Guardsman. We had some Marines that were trapped on, the point. He was in charge, I was second boat. We had one more boat. We had to go in and get the Marines out. We started in and the Japanese opened fire on us. Doug put his boat between the Japanese and our guys and the other two boats went in and got the Marines out. Doug was killed. Doug got the Congressional Medal, he won it but he wasn't there to receive it. I did meet his mom, we were down in Florida at a Gaudalcanal reunion. The news media somehow found out I was with Doug when it happened. I was only one of them, there would be six other people. I got to meet his mom. She was in tears the whole time because she hadn't met anybody who was with Doug when he got killed. He did sacrifice his life, you know, to save somebody else and he did. We towed his boat out but he was dead. Then, like I said before, Talagi was our real problem.

D: Well, for three months you are taking troops back and forth to Gaudalcanal?

H: Right, going down to New Zealand, picking them up, and bringing supplies and ammunition. There were times we would take the aviation gas in fifty-five gallon drums, throw it over the side of the ship--the A.P.A--tie lines on to it and tow it into the beach that way. People don't realize we didn't have the equipment. When I went into the first detail I made, I didn't have a side arm. We didn't have a side arm. You don't ever want that situation to come up again. I do have the .45 right now, that I carried . . .

D: So for three months you were going back and forth from Australia to New Zealand to Gaudalcanal?

H: Mostly New Zealand.

D: During this time you are also going up the rivers?

H: No, only one I was assigned on is on what we call the motor pool, a boat pool and you were assigned then. You went anywhere they sent you.

D: After that three month then you went to Talagi?

H: No, Tulagi was ours. Tulagi was hit the first or second day of Gaudalcanal. Just didn't have a lot of Japanese on there. Tulagi finally ended up being a PT base. Then, we had the battle of Coral Sea, we had two of those. That was the night we lost the Vincennes, Quincy, the Astoria, Cambera. The Sullivan brothers were killed that night. I don't know if you have ever heard of that one. There were five, I think, five brothers--Sullivans--on a same ship. We crossed fire that night, I know we did. The Japanese came right down in the middle of us and we just shot right across.

D: You were involved in that?

H: Yes, I was involved with both battles in the Coral Sea.

D: What was that like?

H: It was night time and all you saw were guns flashing. You take five inch-thirty eight is what the Destroyers had and they could fire them as fast as you can load them. They made a big splash, a big fire when they went off. Some of them, the Astoria's the eighteen fifty class had twin mounts stuck with two guns in each turret; four, five inch guns.

D: So that was the surface to surface battle?

H: Yes, ship to ship.

D: Did you encounter any anti-aircraft?

H: No, not at that point. We knew they were coming down what we called the slot. We had a lot of people like New Zealanders and Australians that were working the islands, the plantations. They became what we called coast watchers. We would drop somebody off and he would be a coast watcher. He had to move because they could chase you. Trace their radios. They would radio the information that they were coming down. It was the element of surprise. You get upset the first time you kill, it bothers you. Then you realize it is either you or him. After that it comes easy.

D: When did that moment come for you?

H: It came on Guadalcanal. I'm not sure of the date, we had just landed some Marines on the beach and as I was getting ready to get back in my boat a Japanese was coming right at me with a bayonet. He wasn't firing. I just pulled my .45 out shot him.

D: How far away?

H: Oh, maybe thirty feet.

D: You think it was that.

H: Yes. I think he was out of ammunition he was just going to use his bayonet. I never stopped to find out. I know that I killed him. In my beach heads most of the time you didn't actually see the guy you hit. If you fired your Lewis Machine gun you fired it at a group. After Guadalcanal was secured along the south route, I can't give you an exact order, but we moved in. The worst place of all the beach heads I made was Rabaul.

D: In New Guinea?

H: No, Rabaul itself. New Guinea is another section. Rabaul was . . . It was a bad one. They were ready for us and they were dug in. Every inch we earned. We figured the tide wrong, we had to let the guys off 400 or 500 yards from the shore, at the end of the beach. Anyway, I had that. The first burial at sea is kind of hard to take. The guy next me by the name Charlie. We were under raid, the bombers were coming in and so forth.

D: Were these bombers?

