

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, July 22, 2015 at the home of George Rudnicki. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with George Rudnicki who served in the U.S. Navy during the years 1957 to 1961. George learned of this project through me and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

Chicago, Illinois, January 16, 1938.

What did your parents do?

Not much. I had no good relationship with them.

So did you grow up with just your mother?

I lived with my grandfather.

Did you have sisters and brothers?

I had two step-brothers.

Were they ever in the service?

No.

What did you do before entering the service?

Well, I – I was delivering papers at 12 years old in the winter time. I worked in a Sauerkraut factory for awhile.

How old were you when you went into the service?

Nineteen.

So what were you doing right before you went into the service?

I was working at a company called Western Union.

What was your job there?

Oh, a number of them, but I was looking for lost telegrams on conveyor belts and things like that.

So you had no other family members serving in the military.

No.

How did you enter the service – did you enlist or were you drafted?

Originally I was going to go with a guy I grew up with and we were gonna go into the Coast Guard and for some reason we changed our minds and went into the Navy, and then he couldn't pass, so –

Wait -- did you enlist of your own free will?

Yes, I enlisted.

You enlisted in the Navy.

Yeah, to get out of the neighborhood and do something else.

And why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Just to get out, get away, see the world.

You didn't care which one you went in –

No, I picked the Navy in particular, I don't know why –

See the world, you said. That's a good reason.

Yeah.

And what year was that?

It was 1957. Probably in the Spring of '57 when I started the process.

And were you a high school graduate?

I was not. I was not.

But the Navy took you anyway.

They did take us; I passed the test so there was no problem.

And while you were in the Navy did you continue your education?

I got my G E D and took some courses, you know, for Navy purposes.

Went through them and after I got out, years later, I went to college.

How was your departure for training camp and early days of training.

Where did you go and how did you physically get there?

Well, I was living in the City, of course, and it was at 844 North Rush Street –

The Recruiting Office –

The Recruiting Office, so I went down there like 5 o'clock in the morning and people were still bailing out of the bars on Rush Street.

Yeah, right.

So I went there and passed the physical and they sent me off to Great Lakes.

How did you get to Great Lakes on your own or did they send you –

No, not on my own; I think they had a bus or something; it was close.

How did you like Great Lakes? How did you like the service once you got in there?

I'll tell you a quick story – I was aboard ship one day, way into my tour – it was raining and sleeting off the coast of Greece, and I was down on the deck trying to tighten a thing

to keep a car from moving on the deck, and I seen a pair of shiny shoes and I thought it was some – really, really black shiny shoes – and I thought some officer didn't have nothin' better to do than watch me in the rain, and I started lookin' up and all I could see was gold from here to here (indicating from elbow to shoulder) – and actually it was Arleigh Burke was Chief of Naval Operations – he was our last five-star Admiral.

What was he doing there?

He was visiting the Fleet.

Oh, I thought maybe he was injured, laying there –

He was visiting the Fleet and just – he, too, was an enlisted man at one point in time. He walked from Kansas to San Diego and hitch-hiked –

Really –

And when he got to San Diego he decided to join the Navy because he seen the guys were wearing no shoes scrubbing the wooden decks. So he did. He rose from enlisted seaman to five-star admiral. Our last one, by the way.

Wow; that's an interesting story.

So we had a 12-minute talk and the same questions you're asking me, he said – “How do you like the food?” I said, “Hey, it's food.” He said, “You got any problems?” I said, “Well, the only problems I have is the Junior Officers.” He said, “That's all right, son, I have the same damn problem.”

Anyway, back to the – let's stay with Great Lakes right now. How long were you there?

Eight or twelve weeks, something like that.

Besides the food, how was your training?

Oh, the food was okay. They run you ragged.

What was your training like? Was it marching – calisthenics, schooling –

Calisthenics and stuff –

How about classes –

Lifesaving, swimming –

We're talking about what kind of classes did you have at Great Lakes?

Great Lakes, fire fighting, you know, it's kind of a standard thing. Fire fighting, seamanship, how to tie knots, things like that that prepare you for – I wasn't going anywhere with technology or anything. So I just went –

Lifesaving –

Yeah, life saving, a lot of swimming –

How about guns – artillery?

