

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, May 29, 2024 at the home of Michael Sutura. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Mike who served in the United States Navy and is a veteran of the Viet Nam era. Mike learned of the Veterans' History Project through a mutual friend, Al Reuter. Mike has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Mike, when and where were you born?

Chicago, Illinois, June 27, 1948.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was in construction and my mother was a housewife.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

One brother, younger.

Did you have other family members serving in the military?

Yes. My father served in the U.S. Army during World War II. My brother served in the Army during the Viet Nam War.

Any others?

One uncle served in the U.S. Navy during WW II and one served in the Army during that time.

What did you do before entering the service?

I worked for a lamp manufacturer – Sandell Lamp Manufacturer.

How old were you when you entered the service?

I was 19.

Mike has his DD-214 here; his dates of entry are August 7, 1967; discharge on May 3, 1971 – almost four years. How did you enter the service – drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted.

Why did you choose that particular branch of service?

Because I was ready to be drafted. If you weren't going to college full time, or you didn't have a family with one child, you were high on the list to be drafted. So my father said, "You don't want to sleep in the mud. Go in the Navy where you got a clean bed and meals." And he was exactly right. (Added - I also wanted to get schooling as a Draftsman, but that was eliminated.)

That's very true.

Exactly right. I ate well.

Did you go with a buddy or go alone?

I went alone.

Where did you go? How did you get there?

A friend of mine enlisted and he told me where he went to enlist, and I went to that location and applied.

Where was that location?

It was in Chicago, yeah, I don't remember the address.

Well, you lived in Chicago.

Yes, um-hmm.

Where did you physically go?

I went to Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

How did you get there? Downtown Chicago –

Yes, we were inducted into the Navy in downtown Chicago.

They took you by bus – by train?

By Train to Great Lakes.

How long were you there?

Great Lakes was six weeks.

That was your boot camp?

Yes. Ha, ha

What did you do during boot camp – tell me what a typical day looked like.

Oh, -- rise, very early, and keep on running – everything was running –

Okay – ha, ha

Most of the time was spent doing calisthenics, from day to night, calisthenics –

Oh, really!

Yeah.

Did you have classroom teaching too?

Oh, yeah, we had classroom too – we learned how to tie knots; we had shipboard etiquette, we had – each day, after calisthenics, we went to classes, swimming classes, saving – damage control –

Lifeguard saving?

Yes. Lifeguard saving.

You had to be able to swim and do all these things?

Yes, and you had to swim to qualify.

How did you feel during this six weeks? How did you adapt to military life – like the physical regimen, barracks, food, social life –

Well, the food was terrible – but the life – once you get used to it, it wasn't too bad, you know.

Once you get through that one week of initiation –

Initial period –

Yeah, you get a special routine and you follow that routine over and over.

For a week?

For, well, that first week is orientation.

Orientation.

Where they hand you your uniform, shave all your hair off; they do all the physicals, like that.

Oh, that's all in one week.

That's terrible –'cuz you're not into a real barracks yet. After you get done with the basic orientation, then they send you over to the regular barracks.

Where did you sleep during that first week?

They have – they had a barracks there, but it wasn't part of any schooling part.

Not regular, okay.

Yeah.

Well, you didn't have any social life; you were on the base the whole time.

Yes, yes.

Did you not have any gunnery training?

Very little; very little.

You learned mostly shipboard stuff.

Yeah, yeah.

What happened after the six weeks?

After the six weeks I was stationed on the USS Saratoga.

How did they determine that? Did you have to take tests beforehand?

No, I don't know. They just – right out of boot camp they assigned me to a certain field and I was assigned to the aircraft carrier.

You went home probably before that?

Yeah, right after the six weeks I went home for another two weeks; a leave.

I'm curious because you're from Chicago and you were at Great Lakes – you were able to call your family on the phone during that time?

Yeah, in fact there was one time we had free liberty – I was able to come home during boot camp – yes.

Oh, really!! That's unusual, I would say.

Yeah, it is unusual, but I was close by so it was just a train ride away.

Right, exactly, just an hour away.

Yeah, right.

That was nice.

That made it nice – cuz I was never away from home.

This was your first trip away from home.

Yes. I was never – I hated it. Ha, ha

Okay, you got your orders and they sent you to the Saratoga – wait a minute – while you were in boot camp did you have any kind of specialized training?