H: Yes. They come in real low. They came in right between the ships and we crossed fire there. I'll never know to this day whether Charlie got hit with . . . Whether he got hit from a Japanese bullet or one of ours. When we buried him at sea that was the first one I helped bury at sea.

D: Somebody you knew pretty well?

H: Well, he was a buddy, a shipmate. You knew most everybody . . . We knew most everybody on those ships because we only had a crew of like four or five hundred.

D: So, you are still doing the running landing craft taking troops back and forth?

H: Oh yes, I was running landing craft at that time.

D: Did you get very much sleep?

H: Yes, we got enough sleep. There wasn't any problem in getting to sleep at all. We ran out of food at times. We didn't have any C-rations or K-rations or whatever, that kind of stuff. But ninety percent of the time we did eat good, there is no question about it. We got into this powdered eggs stuff and powdered milk and you didn't even want to eat it. Chipped beef, let me tell you something I hated that. You always managed to find K-rations or C-rations or something like that, and you kept that.

D: On board the ships did you ever hear any Tokyo Rose, any Japanese propaganda?

H: Yes. The only Tokyo Rose I ever heard was on the PA system of the ship.

D: Did you listen too often?

H: No, it was just coincidence if you were going by the radio shack or something; you heard it you know. Or they would even put it on the speaker system.

D: Really!

H: Yes, just for the hell of it.

D: What was day-to-day life on board the ship like? Did you work all day late?

H: No, you had different "watches", as we would call it. You worked your assigned watches. You might have the midnight to 4:00 in the morning.

D: This is always changing?

H: Oh yes, it changes. You might have the midnight to 4:00 that you are going to be a lookout; on the right side of the bridge, on the left side of the bridge, or up in the bow, or at stern. You might be on the wheel watch, as I said earlier, steering the ship. If you were in the engine room you had to learn the engine room, do whatever was necessary down there. If you were a gunner's mate, a gunner's mate meaning the person that took care of the guns on the ship. He cleaned the guns and kept them in working order, receiving ammunition goes in the ammunition lockers, ready in case you needed it. Guys had to clean the ship. Everybody had to get up at revelry. Of course you get your three meals a day. If you were a baker or a cook on the ship you had to prepare the meals and get them ready.

D: At this time you are still a seasoned apprentice?

H: No, I had worked my way up. By the time we got to Rabaul I was a petty officer. That would be like a sergeant in the Army. Then I would have people who were responsible to me. Each division, there were divisions on the ship, you had an engineering, deck division, and so forth. You were assigned to one division. They had people that were machinist mates and they actually repaired the small engines on landing craft. Kept them in working order. That was their job. Or something would go wrong on some piece of pump or something on the ship. They had a regular machine shop on the ship. It wasn't large but somehow they managed to get things done.

D: Do you remember what the weather was like?

H: Yes, it was hot, hot, hot, and it rained a lot. I hated it. I picked up malaria. They didn't know what was wrong at first and then they found out it was malaria. Then we got quarantined for that.

D: How about the insects?

H: No, nothing really . . . You had mosquitoes, of course, they were carrying malaria. I didn't find. . . With the ship being out in the ocean and in the harbor and stuff, you didn't have the bug problem that the guys had. Actually we had it comfortable, much more comfortable than the people on the beach. At least we had clean water. Now we did run out of fresh water at times. We were on half a bucket a day per person because they couldn't make fresh water from salt water. When it was possible we would get to New Zealand and load up with fresh milk and freeze it. We had the facilities to do that where the troops id not have the equipment. The cooks put out chocolate at chow time. You would catch hell if you didn't eat it, if you threw food away. Food was too scarce to just waste.

D: What were your accommodations like?

H: Good, they were good.

D: Did you have just a little hammock?

H: Some of us had hammocks and some of us had, you might call it . . . It was a bed maybe three high. No reason to complain at all, none whatsoever, and it was dry. We slept on deck a lot because of the heat. The ship wasn't air conditioned and a lot of times the vents weren't that great. We had no problem. The nights were cool compared to the days. Many times we would sleep right on the deck.

D: When you were making these landings did you ever run

across any of the local natives?