No artillery – they had guns, 45s, just the old kind of good pistols –

You learned to shoot though?

Yeah, we did learn to shoot – not much. They didn't waste a lot of money on -- the Navy's got big guns; they don't need the other.

Yeah. So that lasted 8 to 12 weeks. Now you're talking into Summer of 1957 – what did you do right after –

Well, I got out. I finished Boot Camp and my assignment was to the USS Canberra, which was the first guided missile cruiser in the United States Navy.

Okay, guided missile cruiser.

So they gave me tickets to Norfolk, Virginia – I lollygagged around there for about a month – they got to get enough people to go to Europe at one time – so they flew us to various places that we were supposed to go , stopped at Heathrow –

You flew to London?

Well, we never got to London. What happened is it was so fogged in we couldn't land. So they went across the sea a little bit to Scotland –

Why did you have to go to London?

Well, I was going to Europe; that's where the ship was.

Oh, the ship itself was in Europe – I didn't understand that. Okay.

Yeah.

So in order for you to get to the Canberra, you had to go by plane to Europe –

We got off the plane in a place called Ayre Scotland – and when it was foggy in London – I don't know what they called fog in England, but we couldn't see two feet ahead of you because it was so thick. So we spent a couple of days in Scotland and had a good time, but – very strong beer, by the way. – We went on our way, chasing the ship. They were in one place, then they were in another place, and I kept going back and forth in Europe

Your ship – you're still looking for your ship.

Yeah, yeah. So eventually I got to the ship in Naples, Italy – we finally went aboard ship and the Navy, I don't know, generally as soon as you get out of boot camp, they put you

cookin', mess cookin' – serving the rest of the crew. Then they were looking for some volunteers and I know that in the military they always say don't volunteer, but I did. And they picked me and someone else and we went off to work for the Commander of the Sixth Fleet, on his private boat.

Wow – Commander of the U.S. Sixth Fleet – okay.

He was a three-star, by the way, so –

Who was he?

His name was Charles Randall Brown – Vice Admiral Charles Randall Brown – we called him Charlie Brown.

When you left Great Lakes you had no further specialized training – you just had regular training that all enlisted men got.

No, I just went to –

Well, you must have had to pass some tests for them to put you on a guided missile ship, don't you think?

I don't know. If you're put on a deck crew, you work on painting and chipping paint.

Oh, I see –

More painting.

So you were part of the deck crew.

Yeah.

How did you adapt to military life, as far as physical regimen, duties –

I adapted just fine. I had no trouble whatsoever.

You didn't mind the exercise or the food or anything like that?

It's better than what I was doing in civilian life.

And the camaraderie –

I still got a couple of friends still living.

Okay, and you're getting to see the world too.

See this book here – that's the two-year cruise – anywhere from Gibraltar to Lebanon, Egypt, in that area, probably 15 times. (This is a hard-cover bound book with many photos of life aboard the USS Salem – home port of Villefranche, France). They traveled to Greece, Turkey, everything –

How wonderful – what a great geography lesson.

My DD214 on discharge report states that I was out of the country three years, six months and 25 days out of a four-year tour.

Wow – so you were really gone a lot.

Our homeport was in Villefranche, France – and if you walk out the front door – we used to have a room, three different guys, you would see Monaco. And if you walk out the other door, you overlooked the port where the ship was at. And this is right on the Riviera.

So you had it pretty good.

About ten miles to Nice, I guess.

And your ship stayed all around the Mediterranean – the Sixth Fleet is in the Mediterranean.

That's right. Remember now, when I got to the Canberra I volunteered and they sent me off to find the USS Salem, which it was at the time – that was the first flagship at the time – and I got there and just adapted to working for the admiral on his private boat. When he wanted to go ashore he had his private boat. He don't wait on anybody.

What is the highest rank you ever achieved?

E-3 – there's a Fleet thing that you take the test for E-4, as an example,, and if the Fleet has an opening and you're right at the top, then you get it. So, then if you're not right at the top, and they only have two openings or three openings, then you don't get it. But I was rated to be an E-4.

