Donald Val Leetch:

Experiences and Comments about Life Aboard the USS ERIE (PG-50) and in the U.S. Navy

Tell us a little about why and when you joined the U.S. Navy, and where you did your basic training?

In 1939, the economy was still depressed, and not many good jobs were available. I joined Navy hoping to see world and also because of things I heard after visiting with a sailor home on leave. I enlisted on September 20, 1939. I had graduated from high school in May and was on a waiting list until September. There were only three of us from South Dakota picked to join. We were shipped to Omaha, NE for the swearing-in ceremonies. The next day we took a train to Great Lakes Naval Training Center, just north of Chicago, IL. My basic training lasted until Dec. 10, 1939, when we were given two weeks "boot" leave.

How did you became a Musician and then come on board the ERIE?

While in boot camp, I was asked whether I wanted to be a musician or a yeoman (because I could also type). I auditioned on the tuba and passed the audition. After my two weeks of "boot" leave, I returned to Great Lakes and was then shipped to the USS ARGONNE, aboard which the fleet music school was located. About 40 other recruit musicians joined me on the ARGONNE.

We had Chief Bandmasters for teachers in every section of the band. What a beautiful job they had! They all lived ashore (at that time, sailing was limited) and got off duty at 1300 hrs each day. We students were supposed to have individual practice in the afternoons. Sometimes, a bandmaster was stuck with the duty of overseeing our practices.

Orders came down to ship the fleet music school to the destroyer base at San Diego. I was chosen to stay aboard and be the bass horn player in the ARGONNE's band. All the other students went to San Diego. Now, bear in mind that the US Navy also had a School of Music, in Norfolk, VA. From time to time, Musicians 1st Class were sent to this school and would graduate as Chief Petty Officer Bandmasters, often with a ready-made band from the Navy School. These school bands had to stay together, and it was difficult to advance because everyone had served about the same amount of time in Navy, and only one or two rates came out a quarter. However, I was considered a Fleet Musician, so I could transfer to different band duties on

any ship or station by myself. Early in 1941, I had the chance to change ships and I was assigned to the ERIE.

I shipped out to Balboa aboard the USS MILWAUKEE. On the way down to Panama from San Diego, the MILWAUKEE held emergency drills and general quarters. One day I had knowledge that a "Man Overboard Drill" was about to be held. Having no crew assignment, I went to the signal bridge to observe the drill. The chief signalman had a dummy that he threw overboard for the drill. At the appointed time of the drill, the chief fell overboard instead of the dummy. The command then was given "MAN OVERBOARD. THIS IS NO DRILL!" The cruiser stopped and backed all engines. A motor whaleboat was lowered into the water to retrieve the chief. The chief was unconscious when taken aboard. I watched horrified, while the ship's doctor and aides tried to revive the chief. It seemed they worked hours, but to no avail. The chief's body was embalmed with formaldehyde and stored in a freezer until the MILWAUKEE reached the East coast. (Maybe the body wasn't embalmed, but in my sleeping compartment we could smell the stuff for days.) I arrived at Balboa on 29 January 1941 and immediately went aboard the ERIE, with the rating of Musician 2nd Class.

Describe your experience as a Musician on the ERIE.

In the late 30's, just about every Admiral had a band attached to his command. The ERIE, because she served as the flagship for the Special Service Squadron (SPERON) stationed in Panama, had a band stationed aboard her.

One of our duties was to play honors whenever the admiral came aboard or left the ship. The number of ruffles and flourishes depended on how many stars he wore on his shoulders and sleeves. (A Rear Admiral rated two ruffles and flourishes, followed by a march.)

If we were in port, another band duty was to play the National Anthem at 0800 sharp, as other sailors would raise our flag. We usually played a few marches for entertainment afterwards. This brings to mind that we played the national anthem of any country that had a war ship in port. Consequently, we had music for all countries. I liked the Brazilian National Anthem best. It was long and pretty.

When the mess hall was cleared (sometimes we went topside), we would have a rehearsal every morning. At noon, we were expected to play a concert (often on the fantail). We also did evening concerts. I remember playing a concert several evenings around 1900 hrs. Mrs. Andrew Mack

would come aboard with friends, and we played for them. They sat in folding chairs on the barbette of number 4 six-inch gun.