H: Not making a landing but when I was New Caledonia one time, between these beach heads and what have you, I got a signal man . . . That is a man on the ship. A signal man is the guy that communicates with the flags and so forth between ships. He said to me, "John, you are wanted on that submarine over there." I said, "The hell I am. I ain't going on that submarine." He said, "There is a kid from your home named Tony Belasia. He is from your hometown, he wants to see you." So I said, "Okay, I'll go over and see him I guess." At that time I was chief petty officer which was the highest you could be in the enlisted ranks.

D: Did the promotions come pretty quickly?

H: Pretty good, yes. I was regular Navy and what they had in the Navy, they had a system by which the flotilla was allowed so many of each rank. Then you would take a competitive exam. The highest guy got the job and got the rank and was transferred to where he was needed; sometimes to another ship. At that time I got transferred from the Legion to the Liggett.

We were in the harbor as I was starting to say, and this message came over. So, I went over to see Tony and I get in and shows me the sub and then all of a sudden ...

D: On the submarine?

H: On the submarine. I hear a bell go and a click and I hear this banging going on and I say, "Tony what's going on?" He said, "Well we were going out for a test dive, I thought that you might like it". I said, "Go to hell, get me off of this thing," and he just laughed. Well, I went out for the test dive and we were only out probably an hour and I got over it all right. . . I known what we used to do when I was on the key and practicing against destroyers when the depth charges you know, dropping on the submarines. I didn't want anything to do with it because they never had any problem that I knew of being in the area with the Japanese ships, but I was kind of glad to get off of that submarine.

D: You knew this Tony before?

H: Oh yes, I lived across the street from him in North Pelham, New York. We had gotten hit with a torpedo and we were in New Calidonia getting supplies, we had the mesh nets and stuff over side the compartment was closed off and I had to get some steel and stuff to patch the hole and I'm walking down through this army

barracks and the one guy hollers at me, hollers my name out, and it is Rush Riley whom I had played basketball with in high school. Those are the only two guys that I ran across in the service.

D: How did you feel towards the Japanese?

H: Madder than hell.

D: That was back to Pearl Harbor?

H: Oh yes. I figured that they would sneak attack. I have my feelings even if it was sneak or not, but I held it against them a lot because the way it was done and as a matter of fact in about 1974 six or eight couples from here, some friends of ours went to Pearl Harbor and a Japanese came over and wanted to take my picture in the group and I told him get the hell out of the way, we didn't want anything to do with them. I did hold it for along time. Today I don't hold it, I realized that people I'm talking to today are descendants and have nothing to do with it at all. I strongly feel that Mr. Roosevelt caused the war, he wanted to get into the European War and that was our way of getting into it.

D: Would you get American propaganda to keep you guys fired up against the Japanese?

H: No.

D: You didn't need it?

H: No, we didn't need it. We were young enough and knew enough that we had been attacked and we had to fight back. We were still a flag waving group of young people and I still believe in patriotism, I believe in saluting the flag.

D: You did this landing boat?

H: I made nine beach heads.

D: Nine beach heads, wow.

H: Gaudacanal was the first, then Tulogi. Then the others Munda, Rabaul, Tarawa.

D: Going in on the firing?

H: Yes that part and call, you couldn't get any type of landing crafts to the beach. Some of our information wasn't that great and in the tides too when we missed them, like at Rabaul, the tide was not where it was supposed to be, it wasn't high enough and we lost a lot of guys shot in the water, killed because they couldn't

get into the beach, they had to walk in.

D: Your boat would go in as far as it could?

H: Right on the beach.

D: Now is this the kind of landing craft that we would see at Normandy where the front ramp drops?

H: Yes, that is an LCM that type. The LCP and LCM and the LCT is the big one where the bow opens up from the ramp, they go right up, they are big. They developed the LCT during the war, we didn't have that before the war. The LCM that would just about carry a small tank, then the LCP was strictly for personnel.

D: It was ply wood?

H: Yes. The LCM with the ramps they were steel they weren't armor plate and the ramp was brought down and the guys could go right up.

D: Then you would put the ramp up?

H: Put the ramp up and put the boat in reverse and try to get off the beach. The propellers had enough power to go in reverse and some had controllable props, and we could change the angle and push the sand out from under the boat.

D: As the war progressed did you find the Japanese defenses more and more sophisticated?

H: More and more that they were going to fight till the last minute. It got that way.

D: Right from the beach?