Did you ever see any actual combat?

No, other than getting shot at in Lebanon in 1958 –

We'll go into that –

No, not other than that. But sometimes just being on the ship is kind of bad.

Yeah, I guess it can be. What kinds of medals, honors or awards did you receive?

I have to go get them.

We're going to stop the tape for a little while. Back on the record, tell me what did you receive?

Well, the Good Conduct Medal, which – unless you really screwed up, you get that. One is the Armed forces Expeditionary Medal and the other one is National Defense Service Medal.

You said that you made friends on board ship that you were still in contact with today?

Yeah, I'm in contact – one lives in Rock Island, and one guy's in the Denver, Colorado area.

Do you have reunions or anything like that?

No. We had a reunion about five years ago for the U.S.S. Des Moines, which was the second cruiser – when the flag changes on the cruise it's time to go home. The flag just picks up your gear and you go over to the new ship – so I went from the Salem, which was only for a short period of time, and that resides in Massachusetts, by the way.

The Des Moines?

Yes, U.S.S. Des Moines, it's a heavy cruiser – 8" guns. It's kind of falling apart because there's nobody to, you know, give money to it.

Do they use it like a museum or something?

Yes, it is museum now. So when we went there a couple of years ago, we were going to Nova Scotia, we stopped by. And when the guy came to open it up for us, I said, "I served on here for about six months." He said, "Oh, good, then you can show them." The tour guide left.

While you were in service and spending all this time in Europe, how did you stay in touch with family –

I didn't.

You didn't write letters – how about receiving letters. Did you get any letters?

No.

No telephone calls?

My mother finally wrote the Navy, I guess and the chaplain came and said, "You gotta write home." Why? I didn't get along with anybody.

Okay, so you had not many – very few.

Very few – in fact, I used to communicate with – Pat, who is my wife now, but we weren't an item or anything, just friends; we used to work together.

So you would hear from her occasionally?

Yeah, that was fine. I was having a good time on shore.

What were your recreational or off-duty pursuits?

Well, I did some scuba diving.

Okay, where was that at?

Anywhere; we did it off the coast of Greece; off the coast of France; wherever we were at. A lot of beer drinking, that's for sure.

I mean organized sports, is what I'm talking about.

No, I didn't do much. I had enough duties to do that –

What were your duties when you were on the ship. Not when you were with the Admiral, but when you got back to your company.

On the cruiser – there was a crane on the back end and I used to take care of that crane and offload and onload the boats as they came in –

Materiel –

Liberty boats, if you will, and the Admiral's boat, and Chief of Staff's boat –

Well, what did you off and on load, supplies are you talking about?

No, no, no, we're talking about the Liberty boats, you've got to – you're anchored out – not docked somewhere – you have to get the troops going to liberty –

Oh, so it's people.

People, yeah, our troops –

Not cargo --

No, no cargo.

Was that your main job?

Yeah, in that area – in that' ship's area. Then I did some part-time helicopter work with them.

Okay, what did that involve?

I was a fill-in – well, I jumped in the water in France to show – Ivy Baker Priest was our first – she was the first woman cabinet member – Treasury Secretary. She was there visiting on one of her tours that Congress people like to take. So I jumped in the water in January, and the wetsuit leaked – that's all I remember, it leaked, and it was damn cold. And we would deliver, from time to time, I would deliver mail –

To who?

To other ships –

Deliver mail to other ships –

To other ships; to the chaplain on Sundays or whoever, whatever religious part they were. And, you know, just all around duties.

So, now tell me some of the stories. You said you went all around the Mediterranean with your ships. Just tell me some of the countries that you visited.

Oh, I can tell you geographically - Gibraltar, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, up the Dardanelles, Lebanon – and somewhere in there Algeria is on the other side of the Mediterranean – we did go there. And Beirut was a favorite spot; they've got as good beaches as they do in the Caribbean – of course Syria's got it all screwed up right now, so.

You didn't go to Israel, did you?

No, I only went on a tour.

A tour – not through the Navy, you went on your own private tour.

They used to do these cheaper tours for the Navy – you'd sign up for them. I went skiing in Switzerland, tried to ski – I got there – I never, I lived in the flatland, you know, Illinois

Well, it's good that you tried.

It was – we got out a little bit one evening, the first evening we were there, and then it snowed four feet that night. Four feet – I couldn't believe it – and we couldn't go out there. They were blasting so that you didn't get an avalanche or whatever, so –

Well, that's very interesting.

Turkey was an extremely interesting country.

What did you do in Turkey?

We just did a lot of sightseeing.

What did you see? Do you remember?

We went to an Emir's palace, which is open to the public for tours, and they had a room – he had about 80 wives or something and they had no beds. Everything was in a great big room and everyone slept on pillows – very elaborate pillows.

On the floor.

Yeah. And when he wanted one or two or three whatever, he'd just call up. And we went in the household area. They had vases that were this big (indicating head high) and they were encrusted with diamonds and rubies and whatever. So I asked the Turkish soldier that was there – you know we get along pretty good with the Army in Turkey – and I said, "Did you ever have somebody try to steal one of these?" He said, "Yeah, from time to

time.” So I said, “What do you do to them, put them in jail?” He said, “Oh, no, they cut their hands off and then they kill the entire family.” – the surviving family. So you’ve got -
- if you don’t care about your family, that’s a good way to get rid of them.

Yeah, Wow, they don’t fool around there. They don’t wait for appeals either – like we do.

Anything in particular you remember about France? – going to the beaches.

Greece – Greece I went scuba diving and I found an ancient knife – and it sits in a museum somewhere around Corfu, Greece.

Really? You gave it to the museum?

You have to; the Greeks get very testy about taking the antiquities from there.

Right.

So I was actually – we were at the --

Did you find it underwater?

Under water about 80 feet deep. Just happened to spot something. It was encrusted with salt water, you know, barnacles, whatever, but they warn you don’t take it home. I don’t know what I would have done with it anyway.

We were in Rome for the 1960 Olympics – and the interesting thing about it was – when I worked for this – we got to be good friends with this helicopter pilot, so he was kind of in charge of recreation, you know, so he gave me and my friend Victor -- a walking around pass – so you get in any venue you want to get in. If you don’t like that venue, you can go somewhere else. You can sit in the seats except if somebody came with tickets for those seats, then you had to get up and move – which was okay. But this Italian guy I hung out with, he was about six’ four” and 230 with about 5% body fat. – So a big guy, fluent in Italian, or Sicilian, as it was. His name was Victor –

It’s unusual for Italians being that tall.

Yeah, it was very unusual in Italians, right. Intimidate the hell out of people.

Yeah, sure.

Especially when he’s talking to them in Italian.

So any more exploits that you can think of in other countries that you were in?

You mentioned –

Uh, Gibraltar, because – it's interesting because you've heard of the great apes there – they have these big gorillas, basically – to me they're gorillas but – they're there. You don't touch them or anything; they're –

They're not apes; they're monkeys, aren't they?

They're huge; they're as big we are; they're bigger.

Well then they are apes. No tail.

Yeah, apes; there's some monkeys too, I think. But they vanish in the winter time.

I mean are they wild?

Yeah. They're in the trees and little caves that they have; but they're used to seeing people walking around.

So they don't bother the people.

You can feed them peanuts; they're kind of in a restricted area. I think there's a moat or something around where they're at. But you throw them peanuts or whatever. But the interesting thing is that they – they're there all summer, spring and fall and then they vanish in winter time. The rumor was that there's a tunnel that goes – that was, not manmade – but by nature, from Gibraltar to basically under the Mediterranean over to Algeria, which is right across.

So do you think they –

Well, if they vanish, they don't know where the hell they go.

Then they come back again.

Then they come back.

So nobody really studied them to see where they went.

Well, we went to – Algeria -- and to Morocco.

Morocco – that's right across.

Just a couple of days we were there. Later on, after I got out, we went to Disney World years and years ago, found out that the Moroccan king built the Moroccan portion of the EPCOT Center – and did a nice job on it. The king of Morocco paid for the whole thing.

Wow, so you're talking about EPCOT Center – the Morocco exhibit there.

Yes.

That's interesting. I didn't know that it's very nice too – I was there.

