

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Question: Like to have you do me one favor.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Just give me your first and last name and the correct spelling so I have it on video tape.

Answer: Okay.

Question: Go ahead.

Answer: Larry LaFontaine. L-A- capitol F-O-N-T-A-I-N-E.

Question: Great.

Question: So now you were -- do you remember where you were, now did you go in before or after Pearl Harbor?

Answer: A week after. What happened, see, I was 17 years old, first of July 1941. Well, I went down and I took a test for the Navy, but they said the quota is full, we'll call you. So the war broke out on the 7th of January, I mean, December, you know. I was -- in fact I was in a movie house watching a movie. And they come out on stage and said the war just broke out and all the Armed Forces and whatever that's in here, go to your post. Well, I -- I went on home cause I wasn't in the service. But then three days later I got a letter saying report to Los Angeles. So then I went down and reported and got my shots and everything and they says, well, go home for a few days because we got so many men coming in from the Midwest we don't have room in San Diego for them. So then I went home and then a week later, 7th of January, I went down to San Diego to boot camp and I put three weeks in boot camp. Then they sent me to a -- Balboa Park. They put us up there with the Marine Corps for a couple of days. I guess about a week we was in there with the Marine Corps. Then they sent me down to the destroyer base. And they took me in a great big old room there, and it had about 3 50-pound bags of shrimp there. And they said okay, sailor, start peeling shrimp. You know this is for the officers quarters. And so, God, I seen these damn shrimp there and I thought cripes I'll never get out of here. I'll spend the whole war peeling shrimp, you know. So then about two hours later a chief come by and said how'd you like to go in the Armed Guard. And I says never heard of the Armed Guard, what is it. He says oh you ride on merchant ships. That was it. So I said fine, that sure beats peeling shrimp. So he said go get your gear and pack up, you're going to San Francisco. So they took me up to San Francisco, there was about 12 of us, I guess, and took us on the quarters. That's where they had the 1939 World's Fair. Had all these great big empty barracks there, you know. And so they put us in there. And first three or four days they gave me a flashlight and a whistle and a fire extinguisher and you walk around there checking for fires. So then -- then they started sending us to gunnery school. There was 25 of us. No, signal school, first. So they put us in this signal school. Well, we didn't want to be a signalman. There's no glamour or glory in being a signalman, you know, so about eight of us, we couldn't get the 25 words a minute on the Morse Code so they transferred us over to gunnery school. Well then we went to gunnery school there and I guess we was three weeks in that. We had a big old gun out there. We got to throw these dummy shells in it. And they took us out to Point Montera and we got to fire 20 rounds apiece in the 20 millimeters and I think about three or four rounds out of the three-inch 50. And that was gunner school. So then we come back from there and then they -- my first ship was an old Standard oil tanker. They took me over to Richmond, California and put me on that and we went up and down the coast there a few times. And I got tired of that one so I come back and

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

I was there two or three days and they put me on another ship and I just -- so many different things I can't remember all of them, you know.

Question: Oh, yeah, plus it was 50 years ago.

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: So let me back up a little bit. You were 17 years old and you were going to enlist before the war.

Answer: Right.

Question: Did you know there was a war coming?

Answer: No, well I had -- kind of -- we didn't really know there was a war coming cause in my spare time out of school I was waiting tables, there's a big hotel down, oh, a few blocks from where I lived. And they had a bunch of Army guys in there that was training to be pilots. I guess there must have been a hundred of them stationed in this hotel. And I was waiting tables on them, you know, and what not. But at that time I guess the government knew more than I did because they was -- they was training these guys to be pilots. But then the minute the war broke out they more or less scattered and then I was gone, too, you know, I went off into the service. So that was it.

Question: So had you finished high school or you were still --

Answer: No, I was in the -- I had completed tenth grade and I was half-way through the eleventh grade. And that was as far as I ever got in school.

Question: So, boy, that's amazing. So when you heard Pearl Harbor broke out, and now you thought I'm getting in the Navy --

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Were you looking for a job or what was your thinking on that one?

Answer: Well, no, I thought -- Navy's clean, you know. I mean it was like when I went aboard this old USS Ironsides down here. I mean everything is so spic and span and spotless, and beings I lived about 20 miles from Long Beach. I was a Boy Scout at the time and several trips we made down to Long Beach and went aboard these Navy ships. I went aboard the Saratoga, I think it was in 1939. Beautiful ship. All those guys just spotless and clean, you know and what not. I thought if I ever go in anything, I'm not going to be in the mud with soldiers so -- so I'm going to go in the Navy. And so that's when I decided to go in the Navy.

Question: So what was the duty of the Armed Guard, because very few people know about the Armed Guard.

Answer: Well we was -- every -- all of us were Navy, but they put us on these merchant ships. We sailed over -- there was 144,000 Armed Guard. Course a lot of them never went to se

Answer: A lot of them was office people and what not, you know. But they put us on all these different merchant ships as Navy gunners. And so some of the ships -- well, my first ship we had seven of us on there. And we had one third class petty officer in charge of the six

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

of us. And that was it. We had an old beat up four inch fifty out of some city park some place and we had four Lewis machine guns from the first world war. Nobody ever knows what they are anymore, they had round drums on the top and what not. And that was -- that was what we had aboard that tanker. And then later on we -- as time went by it got better and better. But I got off -- the two tankers that was going up and down the coast and I got on this brand new Liberty ship out of Portland, Oregon. And we loaded up with cargo from Canada

Answer: They brought it down from Canada, loaded our ship up there, and we took that to Suez, Egypt for the British Army. They was fighting in north Africa

Answer: And so it took us 67 days to go from Portland, Oregon, to Suez, Egypt, which is longer than the Gulf War lasted, you know. So we spent I guess three or four weeks in Suez, Egypt, there. That's when I hitchhiked from Suez to Cairo, a buddy of mine, and of course we got lost out in the middle of the desert there so I went up and seen the Sphinx and the Pyramids. What happened, we got picked up on the way up there. We got in two trucks. I got in one truck, British Army truck and he got in another British Army truck, and we got to Cairo and they split. So I didn't know where he went, but I was on my own, so I went on up and I got pictures and what not. And then it started getting dark so I didn't know how to get back to Suez, it was a hundred miles, you know. And so I got a ride with a British soldier in a dump truck there. Well, we got about half way back and he says, well sailor, this is where I turn off. So he said my camp's about ten miles down here. I said well I'm not stopping right here. I mean 12-foot wide road right out in the middle of the Sahara Desert, you know. And so I went on down to their camp, and they were Scottish Highlanders. They'd been there for seven years fighting the Germans and what not, you know, in different places. And so they took me down to their camp and they gave me a blanket and I slept in the desert all night. Next morning we got up, had a can of - or a pot of hot tea and a dish of oatmeal I think it was, no cream or nothing on it. And I got back down to the road and I got a ride back to my ship the next morning. And I caught hell from the officer because my buddy and I got separated, you know. My buddy got back the next day, so we got everything straightened out.

Question: Now that's kind of an interesting aspect because here World War II is going on and, I mean, for all intents and purposes, as I hear your story, you're kind of out sight-seeing.

Answer: Right, hm-hmm. Well, see, in the Armed Guard, all's we did is haul supplies for the Armies and everything else, so we got to go ashore at every place we hit. Which the Navy didn't. The Navy's out there ten miles bombarding islands and stuff, they never got off their ship. But beings I was the -- I run motor launch and I was also the mailman, so I got to go ashore to report and pick up the mail and take the officer, whoever wanted to go ashore, into the motor launch. So it -- we got to see everything, you know.

Question: So were you then close enough that you physically knew a war was going on or you just saw soldiers?

Answer: Oh, no, we got right into ports. We lost -- what, 710 Liberty ships - -710 ten ships, yeah, I can just check a minute here, something I wrote down. The Armed Guard sailed -- Armed Guard had 144,970 personnel. They sailed on 6,236 merchant ships. We lost 710 ships, sunk and many more were damaged. We had 1810 men killed plus many more were wounded. And then I had an article here, all the different places I've been, which very few people -- should I read these?

Question: I'll kind of bounce back and forth because you -- at one point -- well let me, well I guess two questions. Boy the questions all of a sudden start going now in my head. So

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

when you were traveling in your -- in these Liberty ships, what was your protection like? I mean were you in a convoy or were you guys kind of out by yourself?

Answer: Very few convoys. One of the convoys I was in was when we got torpedoed and sunk. But most generally we traveled alone. And the only protection we had was our guns on the ship and the Navy gun crew -- that was -- that was the protection.

Question: And we're not talking a lot of guns?

Answer: Well, we had generally later on we had a five-inch 38 on the stern, a three-inch 50 on the bow, and maybe eight 20-millimeters. That was -- that was what we had for protection. The first ship I was on, we had one four-inch 50 and four Lewis machine guns.

Question: And that was a tanker or was it --

Answer: Yeah, tanker.

Question: So you're sitting on this vessel of very flammable fluid --

Answer: Yeah. You don't have to worry anyway. I mean once a tanker's hit, you're gone, you know. I mean we lost a lot of tankers and a lot of men during the war. I got a -- I got a list out of there of all the different ships and stuff, the name of every ship that was sunk, you know. And there was a lot of guys killed. I mean you probably seen these pictures of victory at sea and stuff, when German submarine hit a tanker, it's gone. Just like one trip, we -- we went from Portland, Oregon down to Port Hueneme and took on some Seabees. And with those Seabees we took their tanks -- no, not their tanks, their shovels and dozers, plus 58,000 cases of dynamite. And so we were pretty touchy on that trip, you know.

Question: Now tell me about being torpedoed. Where you were and what that was like. Cause you got sunk, right?

Answer: Yeah, right, hm-hmm.

Question: Tell me about that.

Answer: Well, we was -- we left -- we had left Recife, Brazil. We was empty at that time. The ship had come back from India

Answer: And so we was empty. We left Recife, Brazil and was out -- well we went out about one day and we joined a convoy of ships -- there were 29 ships plus us -- we made 30 ships. And we was back in the -- in the left hand corner, coffin corner, they called it. And we was going there and it was -- it was the 28th of February. And I was up on the bow watch, it was midnight. I'd talked to my buddy a few minutes before. And he had the eight to twelve watch and I had the twelve to four. And I was talking to him and what not, and then I went up to my -- up in the bow. We had two 20-millimeters up in the bow in this particular ship and a three-inch 50 astern. Well, I was down there, it was a little after midnight. And I looked across there. It was a beautiful night. It was the first of March, then, we'd just passed -- first of March 1943, and I looked out across there. The water smooth a glass, beautiful full moon, and I seen this wake coming across. Well, I was up in the bow, you know, I looked and the torpedo went right underneath of me like that. I looked and I see it go right underneath of me. So I called up the captain on the bridge and I said captain I believe I seen a torpedo just go by here and he says no, it's probably a porpoise you saw out here. I mean you could see the wake of it, you know. So I wasn't happy with that answer so I left my gun and I went

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

down to quarters and I woke up our officer. I said, "Lieutenant, I seen a torpedo go by here and the captain didn't believe me." He says okay, well, wake up all the rest of the gun crew and send them to their battle stations. So I did that. I went back up to my gun and about 15, 20 minutes later, another one, right down the side of us. Missed us about 50 foot. And then we were pretty alert then. And another 15 minutes went by, I guess, maybe a little less than that, then we got one right broadside. And it knocked a hole about the size of this room in the upper five hold which is fortunate it was empty, see. But the buddy I talked to, he had been back there and, well, we don't know what ever happened to him. It blew him up. And it knocked our after gun off its mount. And then the ship started going down by the stern. So one life boat was destroyed, and we had -- one of the Marine merchant Marine officers -- he was kind of shaky. And we have -- we generally have four life rafts and four life boats. Well one life boat was destroyed and he pulls the pins on the life rafts but he pulled the wrong pins and all the life rafts floated away. So we had -- we had three life boats left and they all -- they got two of them off and I was still up with my gun up in the bow and they finally said, well, blew the whistle, and get out of here, you know. So I left my gun real quick and I went down to my quarters and I grabbed my picture album and put it in my belt and got in the lifeboat. That was probably maybe 3:30, 4 o'clock in the morning, and we was out in that boat until I guess about 8 o'clock. And we got picked up by a Brazilian Corvette, small ship, you know. They took us aboard that. Probably an hour later they transferred us over to a Brazilian merchant ship. A little dinky merchant ship. And they took us into Bahia, Brazil. And I don't know what ever happened -- the Merchant Marine crew, see they had so many of them, so many of us. Well they took the Merchant Marine crew and they disappeared and they took the gun crew, put us in an old truck and took us down to jail. So we spent the day in the jail there because we don't carry any papers, you know. So they put us in the jail. And then they got ahold of the Navy someplace down the coast farther they had a Navy base or something, and they came out and they picked us up, took us down to the Navy base. Then we stayed a day there. I can't remember -- this all happened over a couple days, you know. At that time I had a pair of cut-off pants and a pair of rough-out shoes, that's all we wore, you know, we wasn't Navy guys. So they took us aboard the USS Milwaukee. And I kind of got a kick out of that cause we was walking down this deck and all these young sailors on there, real spotless and you know, what not, and they yelled at us, hey sailor, you out of uniform, you know. Cause cut-off pants. And the officer explained to them we'd just lost our ship and what not. They give us a set of clothes and what not and then they took us over a destroyer, USS Kearney. Put us on that destroyer. Our gun crew -- there was 12 or 13 of us. And that destroyer took us from Bahia Brazil to Charleston South Carolyn

Answer: And then we was there for a day. And then they took us from there to the Brooklyn Navy -- or put us on a train and took us to Brooklyn Navy yard, which I got up in New York and seen that Pennsylvania Station, biggest building I'd ever seen in my life, you know. And then the -- somebody met us there and they took us by subway I guess it was or whatever, to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We stayed there for three days. Then they says well, anybody that lives west of the Mississippi, pay your own way, you can go back to the west coast. And so it cost me, I think, \$37 on the train, my own money, to get from New York out to California, you know, to Treasure Island again. So that was -- well, they give me 30 days of survivor leave to get there, you know. So then I got back there again.

Question: So you got -- having been sunk they gave you, okay, 30 day leave.

Answer: Yeah, yeah some guys they sent them to big hotels, rest stops and everything else, you know. But us, they just give us 30 day leave and go back to sea again, you know, that was it.

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Question: And that was the difference between the Armed Guard and the RN -- the regular Navy.

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

And we got -- I got my leave and I went and visited my folks, and then I was back to Treasure Island again the end of my 30 days and they sent me to Seattle and put me on this old World War I Hog Island freighter. And that's the one we went from Seattle all up and down the coast and we hauled supplies for the Army out to Attu and Kiska and what not. We pulled into Attu Harbor; they dropped the anchor there, we was going to unload our cargo and they got ready to move the ship and they pulled the anchor up, here's a 500 pound aerial bomb, sitting right on the flukes of the anchor. A plane had dropped -- went down there, I guess, and the bomb was still in the bay. We pulled it up. So they eased a barge out there and set it on there and took it out to sea and exploded it.

Question: Now was that -- because my history's not that good. But was that -- because the Japanese --

Answer: The Japanese were still out there.

Question: They were still out there, okay.

Answer: When we pulled into Kiska Harbor there, I went ashore there. And the Japanese had left a day or two before in submarines. I went ashore there, they had big tents there. I walked in one of these tents -- here's a little stand there with a Japanese soldier's girlfriend or wife there, right on the stand, you know, little Japanese dogs running around. They had piles of food stacked up there, canned food and what not -- the had planned on staying, you know, but the Americans just drove them out.

Question: So I guess two questions. I'll back up to one cause your description of standing there and watching this torpedo go under your ship. You talk about it very casually. You were what, maybe 18 years old by --

Answer: I was 18 years old, yeah.

Question: I mean --

Answer: When you're 18 years old, nothing happens to you. I mean you don't think of anything, you know, it's not like when I am now, 76 and what not. But you're just invincible at 18.

Question: And the way you described it sounded pretty much like you see in the movie. You could see this torpedo --

Answer: Right. But there's really nothing you can do. I mean you see a torpedo coming at you, it's either going to hit you or it's going to miss you, one of the two, you know. And I was very fortunate because that thing missed me about three foot and I'm here today.

Question: So when you did get hit broadside, what was that -- I mean, what was going through your head at that time?

Answer: I don't know. I mean everything just happened so quick, I just thought well, it's time to get off this ship, you know. And I just -- we just lucky there was -- the whole convoy sailed away, we was out there all by ourselves. They don't stop for anything, you know. But

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

we just lucky that Brazilian ship picked us up. There have been cases of guys in the life boats for 37, 40 days you know, before they was picked up. And I got stories from a lot of them. I mean they -- a lot of people died in those boat because nobody ever found them.

Question: What did you think -- now, the lifeboat that you got in. Was it an inflatable boat or a --

Answer: No, it was a metal boat, I think they was about 18, 20 foot long, and they'd hold about 20 people in them. Of course they're all supplied -- you have -- they have a little mask in there, they have food in there for a couple weeks and what not, you know. But you can get by for a little while in them.

Question: So when you got into that did you think oh, boy, here we go or --

Answer: No, because we knew there was -- there was escorts that were out there, you know, and generally they're going to pick you up.

Question: So you lucked out pretty --

Answer: Hm-hmm.

Question: It's interesting because you saw a lot of the war .

Answer: Well, I saw -- see, the Armed Guard, I was in all theatres of war. Very few people in the service got to be in all three theatres of war. And in the Armed Guard we got to do that because we had -- we had guys that went on the Normandy Invasion and Sicily and different ones -- different ships, you know. Just every place the Army needed the equipment, the Armed Guard took it.

Question: So were you usually before the action, during the action or after the action in your deliveries?

Answer: Just, just, most of ours was before. And a few of them was after, you know, where like the Army troop transport I was on, we took the troops, the replacements for the guys who had been there.

Question: Wow. Now you -- there was one picture you had of one of the Liberty ships and there were thousands of soldiers on it. Where was that?

Answer: That wasn't a Liberty ship, that was a C-2 transport.

Question: And what was happening there? How come there were so many people on there?

Answer: Well, that was, see, that was -- it was an Army transport run by the Maritime Merchant Marines with Navy gun crews. So it was kind of, kind of mixed up. But we -- we had 2000 troops. We took those troops to Okinawa and we took those troops to Iwo Jima and some of them we brought -- and later on we brought back a lot of those troops back to the States from the different places.

Question: So you bring back wounded and --

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Answer: No, no wounded aboard our ship. Wounds come back on a hospital ship. We had just troops that could go by themselves, you know.

Question: So after they had taken an island or whatever, things were settling down, you had to --

Answer: Move them on to someplace else.

Question: First of all you talk about the ship that had the Navy and the Marines and everybody on there. Was it like the movies where really all of those armed forces -- I mean, Marines didn't like the Navy and the Navy didn't like, I mean,

Answer: No. We all got together good. The only problem, the Navy and the Merc Marine had. They got so much more money than what we did, you know. My pay at that time I think was \$87 a month and they was getting maybe \$300 or \$400 a month. But most of them -- they treated us pretty darn nice. There was a few young snotty ones on there like there is every place but most of them treated us pretty nice.

Question: Now you talked about being in your shorts and all that. I assume that the Armed Guard, the Navy rules were a little different.

Answer: Right.

Question: Or you wrote your own rules or how did that --

Answer: We didn't have a lot of that Navy spit and polish stuff, you know. I mean all we was was just gunners. And we took care of our guns and stood watches. That's all we did. And we had our own private sleeping quarters and we had our own private mess hall. You'd go in there and sit down at your table, you had a big menu up on the wall there. You order what you wanted and they'd bring it in to you and what not. I mean it was just like being in a big hotel, you know. I mean, I loved it. There was no better place in the Navy than being in the Armed Guard except maybe the submarines, you know, which I wouldn't be in, but it was real interesting.

Question: So how big a crews did you have? How many people were on these ships usually?

Answer: Well, just in the gun crew? Well, just like I say the first ship was seven and during the middle of the war they probably run about maybe 20. Then of course you get on a big ship like an Army transport you got about 40 to 50 gunners on there cause you got so many more guns. Then the Merchant Marines, they had maybe, they had maybe 25 or 30 Merchant Marines on there too. Of course they had their own separate quarters and their own mess hall, so we -- we stayed buddies with them, you know. Lot of times we needed them to help load our guns and what not.

Question: So did the Merchant Marines take care of the cargo and you took care of the protection, is that --

Answer: Right. Yeah they took care of the cargo and we took care of the guns. That's all we did. And we stood watch at -- many a time we'd stand four on and four off for days at a time, you know. And just like when I was up in Alaska, four on and four off up there and 80 degree weather, wind blowing 100 miles an hour, you know. I don't mean 80 degree, I mean minus, you know. (laughs) Yeah, this one old ship I was on. It was so damn cold. Like I say

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

it was a first World War ship and there was four of us in a room there, I guess we had about a 12 x 12 room, four of us in there. We had an old steam radiator and that radiator would leak water all night and it would freeze a half inch of ice on the deck of our room in there because it was so damn cold. I'd sleep with one mattress on top of me and one mattress underneath of me, trying to keep warm. Then the Navy, they didn't have any good foul weather gear so they give us some foul weather clothes out of World War I submarines. Which didn't keep us - - but I get pretty smart on that. I met an old Eskimo there. For \$35 I bought a beautiful parka and a pair of seal skin pants and muckluks, dog skin gloves. I could wear a T-shirt and keep warm and these other guys, they was walking around with all their old clothes on, you know.

Question: Yank ingenuity.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: It's interesting. Now I assume a lot of times when you took off, you didn't know where you were going.

Answer: No, we didn't, the captain did, or lot of times he didn't know at first because they go so far and then they break out their orders where they're going. But generally, generally when we loaded the cargo, you know. Just like the cargo we loaded in Portland, Oregon for Suez, Egypt. Well we had three miles of railroad track. We had a lot of flat cars on there. And these flat cars -- English type flat cars -- they got two big round things on each side and you got a chain hook, hooking them together, see. They didn't have the same kind of couplings Americans have. So we had an idea there what was going to happen, we was going someplace, you know. But then we had tanks on there. We had, I can't remember, tanks, Spitfire airplanes, and we just had so much. We had I guess about three foot of free board -- that's amount of ship above the water, you know. It was so heavy loaded and we got caught in a storm in the Indian Ocean. Sixty, seventy foot waves. That old Liberty ship. I mean we just up and down, up and down. We made five miles in three days. Just going up and down like this. And lucky it didn't break up. Later on when that storm cleared up we seen pieces of wreckage floating all over the damn ocean out there. I guess one or two ships must have broke up or something. Because several of the Liberty ships broke up and sunk, you know. But we seen big sections of these pontoon barges. You the Army made great big steel sections of barges and pulled them together. Well the whole ocean was loaded with these damn pontoon sections out there.

Question: Well that's interesting because when you got near different places, I assume things would happen on the beach or whatever. So was there a lot of different debris out there from the war?

Answer: Not too much. No cause generally, well I don't know how to say it but they -- everything that's useable was collected and used. Except out in the ocean out there where you couldn't do nothing.

Question: Boy the seas --

Answer: I mean it was rough. I mean straight up and down. They'd go up one of those crests and the prop would just scream, come out of the water and start down another one like that. And nothing we could have done if something happened to the ship. I mean you're dead right there cause nothing you can do in seas that big.

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Question: It's interesting, you know. You didn't know where you were going before you went and you could kind of maybe start guessing as you went along. But the fact that sometimes you were bringing in supplies before something happened, you sometimes had an eye on the war before the soldiers knew -- I mean you took over to Cairo or over to -- I don't know, did you end up at Normandy or any of --

Answer: No, I never got to Normandy. Some of the guys did, but I never got over there.

Question: Iwo Jima?

Answer: Yeah, I was out at Iwo Jim

Answer: I know I got to go ashore there. And the first thing I did, I got out on the beach, I sunk clear up to my knees in volcanic ash, it was real course volcanic ash. See all the action was over with by the time we got in there cause we was hauling supplies in. But the Marines was still there. And I got to go ashore there and I went in a few of those caves there. They had underground tunnels and God, I went in one there. I don't know how far underground it was. It must have been oh, three or 400 hundred yards long. Just so wide and real short, so high, and about every three foot they had a dugout on the side there. These soldiers would just live and sleep right inside those tunnels. And later on I'd read in the paper several years after the war was over, they opened up one, they found over a thousand men buried inside this thing because they was trapped in there when the fighting was going on, you know.

Question: What was that like, especially at Iwo Jima after -- what did -- when you walked on there, what -- do you remember what your feelings were or --

Answer: Well, I could still -- Iwo Jima had sulphur pits and stuff in it, you know. And I guess dead bodies or something in there. You could still smell it. But there was tanks and stuff sunk all over there. Right alongside of where our ship was there was a bunch of concrete barges they'd sunk. I guess they'd brought these barges over from the States. They was all made out of concrete, and they sunk them right there in the beach and used them as landing ports, you know, so they could unload stuff. But I walked around there for awhile, just like. That's where I got the pictures of the Marines there, the cemetery. They had a lot of Marines killed on Iwo Jim

Answer: And later on I guess they -- they took all the bodies and shipped them back to the States to different places cause I seen a few years ago they had -- the Japanese and the Americans got together and they had a reunion over there. But I didn't see any -- any graves or anything in that picture.

Question: Is it something that at the time you have a concept of the death or is it -- you just kind of shut that out as a young kid and think there's just a war going on and you -- I mean it seems to me that it would be very scary to be in that environment.

Answer: Well, yeah, they was the enemy. I mean all the propaganda and stuff you hear you know. I mean you hear all kinds of stories. Just like that one deal there where they sunk this American ship and took everybody aboard it, all the survivors off the ship and made them walk across this submarine deck tied up and beat them with clubs and a plane come and they -- and they dove and these guys, they died, you know. I think six of them survived to tell the story and what not, but that's just some of the atrocities that -- that happened in the war.

Question: Did you lose friends in the war?

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Answer: Well I lost a real good buddy, the one that was aboard my ship that got blowed away. But he was the only one that really killed, you know. But he was young. He was -- I guess he was about two years older than I was. He had a little 3-year-old daughter at home and what not. But then I -- I tried to find his folks but I never did ever locate them. Right after the war you just wanted to forget everything you know. So it just gets out of your mind. In later years you start getting in contact with different ones. Of the ones I've tried to get in contact, I've only found one fellow that I sailed with. And most of them are dead. I mean they're dying over a hundred a month you know out of the Armed Guard, so there's all -- we have a little paper comes out and every -- every three months they got a whole page of the guys that have died in that period. It's just like me. I'm going on 77 and I was one of the youngest guys in the service. The only ones could be younger than I would be two years younger that went in the latter part of the war, you know. So it's -- it's kind of scary in a way.

Question: Where were you when you heard the war was over?

Answer: We was in Okinawa

Answer: We had -- we had loaded up 2000 troops aboard our ship from Okinawa -- we was going to invade Japan. We had about 300 ships out in the harbor there, we was going to invade Japan. And I mean it -- then they dropped the bomb and we went on in anyway. But I mean that would have been an awful bloody mess if we'd had to go in Japan and take Japan.

Question: Somebody told me yesterday -- I didn't realize this. That the government had minted seven thousand, seven hundred thousand -- I can't remember. It was a large number of purple hearts.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Looking ahead to going into Japan, knowing that we would have had --

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: So what -- did they announce over the ship that the war was over or how does that happen? How does a war end?

Answer: I really can't tell you because I remember they came over the PA system. I guess the radio operator aboard the ship got a radio message or something, you know. But just come over -- all the ships got a PA system you know, what not. And they just come over and said the war is over. And that was it. So we went out anyway and still discharged our troops. And we went into Yokuska Navy Base and discharged our troops there. And I guess they was replacing some other -- somebody else, I don't know what it was. But we stayed there about four days or so.

Question: So did you then have -- cause your duty was bringing all the supplies while the war was going on. Now we had all these people and equipment and I know a lot of it they just pushed off into the se

Answer: But did you then have to continue on and now de-commission and bring everybody back or what --

Answer: Well, when the war is over, they had a point system. I mean you're in there so long and seen so much and done this and that, you get so many points, see. Well I had about

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

30 points more than I needed to get out of the service, because I signed up from 17 to 21 and I was six months past my 21st birthday and what not. So this point system come in there and I says I'm going home. So about 12 of us, 15 of us aboard our ship had enough points, so we got off that Army transport, then we got on a -- on a Navy ship and come back to the States. And I hated that Navy ship. It was, oh, get up 6 o'clock in the morning, do this, do that, sweep floors and what not. And I said boy, that's not for me. I'm getting out of the Navy; I'm not going to stay in here.

Question: So when you were on the Navy ship did you all of a sudden have to wear the Navy uniform and --

Answer: No, we didn't have -- wear any Navy uniforms cause generally all we had was very few clothes, you know, in the Armed Guard. But we just wore our dungarees and shirts and stuff and well, we had a pair of dress blues so soon as we got back to the States, we -- then they got around to giving us discharge.

Question: What did you do when you got out of the --

Answer: Well, I worked out here in the Reserve fleet for about six months and then I worked in a logging camp and what not. And I thought boy, there's no future in this stuff, so I'd got discharged at Bremerton. So I went down to California and I -- I drove a truck for -- big up and down the coast truck for about a year and I though, oh, nothing to this. And so I took a test and I got on the water department down in San Bernadino California and I worked couple of years in the water department. And I thought I want something better than this, you know. So then I got on the fire department. I put 27 years on the fire department down there before I retired in 1976.

Question: Oh, wow.

Answer: So I've had a fun life, you know. everybody can't have that.

Question: How much do you think World War II changed your life?

Answer: Well it completely changed it. I mean, here I was in the -- 17 years old and 11th grade in high school. I had no idea what I would have done. But I thought I wanted to go in the Navy, even peacetime, you know, but the Navy showed me what the Navy's like after I got in there. So it -- you don't know what the future holds, you know, so what can you say.

Question: Were you one of those ones that basically went in a kid and came out grown up?

Answer: Yeah, real fast. Hm-hmm. Yeah when you get out there in that -- in that water. I mean, when you're a kid, everything's so much different. Nothing could ever happen to me, you know. But then you start seeing dead bodies and stuff and what not, you thought, well it comes to me I'm glad it's him and not me. I mean that's the -- that's the attitude you get, you know. And it's maybe not a good attitude but that's what keeps you going.

Question: What ... oh, my mind just checked out on me there or a second. A day in your life. What was it? Kind of like I assume there was a lot of hurry up and wait. What was kind of an average day in the Armed Guard?

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Answer: Average day. Get up in the morning, you eat, you go spend four to eight hours on gun watch and get off. And that's it, you know. Paint guns, clean this, clean that. I mean that's all we did is paint our guns and keep everything ship-shape.

Question: Saw a lot of water.

Answer: Lots of water. I mean I've been in, well, I tell you what I've been on.

Question: Yeah, take me through a --

Answer: Well, here's the places I've been. I've been to Attu, in Alaska I've been to Ketchikan, Nome, Kachibu, Point Barrow, Kiska, Attu, been to Pearl Harbor, Wellington New Zealand, Aden Arabia, Suez and Cairo Egypt, Capetown South Africa, Bahia Recife, Brazil. Out in the South Pacific, Leyte, Manila, Philippines, Tacloban, Hollandia, Port Moresby and Finckhafen New Guinea, Mannis Island, Guam, Saipan, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Tokyo, Yokohama, Yokuska and I sailed on Pacific Ocean, the Arctic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Bering Sea, the Red Sea, the South China Sea, the Coral Sea, Philippine Sea and the Bismark Se

Answer: So I got around.

Question: All in about four or five years.

Answer: Yeah, four years, hm-hmm. I mean I spent all my time on the ocean, you know. I wasn't one of these guys that spend six, eight months at a time in the -- in some office someplace.

Question: Boy that's amazing because you did, you saw -- you saw maturity of the war.

Answer: Yeah, and no way in the world could an average citizen ever do this. You know it would have cost you thousands and thousands of dollars to take these little trips.

Question: How many of those places, of those cities that you mentioned on there and countries that you mentioned. How many of those had you even had the faintest knowledge of before you joined the Navy?

Answer: Nothing. I -- I'd heard China and different things but I never got to Chin

Answer: But I had no idea

Answer: You know when you're a young kid in school and you read this history book and stuff your mind wanders off, God it would be nice to be able to see that country. But I never ever dreamt I'd see all these South Pacific islands. Some of them are beautiful, you know. Course I understand now that they all got big Hilton Hotels and everything else on them. But it was nice walking along the beach out there in New Guinea and see all these beautiful little shells along the beach, beautiful white sands, coconut trees.

Question: So what were you doing in New Guinea? What was your task down there?

Answer: Well we hauled supplies in there and we stayed there about 35 days waiting for orders to leave, see. So we just -- that's what we done. Just sat around there and take a motor launch over to the shore and wander around and check out the islands. Be very careful of where you go and what not, there was still Japanese on there.

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Question: But yet you were a war tourist.

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: Now I noticed you had and I saw a gentleman yesterday and I didn't ask him about this. It was a beer token for three beers and you --

Answer: Oh, yeah, they give you those deals cause you're only allowed three beers at a time so you won't get drunk, see.

Question: And where was that -- that was from -- in Japan somewhere, I think?

Answer: Yeah, Yokuska Navy Base. Hm-hmm.

Question: So did horse trading go on for --

Answer: Oh, yeah, hm-hmm. Well, just like, I didn't know what black market was, you know. And aboard the ship they sell cigarettes for fifty cents a carton. Well I had to go into Manila to pick up the mail and what not and I had ten cartons of cigarettes I'd bought aboard ship. I mean fifty cents a carton, that's \$5, you know. And so I'm walking down the deal there and some guy, young guy, says come over, what you got? And I says I got cigarettes here. I was going to trade them off to a soldier or something. He says what you want for them? I says I don't know. He says here, I'll give you \$10 a carton for them. So, God, I'd never seen that much money in my life, you know. So I says fine, I had no idea it was black market or nothing. So I just took my 150 bucks and went back to the ship with it. But just amazing there. Then Army, they had what they called these bubble blisters. They had big tubes with little spouts on them, different -- setting around, different places in the street. You go in there and you get a drink of water or Coke or whatever they had in these things, you know.

Question: Oh, really?

Answer: Yeah. But this kid that bought these cigarettes from me, he pulled out a wad of bills like that. And I says Jesus, where did you get all that money at? I mean 20's and 10's, you know. He says when the Japanese come in here they took the American money out of the bank and threw it out in the street and I went out and I saved it. So he had all kinds of money, you know. He says I got a nice Harley Davidson, too, but it's buried under my house. (laughs)

Question: So was there and I know this is the Korean War, but on the TV show, Mash, you see Radar and they're always somebody swapping this and negotiating that and they need parts and they -- so was there a lot of that that went on too, I mean --

Answer: Oh, not -- not too much so with us because we didn't have access to anything hardly aboard ship, you know. Course sometimes a soldier would go off and they'd leave a rifle or something on there. But it got to the point now they'd say well we're going to go back to the States, they're going to search everything, take everything away from you, you know.

Question: So when you took a plane over or a tank or whatever, the full tank ended up getting to where it was going. There weren't parts missing --

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Answer: Oh, no, no. The only thing missing, that one trip we took up to Alaska we had all the supplies for the Eskimos up there. And the Navy gun crew got to help some of the cargo up at Point Barrow because there weren't much of us -- many guys -- aboard the ship, you know. But a lot of the Merchant Marines got down there and they broke into all of the whiskey and stuff. By the time we got down there -- of course the Merchant Marines, you know, most of them are older -- most of them are 35, 40 year old guys, you know, they know the ways of the world. But us 17, 18 year old kids -- we didn't know much about that. But, God, the whole inside the ship would be lined with empty whiskey bottles and stuff like that.

Question: What did it -- did you ever get a chance for -- I mean you hear of the, in the movies you see the R & R Club, the officers and the enlisted men and they get to go somewhere and have some entertainment and all that. Did you get involved in any of that? I mean --

Answer: Oh, we got to see some. Just like when we was out in, I think it was Mannis Island someplace. Bob Hope come out there, you know, they had a little stage, the Army built a stage for him he could get the show on. We'd go out there, they had old split coconut trees. You sat on these trees, what not, and you're sitting there watching Bob Hope put on his show and all of a sudden you hear little something drop in the background, you hear a Thompson machine gun going off or something, they think a Jap's out there or something, you know, it would be a coconut falling out of a tree. Or then it would start pouring down rain, which it rains a lot in the Tropics. And so you sat there or you'd be sitting there watching something going on, pretty soon all of a sudden, it come over get back to your ship, back to your ship, you know cause there would be an air raid or something coming off. So it was interesting.

Question: So it sounds like they never really got to see a full show.

Answer: Well sometimes you would but generally you wouldn't. Always something interfering with it. But they had quite a few different people, USO shows come out to those islands, you know.

Question: Were they good shows? I mean I've heard different stories --

Answer: I wouldn't know good show because I'd never seen anything before, so I wouldn't know how to compare it, you know.

Question: But the soldiers and all, that was --

Answer: Yeah, they was entertainment. You know that's the main thing. God, you sat there and stared at the same people day after day, you know. You just kind of run out of talk and everything.

Question: Was that home for them? I mean kind of --

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: Now was that tough because you were out to sea quite a bit. You had Christmases and New Years and birthdays and -- was that a hardship, homesickness?

Answer: Oh, not too much so. I mean I was kind of on my own, you know. And so it didn't bother me too much. Of course I had -- my mother -- my dad was in the Navy at the time, too. My mother -- I had three brothers and a sister at home.

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Question: Was that tough on your mom?

Answer: Well, yeah, it was kind of tough on her, but I'd give her my allotment and what not. But it was just the way the war was, you know.

Question: So your dad was in the Navy while you were in the Navy?

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: Where was he?

Answer: He was stationed at Pearl Harbor submarine base. I never did see him all the time I was in the service. And then I -- of course I had three sons. When he went in the Navy in Viet Nam, he put two tours of duty on one of these river patrol boats over there. And the other one -- he went -- the youngest one -- he went in the Army and he put his time over in Korea at Camp Casey, I think it was. And the third one -- he become a school teacher and he teaches school down in California

Answer:

Question: Do you have any grandchildren yet?

Answer: Well, I got three, yeah. Two of them's -- one of them just got out of the Army and the other one's still in the Army. He's in the combat engineers. He's staying in Hawaii right now.

Question: They didn't listen to Grandpa -- stay out of the dirt -- get in the Navy.

Answer: Yeah, right. Lot of people like that terra firma, you know. I don't like those fox holes.

Question: Do you think that there's a message to be left for future generations from World War II?

Answer: Well, I think there is. I mean you seen that book in there, all those thousand and thousands Navy and Marine Corps casualties, wounded. And the people nowadays, they could care less. I see people go down there and burn the flags and stuff and just irks the hell out of me, you know. But not much I can do about it -- it's the damn politicians and stuff letting all this stuff go on.

Question: Do you think we learned a lesson in World War II or we taught a lesson or we --

Answer: I don't know. All's I can say the lesson to learn is be prepared, cause we wasn't prepared. I remember when I was a young kid down in California there at the time -- the Japanese over here, they hauling tons and tons of steel. We was giving them steel, you know, and they was taking it back over there and they making shells and tanks and stuff to shoot back at us. And it seemed like this whole country runs on greed. I mean, that's how much I can get out of it, you know. That's the impression I get out of it.

Question: Now somebody yesterday was talking about that. Talking about a war really being what can I get out of it. That's where the war started. Whether it be oil or whether it be money or --

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm.

Question: Do you think World War II could ever happen again -- a war like that?

Answer: Well, everything has changed so much. Just like I say, there will never be another Armed Guard that I was in. I mean, they just don't need that stuff anymore, you know. Everything is so mechanized and everything. And everything's -- well look at the improvement they made in all these guns and everything the last 50 years. Geez, I went aboard a Navy ship down there a while back. When I was in the Navy I was a gunner, I was a gun pointer, I fired the gun and what not, you know, into what not. But you don't have to do that anymore. They got a little room back there and you just touch a button and everything's automatic. And in World War II, if you was better than they was, you shot them. If they was better than you was, they shot you, you know. So that's the way it went.

Question: Thank goodness that submarine wasn't too much better than you that they missed you twice --

Answer: Right, hm-hmm. I don't know why, out of that 30 ship convoy, we was the first ship to get sunk. I don't know whether they ever got anymore, cause I never heard. The convoy sailed away, you know, that was it. But according to these records I seen they didn't -- they didn't get any more ships in that convoy. Maybe they was out of torpedos or something but they -- the Germans sank an awful lot of American ships. Especially off -- back on the East Coast. You know they had one admiral back there. These guys get so high in rank they think nobody can touch them. This admiral -- he knew these German ships was sinking -- the German subs sinking American ships hand over hand back there, but he wouldn't turn the lights out in the cities. And the submarines was out there and they could see the silhouettes of these American ships and they was sinking them right there in their back yard, you know.

Question: I've heard a couple stories like that where it was ignorance or pride or whatever it was that caused -- caused trouble.

Answer: Yeah, hm-hmm. They get such a high rank they think nobody can touch them, tell them anything, you know. I mean they know it all. And what can you say. I've seen that in some of the officers I served under. I mean they -- they get an ego thing and you don't tell them anything. You say it's wrong or something, you go in the brig for a week, you know. It just don't work out that way.

Question: That reminds me. You were showing us some of the logs from the different vessels and there was one that you had been disciplined on.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: What was that? What happened?

Answer: Well, we pulled in this little island out there in -- I think we was in New Guinea someplace and I was on this Liberty ship and we was about a hundred yards from the beach. We pulled in there because there'd been submarines attacking ships in there. So we pulled in there to hide for a day or two, you know. And we was about a hundred yards off the beach. Beautiful beach. And the officers says you guys, if you can find a way to get over there, you can get over there, you know, big smart ass type. And so three buddies and I, we found about a 12-foot wooden ladder there. So we put a life jacket on each end of that ladder, we got on that ladder and we paddled over to that island. So we was just having a good old time, lounging around. Pretty soon here comes a motor launch or life boat over there, they picked

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

us up, took us back to the ship, and he give us a restriction cause we left the ship, you know. I mean. So I can't remember, he finally lifted it after a couple days, told me you was going to be restricted so many days and what not. But we kind of explained to him that he said we could get over there if we could find a way. Well, we found a way. I mean, Navy you can always find a way to do something. So we got restricted for a few days.

Question: You were some young kids, it was hot and you wanted to go swimming.

Answer: Yeah, I mean, out in the Tropics it's hot all the time. You don't sleep at night, those damn beds at night, in those quarters, they're so damn hot and there's no air conditioning or nothing. That's why on the one ship my buddy got killed because it was so hot down there we couldn't sleep inside so we sleeping out on deck and he just -- he just happened to pick the wrong spot to sleep, you know. But many a time I had a hammock -- in those days the Navy used hammocks. And I'd string that hammock right underneath my gun tub and I'd sleep in that hammock. Night after night there. Of course it's nice there because you're swaying back and forth with the ship, you know.

Question: Boy, you saw all extremes of weather, too.

Answer: Yeah, oh, gee. I seen some weather -- I'd never want to go through it again. I took a trip a few years ago -- the Armed Guard -- we had a reunion up in Seattle. We took a trip from Seattle to Vancouver, or Victoria, rather. I mean three hours on that ferry is more than I even wanted to -- I just couldn't hack that water anymore.

Question: It sounds like the Navy didn't actually really prepare you that well for those extremes, at least early in the war.

Answer: No, they didn't. Nothing. I mean they just -- well they just figured we was expendable, you know. Put you on a ship, if it gets sunk, we find somebody else to take care of it. Like I say, nobody knew about the Armed Guard, hardly, and like I say, Patty Murray was trying to put in for a medal for the Armed Guard because we didn't get the medals and stuff the regular Navy got, you know, but it's still in the process back in Washington, D.C.

Question: That's interesting that they delineated the Armed Guard out. Because I mean you were Navy. You just were on different vessels.

Answer: Hm-hmm. Just like two months ago they sent me a ribbon, a combat action ribbon for being in combat and stuff, you know. I mean they didn't issue that stuff in the war. Just three years ago they sent me all these other -- all these other medals I got. But they hardly had any records of anything we done. The only records we got is what that officer wrote down in that book and if he didn't write nothing down, there was no record of it.

Question: Boy, if you were to take the Armed Guard away, I mean there would be no supply line, basically.

Answer: No, see the Armed Guard, they had a little bit in World War I. I think they had about three or 400 ships in World War I. But like in World War II we had 6000 ships, and all different nationalities. I knew some guys, they sailed on Dutch ships, and some on Indian ships. I said, God, I never had so much curried rice in my life, you know. But the American ships was pretty nice, most of them. Course we had one guy in our VFW group, he was an Armed Guard, but he was a pharmacists mate and he sailed on a -- I think a Lauraline -- one of these 5000 men transports. That's all he done during the war, just go back and forth in

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

that big transport, you know. But I enjoyed every -- every minute I was in there at that time, cause I didn't know any better, and it was a big adventure.

Question: What were some -- do you remember some of the unique cargo that you might have taken?

Answer: Cargo?

Question: Yeah, it sounds like you had a wide variety of materials.

Answer: Oh, everything. I mean just like that trip we made to Suez, we had all those tanks and planes and everything and down in the hold we had hundreds and hundreds of flour sacks. Full of flour, you know, and what not. And we was about a half a mile out off the shore there, maybe a little less. And they'd bring these lighters -- barges -- alongside. And these Egyptians -- they'd come up there -- they'd unload the cargo. And they all wore these nightgowns, you know. So we'd see them down there and they'd take a knife and they'd split one of these sacks and they'd fill little pouches up underneath their nightgowns. That's the first time I ever seen a taco or tortilla or whatever they was. You know they had a little stove and these lighters and they found this flour and make it. And I was on watch one night there and we had cigarettes -- I mean we had cases and cases of cigarettes too, you know, in big waterproof boxes. And I was on watch there, midnight to 4 o'clock in the morning. I was on the fan tail and I kept hearing a little splash, splash. I looked and here was one old Egyptian over here, he was throwing these cases of cigarettes over the side and he had a buddy in a boat way behind us there picking them up, you know, and what not. So I called the officer up and I says damn, they're borrowing cigarettes from us, you know. He says well can't you stop that? And I says yeah. And I just took my 45 and I fired a magazine back at the little boat. Of course I don't think I hit anything but at least stopped the cigarettes, you know. And then at night time we had -- each porthole -- we had these outside quarters and we had a porthole there in our quarters and had a little guard on it. Well, we watched them. They'd reach in there, everything that's loose that they could reach, they'd grab it. So we took the guard off our fans, turned it on full blower and put it in there at night time, you know. And you'd seen this hand come in there, (gestures) (laughs) But steal everything. We had a big cook aboard our ship. He must have weighed 250, 300 pounds. Well, he went ashore and got drunk and I had to take the boat out about midnight to go over to the beach and pick up these guys went ashore. He was laying there dead drunk on the beach. They'd come and stripped all his clothes off and there he was, bare butt naked, you know. (laughs) Oh, really, really thieves. They'd steal everything. One night there, well we was anchored little town called Tufit it was about ten miles out of the mouth of the Suez Canal there. I was going back from Suez to where I got aboard ship there. This British soldier picked me up in this dump truck. And course there's driving on the right hand side, you know. And I says what you hauling. He says I got a bunch of hams and bacon back there I'm hauling down to camp. And I says well, who's that guy in the back there? Say what guy? He looked back and there's this old Arab, he was throwing hams and bacon off the side of the road. He says hold the steering wheel a minute, will you. So he took out (inaudible) so he just reached back there and shot the guy right off the truck. And stopped the thieves. But I mean there's so many things going on. They'd even go down in the airport place there and they tried to steal the parachutes, you know. I seen everybody got their finger into something, you know.

Question: Yes, it seems like there would be that --

Answer: Well, they only made seven cents a day for unloading our cargo aboard the ship, so that -- and life meant nothing to them people over there. I mean I've seen -- they sent

Larry LaFontaine

Tape 1 of 1

some people out there so badly chipped up and what not they just take them out and shoot them cause they got no medical facilities for them.

Question: Wow.