H: Yes. I think what happened then, and I'm guessing at this, is the further we got west, which meant we were getting closer to Japan, the more fortified they were in protecting their home land.

D: So each time that you knew you were going to make a landing how did you feel?

H: Scared.

D: You did it five or six times. . . and you were still scared?

H: Well, you don't want to die and you know the chances, we would go and have a service and we would have a priest or a minister there and it didn't make any difference you went to that service, in your own way

you did thank God. That if you were gone you would go to heaven and that was all there is to it. I know one thing that might be of interest to you, it is personal, but we were under attack and bombers--it was like Gaudal canal--and suddenly we had one hundred bombers on us. I don't believe that, but there were a lot up there and we went on to the beach and a bomb came down and hit near us and my whole--I had a small tank in there--marines and my crew and I remember flying in the air and calling for my mother. I got my head broke, I ended up in the hospital in New Zealand. When I woke up, guess where I woke up? . . . Well, to get the religious end of it my mother woke up in New York and told my dad that Johnny is hurt.

D: At the same time?

H: Evidently. You can't tie it to the minute but at least the day. A year or two later, I'm not sure when it was, but I compared figures and she knew about me being hurt when it happened.

D: Incredible.

H: It is incredible. My dad didn't want her to be upset so he told her go to sleep or something like that, but I understand that he tried to get Pearl to find out if I was in the hospital there. I was in New Zealand and I woke up in Wellington, New Zealand in that hospital, this is interesting, I woke up in the psychiatric ward. Here I am all bandaged up and I said to the pharmacist, "What the hell am I doing here?" I said, "My head hurts." He said, "Well they told me to put you in here," and I said "Do I look like I am nuts?" Then he called a section eight and it was shell shock, he just went out of his mind basically about the service he couldn't handle it anymore. Finally the officer came in, the doctor came in and I said, "I don't belong here doctor, I got a headache." The doctor said "You have a fractured skull." I said, "Get me the hell out of here," and he did. In five days my ship came in and I just left the hospital and went back to the ship.

D: You didn't get formally released?

H: No, we didn't do that kind of stuff. No, we didn't get into that, I just got dressed and walked down the hall and went back to the ship.

D: So how long were you laid up then?

H: I wasn't. I was only in the hospital for four or five days. They flew me down to Wellington.

D: From Gaudalcanal?

H: Yes. They had a lot of planes going back and forth.

D: Off of a carrier or off the ground?

H: No, off the ground. This is after the Island was pretty well established.

D: So you never came to once you hit?

H: No. I remember the bombs coming down and that is all that I remember and then I woke up in the hospital and that is all that I remember. I would say that a week, five days later I heard the ship was in Wellington I put my clothes on and I said, "Take me to Wellington I want to get onto the Liggett."

D: What did you think of the medical care that you received?

H: Overall the medical care was the very best you could get. I don't know what the Army called it or the medics, those guys went way out of there way to do everything. As a matter of fact they were handing a syringe type thing, it was plastic like, they would say, "Give that guy a shot," and I said, "Where?" They said, "Just find the vein." He was very banged up. You just line the vein up and put it right in there. The first one was again tough, but then you learned that it was only for their own good and you are only trying to relieve them.

D: Did you ever encounter Negro sailors or Negro Marines?

H: Yes. They basically served the officers and so forth. I had one incident where I did pull a .45 on a Negro and if I hadn't been where I was, I probably would have shot him.

D: Where was that?

H: We were under attack and I was in what you would call a Magazine at that time. We were feeding ammunition off to the gunners. It was scary, there is no question about it and this guy wanted to leave and I needed him down there to load the conveyer and get the ammunition. There were no uncertain words passed if he didn't do it I was going to blow his head off. I couldn't shoot him there and I knew it, but I was mad enough to. Get excited, you don't dare shoot a gun off in a magazine, the ammunition is all around you. That was the only incident that I had. Other than that no, it could have been.

D: Was he a regular sailor or was he a draftee?

H: I assume that he was probably a draftee. I don't know, but there is one thing that should be emphasized without the Reserves we could not have made it.

D: The Naval Reserves?