Afternoons in port were usually for our liberty, unless we had a job to do. Out to sea it was different. The flag was always flying and the admiral was on board. We usually rehearsed in mess hall and played a concert on the fantail. The only time I had a different duty was when the war started and we were assigned lookout duties. Early in 1942, almost of the band was transferred off the ERIE.

Sometimes, we left ship and went to the Admiral's house. This was to play "honors" for him, if he were departing on official business somewhere. A Marine rifle squad from the ERIE's sea detachment also went along as an honor guard. They would "present arms" while we played the honors.

In peacetime we made a number of "good will" tours to different Central and South American countries. I remember going to Caracas, Venezuela. We were bussed to the American Embassy there and played for a dance after the dinner where the ambassador and wife were entertaining the Admiral, some officers on his staff and notables from the Venezuelan government. We were first introduced to the ambassador, his wife and a daughter. We were instructed to use the daughter's bathroom. In her bathroom was a pile of neatly folded hand towels. Each band member had to steal a towel. I told this to the daughter and she said she felt honored that we did that. The family's name was Corrigan.[1]

The kitchen for the embassy was a separate brick building. We watched as the servants delivered food to the many invited guests. We asked a waiter what they were serving and he mentioned ham, chicken and roast duck or something like that. The band thought we would be served after the dinner and that we would get to eat the leftovers. Much to our surprise and chagrin, we were directed to appear in the kitchen building. We all sat at tables and a dish of rice was served each musician. On top of the rice came a helping of chili beans. No roast duck for us.

We made up for it after the dance music started and there was dancing on the marble patio. The waiters were serving scotch and water to the guests. One waiter sat a tray of drinks down by me for the band. I distributed the drinks and asked another waiter if that was all they were serving. He informed me than we could have beer because they had a keg of beer all tapped. The band stayed with the scotch. After I distributed the drinks to the

[1] Frank P. Corrigan was the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela from August 14, 1939 until September 5, 1947.

band, the empty tray was set down by me. Another waiter coming along would see the empty tray and immediately get another round of drinks. Between tunes, I would distribute the drinks and this same action happened until each player had several drinks of Scotch sitting by his chair. The trip by bus back down the mountain to the Port of La Guardia was a happy ride. Someone in the back had stolen a large jar of olives. We all began singing for the Bandmaster, "Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, How you can love" all the way home and throwing the olive pits toward the front of the bus, where "Bandy" Johnson was sitting. Mr. Johnson was a wonderful man, and everyone in the band loved him immensely.

I played in every Central American country, except for Mexico. The only South American country I remember being in was Venezuela. The band once played at a ball game in Nicaragua. Often, while we were in port, we were invited to play for dances at the Albrook Field Non-Commissioned Officers' Club on the outskirts of Balboa (Canal Zone). We didn't get paid because of regulations, but they gave us free drinks and fed us a good dinner. We were transported to the Club and then back to the ERIE in U.S. Army trucks.

I know of no special privileges for musicians except for the afternoon liberty we were granted every day, if we weren't assigned some other job.

If the Admiral requested it, we would play anywhere. One time, we went to 15th Naval District Headquarters in Balboa and played a concert during the radio broadcast of the Army-Navy football game (back in the States). People listened on radio and probably drank beer. We played before the game was broadcasted and during half time.

How did you become a Radioman on the ERIE?

I had completed two years of Navy time in September 1941, while on the Erie. Occasionally, I would see a young sailor come on board and a few months later he was a 3rd. class Radioman (RM). Once, I stopped by the radio shack, and the boys there said they would teach me. I already knew Morse Code from being in the Boy Scouts. They recommended me to be an RM, and I requested transfer from the band to communications. The bandmaster would not approve the move. But I went to the radio shack whenever I had free time and improved my code speed.

One day a PBY (a "flying boat") went down out in the Pacific where a squadron was patrolling. The guys in the shack put me on "listening watch" on the frequency the plane's disaster radio would send signals on. The second afternoon of listening I was alerted to some code coming over. The guys told me not to try and figure anything out that I heard, just copy down

whatever I had heard. The signals from the plane gave its location. Captain Mack was summoned and he came to my desk and mill (typewriter) and asked, "Who copied this?" I was sitting there, and since it was, after all, me, I owned up to it. He said, "Aren't you the one that wanted to be a Radioman?" And I said, "Yes." He immediately replied, "You're a Radioman!"

The Bandmaster was very unhappy, but I got transferred to communications just as soon as a replacement arrived from New York and relieved me. I was officially given rating as a Radioman 3rd class on May 16, 1942, because I had the time in service. By late summer 1942, all the musicians were transferred off the ERIE, but I stayed on because I was now a Radioman.

Describe the daily duties you performed as a Radioman.

The Erie radio shack was located directly beneath the bridge. There was a WT (water-tight) door on the port side. I think we may have had portholes on the starboard bulkhead, but I can't remember. (There may have been a bosun's locker or something on the starboard side of radio shack.) In port, there was at least one radioman in the shack at all times. When we secured the ERIE'S communications to Com. 15 [see below], we would stand 24 hr. watches, with different guys relieving you so that you could go for chow or to the head during the day. By taking a watch for 24 hours, we had three days liberty in a row.

Messages were being sent continuously to the ERIE on what we called a "FOX" schedule. This merely means they were sent blind to all commands and they were only one-way transmissions. We were not required to answer or give a Roger to them. These came from the NSS Annapolis [officially known as NavCommStaWashingtonDC]. NSS would repeat the messages every hour on the hour, on the Fox frequency. Sometimes, frequencies changed, like from a day frequency to a night frequency, for better reception. Anyway, before the war there were not a lot of messages, so we could smoke or drink coffee until the hour rolled around, and then we had to pay attention to what was coming over. At first we copied every message whether it was just for the ERIE or for all the ships in our command or our area.

All messages were numbered, dated and prioritized. "O" priority messages were the least important; "OP" (Operational Priority) messages were more important. A "U" (Urgent) message was the highest priority.

When we were in port, like Balboa, we secured our receivers and hooked a landline to Com 15, the 15th Naval District Headquarters in Balboa. They stood watch for us, but we had to have a radioman in the ERIE'S shack at all

times. We were allowed to bring a mattress up and sleep in the shack at night. The chief rigged up a soundboard for us. It was made out of Bakelite and had a light, a sounder like railroad telegraph and also a code oscillator. When we went to sleep at night, we would switch to sounder, and if Com 15 radiomen had anything for us marked urgent, they would really rattle that sounder and it would wake us up, and we would then answer them. It was fun. Sometimes, if we never got anything important, we would send a man over to Com 15 and pick up miscellaneous radio traffic that was just general information. This was something like getting junk mail everyday --- I guess you could call them bulletins.

Some messages were encrypted before the war broke out, but not all. Weather messages were groups of numbers only. The weatherman had a book he could use to decode the forecast. We copied "wx" messages easily, because they were all numbers, and once we put our fingers on number home keys, it wasn't much but a boring job.

There were several ways the body of a message was encrypted. This was done on what was called an ECM (Electric Coding Machine), a machine that was larger than a standard typewriter. Enlisted men weren't even supposed to see what it looked like. It was in a locked closet with desk and a curtain to pull shut when messages were being decrypted. The heading of a message was also encrypted, but we had tools and apparatus to break those down to see if it were for us. It all depended on what method was used and the method was often changed often. This required us to learn the new methods as they came out, and some were difficult. Some were like you see in a paper where you have to find different words in a maze of letters. Once you found the good line, no matter which way it went, you were on your way to breaking down the headings. On the ECM, the code was changed every hour.

If we were on radio silence underway, we only used receivers to copy code using typewriters called "mills." All letters on the mills were capitals, like a billing machine. The numeral keys were that alone, with no shift bar. There were usually two radiomen on duty at sea. One would be senior over the one that was copying code, but he would relieve him if necessary, or light a cigarette or pour a cup of coffee for him, etc. We very seldom saw the Chief Petty Officer Radioman. He might come in shack in morning just to say "Hello." He was the only one onboard who could repair the ECM, which he did quite often. If there was a big problem you could always call the Chief, but he usually stayed in the Chief Petty Officers' quarters.

When were on convoy duty, communications were often carried on by signal light or flags during the day. During the night, there were multi colored lights on masts in clusters. We called them "Christmas trees." The

"Christmas trees" wouldn't be on very long, and they usually signaled a change in course heading. Or navigational bridge might have had a TBS (Talk Between Ships) radio going at night, but only in emergency situations. The instructions for night navigation were assigned during daylight hours. It was pretty quiet at night on the bridge, but in the radio shack we had black out door switches and kept copying code all night long. We usually copied submarine sightings in plain text sent out to all ships by a shore station. The attention getter was a series of "SSS," "SSS," "SSS" to alert us to copy. This is where the second radioman came in. We also had the distress frequency of 500 KHZ on a speaker and a separate receiver that was never moved off this frequency.

Did you ever have to adjust the ERIE'S radio antenna?

I never did on ERIE that I can remember, but I did have to climb the mast and yardarm on the USS SUMTER. It was scary for me because I hated heights. The ship would roll, and you would look down at the sea and there would be no ship under you.

By the way, the ERIE'S main mast had connected to it lanyards (for the US flag, pennants and signal flags), some braces for davits, plus the radio antenna that had "traps" on it for use on different radio bands. The other wire ropes on the mast were not continuous, but had insulators spaced across them, so that the wire rope wouldn't be in harmony with any of the ship's radio frequencies and send out spurious signals.

Describe the ERIE'S guns.

In addition to the four six-inch guns, we had several other guns. The most worthless guns, in my recollection, were the 1.1 Bofers anti-aircraft "pom, pom" guns. We got rid of those and put on board the 20 mm machine guns and the 1.1" quad machine guns. We also had saluting battery guns and a gun that shot the heaving line to the dock when we came into port. The saluting battery was a small gun that shot blanks --- the number of rounds fired depended on the rank of the dignitary that we were saluting.

Describe the "facilities" aboard the ERIE.

There were shower and toilet facilities in each berthing area. There were no sinks. Instead, the crew had pails that were hung on their bunks. They usually had a padlock through the handle, because pails had a way of disappearing or you might find that someone else would use, it if it were just hanging there. These buckets were used as washbasins, or you could wash your underwear and socks in them. These buckets were never used by

anyone to scrub the decks. The deck force had their own (ship's) buckets. By using a bucket to shave or wash, you conserved fresh water. We never had washbasins --- just buckets and spigots, and you never left those running to brush teeth or shave, because you would be wasting fresh water.

We usually had fresh water to use only the first week at sea, and then we had rationing or you could shower but only in salt water. After a week or so at sea, most of the fresh water was for the ship's boilers.

What were the laundry facilities like?

We used to have laundry bags that were made of netting. These were fine for socks and underwear. Each bag had a clip (a huge safety pin) with a number on it that identified it as your bag. If we needed cleaning of clothing (like wool uniforms), you could get that done for a price, if the laundry men had time. If we were in port, you could send out to the cleaners and get the uniform delivered back to ship (this was only in peace time). The whites were laundered and pressed for a price. I cannot remember how we cleaned our mattress covers. Seems to me that we put them in the laundry bag. Twice a year, we had to fumigate our mattresses in a steam centrifuge set up on main deck. It would hold six or seven mattresses.

The laundrymen would just throw a bunch of laundry bags full of clothes into a huge washing machine. You may have got them back rough dry, which meant that you had to find a spot you could find where there was hot dry air to get them completely dry. We found a place by the stack where we could hide the clothing while it was drying. Some guys had irons, I think, and you could press your own. It has been so long ago that I can't really remember all the details, but I do remember that the Erie had a compartment with a pipe in it. Sailors hung these net bags on the pipe and kept putting dirty clothes in them, until it was their division's day for doing laundry.

The ERIE "crossed the line" a number of times while you were aboard. What are some of the things you remember about the hazing ceremonies that occurred?

When I was initiated I recall not being able to eat a regular meal but had to eat beef tongue and wash it down with quinine water. I also remember the "operating table" that was on the port side of the ship, as well as the electric chair. On the starboard side astern was a big canvas tank filled with water and we were made to "walk the plank," then turn around and sit in a wooden chair that flipped over backwards spilling you into the tank of water. I thought I would be smart and stay under water, until the next guy walked the plank, and then I would get out. No dice. They waited for me to surface

for a breath of fresh air, then shoved me down under repeatedly, and damned near drowned me before I could get a breath. I will never forget it.

How would you rate life on the ERIE versus other vessels that you served on?

I can proudly report that the Erie was the very best ship I ever served on. The food was excellent. The crew of around 230 enlisted men were all good, honest, sailors who loved the Navy. These people had all wanted to join the Navy like I did, and they loved it. The crew was so honest that you could leave your billfold on your bunk by mistake and no one would take it. The food was great. We would have "steak and eggs" as one of the meals. There was always plenty of fruit, and the cooks and bakers were the very best.

Do you remember where you were when the ERIE's crew got the call to return to ship, after the attack on Pearl Harbor was announced? Besides removal of the canvas awning system, what other preparations were made on board before the ERIE went to sea the next day?

At approximately 1330 hours, a friend and I were in a motion picture theater in Panama City. All of a sudden, the lights were turned on, and the movie stopped. An announcement was made that all military personnel had to return to their respective Posts, Camps and Stations. I went outside on to the street, and people were looking at us funny like. I stopped a boy selling newspapers, because I saw in Spanish a headline with the word "Guerra" ("War"). We looked inside the paper for the English section and read that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

A Navy shore patrol vehicle (a "Black Moriah") drove by on the main street and shouted for us to return as soon as possible to our ship.

As soon as I got back on board the ERIE, "All Hands" were ordered to help with ammunition and powder bags. There was a "ready locker" behind each six-inch gun. An electric elevator was sending up shells from the magazine. The shells had a preservative called Cozmoline on them, and we had to wipe them off. We racked star shells and high explosive shells. Then 125-pound powder bags in metal containers were sent up from the magazines. The powder bags were put in ready locker. The USS ERIE got underway at exactly midnight on night of December 7, 1941. Because I was still a musician, I was put on "look out" watch at midnight. I was up on the signal bridge and reported whatever I saw coming into the Balboa harbor area. I thought I saw a "man of war" with guns sticking out the side coming towards us. It turned out to be just a merchant ship with loading booms that looked like gun barrels.

We patrolled the Pacific Ocean off Panama for the next two weeks, looking for Japanese submarines. We stopped a fleet of tuna boats that had Japanese fishermen on them. They were out of San Diego, CA. Some of the Japanese personnel on these boats were held as prisoners in a compartment below Marine quarters on the Erie and then were sent ashore, when the ERIE docked in Balboa.

What do you remember about the torpedoing of the ERIE on November 12, 1942? Do you remember any of the actions that you took in the aftermath of the torpedo hit and before the order was given to abandon ship?

Before we left Trinidad (on the 10th), we knew that there were many German subs along the convoy routes. I had been in the radio shack at about 2100 hours the night before, listening to reports on sub sightings. I think more than a few of us were scratching our heads wondering why we were taking off with German subs lying right outside the submarine nets in the outer harbor. I guess we headed out because "orders are orders".

At approximately l700 hours on November 12, 1942 I was off duty sitting in the radio shack awaiting the call for chow. All at once our ship's siren took off whining three blasts and I heard the shout, "TORPEDO!' The ship was changing course. All at once there was an explosion. I rushed to the watertight door of the radio shack and looked forward and aft. I didn't see anything amiss and ducked back into the radio shack. Another explosion and I again looked out and this time I could see black smoke curling up aft near the fantail.

We all knew something was wrong then. The radio operator on duty was copying code. We had a coffee pot perking on the shelf of a metal locker next to the radioman. The first explosion had lifted that coffee pot full of hot coffee right off the shelf and dropped it right into the mill (typewriter) of the operator. He shouted, "What do I do?" Of course there was nothing he could do but stand up and watch the coffee grounds and coffee seep into the keyboard of the typewriter.

At this time the word was past for all hands to grab buckets or anything that would hold water and start fighting the fire which had started aft near the Admiral's cabin. I dumped our wastepaper basket on the deck of the radio shack. The senior operator shouted his protest because or deck was always kept spotless. I hurried with my wastebasket down the ladder to the ship's galley that was amidships and topside on the main deck. There was a measly stream of water coming out of a faucet in the galley. I filled my basket and hurried back to the flames and threw the water, but I couldn't

get close enough and gave it up as a bad effort.

What had happened was that a torpedo struck our port side about at the waterline. This caused a 500-gallon aviation fuel storage tank to explode. We had a big fire going, and then one of the ship's fuel tanks caught on fire also. I hurried back to the radio shack and we were instructed to send a radio message that the USS ERIE had been torpedoed by an enemy submarine. We took turns sending this message but none of us operators could get a "roger" or receipt for the message. Upon examining our radio receiver I found that the concussion had jarred one of the dials off a whole band and we were not receiving on the correct frequency. We set that right and immediately heard a whole bunch of receipts from many sources including a U.S. Navy radio in Florida.

We were approximately five miles off the shore of the island of Curacao. We were Commander of Escort vessels. Our anti-submarine sound system was pinging outward from our convoy and we were turning to gather in two oil tankers coming out of the port of Willemstad, Curacao. It turned out that the submarine periscope was sighted between the ERIE and the convoy. Other ships had seen the periscope, but could not fire because we were in the line of sight. The submarine fired three torpedoes outward toward us instead of lying out and firing into the convoy. The ship started listing to the starboard and we had a big fire going and oil was burning on the water.

Captain Mack decided to run the ship onto the shore to save it from sinking. A Dutch torpedo boat or patrol boat shouted to Captain Mack that he couldn't run it ashore because of the reefs, and they instructed him to go around the island. We didn't have time to do this and the word was passed for all hands to grab hold of something solid because we were going to beach the ship and the Captain didn't know just what would happen. As it turned out the good ship ERIE righted itself smoothly and slowly came to a stop sitting on a sandbar.

The word came over the loudspeaker to "ABANDON SHIP". We could no longer save the ship because the fire and the many explosions that were occurring aft. The reason we couldn't fight the fire with water and hoses is that the torpedo had struck and busted our principal water main and there was no pressure. We had a "handy billy" (water pump) on board, but it could not be reached, because the torpedo had struck right where this pump had been stored.

Many of the crew were swimming in water where there were fires of burning oil. When the order to abandon ship was given, I hurried to the bow of the ship. I think that a Marine and I were the first to reach the bow. We looked

down, and the clear water only seemed to be inches deep. We had our life jackets on and he told me to jump. I said, "No, you jump first." He did jump and bobbed down and up like a cork and took off for land. I then jumped in and took off swimming toward the beach and, looking back, it seemed that the burning oil was chasing right after me. I swam as fast as I could and became exhausted. I stopped swimming and tried to untie my shoes and get them off, so I could swim better. The laces were wet and I gave up trying to get my shoes off and took off swimming again. I was very lucky that my shoes didn't come off. The sailors that took their shoes off stepped on sea urchins upon touching the bottom of the ocean. The needles of the urchin are hard in the water and soften when out. There were a lot of men who came out of the water with badly infected feet, so bad that they could not walk on them. Many years later (when I was back home in South Dakota), I learned that one of our town doctors, Bernie R. Skogmo, was the young Captain in the Army Medical Corps (stationed at Willemstad, Curacao) who had treated the ERIE's crew.

Six officers and one enlisted man lost their lives that day. The torpedo had struck near the officers' quarters. The enlisted man was a mess attendant named Gavino Enriquez. (We called him "Gin Rickey.") From stories we heard, we learned that "Gin Rickey" was topside and saw the torpedoes coming at the ship. He ran toward the fantail and was practically right at the spot where the explosion occurred and was covered with burning fuel oil. He died the next day in the hospital. Among the officers we lost were: Lt(jg) Frank Greenwood, (for whom a Navy ship was named a year later); Lt. Ned Wentz, Supply Officer (my friend because he loved to hear the band); Lt. Ernest Peterson, Aviator (we had an observation plane on board); and, Lt Gilbert Gorsuch, Dentist. Ironically, this dentist couldn't wait to get back on board the ERIE, so he flew down to Trinidad and come on board there. He removed two of my wisdom teeth, two days before his death. Also lost were Lt. Commander Albert Lloyd, Supply Officer and Lt. George Kunkle, Engineering Officer. (I later served with Lt. Kunkle's brother aboard the USS FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE.)