And he sent his own workers to do that.

Really – the king of Morocco – wow.

I think that's about it for the countries..

When your tour was ending, you spent four years there, you said 3 ½ years actually over seas –

Yeah, well, they did ask about re-enlistment and I said no. By that time I realized I had to get an education and I said it's time to get out. I've had nothing particular to do so I got out. I actually went to -- Pat and I started dating – I did take the fireman's test and I was way high on the list. And then Jack Kennedy got shot and Lyndon Johnson told the Mayor of Chicago that there were not enough minorities on there, so I never got to go – they said it was going to be five years before I could retake the test – and I said what am I gonna do for five years. I'm getting married.

So what did you do?

I flipped a coin and I went to computer school for \$450 –

Did you use the G.I. Bill?

No, I didn't use the G.I. Bill then, for that. I didn't even know or care about it. I went to the school; it was gonna be like 80 weeks, one night a week, and then when we got married I got a job right away in the computer business. And so I was finishing school and doing the same thing at work – the same stuff, hole punch cards and whatever. So I finished that school and I was okay. I was already in the business.

We didn't finish – when you were getting out of the service, how did you get back home?

Oh, when the ship came to Boston they decommissioned it.

Oh, you sailed –

We sailed back to Boston.

How was the trip back? How were the seas?

The seas were fine. We went a little bit up to the North Atlantic and it was pretty rough. In fact I think we were hammering ice and stuff on the outside ladders.

What ship was this?

This was the Des Moines now.

So that ship was decommissioned when you came back to Boston.

They decommissioned it; it sat for about 30 years and they finally – now they cut it up. They sent it to Houston and cut it up.

How was your reception by family and friends? Did your mother meet you?

Did you go back and live with your mother?

It was fine. I did live with her until we got married, which was only 9 or 10 months later. We still didn't get along, so –

Some people don't – what are you gonna do? So your readjustment to civilian life was fine.

It was fine. I had a job waiting for me.

Was it a big company?

Western Union.

Oh, you went back to Western Union.

I was just a clerk there. I think I was making 66 bucks a week there.

Well, that's probably what everybody was making back then.

So I went to school and I got in the computer room and stayed there, and that was kind of the end of my military stuff.

Oh, yeah, you said that they called you back.

Well, I didn't do much. I went down to Navy Pier like six times and taught the new recruits seamanship – how to tie knots, how to do this or that.

That was in your Reserve status.

Yes.

For like about a year, you said.

Yeah, it was just a year, or less.

Now, you said before you did have contact with fellow veterans over the years.

Yeah, I've had – one guy just died this past year. I didn't see them for a long time. The one in Rock Island I used to communicate with regularly. We still do, call now and then. The Italian fella that got out, he got Lou Gehrig's Disease after he got out. And it took him a long time to die. But we used to communicate until I called him one Sunday. He went through the VA so it was really good for him. He couldn't walk or talk or anything anymore so he's just laying on the floor – a big guy like that. And I said hello to him – hiw wife held the phone, but that was the last I heard of him. And another guy just died; same size guy – died, he was a big guy, going to fat to begin with – so he got out and he was a huge, huge beer drinker. He was a hunter; lived in Pennsylvania; used to hunt deer there all the time. He got up to 500 pounds. So we go to this reunion and I met him

and he had that lap band surgery and so he was doing pretty good on that. And I think he got down to about 350– from 500 pounds.

Amazing!.

We had to sleep together because there was a bunch of reunion guys there in this hotel and I said, “Steeler, if you start rolling towards me I’ll have to kill you.”

Ha, ha.

So he lived okay and he moved to Florida and we talked from time to time. So I called him and he didn’t answer. His daughter, who he didn’t really get along with, she was his only survivor, so finally I left a message. And she said he’s coming home tomorrow. So I called the next day, I left a message and she called back and said that he lived one day after he got out of the hospital and just died. His heart was probably gone.

Do you have membership in Veterans Organizations?

Just the American Legion. That’s only been a couple of years because, well, for a time they eliminated people from the years ’57 to ’62 or 63 –

Yeah, but you were overseas.