H: Any of them. I can speak strongly for the Reserves, the Naval reserves because what they did is they took, I can't tell you how many men, on either the Legion or the Ligget but I will bet you a third of the people on those two ships were reserves. These guys were not highly technically trained, but they knew what they had to do and they could be trained in a week to do the job very well. So if you figure that we had a third of the people could get a ship out, two-thirds regular that made a difference and that is how we got things going so fast, because we had the personell semi-trained. They didn't have to go through twelve weeks of boot camp before they... if they were in the naval reserves that meant that they were a ship fitter in the reserves. He knew the basic things that he had to do. You could put him in one regular Navy ship fitter and the two of them and take the other Navy ship fitter, the regular Navy ship fitter and put him on another ship, you could take half of a crew without exaggerating, half of a crew like we did on the destroyer, take half Navy half reserve and run that ship fine. You had a few things to iron out in a couple of days, but at least you put the ship to sea.

D: So the reserves were used to flush out the ...

H: In other words you could take, if you had the ship in moth balls as we would call it now, if we had a shipment of moth balls like we had the World War two destroyers you could take half to a Navy and half to the reserves and get a ship going. You could put twice as many ships basically out to sea than a third of the time that it would take to do any of the other work. I'm big on the reserves, the Air Force reserve, the Navy reserve, anything because let's take today currently, if we had a war and you could call in the pilots that are in the reserve program that have left the service, they might be flying out of an air field as a reservist on a current model airplane like we have at Miami. They could have thousands of airplanes in the air, and in a week what you couldn't have any other way.

D: When you were sailing on the ships in the Pacific did you ever encounter any rough weather?

H: Oh yes.

D: Like a typhoon?

H: No, I never got into a typhoon, but big storms. We were going from Australia, no from New Zealand to Australia one time, the Bizmarck Sea and I was on what we called the Flying Bridge, and that is where our firing station was. It was forty-five feet or so maybe even fifty above the water line and we were getting heavy spray up there. The water was coming over the bow.

D: Pretty scary?

H: No, it was exciting, I wouldn't say that it was scary. You get used to the rough seas, but the Pacific was a lot smoother than the Atlantic. I had sailed the Atlantic before and it was cold and I had seen times where we were breaking the ice off of the deck and it was building up to fast. The Pacific, the ocean is generally calmer, there was some typhoons out there. I know that we lost some ships, but that was around Midway.

D: Because of the weather?

H: Yes, because of the weather.

D: Would you hear anything about the war in Europe?

H: Occasionally we would hear something, but not much. . .We heard about the hit in Normandy, for instance. We knew nothing about the progress being made basically until the war ended. No we were not in contact with Europe at all.

D: You wouldn't get any of those service newspapers like Stars and Stripes?

H: No we didn't have any newspapers like that. We couldn't get in on the beach because we made a mistake on the tide. The tide wasn't high enough.

D: Pretty common problem with these landings.

H: No, it wasn't common but two I know of.

D: Okay, so how was your last landing?

H: Terrible.

D: Terrible? When was that?

H: I'm not sure, but I think that it was the late 1943.

D: Well after that.

H: After that I came back to San Diego.

D: Your whole ship came back?

H: No, I came back on another ship. I was assigned to Naval Repair Base in San Diego, and that is when I met my wife. She was a wave.

D: Not meeting your wife, I mean going back to San Diego.

H: Well, I came back to the states for resignation. I had almost forty months in combat and I had points galore, so I had a choice. I wanted to get to the Great Lakes, I wanted to come East. There was a spot open in San Diego repair base, so I decided that I would take that. Then I remember that my extension on my reenlistment was up and I hadn't resigned and that is probably one of the reasons that I came back. My wife worked in the same building that I was assigned to and her girlfriend knew me because she worked for me and she told my wife that I was a nice guy and that she should meet me. We did, we went for each other. Then in November of 1945 I got her a diamond ring and I came through Youngstown to meet her folks and we were engaged at the time and I went to New York and she got out of the waves on February 2, 1946 we got married because we were in Youngstown. We went to live in New York for like three months and I couldn't handle it, I just hated New York.

D: New York City?

H: Well, North Pelham I just hated it.

D: Why?

H: I didn't like the people.

D: Well that was where you were from?

H: Yes. But I found out that there was a better place to live and right here is where I want to live. I've been here since 1946. We lived in New York for three months and I couldn't handle it. I hated New York, I hated the place. I got a little taste of this area and we came back here and we lived here for three years and she got the bug and wanted to go to live in California and I said to her, "I don't care, I don't care where you want to go," so we went to California and lived there for three years. We came back here and have lived here ever since.

