

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, April 18, 2024 at the home of Sheldon E. Weiser. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Shelly, who served in the U.S. Merchant Marines and was discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard in 1946. He later found out that in 1980 the law was changed making anyone who served in the Merchant Marines was automatically a veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard. He does not have a DD-214, he does have a Certificate of Discharge which will be included along with this transcript. Shelly served from 1945 through 1946. Shelly learned of the Veterans' History Project through a mutual friend, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Okay, Shelly, when and where were you born? City and State.

In Chicago, Illinois, July 20, 1927.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a furrier, made fur coats, had a business.

How about your mother?

Housewife.

Did you have any sisters and brothers?

Yes, I had two brothers.

Were they older than you?

Both younger – there was four years' difference between us.

Did you have other family members serving in the military?

Oh, yes.

Who are they?

Well, my cousins – I had a lot of cousins.

In various services?

Yes. One was a Commander in the Navy during World War II.

What did you do before entering the service? How old were you when you entered the service?

Exactly – I signed up on my 18th birthday.

Where did you sign up?

New York, New York.

Why did you go to New York when you lived in Chicago?

'Cuz my buddy, who was in the same position I was, just out of high school, didn't want to go into the Army because we were both 1-A. We were about to be drafted. So my buddy's father knew the Recruiting Officer for the Merchant Marines in New York. So we had all that information. We left the day before my 18th birthday, both went to New York and went right to the Recruiting Office.

How did you get to New York, was it by train?

By train, yes.

So you turned yourself into this friend of your Dad's and –

Okay, we signed up – it was all new to us – we signed up – Merchant Marines – to go to Sheepshead Bay for training.

That's in New York?

Yes.

What did this training consist of?

Well, that's the story. That's the whole big story.

Okay.

The first day we signed up; the next morning we had to go get our physicals – let me put it this way first – when we went into the office, there was about 25 or 30 other boys –

Recruits.

Recruits from Texas; every single one was from small towns in Texas except the two of us.

We had nothing in common. So we went and got our physicals and we signed up and next morning after the physicals we went to get our equipment.

How about a uniform?

That's equipment. We had to stand in line, after we passed our physicals – so we had our uniforms, shoes and everything else. While we're in line, I was getting my uniform, another Merchant Marine Officer came in and asked if anybody here knows how to play an instrument. So I raised my hand because I played the clarinet. I played in the orchestra in high school. He said okay, come along with me. He took me out of line and everything –

But your friend stayed in line?

He stayed in line. The Officer said, your job from now on is gonna be in the marching band. Well, okay, sounds pretty good. Now my friend wanted to become a Purser, go to Officer's school. So he signed up for the Purser's school. We ate together; all the guys from Texas and I were in one squad.

Did you bunk together?

Yes.

What kind of accommodations did you have?

Barracks. I was still with the same guys from Texas; they were friendly, but they couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand them; they were farm boys and ranch hands, you know, they were very innocent guys. They found out from my papers that I was Jewish – and they said "No, you don't look Jewish. We never saw a Jew before. "

No kidding!

They thought I had horns or something – but they were friendly enough. They said you look like a normal person – so we got along. Anyway, after I went with the officer to sign up for the marching band. I still was bunking and eating with the rest of the guys but – they all went to different classes; they did exercises, wake up early, did exercises – I didn't do anything.

Wow! What did you do?

My only job was to march, learn the music and march and play the instrument.

How large was the band?

Oh, about 40 guys, I think.

And how long did this "training" go on – how long did you remain there?

Until the other guys graduated with their class; they were all sent out to different ships to be signed up to go to sea. They didn't know what to do with me 'cuz I never took any of the classes; that's all I did was practice.

How long was the training supposed to be – three months or – eight weeks?

Eight weeks, it was.

So for eight weeks they were training and going to classes –

Right.

And you weren't.

I wasn't

You were practicing music.

That's all I did. That was my job.

So what happened at the end of eight weeks?

Well, they all went – they got put on different ships with different job and they didn't know what to do with me because it was time for me to leave too.

Right.

The Officer came to me and said you have to go out and go into the Merchant Marines. So he sent me to the union office in New York, Merchant Marine union office in New York and they put me – walked in this great big room with great big chalk boards with all the names of the ships and where they were going to - with different jobs. And you were supposed to pick something out that you wanted to go to. So I saw a ship that was going to, depending on what kind of job was open, going to Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and I said, Okay, the open job they had was for mess hall, serving food –

Like a cook –

Assistant Cook, mess man, I guess, serving the food on the ship – I went there and they assigned me a ship and I left and went on the ship–

Like you left the next day or when did you leave?

Right.

And you don't remember the name of the ship?

I still have the information because my daughter found out through the Veterans Administration – she found out. I forgot what ship it was. She has all the information. (Later discovered that the name of this ship was the USCG – Joseph M. Terrell).

The first ship was a cargo ship and I went right to the ship. I had work clothes; I did have the uniform too, that I took with me, but most of the times just work clothes. They sent me to the mess hall – the cook and everything – and he told me what to do. So I went on this ship from New York to Amsterdam, Holland on the North Sea. And when we got there we couldn't dock into the docks. We had to anchor out into the bay because all the docks were lined up with soldiers with machine guns.

Wow! Were they Americans?

The whole line up – no, they were Netherlands – but the dock was all lined up. So we had to take the small boats from our ship in the bay to the docks on land.

How long did this trip take – from New York to Amsterdam? Just an estimate –

I would say two weeks.

And all during that time you were serving as an assistant cook.

Right, right. It was a nice job; very pleasant atmosphere; everybody got along on the ship. I got to be buddies with all the guys there.

But you left your friend behind –

Yeah, he went right to Officer's School and then we split up from there.

Okay, so you're in Amsterdam, what happened there?

Well, I'd never been to a foreign country before. So we got there and a group of 8 of us went to look the place over. There was a policeman, we went up to him and we said where could we go to see action. So he says okay. So he gave us an address to go and it happened to be the red light district.

Of course – ha, ha I've been to Amsterdam.

Naturally, there were 8 of us so he thought we wanted to see some action, ha, ha. So we went there, down the street, they had two-story houses with big glass windows in front on the second floor and the girls were sitting in the window with lingerie and they would beckon us to come in. Well, I never was in that position before.

You were very innocent.

Innocent, very innocent. So we went up there and the girl came in, she couldn't speak much English, but we all got in there – it's a parlor and on the side there's a draped room where action took place. We went in there and she takes off her robe and was nude underneath – and she grabbed her breast and pressed on her nipple and milk came out --

Oh, my God!

And she said I just had a baby. So we were all so dumb we didn't know what to do.

Oh, my God!

So one guy says okay, I'll try it. She takes him to the side room. WE thought we'd play a trick on him 'cuz it's only drapes. So while he was in the room, we went over and opened the drapes and you could see the outside – right into the room, ha ha

Oh, you could see from outside – oh, my God! Ha, ha

So that was our first big thing in the service. They had little kiosks on each corner of the street but it was raised about a foot high, on stilts. Turned out they were washrooms.

Oh, my God!

On the outside on the corner, so you could see their feet – whoever was in the washroom –

Really!!

But you couldn't see past that. So if you went to the washroom you could see their feet.

That was terrible!

An eye-opening experience.

Afterwards we went to bars --

Well, we don't need to go into that detail -- but how long did you stay in Amsterdam?

Not long. They had to unload. We didn't have to load or unload the ship. That was not part of my job. So we could go out to shore; we didn't have to be onboard.

So you only worked on the ship when it was moving.

Right, yeah.

Didn't they eat when it was docked too?

Yeah, but we didn't do that.

They probably had just a skeleton crew, or something like that.

Yeah, right. They did. It was an easy job.

So how long did you stay in Amsterdam?

Not too long – several days, I think.

Okay, less than a week?

Less than a week.

Then where did you go?

Then we went back on ship – went to Wales – which was – happen to be – tell you the time we spent there – because we landed there in Wales on New Year's Eve.

And that was 1945 – going to be 1946.

Yes, yes. So I went to town –

Wait a second – how was the journey – well, not much of a journey from Amsterdam to Wales.

No, no, to Wales, it was okay. But the action started after Wales – coming back. We went there, were in the Square on New Year's Eve, I went alone. Waiting for 12 midnight to come up and there was a girl standing next to me and she grabbed me and kissed me. Well, that's what they do on New Year's Eve.

That's what they do.

So we started talking and she took me home with her, found out I was American and she liked that idea. Introduced me to her father and mother –

Oh, wow!

They were very nice to me, and so I stayed there for dinner and we talked; they went into another room and left us alone.

They are very much more lenient in Europe than they are in America.

Oh, yes; they were very happy to see me; she wrote me two letters after I got home. I gave her my home address – so we left Wales to go home to New York. That's when a big storm hit on the North Sea.

That's what I want to hear. What happened?

A huge storm; we were in a convoy and the storm was so bad there was an air craft carrier in the convoy and it cracked in two from the storm.

Really!! Broke in half – do you know which one that was?

No, I don't know. But it was told to us –

That would be in January of 1946. Wow! – an air craft carrier.

I was stupid; something happened to me too – the sea was so bad, we were going up – it was a big storm, I went to the railing, we weren't supposed to go out but I wanted to see the storm. So I went by myself to the bow of the ship. Now at the bow of the ship there's a little metal room that's waterproof; where they kept the ropes and equipment; it had a big steel door with a big handle – watertight – and on each side there was a little porthole that was locked from the inside. It got to be so bad I couldn't get back – because the ship was going up out of the water and then coming down under the water – so I could see the water from the portholes raising over the window. So I was really under water. So I was there for two hours; I could not move. I couldn't get back –

That's why they told you not to go there.

Yeah, right. I was stupid; I went there. So after it calmed down –

You were hanging on for dear life.

Yes, I thought I was gonna die. And when the bow of the ship went into the water, the propeller in the back came out of the water and the whole ship was shaking back and forth. I didn't know what was gonna happen. So finally it eased up and I went back and I never forgot that day.

No, you would never forget that.

So we got back and we were discharged from the first ship, from the union –

So you were back to New York.

Right. I was discharged from that ship but I still had to get another ship or I would have been 1-A again, if I would have gone home. But I had a vacation coming --

When did you get back to New York? Just January or so – of 1946.

Yeah. So I went home after that – I think I had 10 days coming.

Okay – 10 days – and then what?

I came back for 10 days I had a friend there who never went in the service and we got together. I was telling him my experiences and he said Shelly will you go on a blind date with my girl friend's girl friend. And I said Yeah, sure. So I got her name and called her up and we went out – a movie or something. I went to her house, I was in uniform –

What uniform was it?

Sailor's uniform –

Merchant marine?

Yes, it was like a sailor's outfit with the blue –

The uniform you got when you first went in.

Yes. Just like a sailor's outfit, with sailor hat and all?

Yes. I knocked on the door, her father answered, I introduced myself, he said okay, wait outside for a minute. She told me later what he said – watch out for those sailors.

Ha, ha

They're bad guys; you're gonna get in trouble. She came out and she was gorgeous. She was a model. She was still in high school.

Wow! Well you were only 19 yourself.

Yeah and she was 18. She was a year younger. But it was chemistry. We went out every single night and then – we fell in love.

What's her name?

L-i-s-b-e-t-h.

And was that your wife? Did you marry her?

Yes, I did. After I left she wrote me every day on my next trip – it was nine months at sea.

Nine months at sea.

We went to the Pacific -- I went to almost every country in the Pacific.

How did you get that trip? You had to go back to New York and the union office –

I Signed up for a new ship.

What ship did you sign up for.

The S.S. Resolute was the name of the ship; the company was the United States Lines.

So the only job that I had to go was Ordinary Seaman – I signed up for it

What were your duties?

Just maintaining the ship.

No matter if it was painting or cleaning –

Right, anything they told me to do.

Who was your superior officer?

The Boatswain's Mate. I went onboard, got all the papers signed and everything, they told me who to see and then we went from New York down the coast to the Panama Canal and stopped off at New York to pick up cargo. After New York cargo the first place we went –

Wait a minute – didn't you leave from New York?

I left from New York, the ship traveled south to the Panama Canal, on the other side, that was the Pacific Ocean and we went up to California.

Oh, to California and picked up something there and came back to New York –

No, no, no – that's after nine months.

Oh, your final destination was New York.

Yes, right.

Okay, you went through the Panama Canal and you're on the other side in California – what did you do there?

We picked up cargo.

Do you know what kind of cargo?

No, I don't. I don't remember.

Did you have normal hours ?

Yes.

What were your hours like?

We worked for four hours and had 8 hours off –

Four on, eight off. Did you have watches?

Yes, same thing – four on, 8 off.

And that was in addition to your doing maintenance work on the ship?

Yes.

You had a regular schedule.

Yes.

But you had nothing to do with cooking on this ship?

No.

What was your title?

OS – ordinary seaman.

Okay, you did that for nine months. Where did you go after California?

Now, that trip was a nine-month trip. First land we went to is China.

Okay – where –

Went to Hong Kong, Shanghai – by the way this ship had 10 passengers on it. It was a cargo ship but it had passengers.

They do have cargo ships with passengers.

Two of them were priests going to China.

Like missionaries?

Yes. We became – actually my friend on ship, buddy on the ship, made friends with the two priests. So when we finally got to Shanghai, they got off, and asked if we'd like to see the monastery they were going to – it was inland. So we got permission to go with the two priests.

Who was your buddy – what was his name?

Oh, God, I don't remember, Ralph, I think – so the priests got down on the dock with a Jeep. It was gonna be a long trip, not overnight, but they were gonna take us to see the monastery. We were interested. We went through jungles, up into the mountains, like a jungle, like Africa actually – we get to this big – did you see King Kong? It was just like King Kong – we drove up to this tremendous wooden gate – like 60 feet high with a big sliding thing in the middle and a little door on the side that you get into – but it was a gated city – a gated city.

Why did they have this tremendous huge gate like that?

It was a tremendous place; they had all buildings; it was like a little city that had a fence all around it.

Wow !

So we went in there – what happens is in China at that time they didn't want children; they could only have one child. So they used to put the child in the basket in front of the gate and the priests and nuns would take them in and raise them.

Oh, like an orphanage.

Yeah, an orphanage, but they'd spend their whole lives there. They had schools; they taught them how to carve wood and they had special jobs for women – made all the clothes, embroidery –

Well, they taught them trades.

Yes, they taught them trades. We went to this big hallway in one of the buildings and there was this old man, I think in his 70s, and he was carving the walls – the walls were wood – and he was carving little figures into the wood. That was my first realization about carving which I thought was very interesting.

I want to interrupt Shelly for a minute because he is a woodcarver and this is where he got his very first inspiration for woodcarving. He has tremendous carvings here in his apartment and downstairs; he is a Master Carver today – so we'll hear that story later – this is where he got his first impression of wood carving.

They had a big table and chairs that sat 20 or 30 people; it was a massive dining room set. The tables and chairs were all carved with little figures on them. You could buy things there at the monastery – how can you get that out of the jungle?

Right.

But I bought a lot of things there like kimonos and a lot of linens and tablecloths and stuff like that to bring home.

So you bought souvenirs there. But you didn't buy any wood?

No, just clothes and linens.

Interesting. So you were there the whole afternoon –

Yes, were there the whole day and they drove us back to our ship.

You don't know the name of that monastery, do you?

No, I don't remember.

Okay, that was China. Where did you go next?

Let me ask you this – what were your accommodations on ship?

I had my own room.

Your own room – you had a regular room with a bed.

I had a room with a bed.

Wow – like luxury.

And – and the food was absolutely great. It was like on a cruise ship –

Wow!

We had waiters waiting on us at tables and we had menus – could pick from three different entrees.

Wow! So you're like on a world cruise but you are working.

Now – I was 145 pounds when I went in – 245 pounds when I got out.

You're kidding!! In a year and a half –

Because I was so – they were teasing me – I would eat, eat, eat. I'd have 13 eggs for breakfast --

Oh, my God !!

When we had chicken , I ate three full chickens – three full chickens.

You are a big man! Even today at your age.

So I gained 100 pounds. They thought I had a tape worm so they sent me to a doctor – a ship's doctor. He said no, he's just a growing boy; there's nothing wrong.

I've heard of many guys who gained a lot of weight in the service.

They were teasing me; every time I ordered something – look at him go . The more they teased me, the more I ate. Matter of fact the chef came in one day with a side of beef and put it in front of me -0- okay Shelly, eat this!! Ha, ha. But I was working out too, so I wasn't fat.

You were 19 or 20 years old – ha, ha.

I wasn't fat; I just had a good body.

Okay, you're sailing back from China – where did you go?

Australia –

How long was that trip – on the water?

I don't remember.

Well, your whole trip was nine months – I'm trying to gauge – from China to Australia – gotta be a couple of weeks or so.

Yeah, yeah, right.

You weren't traveling that fat – how fast was your ship going?

It was slow – it was a C-2 – they called it – a C-2 which is larger than a liberty ship.

Do you know how many guys were on that ship?

I don't know.

So you were really enjoying yourself.

I had a blast! Like I was on a cruise ship – and I did my work for four hours and I was 8 hours off, did anything I wanted; eat what I wanted –

Guys wouldn't believe it – that you were in the service.

And – it was like – you were served great meals, except after a long voyage – if it took a long time between countries – they'd run out of food – and we got to eat bread that had weevils in it.

Really!!

Start eating, you eat the white bread, see something crawling in it –

You would think on a big ship like that they'd have enough provisions.

So we – after a while we started picking them out, the weevils, until we ate the bread with the weevils.

How many men were working with you on your ship?

Oh, my God, I don't know, maybe 30 – maybe.

Okay. And then you had 10 passengers, and that was a pretty good size ship.

Yes.

With not that many people on it.

How did you stay in touch with family and friends during this time?

I wrote my girlfriend letters –

How about your Mom and Dad?

And that I did too, yeah.

And how about receiving letters?

Yeah, every time we hit a port we got mail.

Oh, they had the mail waiting for you.

Mail waiting, yes.

So you'd have built-up – 10 letters or whatever.

Yeah, yeah.

And it would take quite a while for that mail to get to you.

Oh, yes, yes.

A month or so –

I'm still writing love letters to my girlfriend, 'cuz I was away for nine months, and we were getting kind of close through the mail. So I said I don't plan to get married right away, not till I'm 25 or 26.

Well, yeah, you were young.

I said I'm not marrying till I'm 26 years old and \$10,000 in the bank. So we had this game writing letters to each other, and we used to be married (in the letters) and we had a baby whose name was Stinky, ha, ha, ha. Now my parents got hold of the letter –

Oh my God!! Ha, ha

And she actually thought that I had a baby with her – oh my goodness – my kid has a baby – ha, ha

No baby.

Here's a good story; we went to a lot of different countries and a lot of small islands – Guadalcanal and went to the Philippine Islands, Manila, we stayed there for awhile.

What did you do when you got there – picked up different cargo and dropped off stuff.

Yes, right.

Did you have to work with loading or unloading that?

No.

You were not longshoremen?

No. We never did it never handled that.

So OS was your rank, you never got anything higher?

No.

Did you ever get any medals, honors or awards?

No.

When you got to port that was your only recreational or off-duty pursuits. What did you do on ship – did you play cards –

Oh, yeah, yeah. Then we crossed the equator at that time – that's a big thing. If you never crossed the equator – there's a big party on ship.

Yes, I've heard about it.

I have pictures, I'll show you.

How many times did you cross the equator?

The first time is the big time. So we had King Neptune, he was on a throne and with a crown and everything. And they shaved off – whoever was there the first time, they shaved their heads –

Yeah.

I had to sit in the middle on a stool and they shaved all my hair of, which I have pictures of too.

I'm sure you crossed it more than one time

Just one other time. I went to the islands, and they had tours for guys like me who were on ships that weren't – the war was over but it still was wartime.

Right, right.

Because we got paid for being in a war zone, extra money for being in a war zone. Because I saw – when I was crossing we saw mines coming on the water, right next to the ship – so if we hit one, we would have been blown up.

So you were paid for combat duty, you were sailing among the mines.

Yes. Do you know that the Merchant Marines lost more men than any other – that got killed more than any other branch of service.

No, I didn't know that. Because of the mines –

Yeah, and sinking of the ships with the U-boats

Wow! So did you ever – your ship was never affected by mines?

No, no.

You were lucky – you had to sail through mine fields.

Yes, yes. So we went to this island and they had tours in PT boats – they took several of us guys and we went through the jungles into – where they had the big cement houses with big canons in it for defense – and they took us into – we went into the house that housed the guns, and there were men sitting at the dining room table, Japanese – the skeletons – they were killed while they were eating and they left the skeletons right where they were.

Oh my God! And you saw that – they actually had tours –

Yes.

Tours just for servicemen –

Yes, yes.

They didn't take any civilians.

No, no, no.

Oh my God – skeletons sitting at the table.

Yeah.

Were they in caves?

No, a big cement bunker – with great big canons, just for that –

Wow!

So coming back to the ship, through the jungle, we had to walk through the jungle to get to the boat, I see something laying on the ground. I pick it up and it's a – can't think of it – an explosive – when you pull the pin out –

Oh, a hand grenade!

A hand grenade.

A live hand grenade?

So I pick it up and it's live; the clip was still on it.

Oh, no.

So what do I do, I put it in my pocket and I brought it back to the ship.

Oh my God!!

And I was afraid of it so I hid it on ship in the cargo bay.

Oh my God!

Now if it went off it could have sunk the ship.

Why would you do that?

Because I was stupid.

What happened to that?