Well, I know, but that’s not a VFW. You know the American Legion had no reason to do that. So I didn’t bother joining; I said to hell with them all.

Yeah, right.

I probably got shot at more times than most of the guys that ever went to Viet Nam to begin with.

Yeah, you were starting to tell me that – before we got on tape – you were on the ship and --

No, we were with the Admiral’s – hauling VIP’s to the dock –

Where were you at – what country?

In Lebanon, in Beirut. So we’re in white suits, white uniforms because it’s summer – it’s always summer in Lebanon – in white uniforms standing there smoking on the dock and I hear these pings – like a rock hitting the water – I’m looking – what the hell was that? And I turn around and I could see a flash – like a rock hitting the water – so I told this guy Mike, let’s get out of here; they’re shooting at us. So we started back to the ship, you know, took off, they had a boat cone around the ship with a machine gun on it to protect the ship, which the U.S.S. Cole should have done and that never would have happened to the U.S.S. Cole -- So then they’re yelling at us to stop or they’re gonna shoot us –

So it was our people shooting at you?

No, it was the Lebanese, Communists or whatever, shooting at us but our little boat going around the ship would have shot at us if we didn't stop.

Oh, I see.

They didn't know who it was.

Yeah, right. After reflection on your years of service, how did your military experience affect your life, do you think?

If anything, I got smarter. And I did go to college later. I went to Illinois Benedictine four nights a week. I basically studied Economics and taxes. So it was not an easy time. My daughter asked me one time – I asked her to do something for me and she was older but not married yet. She said, "Dad, I just don't have the time." I said what are you talking about time. At one time I was working probably 50 hours a week – in an IT business you never work 40 hours a week – you work 32, but you didn't work 40. And I was going to school four nights a week, my wife was working nights, I was going to school four nights a week in the evening and I was on the Rescue Squad in Woodridge where we lived, and I took my daughter on canoe trips with the Indian Princess Program with the YMCA and I coached Little League baseball – did all of that. So I was running about 100-hour weeks at least, and she says, "I don't have time" and I told her what I just told you and she looked at me and said, "Dad, I'm just not as strong as you are."

Right.

We had a son that we lost, and he got out of the Marine Corps and he could live on three hours of sleep a night – and she needs her 9 or 10 hours.

Did you learn an important life lessons from the military?

Yeah. Get educated.

Very good – that's true. And you never did use the –

Yeah, I did use the G.I. Bill when I went to Illinois Benedictine, but I had waited a long time between –

It's a wonder they were still doing it.

I took the S A T test at Navy Pier, and I passed everything okay except for math – because I had cut school in the beginning of my Sophomore year – and there was no chance to get that math back at that time. So I couldn't go at the time; I was working too much in the business and trying to learn the computer business – so I went through

probably 12 jobs in my life – I consulted with some huge companies, including the Chicago Tribune. I worked for them for two years and I ran one-half of their world wide network. So I came a long way from hanging tapes in a computer room.

Yeah, right. Well, education counts.

But when we moved here I was cleaning files that I had saved. I had 2,000 hours of classes at IBM alone – I could have had a Ph.D. in Computer Science.

Sure, you probably could.

Well, you know, software changes daily. So we'd go from one class and then six months later go to another class.

Wow, that's really something. Anything else that you want to add to your story?

The Navy probably saved my life – only because I would have done nothing with it. Everybody I grew up with was in jail or dead – you know that kind of stuff.

Where did you grow up in Chicago?

36th and Marshfield.

Not too far from me; I know where that's at.

Right down the block from the Wrigley Chewing Gum factory.

I know where that's at.

And up the street from the Stockyards.

Right. And not far from Comiskey Park.

Oh, yeah. I used to walk to Comiskey Park a lot. WE used to run at the turnstiles in front of the park – we'd get 15 of us and jump right over them. And the Andy Frain ushers would chase you; if they'd catch you, you went home. If they didn't catch you you sat in the bleachers in center field.

We are through with this interview now - and I thank you very much for this interview, George, and thank you for your service to our country.

No problem. I was glad to do it at the time. It actually just changed my life.

Very good – for the better.

Oh, absolutely for the better.

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