We stayed at an Army post on Curacao with just the clothes on our back. The Red Cross furnished us with little bags of toiletries. The only problem was that one bag had the toothpaste and no brush, and another bag would contain a brush with no toothpaste. I was flown with approximately 130 others to the Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba where we were partially outfitted.

A few days or maybe a week later, certain petty officers were allowed to return to the ship. Gallagher, the 1st Class Radioman, was one of those allowed to go aboard. When he returned, he described to the rest of us how

everything had melted right down to a puddle in the radio shack. This included our large-kilowatt transmitter, the "mills" (typewriters) and any other metal equipment.

Describe your Navy career after the ERIE was torpedoed.

After the Erie was torpedoed and sank, I was transferred off the USS ERIE by many different orders. Our crew was promised that we would all hang together and be sent out on a brand new destroyer called the USS DASHIELL. But after we returned from our 30-day survivor leave and received orders, we all went to the four winds. I was transferred to the USS FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE. I thought it was a hospital ship, but the tub was a troop transport that could hold 2,000 troops. I made several trips to Africa on her taking over either soldiers or doctors and nurses. After carried troops over for the invasion of Sicily, we returned with 2,000 Italian POW's, and then went back over with troops. One time we brought back 500 German POWs. They were in a hold, locked up. The Italian troops we let have the run of the ship, so they could scrape paint and paint. They were very happy to do this as POWs, because the German troops had shot at them retreating and also the poor guys were half starved.

One afternoon while docked at Staten Island where we always unloaded our prisoners from overseas, the CRM (Chief Radioman) asked if I knew how to make coffee. I replied that I did and had been making coffee for some years. He informed me that if I made him some coffee and he liked it, he would promote me to RM1C. I chuckled, made the coffee and forgot all about it. A couple of months later a sailor asked me where the cigars were. I told him I didn't have a child and why was he asking this? He said he thought he saw on the bulletin board where I had received my First Class rating. I hurried on down one deck to the bulletin board and found my name and my promotion. The Chief had kept his word!! No exam (except the coffee making exam), and I had become a Radioman 1st Class.

I later had an opportunity to pursue going to V-12 Midshipman School (after which I would be commissioned as an Ensign). When I meet with the officer assigned to interview me, a Mr. Kunkle, he questioned me about my prior duty stations. When I mentioned that I had served on the ERIE, he asked if I had been aboard when she was torpedoed. I answered in the affirmative. He abruptly stopped me and informed me that his brother, Lt. George Kunkle, was one of the men killed that day. This ended the interview and, I believe, resulted in my nomination for the schooling.

However, there were too many first classes on the "Flossy," so I was soon transferred to the USS SUMTER, another attack troop transport. We sailed to

the Pacific and trained with Marines from Camp Pendleton, CA, and docked regularly in San Diego. One day, we set sail to the Marshall Islands in the Pacific where our Marine force landed and took the islands. I was afraid I was too stupid to be first class on the SUMTER, but soon found the other new first class was just as dumb as I. (His name was Frank Jolly and he now lives in Green Bay, WI. He is also a ham operator, but we have corresponded by computer, because his radio signals weren't very strong.)

When I again inquired about attending Midshipmen School, we were way down in Noumea, New Caledonia. This time, I was told that I needed to take a test, which I did and passed. Orders soon came for me to head back to the States and to school. Just as I was about to be transferred out, I was called aside by my Division Officer who informed me that I would be made a Chief Petty Officer, in another month's time. I debated the offer to stay on and take the promotion, but after a couple of hours decided that I would prefer to be back in the States. So, I shipped out to San Diego.

I was transferred to Asbury Park, New Jersey where for a couple of months I took refresher courses in several high school subjects (this was sort of a pre-Midshipmen School). I then spent 16 months and received 2 years of education in Valley City (North Dakota) State Teachers College, one of the two Midshipmen Schools in the Dakotas. I never completed the full training program, because my enlistment period was about to terminate and I had decided to pursue the possibility of working for the U.S. Border Patrol (which never panned out). In a way, I am glad I didn't complete the Ensign training, since, after the war ended, all the new Ensigns coming out of the V-12 program were assigned to the Navy Reserve.

I was discharged Oct 30, 1945 after serving 6 years, 1 month and 10 days in the U.S. Navy.