Uh, no.

Did you later have any specialized training?

No.

So what were your duties on the Saratoga?

I was – I started off as a deck hand – yeah – boatswain's mate.

And where was the Saratoga? Where was it based at?

It was based out of Mayport, Florida, just south of Jacksonville.

So you got on the Saratoga and you were a regular deck hand?

Yes.

What did that involve? What were your duties?

Oh, that was chipping a lot of paint, working on the anchors.

Did you have to stand guard duty as well?

Oh, yeah, stand guard duty, yes.

So those were basically your duties for how long? How long did that last?

Well, as long as I was on that ship. In the beginning; later I was assigned as a yeoman.

Which was how long – how long were you on that ship?

I was on that ship three years.

And where did the ship go to – you didn't stay in port.

No, we went to the Mediterranean Sea for six months. (Mike added comments to his narrative after the fact). We went to Philadelphia Shipyard dry dock for a year where the ship was overhauled. We then sailed to Cuba, Jamaica and then to the Mediterranean Sea.

Wow! So did you just cruise around?

Cruise around the Mediterranean, yeah.

And did you stop at many different ports along the way?

Yes, we did. We stopped at Malta, we stopped at Spain, Greece and Italy.

You got off at these places?

Oh, yeah, I got off on every one of them.

And how was the food on the ship?

It was great; that's one thing about the Saratoga, they had a good cook. A lot of good cooks.

What was happening with the war in general – the Viet Nam War – did it affect you at all?

Were you in any kind of --

At one point we were scheduled to go to Viet Nam with the carrier, but they rerouted us to a conflict in Israel, and we went back to the Mediterranean.

So did you essentially sail up and down the coast of Israel?

Yes.

Just like being in readiness.

Yes, exactly.

Were you a part of the Sixth Fleet?

Yes.

I know that personally because I was in Israel and when we were there in Haifa, a city like San Francisco, very mountainous, hilly, you could look out and there was the aircraft carrier, part of the Sixth Fleet – this was in 1995. But they're continuously out there – all the time.

Yeah.

What other duties did you perform?

I was a deck hand for about maybe a year, year and a half, but I graduated to be a yeoman – and I stuck with that profession throughout my Navy career.

What is the highest rank that you achieved?

3rd Class Yeoman.

In your travels with the ship did you encounter any storms or bad weather?

Yes, yes we did.

Could you talk about that –

I do remember in the Mediterranean on the way back - we were on the Med for six months and we were on our way back during December – and there was such a bad storm that we had to stop at a port – and this is the first time they had to drop both anchors –

Which port was that, do you know?

That was Malta – we were just ready to come out of the Med and they stopped at Malta for one or two days –

Till the storm passed.

Yeah,

Wow! So you never really were in combat or you never saw any combat?

No, I did not.

Did the ship encounter any other problems like – was it ever in any difficulty – traveling –

When we first got to Malta, I understand the propeller shaft broke – and we thought we were going to have to go back -- but they were able to fix it; they repaired it and we stayed out there the whole time.

Wow – that’s a big job –

Yeah, it sure was.

\Could you talk about some of the ports that you did stop at and what you encountered there?

First port was Malta; second port was –

Did you get off – I mean -- did you go and visit?

Yeah, yeah -

Can you remember anything about that?

In Malta – I remember going to a number of bars and meeting – particularly people going on vacation with their families –

From the U.S.?

Yes, yes.

Oh, meeting U.S. citizens; that’s nice.

Yeah, that was so nice of those people.

Malta is not too big – it’s a little island.

Yeah, but it’s very nice, yeah.

So after Malta where did you go – you said Spain.

Barcelona, Spain.

Did you have occasion to visit there?

Yes.

Go on some tours –

Yes, we got on some tours there and Palma Mallorca, which is a part of Spain. It was a very nice port.

What did you do on the ship – friendships formed and camaraderie of service – what was your off-duty recreation?

Well, since I was a yeoman I hung around with all the other yeomen in the office. At times, at night they’d show movies on different decks – I’d go to a movie.

Did your planes take off and land, do practice runs –

Yes.

That was a constant –

Constant in the Med.

So while they were moving the planes were always taking off and landing?

Yeah. I forgot to tell you though, when I first was stationed on the carrier and I went down to Mayport, Florida, the carrier wasn't in yet; it was still out in the Med.

Okay.

So I had like a 30-day wait before it got in.

Yeah, you didn't mention that. Okay – and –

While I was in port, I had to do odd jobs like cut the grass, maintenance jobs –

They kept you busy – ha, ha

Kept Busy, yes. Ha, ha

You mean at the base –

At the base, yeah. And then after Christmas – right after New Year of '68, we sailed up to Philadelphia and we were going into the shipyard for one year.

One year? Wow! Why?

A complete overhaul; she went into dry dock and they did a complete overhaul – new engines – new everything.

What happened to the crew during that time?

Well, we went with them; there were no planes onboard at that time. And we got to Philadelphia – as soon as we got there went right into dry dock and I was part of a fire watch crew because they did a lot of cutting and welding, so I had to go where the welder was at – and watch him so if there was a fire, we could put it out.

Right, right. So you were there for a year doing that?

I was in Philadelphia for one year.

So when you weren't on duty in Philadelphia, you were able to go on –

That's where I met my wife.

You met your wife in Philadelphia –

At the USO –

At the USO – how nice. So you wrote letters back and forth after you left Philadelphia?

Yeah, well, by the time I left Philadelphia, we were already engaged.

Oh, you were engaged, because you were there for a whole year.

Yeah, yeah, ha, ha

And your wife's name is –

Delores Jean – she goes by Jean really.

Okay – so that was in 1968 – you met your wife?

Yes, uh-huh. January of '68.

But she was a native – she was from Philadelphia?

No, that's the thing about it; she was from Chicago.

Really? Was she on vacation or something?

No. She actually moved there to live with her Aunt. She lived in McHenry, Illinois. She didn't care for that place too much so she moved to Philadelphia with her Aunt. And eventually she moved on her own to the YWCA and that's where I met her at the USO dance.

Oh, wow! But you knew, or she knew too that she was going to come back to Chicago.

I think so. I don't know.

Did she stay with her Aunt because she was ill or something?

No. She stayed because her parents wanted her to; they didn't want her to be alone while she was there.

Okay; that was fortunate for you.

Yeah, yeah.

Okay, so you got engaged but then your ship finally got repaired.

Yeah, after that year.

So you were in touch with her just by letters –

Oh, yeah.

Did you ever call – telephone calls?

Yeah, yeah.

Phone calls were expensive – long distance –

Yeah, I made one from Barcelona, Spain – that was a long one.

They were expensive at one time. Okay, the ship is out of drydock. Where is the first place you went after that?

After dry dock we had what they call a shakedown cruise where they test everything that they did – to make sure that everything worked.

Right, and it did.

Yes, it did. Then we were involved with the NATO Conference – we showed off our ship and the planes were onboard, taking off, and I actually got to meet President Nixon; he came aboard the aircraft carrier for that

Really –

And I got to shake his hand.

Would you say that was the end of '68 or beginning of '69.

Yeah, yeah, probably the beginning of '69.

Wow – so you actually met President Nixon.

Yeah.

Interesting. Was that in Philadelphia – did he come to Philadelphia?

No, that was at the NATO Conference, so it was –

In another country somewhere?

Actually I think it was at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Where else did your ship go to?

Okay, after Barcelona and Malta and Palma, we went to Greece, Athens, Greece –

That was interesting, I'm sure.

It was and Rhodes, Greece. We spent a lot of time in Greece.

Did you sightsee there?

Oh, yes, I did –

Go to the Acropolis?

Yes, yes.

That's interesting – especially when you go with friends – the guys you're on the ship with – actually go as a group – that's interesting.

Yeah, yeah.

I would have loved that too. Did you ever stay in touch with guys that you met in the service?

Uh, when I finally got out of the service in 1971, I did get a hold of the fella that introduced me to my wife, who was from Chicago –

What was his name?

His name was Jim Cavanaugh.

And are you in touch with him today?

No, no, we don't know what happened to him. I think it was in '71 or '72 we heard that he went back in the Navy and we haven't heard from him since then.

Oh, okay. How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home when you were away – was it just by letter – I mean your family now –

Yes, by letter.

And how long would you say it took a letter to get either way – going back and forth – mail – how was the mail?

Probably it took a couple of days, maybe a week.

But you were on ship – when you were out at sea – probably when you came into port you had all the mail coming in – didn't you?

Well, we were pretty lucky with the mail because the mail plane would fly onto the carrier – to deliver the mail.

Oh, I see, that makes it convenient. Ha, ha

Yes, that's one advantage on the carrier. Ha, ha

You didn't have to wait to get to port. I didn't think about that.

Okay, you were at the Acropolis – how long did you stay in Greece?

Probably a couple of days – 2 or 3 days.

And you didn't encounter any other storms in the Mediterranean – just that one big storm that you remember –

Yeah. Just the one big one –

Otherwise you were able to go through any other storms.

Yes.

So where did you go after Greece?

After that we went to Naples, Italy.

What did you see there?

And I got to go – took a tour to Rome – now that was for four days.

Wow - nice. Nice to go for free – the U.S. is paying your way.

Yes, it was nice. That was the one advantage about that

Yes, yes. How did you enjoy that?

I loved it; I loved it. The tour was good; the food was good. We went with good friends.

That was you with your shipboard buddies?

Yes, yes

Did you actually go to Pompeii?

No, no, we didn't.

Rome is great to see.

Yeah.

Where did you go after Rome?

After Rome we went to the French Riviera; we only stayed a little while because something else developed and we couldn't stay long.

Some other problem and you had to attend it?

Yeah.

Probably Israel or something.

Yeah, it probably was there, yeah.

You never went into Israel, did you?

No, just outside of it.

How far off shore would you say you were - like cruise back and forth along the coast.

Yeah.

How far off shore.

Well, that ship couldn't get too close – can't get close to shore; so it would have to be a mile out, probably

Oh, more than that.

Yeah, the water is deep there. During liberty we had to take our small boats to port.

Oh, right – the tenders. Well, I would say the ship that we saw was a good 5 or 10 miles out at sea – looking at it with binoculars.

Yeah.

You can't come into port and you have to respect their borders – they have a limit, don't they, for how close ships can come --

Yeah, probably.

So after Israel, was your time up already?

After Israel I think we came back to Rhodes, Greece – and then we -- I think the last port was Malta again –

And that was the bad storm?

Yeah, yeah.

After the storm, you were done with the Mediterranean and you came back home?

Yeah.

And where did you land – back to your regular port in Mayport?

Came back to Mayport, Florida, yeah.

Was your enlistment up now?

No, but by that time I applied for shore duty because I still had one more year to go.

Oh, I see.

And I got approved for shore duty.

And where was that?

I was sent to a submarine base in Groton, Connecticut.

And what were your duties there?

First I was on tug boat duty – bringing the subs in.

What did that involve?

That involved the tug boat going out to the inlet and tying up to the submarine and bringing them into port.

Oh, you tie up to the sub and you had to tow them in?

Yes, um-hmm.

And your job on that ship was –

Boatswain's mate.

And there again you had to do all the duties –

The deck work – more paint chipping and that kind of stuff; guard duty; lot of guard duty on that.

That was a Navy tug boat?

Yes.

I didn't realize that they owned a tug boat.

We had about 6 or 7 of them at that port. And depending on how big the submarine was, they would send the larger tug.

So is that the job you continued with until you were discharged?

No, eventually I made 3rd Class Yeoman and they sent me to the school they had there and I was in charge of the confidential books for the classrooms.

Oh, what did you have to do – distribute them or guard them or what?

I had to distribute them, yes. As students would come in for their classes for submarine duty and they would give me the list of books they want and I would issue them.

Was that your final job in the Navy?

Yes, it was my final job.

And you were discharged in May of '71.

Yes.

And how were you discharged – was your time up and they gave you –

Well, that was an early discharge because four years would have been August 6th of '71 but I got an early release and was able to get out in May.

Oh, I see.

Couple months short of four years.

And how did you return home – by what means?

Well, by that time – I was married.

Oh, you got married in the service?

Married in the service in 1970.

Where did you get married?

Chicago.

So you were home on leave and you got married?

Yes, um-hmm. We got married March 14, 1970. So since I had shore duty, I was able to bring my wife out to Connecticut and we lived there for a full year.

Did you live off base?

Yes. We had an apartment – Norwich, Connecticut.

So that was your first year of marriage – you were in the Navy?

Yes, yes

Did your wife work? Did she have a job while she was there?

Yes, she did. Actually she worked for the YMCA there.

Because she was familiar with them?

Yes, she was.

Did you have your own car there?

Yes.

So when you were discharged did you just drive home?

When I was discharged from the Navy, we packed up the car and a trailer and we drove back to Chicago.

So you settled down here. How was your reception by family and friends?

Oh, great, great reception. They enjoyed it; saw me coming back home.

And how was your readjustment to civilian life?

Uh, it was fine.

Well, you were married already – it's not like you were still a single kid.

Yeah, yeah. I was anxious to get back.

Did you have a job waiting for you or what did you do after you got out?

When I got out I was gonna take it easy for a couple of weeks before I looked for a job. But my wife went looking for a job and they asked her what's your husband doing? And she said well, he's not doing anything; he just got out of the Navy. Well, we have a position here for him.

What was it?

It was for a quality control technician – a dental manufacturer – they made dental equipment – dental products.

And did you go?

So I went, took the interview, I got the job but she didn't. She went in for a secretarial position. She didn't get the job but I did.

After you left the service did you ever use the GI Bill?

Uh, no –

For schooling or anything like that?

No, no, I didn't

How about today – do you use the VA benefits?

No.

Because you probably have your own?

Yes.

So your wife eventually found a job somewhere else?

Yes, she did, yes.

So the both of you worked for a while.

Yeah, yeah.

So you did take that job and is that where you stayed or how long did you stay?

I was at that job 26 years.

Oh, wow! So did you retire from there?

No, I didn't retire. I started to go into business for myself repairing dental equipment –

On my own – individual.

Independent –

Yes.

Well, you knew people from the job.

I did.

So you had your own word of mouth business.

Yes, yes.

Is that what you continued doing?

No, eventually I got tired of traveling so I started working for my brother, who was an electrician and I did electrical work for the last 10-15 years.

You learned that in the Navy too?

No, I didn't, but I hung around with my brother and my friend who was an electrician and I picked up the trade from them.

Did you have to get certified or anything?

No, -- yes, I went to Washburn Trade School and got certified.

You just did it on your own?

Yeah, yeah.

And you have not had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

No, I haven't

Do you today belong to any veterans' organizations?

No.

There is one here in Carillon –

I go to the doings here, yeah.

Well, that's good. So you've been retired for quite a while now too.

Yeah, retired since 2010.

And you've lived in Carillon for quite a while?

U, we've only been here 3 ½ years.

Really – so you're fairly new here.

Yeah.

How do you think your military experience affected your life?

Well, I got married, had three kids. It made me appreciate home a lot more; because I never wanted to leave; I never wanted to go anywhere. I was happy at home. My mother and father were good parents; my brother was – we got along well --

You had a happy family.

Yeah, I didn't want to leave.

Well, look at all you saw and all the stuff you did – all your experiences.

Yeah, that's right.

Any life lessons learned from military service?

I know how to tie knots; I enjoy military songs – played for Memorial Day here – gives me chills, you know –

Right.

I think we're going to a picnic – veterans' picnic here –

Yes, there is – I know what you mean. So you did enjoy the military – looking back, I mean, reflecting on it.

Yes, yes.

So would you say you had a good experience?

I did, I did.

Lot of guys say that and they wouldn't hesitate to go back and do it again.

Yeah.

Anything else you can think of that might be of interest – funny or serious – you never saw combat or saw people killed or anything –

We did have couple of people fall overboard.

Fall or jump?

Fall – fall overboard.

Because I heard that people jump overboard.

Well, we had some incidents – because the carrier would refuel – replenish all its goods while its moving – so it's attached to another tanker and they would bring the hoses over –

Right, right.

I remember one time that some ship got in our way and they had to break away and the hose broke. And the guy that was handling the fueling got messed up – all sprayed up with oil and I was on the headphones, and headphones were starting to pull away, and I just managed to get them off of my head before it pulled me over – the scariest moment –

That was scary – right.

The scariest moment – yeah.

You could have been overboard too.

Yeah, yeah.

That was your scariest moment; you survived. I guess it made you think –

Oh, yes, yes.

You have to be alert when you're on there – you cannot be – not sharp.

Right, right.

If there's nothing else, Mike, thank you for your service to our country and I thank you for having this interview; I enjoyed it.

Thank you. It was a pleasure.

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