So coming home, when we got a few miles out and you're coming back home again, they announce it – if you have any weapons or anything like that, please get rid of them because there will be a shakedown when you get in.

Oh, yeah.

So, we were still out at sea, so I better get rid of it. So I took it from underneath – where I hid it, I brought it up to the top of the ship at the railing – what am I gonna do with it – I want to see what would happen, so I pulled the pin and I threw it overboard as far as I can – and BOOM!!! – a big splash in the ocean –

What did the Captain or anybody say?

Nobody knew about it. I was the only one that knew about it, ha, ha

You were lucky! Carrying it around like that. That's a story all right. Yeah, when you get close to the 12-mile barrier, waters of the United States, oh my God!

Okay, so you went to Australia - what was there?

That was really nice because everything was opposite because it was under the equator. So we went to the horseraces there and the horses were going around in the opposite direction.

No kidding! Ha, ha – left to right or right to left – ha, ha.

Almost everything was backwards – but it was a great place. I loved Australia.

Was it the summer season – I guess it was.

Yes.

Did you go on tours in Australia?

Not too much.

How long were you there?

Several days; constantly on the go; from one port to another.

You picked up some cargo there – so where did you go after Australia?

Oh, yes, in China – in Shanghai, we went to town, all rickshaws at that time; it wasn't Communist – Chiang Kai-shek was still in charge – so we went down the street, and that's another, there was these little shops and they had guys sitting outside their little stores and there was one guy carving wood – a big chest – it was camphor, which was good for storing things in – the moths couldn't get into it – camphor wood – and this chest was carved on all sides, inside and out. I said that's very good, would you sell it. He said yes. You wanna buy – I'm working on it; it will be finished today; you come back tomorrow you can buy it. I said okay. So I went back the next day and I paid for it –

How much?

Carton of cigarettes!

I bet you had that for years.

I didn't smoke – (turn tape)

Shelly was saying that he bought this beautiful wooden carved chest for a carton of cigarettes – that's all he paid for it -- and he didn't smoke but he got the cigarettes from his buddies and traded it for the chest.

I still have it.

You still have that chest?

My daughter has it.

Oh, your daughter has it. How large would you say that chest is?

It's like this – (indicating) – about 3 feet by 3 feet.

Oh my goodness – for a carton of cigarettes.

I took it to my room because I had a private room.

You indicated about 3 feet by 3 feet.

I took it; I lifted it and I put it in my room and when I got discharged I had to carry the chest out and all around, ha, ha.

How did you get it home?

That's not the end of the story. When the trip was over, I went to all these wonderful countries, had a wonderful time – I was so envious of all the guys who were in the war, and I didn't do nothin' except -- inaudible – so I felt bad about that.

You were going to say something about the chest –

Well, I gave that chest to my Mother; she gave it back to me when I got married. We docked in New York, after this long trip. I went right to the phone on the dock, off the ship, an outside telephone. I called Lisbeth; her mother answered, Can I speak to Lisbeth; this is Shelly -- Shelly – she went to New York to see you. She's still in high school. She went on a train – and they let her come to New York at 18.

Was she from Chicago too?

Yes, yes. They let her visit me. So I got off the ship and there she is, by the dock on the side of the ship.

Waiting for you, huh?

Waiting for me. At that time there was a strike on in New York, so we couldn't leave the ship –

A dock strike?

Yeah, so I didn't have any money. I just had a few dollars' cuz we couldn't get paid or anything.

Said Lisbeth, how did you – well you wrote me when you're gonna be there. She borrowed a suitcase and clothes from her sister. She had a cousin that lived in Manhattan who was a singer in show business; she lived in an apartment/hotel but she was on the road – in a singing group. She let her use the apartment in New York. I said what do you want to do now? She always wanted to see the Rockettes. So we went -- all she had was her purse; she checked all her bags at the railroad station. So we saw the Rockettes at Radio City, on the balcony, naturally – to make out on the balcony. So we watched the show, after it was over she put her purse on the seat next to her, someone stole it. It had all her money, all her tickets – everything. So we went to get her suitcase at the train station; the thief that took her purse got her suitcase out of the checked bags. She had the stubs and they got all her stuff.

So here we are in New York with no money, no clothes, nothing – and I was out of money.

So what did you do?

We went to the apartment, I had to stay overnight, well we couldn't do anything because we weren't married – so I had to sleep on the couch, she slept in the bed. We were so innocent, ha, ha.

Well, you weren't that innocent after being on the ship all that time.

But I still didn't do anything.

So what happened next morning?

She got up and had to have her coffee, right. I look in my pocket; I got ten cents left. There was a restaurant next door with a sign coffee ten cents. I saw that sign and said I'll go get you coffee.

I go up to the counter with the coffee and the cashier says that's 11 cents. For carry out that's a penny for the cup. I was so embarrassed that I ran out of the place. I never got the coffee. I told Lisbeth what happened – what are we gonna do? We have to do something! We went downstairs to walk around; we didn't call the police or anything; we didn't call home. So a block away from the hotel we found something sparkling on the sidewalk; she picks it up – it's a bracelet made out of dimes – with links holding the dimes together. Home made –

Wow!!

There were ten dimes on it – one dollar!! So we took it back to the apartment and used her cousin's nail file to file off the links – so we had one dollar. Now, I had an uncle living in Jersey City; he got my mail so it doesn't go all the way to Chicago. So I called Uncle Harry – a good man with money -- He said good thing you called Shelly – I got a check here from the shipping company for \$2,000.

Oh my God – wonderful! That was the answer to your prayer.

So he says I'll bring it to you, so he drove to New York and we went right – bought all clothes, suitcases, everything and tickets back home, ha, ha –

So it worked out – everything worked out – you were lucky.

So she went back home and I had to go back because I wasn't discharged yet.

What month was that, would you say? You were discharged in November.

Probably round the same time.

So that was November of 1946 – because when you came back to New York you were more or less done, right?

Yes. I was discharged. I didn't have to go back.

When did you get this paper – the Certificate of Discharge?

When I got the check from the shipping company.

When was that? Your uncle gave you a different check –

Yeah, yeah.

That wasn't this check. How did you get this paper?

I got it through the mail.

Oh, discharged through the mail – so you didn't have to do anything else.

No, no

We're going to make a copy of this discharge and I will send it along with the transcript.

Did you ever use the G.I. Bill?

No.

Were you entitled to use the GI. Bill?

Yes. I didn't know about it.

Maybe at that time – oh, but you never used it.

I never used it. I never used anything from the Veterans Administration.

Over the years did you ever use the VA services?

No; never did.

You still don't?

Because I didn't know I was a veteran. Even after I found out that I was a veteran.

Didn't know until 1980.

Yeah, still after; I never did anything about it – until I moved here (Brookdale Senior Living).

Didn't know until 1980 that you were eligible.

Even when I found out I didn't do anything.

Didn't do anything right away.

Until two years ago.

Two years ago you found out how?

There are pamphlets downstairs at the office –

What's the name of the place you live in now?

Brookdale Senior Living.

The pamphlets explain benefits to veterans.

So you started to look at those.

Yes. And I needed help because I needed compression hose and I needed –

So you needed medical assistance.

I needed medical assistance at that time. And I didn't know; they're very expensive. That's not done by the house. They have Brookdale At Home Services, but it's very expensive. So I had to get the hose and someone to put them on for me because I couldn't do it. So it cost me \$18 to put on my hose every time – and take them off every day. And it costs me \$8 for 15 minutes for the girl to sit out here while I shower in case – to watch out – if I need help.

Called Home Health Care.

So it started adding up; I couldn't afford it, so I had to quit it.

So did you apply to the Veterans Administration?

Yeah, from there, I had a guy, he put out the pamphlets, so we called him up – my daughter and I called him up, and he said yes, it costs \$1,000 for him to do paperwork.

Really!!

He said I'll do all the paperwork – I found out it's a scam – so I gave him all the information, filled out all the forms and everything – he screwed them up; did it all wrong. I never paid him \$1,000 because nothing ever happened.

But he told you it was gonna cost you that but he didn't do the job right and you never paid him.

No.

Well, thank God you never paid him.

And I never got money either; I was supposed to get \$2,050 per month. I never got one cent and that was two years ago.

So do you get anything today?

No, it's still working; there's still working. My daughter went to the State Veterans.

So you still haven't received anything.

No, nothing. But it's retroactive from when it started –

From two years ago.

Right. So if it goes through, I get the money for it.

So you really don't have any VA benefits right now.

No.

But you are eligible to receive them.

So it's good that they're looking into it –

Yes, yes. She calls the guy every once in a while – well, you're fourth on the list, or something like that.

Okay, let's go back to – you're out of the service – when did you actually get married.

I told her I wasn't getting married till I was 26. Well, she started crying – and we got married right away.

So you were married when?

April 17, 1948?

So you waited a year or so -- couple of years. So you were married for many years.

I have three children –

Tell me – what did you do when you got home? How was your readjustment to civilian life?

That's a story too –

Well, not too long of a story - just 5 minutes, okay.

When we came home after we got married we had to stay at her parents' house because we didn't have any money – but we had a 300 people wedding; we used the wedding envelope money for a honeymoon –

Sure, why not.

We came back and we both weren't working and no place to live. So we moved in with her parents and both got jobs. She got a job like that -- at Saks Fifth Avenue as a model.= - because she was a beautiful girl, and I couldn't get a job.

What did you do – you finally did get a job –

Because she worked for Saks Fifth Avenue, they were going to have a shoe sale and they needed people – shoe salesmen – so I went for an interview and I lied and said I had all kinds of experience, and they hired me.

Okay, good.

At that time, a sale was a sale; people standing in line behind ropes to get in. So I had two chairs to fill with customers; they liked me so much they wanted to keep me after the sale but there was no opening. They said go down to the children's department and they'll teach you how to sell shoes to kids. So I started selling shoes there; I was in the shoe business for 54 years.

Wow!!

My goal was to be a manager of a fashion store on Michigan Avenue and I met that goal. I managed JOSEPH SALON SHOES in Chicago -- corner of Huron & Michigan Avenue. I was the manager of that store.

I've heard of them; very prestigious company.

Are you in touch with friends you made in the service?

No. They're all dead.

They probably are, but you never went to any reunions?

No.

Do you belong to any Veterans' organizations today?

No. They meet here once a month.

Do you belong to it?

I never signed up; I go to the meetings.

You should sign up – so you go to VA meetings.

Right.

Guys there should help you with your paperwork.

We just tell our stories, over and over again.

How did your military experience affect your life?

Oh, I was so grateful. Everyone was complaining about their military service, people killed and everything, and I was on a cruise and got paid for it.

Right. You were very lucky. But the war was over really when you went in.

It was over except for a few things.

Any life lessons that you learned from military service?

Not really.

You didn't go through any training or anything like that – like other guys do.

No, no. I didn't do any calisthenics, didn't get up at 4 a.m. and start running – didn't do anything; I just played music.

So did you go to different places and perform?

No, no, just on base.

You sure were lucky that the guy came and took you out of the line.

Anything else you wish to add to the story. I think you covered everything.

Oh, no, we didn't talk about your wood carving. How did you get into that?

I picked it up just recently – but the first time I saw carving, it must have stuck in my mind.

Woodcarving began at age 75, you said.

Yes. I retired at age 72 and didn't know what to do. I saw an ad in the paper about a woodcarving show at Cantigny (War Memorial in Aurora) – so I thought that would be interesting so I went to see it. I talked to a guy who had one of the booths and he said why don't you join our club. It was a club sponsor – if you join the club you learn how to carve. I thought that was a good idea. I went to the next meeting; he gave me a knife and a piece of wood – I was whittling. The following week the man I first talked to came over and said how would you like to really learn how to carve good. I said yes, I would. He said there is a master carver from Manila, Philippines and he has a studio on the northwest side of Chicago and he only takes one or two students at a time. He heard there is room for one. He gave me his name and number. I called him up and made an appointment to come over and interview; he had one other guy there and said okay, that's \$50 for every session on Thursdays from 11-4. He'd serve lunch and watch – coach me. I was with him –

He thought you had potential –

Yes, I was with him for 16 years.

Wow! What's his name?

I went – he just died two years ago – J.R. Cararras – (phonetic) - people called him J.R. He was very well known – internationally known – but we became very good friends.

He passed away last year. Shelly has at least 30 carvings here.

I have 85 carvings –

He has 85 altogether, but here in his small apartment, he has just a studio apartment, he's got to have at least 30 or so carvings all around, and they're beautiful, all of them, that I can see. I'll try to get photos of them. I think that we are finished with the interview, Shelly.

I have photographs to show you, from Shanghai, China.

Shelly will bring photographs from Shanghai – Shelly has given me an original photograph of him taken in Shanghai, China; he is seated in a rickshaw as a tourist. I will include that photo as an original photo of Shelly with one of his wood carvings that won second place. Also, a copy of his U.S. Coast Guard Certificate of Discharge from November 4, 1946. Thank you very much for your service to our country, Shelly and thank you for this interview, which was most interesting.

Thank you, God, for my service.

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