D: What do you remember about VEJD, V-Day?

H: I was at San Diego at the time and VJ day came. We hollered and screamed like everybody else. It was a thrill to have wow and we figured we had gotten them,

what we had gone out to do we did. We were getting ready to land on Japan we figured, I certainly did, and the U.S. Force of one million with very high casualties war occuer, so our president ordered the "Bomb" dropped. and did a hell of a mess over there, but he saved a lot of American lives, and I respect what President Truman did.

D: You think highly of him?

H: Definitely. For what he did about the bomb because he did kill a lot of people over there, but he saved a lot of Americans.

D: What was wrong about Truman, what did you think about the leadership in the Pacific, like Mac Arthur's and so forth?

H: Most of the guys were not happy with Mac Arthur, because you have to remember that we were younger and second, he left the Philippines and we felt that the leadership should have stayed at that point.

D: Well, he left when?

H: Well, Mac Arthur was commander in chief, for that area, and we felt that he should have stayed there. Leaders don't leave their crew.

D: Pretty common feeling then huh?

H: Among the service people I think. I think even in this day if you talked to any veteran that was in that theater he probably would say the same thing.

D: What leaders did you look at?

H: They were strong, and Admiral Halsey was rough. When he told you to do something you did it.

D: Did you ever run across him?

H: No, I never ran across him. Communication problem was no problem and I'd have to be in position where I knew what was going on and messages that came through, and when he wrote a message it wasn't clear when it came through, and he knew and you have to send them immediately and he had all the intelligence information that. . . He knew what was going on and he just had the forces there to do it. Getting back to Midway, the Japanese were coming up after we made the beach head and they were coming up for more troops in every combat unit with navy and heavy stuff like guns and tanks. Some how he got the information and I plane spotted them and he sent our fleet out after them and

not with the same power. We knocked the hell out of them, in fact it was one of the worst battles, naval battles that ever, and we did it with lighter ships, cruisers, and destroyers instead of the battle wagons. That was a four hour battle. There was a lot of respect for Admiral Halsey in the Navy.

D: How did you feel about Roosevelt?

H: Well, I am not a democrat by nature, but I did vote for him while we were in the war because I didn't want to change horses in the stream. I have a feeling that if President Roosevelt, from what I've talked to people at Pearl before they were hit, these are navy personnel, the navy did try to get some of our battle wagons and stuff out of there and they weren't allowed to go out. I think that he set us up. I hope I'm wrong. I think that he wanted into the European theater war so bad, and I can't believe that we didn't know the task force. I can't believe it.

D: After VJ day, what was it like to be a service man or an ex-service man?

H: The days of the war. . . We never had any problem with the uniform or the service at all during the war, prior to the war yes. In places like Norfolk, Virginia, which is where I went to boot camp, there would be signs on the lawns, people would have signs, "Dogs and sailors stay off of the lawn." Oh yes, that was a fact, I've seen them. You weren't welcomed in Norfolk, Virginia and without the bases there and the navy, there would not be anything. That is the way people treated them. I remember talking about that, and Jane B. Dickerson, that is the girl that I liked in high school, when I joined the Navy her dad wouldn't let me date her anymore. During the war servicemen were respected. Anything, the sky was the limit.

D: After the war?

H: After the war I had no problem, because I was at San Diego and the war ended in 1945. I took the bus home.

D: From San Diego?

H: Yes. I took a bus because I wanted to stop here and meet Irene's folks and then go on into New York. From here I took a train. No, I didn't during the war and after the service no problem. It was prior to the war that we had a little bit.

D: When you were mustered out in the unit was it easier to find a job?

H: I went to work for my dad on a couple of gas stations.

D: You never got back into the painting business?

H: No, and he just always worked for himself and after he lost the business he worked for himself and it worked out just fine.

D: That is about all that I have to say, is there anything else that you would like to say?

H: The only thing is that the younger people might read this, don't let them get down on the service. If we need them let's make sure that they have everything that they want. If you're going into combat and you don't have a gun, it is a hell of a feeling and it did happen, don't let it happen again.

D: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW