



Douglas County History Research Center Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with

Gerald L. Cronan

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SUMMARY: Mr. Cronan recounts his experiences in the U. S. Coast Guard in World War II. He talks briefly about moving with his family to Washington, DC and what led to his decision to enlist in the Coast Guard. Following basic training, he performed beach patrol duty in Nags Head, North Carolina, before being transferred to Newport News, Virginia. Following his request for sea duty, Cronan describes activities aboard the USS 240, a buoy tender in the Atlantic. He then requested amphibious training and spent the remainder of his time in service aboard an LST 762. He describes duty aboard an LST, and goes on to discuss the voyage through the Panama Canal and on to the Pacific. Cronan was involved in several battles in the Philippines and Okinawa, and describes his experiences in some detail.

BELT: Well, start moving through about what made you go into the service.

CRONAN: I had, first of all, I had a brother, Ott [*sp?*], who was initially in the Marine Corps, and ultimately retired as an Air Force Colonel. And then a brother Ed, who was in the Marine Corps, and both of them are in the Washington, D.C. area. As was my oldest sister, who left Redding when she graduated from high school, to seek employment in the big city of Washington. And, my Dad had had a paralytic stroke, he was paralyzed for two years and eight months before he died. And, it wasn't possible -- Mother wanted desperately to get the family back together. And, it wasn't possible to bring the two Marines home, nor my sister, who was permanently entrenched in a government job. So, we literally packed up and moved to Alexandria, VA. And, that's where I enlisted from. We just moved the whole family. Took Dad down in an ambulance, and he never recovered from his stroke. Paralyzed until the day he died.

BELT: It must have been a hard decision, just to pack the family and move.

CRONAN: It was, because families in those days lived close together, and our families were big and close. Dad being one of fourteen, we had a lot of uncles around and cousins, cousins by the dozens. But, Mother felt so keenly that she wanted the family together, and that was the only way we could do it. So that's how we got to the Washington area.

BELT: So, you're seventeen at this point?

CRONAN: I was sixteen when we moved down there. And, I was working for a company called Alexandria Amusement Corporation, who owned the theaters.

BARB: Musement?

CRONAN: Alexandria Amusement. I was working initially as an usher, then a doorman, ticket taker, if you will. And when the war broke out, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and I remember it of course. Paperboys hawking the news that America's at war, Pearl Harbor's been bombed. And 9 out of 10 people were saying. "Where's Pearl Harbor?" At that time it was not a state. And, since I was too young at that time, I turned 17 in March of '42 [1942], and enlisted, actually enlisted in October.

BELT: You enlisted because of Pearl Harbor or what?

CRONAN: Well, it was a different world, and people were very patriotic, you might say. Die-hard Americans. And, everybody was touched by this. Had it not been for, so-called, Rosie the Riveters, women that worked in defense plants and things like that, probably the war might have had a different ending. Everybody just dug in. And, truthfully the people that stayed home, probably suffered more from lack of things than we did in the service. Our needs were very limited. We had food and clothing and obviously a bed to sleep in aboard ship. But, the rationing was very harsh and we had tough times at home.

BELT: Did you Mom try to talk you out of --?

CRONAN: Yes, she did. She already had two sons in the military, and the idea of another one going in -- And, interestingly enough, a group of my friends and myself, who were all schoolmates together, and good pals, decided we were going to enlist. And, I don't know who suggested it, or how it came about, just this decision was made to enlist in the Coast Guard. One of the main reasons we wanted to enlist, when you hit 18, you were subject to being drafted, and if you were drafted you went to whatever service they decided to draft you into. The Coast Guard was not drafting, and the Navy --

BELT: The Coast Guard was not drafting?

CRONAN: No, and the Marines, I don't think were drafting. But, the Army and the Navy --

BELT: So, what made you pick the Coast Guard? None of your other family was in the Coast Guard, right?

CRONAN: No, two brothers at the time were both in the Marine Corps. And, subsequently, the elder of the brothers transferred. In those years you could actually transfer from one branch to another. And, he went into what was called the U.S. Army Air Corps, which is currently the U.S. Air Force. Anyway, it was a decision, I'm not sure exactly when we decided on it, but, it was pretty much unanimous, all of us decided to enlist, thinking we'd be together. And, we all went that-a-way.

BELT: Different directions?

CRONAN: Yeah. My best friend, who has been my best brother-in-law for almost 60 years, we were married in '55 [1955], he was married in '56 [1956]. But, anyway, we all decided we were going to go in the Coast Guard. I know my Mother's initial reaction was, "Oh, you'll be sent to some lonely --" envisioning the Coast Guard as only guarding the coast, which was a misconception that a lot of people had. And, ironically, the first place I was sent to from boot camp, was Nags Head, North Carolina, out on the beach. Patrolling it, we patrolled from sundown to sunup.

BELT: Well, that's not going too far. So, you enlist, and where do you --?

CRONAN: OK, I enlisted in Washington, D.C., and the nearest training camp was in Baltimore, MD. Curtis Bay, MD.

BELT: So, you're with your friends there? You're not even with your friends at this point?

CRONAN: My best friend, my brother-in-law, went to Manhattan Beach, in New York. We were all scattered. None of us served together, which you come to accept. We all thought, maybe enlisting together, we would all go together.

BELT: Were you excited about going? I mean, leaving?

CRONAN: Oh, yes, yeah. It was the thing to do, and everybody was so fired up, you might say. You just had to do something. As I said, had I waited until I was 18, I probably would have been drafted anyway, because I was fairly healthy.

BELT: So, that's the reason your mother signed for you, then?

CRONAN: It took a little persuasion. And, now that I've been a parent for many years, I can more fully appreciate what she went through. And, as I said, my Dad was, at that time, paralyzed.

BELT: So, he realized you were leaving?

CRONAN: Yes, he did. He was very sharp of mind. He just bodily, he couldn't function. He could not do anything for himself. The whole left side was completely --

BELT: Could you have gotten some kind of, I don't know what the word is, an

exemption to stay home with your family, since your father was [unclear] and you're the only boy?

CRONAN: Possibly, but in order to do that you had to prove a hardship that, without you, they couldn't function. And, you see, being a large family, even though I was the youngest one, three of my sisters and one brother, who was working at the Navy yard, in Washington, D.C., as a machinist. He was sheeting barrels for battleship guns, and he was frozen in his work. He was not allowed, until the war was almost over. We had more equipment --

BELT: So, they needed him?

CRONAN: Yeah, so he was allowed, and then he went in the Marine Corps.

BELT: So you never thought about getting an exemption? It never crossed your mind? You were going to serve?

CRONAN: It was not even a consideration.

BELT: What was boot camp like? What was that like?

CRONAN: Well, we had second and first class Petty Officers, and to be quite honest, our first class Petty Officer, who was, who we felt he descended from the right hand of God, and he was all powerful. If he said jump, the only question you wanted to ask was. "How high?" I mean, they ruled the roost, and they were rough.

BELT: What did you think about, did you think you made the wrong decision?

CRONAN: No, I never regretted it, never. To this day I don't. My government does not owe me a thing. I'm grateful for what we have, the advantages that they have offered us, but, I never felt that, Boy, I gave you three years of my life and they owe me. They don't owe me a thing. But, first of all your stubborn kicks in, and you're not even going to admit that they bother you. You're going to do whatever you're told to do, and do it the best you know how.

BELT: How were they rough on you? Physically rough? Or mentally rough?

CRONAN: Both. Now, they didn't abuse us, we weren't whipped or anything that,

you can bet. Short of that, they could -- To give you an example, we had what they called tattoo, lights out, 9 o'clock, and that was the end of the day for you. But, they turned the lights out five minutes early, and they wanted strict silence. You know, you were in your bunk to sleep. Not to --

BELT: At 9 o'clock?

CRONAN: Oh, well, unless you got up very early. And the days were very full, and very athletic. You were running and you were going over obstacle courses. They worked you to the limit. In that sense, they weren't brutal. They were hard, and they didn't take any nonsense. You couldn't say, "Aw, gee, I got a cramp, I can't do it." You better get out there and run that cramp off. Just as an aside, one night one of the fellas had gotten in his bunk and had pulled the covers over his head, so he couldn't see the lights go out. And, the first class Petty Officer came in, and he turned the lights out. He opened and closed the door, so you'd think he went out. He was standing inside there. And this one chap, that was under his covers, he was still yakking away. And, all of a sudden, the lights come back on, and here's the right hand of God standing there, demanding to know who that was. Well, nobody wanted to squeal, you did your own [unclear]. So, the result was "Everybody up, pack your bag, your seabag, and out on the drill field, for about two hours."

BELT: He took everybody out?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah. Well, because --

BELT: You wouldn't squeal.

CRONAN: I don't think anybody regretted it, because you just wouldn't do that. We were trying to shush him up, because he was talking after lights were out, and you could hear that. Anyway, we all took our licking. It could be tough, and it had to be. War, as it turned out, is no place for soft, mushy people. And, overall I was in pretty good shape.

BELT: How long were you in boot camp?

CRONAN: As I recall, it was probably about 6 weeks, I think. Near as I can remember. They were full days. And I think, once, during that time, my mother and my sisters, and my girlfriend at the time, came to visit for a couple hours, on a Sunday afternoon.

That was the only time that you could get a little relaxing.

BELT: So you saw them every Sunday afternoon?

CRONAN: No, just one time, while I was in boot camp.

BELT: You remember that, huh?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah. It was a highlight. You know, by that time, you had already been there, probably, oh, considering, the first three or four weeks, so it was a real treat to be able to see them and get a hug from them. I often wonder how my mother made it. She was just a terrific woman, who self-sacrificed for her family.

BELT: Probably pretty proud of you.

CRONAN: Well, I'd like to think so. But, I'm not sure that I gave her anything to be really proud of. Although my brothers and sisters, none of us got into any real trouble, and that's thankful.

BELT: So you survived boot camp. What happens to you then?

CRONAN: Well, the truth of my mother's fear, I was transferred from there to Nags Head, North Carolina. On what they call beach patrol.

BELT: Were you excited to do this?

CRONAN: Well, no, because we really wanted to get on with something else. To do something, not that that wasn't important. It was. But, it wasn't exactly what we had in mind. But, it fulfilled my mother's prophecy, that I'd be sent to some gosh forsaken place, and it was. Because no one was allowed on the beach from sundown to sunup. Most people that had cottages, and they were loaded with cottages all along the ocean front, they just boarded them up and stayed away. There was no point in going down there. So, it was a very lonely stretch.

BELT: So you are supposed to guard the coast?

CRONAN: Yeah, and quite honestly, it was in, it was north. But the Germans actually made a landing on one of the coasts. Apprehended, was able to stop them. They

actually caught them. What they did was they came ashore in a rubber boat.

BELT: Came ashore where?

CRONAN: Up on the east coast, the northeast coast. I think that's the exact location. I've got a big book at home, of the Coast Guard during World War II, and I should have done a little homework on that.

BELT: I didn't realize that.

CRONAN: Do you know that the Japanese actually bombed the west coast? Set fire to some forest in, not Washington state, Oregon.

BELT: Never heard that story, either.

CRONAN: Most of that was hushed up at the time. And, then of course it paled into insignificance, I guess.

BELT: Let's go back a little bit. When you got out of boot camp and you are going to Nags Head, what, aren't you assigned to your first ship?

CRONAN: Nope, this was shore duty.

BELT: Oh, so you are not on a ship going up and down the coast.

CRONAN: No, no, no.

BELT: OK, I didn't understand that.

CRONAN: Well, we had ships out there. This was, our station had a tower there, and that was manned 24 hours a day. When I first went there, we walked the beach in pairs. Four of us would go out to the station, two would go south and two would go north. We were carrying what they called the old Springfield rifles, they were heavy rifles. And we walked 6 hours on the shore. The northbound would go up to a point, there was actually a post on the beach, in the sand, and it had a key, a big key, and we had to carry a time clock.

BELT: Oh, so they made sure that you reached your --

CRONAN: You bet, and each key punched a different. So, when you got to the end of your [unclear], your time clock, and punched it.

BELT: At the time clock?

CRONAN: Um hum, it was actually a time clock. Hanging around your neck, and you were carrying a rifle and you were walking for 6 hours. Two of us at a time. Then, you'd turn and go in the opposite direction, and at some point, you'd meet the other two, and crisscross, and you would go to the far end, and punch the clock there, and they would do the same. After about --

BELT: So what do they tell you you're looking for?

CRONAN: Anything. Any --

BELT: Do you have walkie-talkies?

CRONAN: They didn't even exist in those days.

BELT: So if you saw something, what could you do?

CRONAN: You'd hightail it back to the station. And, each station, it would vary a little bit, it was at least 6 to 8 miles between stations. So, you would walk half that distance, the other station up here, north, would walk, he did the same thing. The whole coast, east and west is covered.

BELT: Wow, I did not know that. So you are in uniform.

CRONAN: Yes, and in the winter time, it is cold out there on the beach.

BELT: So you're in there, what time of the year was this? Winter?

CRONAN: Probably January, February, and then I transferred out of there, in April, or May. No, April, I had put in -- By this time, by the way, after a couple months of that, they brought in retired cavalry horses. They actually built a little stable.

BELT: That makes more sense.

CRONAN: And then we rode, we rode singly, two would go, one would ride south and the other north.

BELT: Did you know how to ride a horse before?

CRONAN: Oh, sure.

BELT: Oh, you did.

CRONAN: We used to ride a good bit.

BELT: There were some people that did not know how to ride a horse?

CRONAN: Yep.

BELT: And they had to get on that horse and ride?

CRONAN: Yep. You know, there was somebody there could kind of show them the basics.

BELT: Did you like riding the horse back and forth? I would think that that would be more enjoyable.

CRONAN: Yeah, but when we walked, we walked 6 hours, but when we rode, we rode the horse, we rode four hours. And the horse is beautifully trained. You could just tap the reins on the left and he would respond. We were not allowed to run them, except once a day, in the daylight hours. After our four-hour shift, we had to curry them, brush them and feed them, for about an hour, before we could turn in.

BELT: So, how long were you doing this? About two months?

CRONAN: About two months. They were still there when I left in April. I got a call from the Red Cross, and my mother had gotten in touch with them, and my dad was in the hospital, not expected to live. So I was given a five-day emergency leave.

BELT: What year was this, Jerry?

CRONAN: 1943. April. I went home.

BELT: How did you get there?

CRONAN: Well, interestingly enough, we hitchhiked from the station. And Nags Head is still pretty remote, although it's a bustling area now. But, the only people that were down there, were a few people who lived there permanently, and the military. There was an Army group there in the area. And, of course our Coast Guard station. I had applied for a transfer to motor machinist school, my bent was mechanical. And, while I was on the emergency leave, my dad did die, and they gave me an extension. Another 5 days.

BELT: So you were there when he passed away?

CRONAN: Yes. Then we took him back to Redding for burial. And when I returned to the station, my transfer papers were there. But, unfortunately, I missed the cut-off date. Those schools start, and they want people there. So there was another guy out at the station and he just wanted to get out of there, he didn't care where he went. He volunteered to take my class. My transfer papers were still there, transferring me to the Sixth Naval District in Norfolk, Virginia. For transfer, to another center. And I actually passed him in the car, and he never said that he was going in my place.

BELT: To take your place.

CRONAN: I was still under the impression that I was going to the motor machinist school.

BELT: So, it was pretty upsetting for you.

CRONAN: When I discovered it, yes, I was very disappointed. So, instead of going to motor machinist school, they transferred me to what they called Captain of the Port. And that was a section of the Coast Guard.

BELT: What did you think about that assignment?

CRONAN: I wasn't real keen on it, you know, because I had my heart set on going to this machine school.

BELT: You couldn't refuse this?

CRONAN: No, no. And, the other slot was filled, this fella. Matter of fact, he was on his way out when I was coming in to the Sixth. I met him in the hallway.

BELT: So, are they going to send you somewhere else, now?

CRONAN: Yes, and I stayed right in the Norfolk/Portsmouth [*Virginia*] area, attached to the Captain of the Port. What we did, every ship that came into our ports, other than the Navy or Coast Guard vessels, had to have Coast Guard guards assigned to them, twenty-four hours a day. We had continuously on the ships, both in the Portsmouth area and, also Newport News [*Virginia*], and Newport News is a big ship area. So, I spent, I don't know, four or five months at, I don't remember the exact dates. Again, it wasn't what I really wanted. So, I put in for sea duty. And they transferred me then, reassigned me to the USS 240. And the 240, I don't have a picture of that one, it was what they called a buoy tender.

BELT: What do you think about getting transferred to this ship?

CRONAN: Well, I requested it.

BELT: Yeah, I mean, are you excited?

CRONAN: You couldn't pick a ship, but I requested sea duty.

BELT: Oh, OK. But, going on, this is your first big ship?

CRONAN: Yes, and it was in the Atlantic.

BELT: So, are you, how are you --?

CRONAN: In a sense, I guess, you can call it that, I was pleased. [*laughs*]. Except that we maintained the buoys that are great distances out from the shore. And the buoys are there for the purpose of guiding the ships into the harbors. And, unfortunately, they consisted of whistle and bell types of things, some of them had lights on them. Most of them, the lights were gas fired. They had big gas cylinders that were inserted down into the tubes of the buoy, and then sealed. And fired by gas. And they just sat out there in the ocean and rocked and rolled around. Well, some of our fly boys, who were

gung-ho, they weren't supposed to use them for target practice, but they did, and they would get away with it, because nobody saw.

BELT: What do you mean by target practice?

CRONAN: They actually shot them. From their planes. You know, strafed them.

BELT: With their machine guns?

CRONAN: Yeah, pretty hefty machine guns on the aircraft that they had.

BELT: And they would fly over and fire at them?

CRONAN: Yeah. We picked up some that were just this far from actually sinking completely. And they were full of holes, when we picked them up, the water just squirted out of them. They hadn't been hit just once, they'd been fired, well, they were firing as they dove down on them. And what we would do was pick them out of the water. And, it was a tremendous operation. They have three big anchors, stretched out, to keep them in place. They don't dare drift, or they would lose their purpose. And, when we came to a buoy, and it could be 2 o'clock in the morning, if that buoy needed service, guess what, out of your bunk you rolled, and up on the deck and worked for three or four hours.

BELT: What did you think about the fly boys firing at the buoys?

CRONAN: Well, mixed emotions. You could just see --

BELT: They shouldn't have done it, right?

CRONAN: No, and if they had, have gotten caught.

BELT: A lot of work.

CRONAN: Oh sure. It was just one of the things that happened.

BELT: So, you bring the buoy in, and just fix it, or just put out a new one?

CRONAN: We actually carried a supply on the ship.

BELT: So you would replace it?

CRONAN: We drop it, we'd retrieve that one, and then drop a new one in its place.

BELT: So how long were you doing this?

CRONAN: I was on there at least four or five months.

BELT: Were you seasick at all? Or did the water bother you?

CRONAN: No, the only time I was seasick was in a hurricane in the Atlantic, which is the same as a typhoon in the Pacific, just different name. And they are violent.

BELT: So being a landlubber and going on a ship, it didn't bother you at all?

CRONAN: No.

BELT: Good. How many people on board that ship, would you guess?

CRONAN: Probably fifty.

BELT: Oh, so it was really a small operation.

CRONAN: Yeah, the ship was 240 feet long.

BELT: How long would you be out? Out on the water before you went back to the port?

CRONAN: Days. Until your supply was exhausted or you had serviced all. We got to sometimes just re-tank them, you know, clean the lenses and things like that. When we brought them aboard the ship, they would be loaded with barnacles.

BELT: Oh, so you have to clean all that off. Sure.

CRONAN: We would scrape them and when we got back to port, base, we would off-load them, and in the yard they would fill up the holes, and re-paint them, refurbish them. When I was on there, I heard about this amphibious training. Now we're getting

to where I spent most of my time. So, I thought, now that sounds like --

BELT: So, you read about it?

CRONAN: I don't remember exactly how I heard about it. May have been a bulletin. But, I put in for it.

BELT: Why didn't you want to go back to that other school again, take the next class? You gave up on it?

CRONAN: Well, I guess in a sense, I did. I probably, in the back on my mind, I hadn't totally given up on it. But, when this amphibious came along, I thought, you know, this is where the war is.

BELT: That's what you wanted?

CRONAN: I put in for it, and --

BELT: What does that mean? What does that job --?

CRONAN: That's what put me on the LST [*Landing Ship Tank*]. Amphibious is just as the name implies.

BELT: What was the job description, when you knew about this? What did you think you were going to be doing?

CRONAN: Ending up on an LST, because essentially --

BELT: Oh, so it told you what ship it would be.

CRONAN: Well, not the specific ship, but, yes.

BELT: OK. So, you knew it was going to be on the LST. OK, so you put in for that, and you got it, so you are pretty happy?

CRONAN: Yeah, yeah, I was pleased. And boot camp was a toyland, a piece of cake, compared to the amphibious training.

BELT: Really? So you are leaving that boat and you have to go somewhere for training?

CRONAN: Yes. We went to Little Creek, Virginia.

BELT: The Coast Guard camp? Or Navy camp?

CRONAN: No, it was Navy/Coast Guard. As I say, we were all part of the same, we were part of the Navy, although we maintain our own. We'd have shields on our arms, which was the only difference.

BELT: Are you, is this a promotion? Or, just a job transfer?

CRONAN: It was a transfer.

BELT: So, you are not getting a stripe for this?

CRONAN: No. I had already gotten to Senior First Class. Guess if you want to equate it, it would be the same as a corporal in the Army, same type of --

...

BELT: Why was this so tough to get through?

CRONAN: Well, because it was the nature of what you were going to be faced with.

BELT: What did they make you do? Tell me about it.

CRONAN: It was another, probably a good four weeks we were there, and it was very, very stiff. A lot of -- Well, again, you thought these people came right from God Almighty, and they were in complete control of your life. They had an obstacle course that made boot camp look like play toys.

BELT: A lot of physical exertion?

CRONAN: Your days were completely filled with physical exertion. You were not assigned to any ship at that time. There were 30,000 men at a time.

BELT: There was obstacles courses and running again, but it was harder?

CRONAN: Yep, and total days. And, matter of fact, the obstacle course was so severe, that they actually parked an ambulance by some of it, because guys were breaking legs and arms, routinely.

BELT: Really?

CRONAN: And, some of the officers complained to the Commanding Officer. He said he wasn't in charge of a bunch of pussy-footed, and he absolutely refused to change them. Mercifully, I got through it without breaking any arms or legs.

BELT: Is there classroom work involved also?

CRONAN: To some degree, but it was mainly physical, for the first part of it.

BELT: What are you, 18 or 19, now?

CRONAN: I was 18.

BELT: 18. OK. Still pretty young

CRONAN: We had to grow up fast. As anybody would, you know the young people that just went over, they had to grow up fast They'll come home --

BELT: Were you smoking?

CRONAN: Yes, I did. As most of us did. But, anyway, everyday you would look on this bulletin board, in hopes of seeing your name on a ship assignment. And one day, sure enough, my name was there. I was assigned to the crew of the LST 762. Now, the LST 762 wasn't even floatable at that moment.

BELT: What did the LS --?

CRONAN: Landing Ship Tanks.

BELT: It stands for Landing Ship Tanks. OK.

CRONAN: Or, large slow target, as it was dubbed.

BELT: *[Laughter]* So what did you think about being assigned to this?

CRONAN: Oh, this is what you look forward to. Because, I actually had an assignment on a ship. And they had full-scale, plywood mock-ups, decks. They didn't have the whole ship, the hull.

BELT: During this, were you were taking the classes, at this time?

CRONAN: Yeah, so we actually trained then, from that point on, from the next day, on this mock-up. We had our skipper, all the officers were assigned to the ship, the petty officers.

BELT: Where did they have a mock-up? Where would that be?

CRONAN: Out in a big field, off, the place is humongous. I don't know what they use it for now. But, in any case --

BELT: How long were you in the mock-up?

CRONAN: I think it was two weeks.

BELT: Oh, two weeks on the mock-up, OK.

CRONAN: When we completed that --

BELT: Before you went to the mock-up, you know what ship you were going to?

CRONAN: Only the day before. When you saw your name on there, the next morning, instead of going out onto the fields, like you normally did, instead of what you call 'fall in', 'muster in', you were assigned to the ship. You know, you just came to it.

BELT: OK, so when you get the orders to go to the ship, how much time do you have to report to the ship?

CRONAN: The next morning. Well, by the way, we lived in tents, on the base. And, of course, now we are a cohesive ship's crew. Before we were just a motley assortment of fellows out there, trying to tone up your muscles and keep in shape, you know, that sort of thing, which was important, and it was strenuous. Anyway, from that point on, you

are trained as ship's crew. We had assignments and certain things.

BELT: Do you know everybody that is in your crew? I mean, from the classes that you took together? Are they coming in from other classes, other states?

CRONAN: Same base. but, with 30,000 men there training, the LST complement, we had a generally, basically, 115 crew members and I think it was 10 or 11 officers, so we had 125 or 126 total ship components. And, it varies a little from time to time.

BELT: Where do you get on your ship?

CRONAN: We trained as a crew for about two weeks.

BELT: And that was at the base?

CRONAN: Um hum, and then all of a sudden we were told to pack our bags, you know, sea bags, you had your blankets and a cot, pad, if you will, mattress, wrapped around the outside of the sea bag. And all of your personal belongings were in that sea bag. You put it over your shoulder. We got a lot of training, as a ship's crew, and traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and they put us in the dormitories of the big university there, and there weren't any classes. We thought we'd gone to heaven – two men to a room, had our own bath.

BELT: After living in a tent.

CRONAN: Yeah. And we were there for the purpose of, again, as a crew, and our ship was being finished in the nearby shipyard.

BELT: It's a brand new ship?

CRONAN: Brand spanking new.

BELT: You haven't seen the ship yet?

CRONAN: No. We were there probably four or five days, and then we were told to pack up, move out. And, we went aboard a ship

BELT: What was that like, to see that ship for the first time?

CRONAN: Oh, it was wonderful. The adrenaline, you know, was always moving pretty fast. And it was brand spanking new, and we knew our assignments. And, you know, we had been trained on these mock-ups, and it was pretty realistic.

BELT: It was realistic?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah, to the extent it could. You just couldn't move it anywhere, because it was earthbound. As an aside, while we were there at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, the telephone, there was a telephone out in the hall that was ringing constantly. And you know, you just picked it up, and it was usually a young female calling for somebody that they had met. And I answered it, and then, without, on a moment's notice, you were told to pack up and move out. So, you didn't have time to call anybody that you'd known, and say, "Hey, we're leaving". First of all, they wouldn't allow you to do that.

BELT: Top secret?

CRONAN: Yeah, the less people knew about, the better our safety was, was the theory. Anyway, I answered the phone out there, and some lady asked for some man, and I went to check, but it was nobody in our crew. And, so I went back and told her, she sounded a little disappointed, but she didn't seem to be interested in getting off the line. So we chatted for a while, and I said something that she perceived to be funny. And she said, "Oh, you're sharp". And I said, that's right they call me Gem for short. Gem razor is a dumb, you know. like Gillette razors. She said, "Oh, you're sharp". And, I said, "Yes, they call me Gem for short". Never thought another thing of it. So, the next evening, I was coming down the hallway, and I hear this guy say, "I'm telling you, we don't have anybody by the name of Gem." And this gal had called, again, and asked for Gem. And I said, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, that's for me." At any rate, it was a pleasant time.

BELT: Did you ever meet her?

CRONAN: No, I started out to, and I got waylaid by another young lady. *[Laughter]*

BELT: So, you never met her.

CRONAN: Talked to her, and matter of fact, I still have her picture at home. But,

anyway, suddenly, we were ordered to pack our bags, and were ordered to ship. We sailed it down the Ohio, to the Mississippi, the Mississippi to New Orleans.

BELT: What was that like, being on that ship, and it's moving?

CRONAN: Wonderful. It's sort of boring when you're in the river, but even the Mississippi is muddy, was, it's interesting. Now, the superstructure, which wasn't all that involved.

BELT: Now, when you say superstructure, what exactly are you saying?

CRONAN: Well, this mast and some of the other equipment is actually lashed onto the deck. It would have been too tall to go under some of the bridges that we had to go under. You know, it's quite a trip, I'd forgotten, it was probably four or five days, I guess, from Pittsburgh down to New Orleans, by the rivers. And, on the trip down the Mississippi, they actually put a pilot aboard.

BELT: Fighter pilot?

CRONAN: No, a pilot who knew the Mississippi, and all the channels.

BELT: A captain kind of?

CRONAN: No, we had our captain aboard ship. And, it was his ship. But, while that pilot was aboard, he was in charge of giving orders and where we went. Because, you look at the river, and it looks like you ought to be able to go straight down it, but the channels are like this.

BELT: Crooked?

CRONAN: Yeah, it's the way the water has gouged it out.

BELT: Sure

CRONAN: So, rather than run aground, they put these pilots aboard. Everyone has one.

BELT: So, what is your job? What are you doing now?

CRONAN: I was a seaman, in the deck force. And the deck force is the largest single group aboard most any ship. I can't say that about an aircraft carrier, 'cause they have so many different assignments. But, we maintained the exterior of the ship and part of the interior. The black gang, or the machinists, who controlled and ran the engines, and things like that, that was their bailiwick, we didn't touch that, they didn't mess with anything topside.

END TAPE 1 SIDE A
BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B

[The interview begins in mid-conversation.]

BELT: --.Coast Guard?

CRONAN: No, they were actually civilians.

BELT: Oh, it is a civilian.

CRONAN: To the best of my knowledge, they were all civilians.

BELT: They just knew the river and how to get through it.

CRONAN: They spent their whole lives there.

BELT: How did they get off the ship?

CRONAN: We'd take them off on a small boat. When you get down to your destination, then the captain would take over. When we were in more open water.

BELT: Then, he would leave?

CRONAN: Yeah. They would debark onto a smaller craft, and then, probably, hitch a ride back up and grab another ship and bring it down.

BELT: Do you know what you are going to be doing, now that you're in open water? Do you know what you're assigned to do or where you're going? Do they tell you?

CRONAN: The orders were usually sealed orders. And they were in the captain's hands, and you did not open them until you were clear of port. So, theoretically, even the captain didn't know until we cleared New Orleans.

BELT: Did your Mom know that you were leaving? Did you get a chance to tell her that you were leaving?

CRONAN: Not really. You weren't allowed to get to some of that. One of my fellow crew members got himself in a lot of trouble, over giving out some information that he thought was very innocent. Anyway, we spent some time in New Orleans, a couple days, putting supplies.

BELT: Loading up?

CRONAN: We loaded the food and water, ammunition. It carries, I forget, the tank deck is loaded. That tank deck could hold 30.

BELT: This is the ramp that could be lowered down?

CRONAN: And, then there was a ramp from the top deck that dropped down onto the lower one, it would lower hydraulically. So, what they did, they would lower that, and anything that was going on the top deck, Army trucks, trailers, 250-gallon drums of high octane aviation gasoline, stashed on top. It felt like a floating bomb, sometimes. But, that was all put up on the top deck.

BELT: So, they are driving jeeps --

CRONAN: Jeeps with trailers.

BELT: Everything just went up that ramp and into the ship.

CRONAN: Well, first of all, they would go up to the upper, the top deck, load that, and then they would raise that ramp up out of the way. And, then they would load what they called the tank deck, which was the main deck.

BELT: They put the tanks in the bottom level?

CRONAN: Oh, we did. We would stack about two feet of ammunition. There's all

kinds of ammunition for tanks. And then they used oak two by twelve, heavy oak planks, and we just stacked them on top of that, and then we would drive the tanks right over the top of that.

BELT: What was it like to see all that stuff coming aboard your ship?

CRONAN: Well, it was awesome, interesting.

BELT: Anybody get hurt, bringing that equipment in?

CRONAN: No, we were pretty well trained by that time, and the Army and, or Marines, who operated the tanks, they knew what they were doing. We had amphibious vehicles, you know, on tracks. They would go out and hit the water, and they just paddled their way along. We'd never seen kind of craft. We had some of them along.

BELT: You're not carrying people. You are just carrying --?

CRONAN: We carried people, too, all the troops that went with that stuff. When we were loaded, we were loaded to the hilt. When we were empty, we had all kinds of room. You could play basketball down in the tank area. I'm not kidding you, it was a hoot. When we were loaded, we were loaded.

BELT: So, you are loading up in Louisiana? You don't know where you're going yet?

CRONAN: Well, the orders were aboard ship, but they were sealed. So, we didn't know.

BELT: So, how long did it take to get everything loaded?

CRONAN: Probably a couple days. In the meantime, they are putting the mast and things up in the yard. And, we finally departed, and then we hear where we are going.

BELT: Were they troops aboard, now, on this ship?

CRONAN: Mostly equipment and ammunition at that time. We left New Orleans, heading for the Panama Canal to go to the west coast. The orders were to San Diego [*California*], as a matter of fact. And that was the extent of what even the skipper knew,

at that time.

BELT: What was it like going through the Panama Canal?

CRONAN: It was interesting. You know you go through, I think it's sixteen locks? You actually go up, and then when you actually cross a big lake on the top, and then you move down.

BELT: How long did it take you to get through the Panama Canal, do you remember?

CRONAN: It had to be a day and a half or two. You see, you pull into a lock, and then they flood it, and that raises you up. And, they open the gate.

BELT: So, one ship per lock?

CRONAN: One at a time. I'm trying to remember, these locks were only about 50 or 60 feet wide, so this ship, being 50 feet, pretty well filled it up. And that wasn't the biggest ship. Course, a lot of those big ships, like a carrier and all, you know they are superstructures, and they are so high up over the top, that they go ping and still go through. But, we started off in the Panama Canal, and we ran into a hurricane, and we rode two days in the hurricane. It was so violent, that all you could do was to tie yourself fast.

BELT: What does that mean?

CRONAN: Just literally lash yourself to something on ship to keep, you couldn't walk around, it would just throw you all over the place. We just had to hang on.

BELT: Inside the cabin?

CRONAN: Yeah, but even that was going. It listed, these ships are about as flat on the bottom as this table is, by design, so that they can go up on the beach. And, they are terrible to ride in the storm, because it just rolls like an earthquake.

BELT: Did you get sick during this?

CRONAN: I felt a little queasy. But, we still pulled our duty, to the extent that you could.

BELT: Still have to do your job?

CRONAN: Yeah. Somebody was on the helm, and --

BELT: Still, no accidents through the hurricane?

CRONAN: No, other than, the hurricane was so violent that we split a seam on the ship, so they ordered us back to New Orleans. Did a 180-degree turn.

BELT: Before the Panama Canal, you had to go back to New Orleans?

CRONAN: We had to go back. We had to unload the ammunition, because they couldn't do the welding, or anything like that. And, they welded it up, loaded the ammunition back.

BELT: Oh, because they didn't want to start a fire.

CRONAN: Oh, yeah, you could have blown the ship up.

BELT: So, they just took off the ammunition, and nothing else?

CRONAN: Yes, a tremendous amount of ammunition. Anyway, they repaired it.

BELT: How long did that take?

CRONAN: Maybe a day or so.

BELT: Oh, not that long.

CRONAN: No, it wasn't terribly long. But, we left there, then headed back to Panama, we went through the Canal, and went into San Diego, and then they transferred some of the equipment there, and then we picked up troops there. And, on the boat was some other LSTs that were doing the same thing. Matter of fact, there was a group of us going through the Canal.

BELT: So, how many troops do you think boarded? A lot?

CRONAN: Well, we would carry, probably, 300.

BELT: About 300 people.

CRONAN: This was in addition to our own crew. And, of course, the sleeping quarters, basically they could only accommodate the ship's crew. So, when this fills up they actually slept up on deck. Some of them slept in the back of their trucks, their vehicles, wherever they could, you know. Two hours [unclear] credit. And, not so, a lot of the other ships. When we carried troops, they ate the same food we did, they got the same chow line, and if they happened to be there ahead of you, so be it. The only time you had preference is when you had to go on duty, on watch, and you went to the head of the line, that was standard. But, they fed the same food, they drank, they showered with. Our ship was capable of desalinating, making fresh water out of sea water. We could make 2400 gallons a day. In other words, 100 gallons an hour.

BELT: Was that drinkable water?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah, as good as this right here. No different. So, it's possible to do that. I understand that it's fairly expensive to desalinate, but now with the water shortages, now, eventually they are going to have to do that.

BELT: What was the room that you slept in, your cabin, what was that like? You shared it, with one person, two people?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah. We had, in fact, I can show you a picture.

BELT: Well, just tell me about it.

CRONAN: Well, they were called compartments. And you had a series of bunks that lined the bulkhead. This would be a bulkhead, not a wall. And, this is a deck, not a floor.

BELT: OK. *[Laughter]*

CRONAN: Anyway, they had three bunks, and they were held up by chains, and when you put them up, they would be --

BELT: They would be flush.

CRONAN: Yeah. And, then in between this set of bunks, and the next one, was a set of three lockers. They were about that wide and maybe four or five feet tall. And each, you had a locker about this high.

BELT: So, three people per compartment?

CRONAN: No, might have ten, fifteen in a compartment. You know, these were like long narrow rooms.

BELT: Oh, OK, long narrow rooms.

CRONAN: And a passageway that went through each one, with a sealable door, hatch.

BELT: So, no privacy at all, really.

CRONAN: In the service, you didn't deserve and you didn't get any privacy, as such. There was pictures in here that showed the compartment. Anyway, they were both sides of the ship, below deck. The officer's quarters were up on the main deck. They had, ah, the captain, I guess, had his own compartment, and the other officers had likely two to three, where we had, maybe twelve, fifteen.

BELT: Wow.

CRONAN: You know, you didn't have any secrets. It was all men, so --

BELT: Are you liking this, are you happy?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah. As I say, I have few, if any, actual regrets about my time in the service.

BELT: OK, now, the troops are boarding the ship. What happens next? What happens after they have boarded?

CRONAN: Well, once you are totally loaded, and if you're, let's say, dock-side doing this, then you are ordered off, and you might go out and anchor. And what they do, they, there will be a bunch of ships and they'll all leave at the same time. You travel in a convoy.

BELT: Oh, in a convoy. OK. But, how many get, you think, will be in a convoy? Five? Ten?

CRONAN: Depends on what you are going to do.

BELT: But, at this time, when you are leaving?

CRONAN: Could be six, eight, ten ships, maybe. And, if you are lucky, you might have a destroyer escort for protection.

BELT: Wow, that must have been pretty impressive to see all that.

CRONAN: It was. And, also a little worrisome, because at that time the Japanese were still running rampant all over the Pacific.

BELT: Are there planes watching the convoy, too? Are there planes flying around?

CRONAN: No. They were so busy trying to free the Philippines and some of the islands, you know.

BELT: Do you have, do you practice on the guns on your ship?

CRONAN: Oh, you bet. We did that on shore.

BELT: So, you knew how to work the machine guns? Is that what they call them, machine guns?

CRONAN: No, we had these bow guns , and the stern, were twin 40-millimeter. And then we had some single 40-millimeter. And they are basically an anti-aircraft gun, although a 40-millimeter shell is probably about that big around, the whole shell is about this tall.

BELT: Were you trained to shoot on that?

CRONAN: Oh, yes.

BELT: You were. So everybody on that crew could shoot it?

CRONAN: Well, you were assigned, yeah.

BELT: Everybody was trained?

CRONAN: Essentially.

BELT: Because that's the only way to protect yourself, right?

CRONAN: Yeah. If you were injured or killed, somebody else could jump in.

BELT: So that could take a plane down?

CRONAN: Oh, in a heartbeat. Yeah. And, to my knowledge, all the crew members were trained, even on shore. We went through training on the guns, itself.

BELT: OK. So, what happens after this point? What's going on after the convoy started? Where are you going?

CRONAN: Again, we didn't really know.

BELT: You didn't know?

CRONAN: No, orders were always sealed until you got underway. They had a saying, in World War II, and it was all over the place. And it was, "Loose lips sink ships." You know. And you were forbidden to talk.

BELT: When did you find out where you were going?

CRONAN: When we're underway.

BELT: Does the captain make an announcement?

CRONAN: Yeah, over the PA [*public announcement*].

BELT: And, so, you are going -- Where are you going?

CRONAN: We went to Pearl Harbor.

BELT: Oh, you're going to Pearl Harbor now.

CRONAN: First, from San Diego.

BELT: To Pearl Harbor.

CRONAN: Oh, we had picked up Marines, I think it was the First Division Marines, anyway, a contingent of Marines, and took them with us.

BELT: OK. So you're, what happens on your, what happens when you get to Pearl Harbor? What's that like? I mean, that's a whole new world.

CRONAN: It was, indeed. And, I've been in Pearl Harbor a number of times.

BELT: Did you go by the [USS] Arizona? Do you remember that? Going into the harbor?

CRONAN: Yes, we saw, we saw, course, that had happened December 7th, 1941. But, at that time, you know, the Arizona, the only thing was some of the superstructure, and they cut that off.

BELT: Did they make you salute the Arizona at all? They didn't start that tradition, yet?

CRONAN: And you are so involved and focused on what you have to do. Anyway, all of the -- We left there, by way of some of the islands, that you've heard about, over the years, and we went to the Philippines.

BELT: From Pearl Harbor? OK, from Pearl Harbor, did you unload everything?

CRONAN: No, we still had troops aboard, and equipment.

BELT: Oh, so you didn't unload anything? You just stopped there?

CRONAN: We might have transferred some of the men off, you know, that happens. But, the Japanese were still pretty firmly entrenched in the Philippines. They were controlling most of it, as a matter of fact. We went in to Leyte, the Philippines, and saw

some action there. It was our first action.

BELT: What do you mean by action?

CRONAN: Aircraft kamikaze pilots. Japanese planes that --

BELT: You saw them?

CRONAN: They were after all the ships that came in. They were trying to sink us all.

BELT: So, are they firing at you ship? At the convoy? They are firing at the convoy?

CRONAN: No, by this time, there was some air cover, too, because we were right there in the Philippines. Out in the open waters, if you had a destroyer escort with you, you were pretty well protected. Oh, well, we weren't helpless.

BELT: Did your ship fire at the planes?

CRONAN: Oh sure.

BELT: Oh, you did fire. Did you, did the airplane go down, did you hit it?

CRONAN: There were a number of planes. You'd almost have to see it.

BELT: So several planes were firing on the ships?

CRONAN: You know, they were trying to sink the ships.

BELT: Right. How many planes do you think were up there?

CRONAN: It was hard to count.

BELT: Oh, there was that many? And, they are flying around, and they weren't dropping bombs, they were just --?

CRONAN: They were strafe shooting, you know. And, the Japanese, by this time, they had developed what you might call their terrorist group, nowadays. They had what they called kamikaze pilots. They were one way. Dedicated.

BELT: Suicide. Did they hurt any of our ships in the convoy?

CRONAN: No, not our immediate convoy, I think we, pretty much --

BELT: But not your immediate convoy?

CRONAN: No, but there were a lot of ships sunk.

BELT: But, you got some of their planes down?

CRONAN: Oh yeah,

BELT: What did you think of this?

CRONAN: The adrenaline flows pretty strong.

BELT: Yeah, was this a matter of just a couple hours? Or a couple of days?

CRONAN: No, no. We were there, I guess --

BELT: With the Japanese kamikaze?

CRONAN: We were there at different points, because we would beach, and unload, and then maybe pick up some and take them to another -- That was the purpose of the LSTs. An interesting aside, has to do with the Philippines. We went in to unload the equipment and men. We had, there was an Army colonel, he outranked our skipper, although the skipper was the captain of the ship, but, in deference to a more senior officer. But, anyway, he apparently had read, or watched, too much of MacArthur [*General Douglas MacArthur*]. You know, you'd see MacArthur, always neat as a bandwagon, wading ashore, about six or seven inches of water, you know. Well, anyway, we were, there was what they called a beach master on shore, and he would direct each ship to come in at a certain point. You know, you had LSTs lined up like ducks and crows. Unloading. So, you didn't just go in where you wanted to go, you'd go in a certain place. They also told you at what speed to go in. So, they ordered us in at one-third speed, and what you'd do, these ships had what they called a stern anchor. And there's 900 feet of cable on that. And, at a given signal from the bridge, when you are going into the beach, the order would come out, "Stern anchor away." Drop your

anchor, in other words. Well, we're going in there, and you can envision these humongous doors, open, like this. Now the ramp is still tight, but the water is just boiling. And you hit the beach, drop the ramp. And there was about three or four feet of water.[unclear]. And the colonel says, you can bring your ship in. So, with that thought, you gotta pull the stern anchor, and then with your tremendous powerful engines, they weren't fast, but they were very powerful, backing up, and with the anchor pulling. And the idea was, once you hit the beach, loaded, and you emptied your stuff, your ship got lighter. And so, with the stern anchor and engines, pull yourself out.

BELT: Oh, of course, back out. Sure, yeah.

CRONAN: Well, we were able to get off. And the skipper requested permission to come in at a higher rate of speed. So, they okayed two-thirds speed. You had to back way off again, and came in again. And, by the way, I was up here, this was my normal station.

BELT: In the front of the ship?

CRONAN: Right up there. I was forward lookout.

BELT: The gun turret in the front?

CRONAN: That's where I spent many, many hours. Anyway, I was watching this whole scene, and then he okayed two-thirds. And, we came in, hit the beach, dropped the ramp, and it was about two feet of water. So, this is the second time, now. And, so, the skipper said, "Let me bring my ship in." And the beach master says OK. So, we back off about a mile.

BELT: This is the third time?

CRONAN: Third time. And he ordered flank speed. A flank is everything you've got. As much as it'll, big, powerful diesel engines. Anyway, the stern anchor detail, which is probably five or six men and one officer, who was in charge of it. And he had the headsets on, and when he got the signal from the main officer, he would pass it on. Well, on this third go in, for some strange reason, he must have perceived that he'd gotten the order, and he gave the order to drop the stern anchor. Now, the cable is not attached, it is a [unclear] tension . . . But, anyway, this thing is whipping out there. And,

in the meantime, the order comes down, with a good bit of [unclear] from the bridge, "Stern anchor, away the anchor." And, this officer, he was a heck of nice guy, he said, "Anchor away, sir." And, periodically they would say, "Stern anchor detail, report", and he would tell them how many fathoms the anchor was down. And, he said, "Stern anchor off, sir." And, he said, "How much is it off? And he said, "It's all out, sir." At one point, all of a sudden, the end of the cable went phht. And, we had no stern anchor.

BELT: Oh, you're kidding.

CRONAN: And, we're still headed to the beach.

BELT: Oh, my gosh.

CRONAN: The result was, I'm sure he got a tail twisting on that. But, we hit the beach. And there was a sentry standing up there, and I can still see him standing up there with the rifle over this shoulder, high and dry, and, all of a sudden, he's chest deep in sea water. That water rolled up there, and bowled him right off his feet.

BELT: Didn't hurt the ship?

CRONAN: No, not really. Except that we were locked into that beach like you wouldn't believe. They walked on shore, high and dry. It took a full day, another LST, and a big Navy tug, each one of them at an angle off the stern, two humongous Army bulldozers. They had what they called snorkels. They could actually operate submerged in water, the engine was still running because the intake and exhaust were high enough out of the water that it didn't affect. And everything else was sealed. And these guys were up to their neck in water, and they were trying to dig the sand away. We were stuck in that sand.

BELT: So, how long did it take to get out of there?

CRONAN: The best part of the day.

BELT: Really. With the tugs and the other ship helping you.

CRONAN: One ship would pull us this way, and one would pull us the other way. We just sat there, the suction of the sand was just tremendous. But, eventually they got us out.

BELT: Well, when you went up on the beach, you unloaded equipment, you unloaded people?

CRONAN: We were in the sand so deeply --

BELT: Even with that weight being gone, you still were wedged in. Wow, what if you didn't have to get that equipment off, you'd probably still be there.

CRONAN: Might be, might be speaking Philippino.

BELT: OK. So once you got out of there, where do you go next? Do you remember what island that was, you got wedged on?

CRONAN: It was Leyte.

BELT: Oh, that was Leyte.

CRONAN: And, we went from there, we went down in the New Zealand area. We picked up some First Division Marines. I don't remember the exact details of that. But, we picked them up down there.

BELT: About how many men do you think that was?

CRONAN: Ah --

BELT: 300, again?

CRONAN: We actually loaded what we had there in the Philippines. Picked up --

BELT: A division. So, you talking a thousand men?

CRONAN: No, they were First Division, but not the whole division. It was First Division Marine Corps. And, picked them up, and, again, you know, their equipment and things.

BELT: You picked them up in New Zealand? OK.

CRONAN: Then we left there and we went, we dropped them off somewhere, I don't remember exactly where. Anyway, we, by this time, the last major battle before, what we expected would be the invasion of the Japanese homeland, was Okinawa [*Japan*], and that occurred April 1st, 1945. By this time, we had traversed a lot of the islands there, shoveling men and equipment.

BELT: Between New Zealand and the Philippines?

CRONAN: No, we had left the Philippines, then. Ah, we were there probably a week or ten days.

BELT: So, were you kind of island hopping?

CRONAN: Yeah, we would. Wherever they assigned us, you know, we would actually pick up men, transfer them. Sometimes we would --

BELT: Are you carrying food, also?

CRONAN: Yeah, we had supplies. They had refrigerated equipment for it. Unlike the troops that went ashore, they had to eat rations. I think they called it C-rations in those days, and they weren't very tasty. The MREs [*meals ready to eat*] that they have now are not too unpalatable. But most of the guys didn't like them. They would come aboard the ship, at the dock, or moored to a buoy or something, and you're nice and calm. And they would see these nice clean bunks that we slept in, and that we had hot food and things like that, and they would chide us, "Oh boy, you see those, you really have it easy. You got hot food and dry --." Well, about the time you'd throw the lines off at port anchor and start out. Now, bear in mind they ate with us, the same chow.

BELT: They saw how hard you worked.

CRONAN: Well, they got sick as dogs. They wouldn't trade their fox hole and their C-rations for all your clean bunks and all your hot food, they just would not. It was really funny, and you could almost predict it. They just --

BELT: Were they always pretty nice?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah. You know, we were all there for the same reasons. There was inter-service rivalry, as there probably is today, but it was mostly lighthearted.

BELT: All this time with the ship there was no accidents. I mean, it sounds like the safety was pretty good, aboard ship. Usually carrying that kind of equipment and things, something usually goes wrong.

CRONAN: Well; we had the invasion of Okinawa, which we were involved in from day one. And there were 1500 --

BELT: You mean your ship? Or, what are you talking --? Your ship? OK, are we, am I losing the story?

CRONAN: No, we spent a fair amount of time traversing islands, and picking up men and supplies, and transferring them everywhere. While we were in Hawaii, for example, we picked up a load of asphalt and took it to one of the other islands, where they were doing some repair work, or making runways, you know. Landing strips and things like that.

BELT: Sure, needed supplies.

CRONAN: So, we carried, and went in any direction they assigned us. And, then ultimately, we geared up, and loaded up, and had invasion troops aboard, and we were heading for Okinawa.

BELT: Where did these troops load up at?

CRONAN: I'm not sure I even have that in the records. I think I might. One of the islands. You know if they secured one --

BELT: From the Philippines?

CRONAN: No, we didn't go back to the Philippines, I don't think. There were different islands.

BELT: So, you were assigned to go to Japan?

CRONAN: Yeah, to take part in the invasion of Okinawa. The one, if you remember, the Marines, hefting the flag up, well that was the one just before Okinawa. That was a bad battle. Okinawa was the worst one of all. It was the Japanese, who were really

being -- They were beaten, and they had not given up.

BELT: They didn't surrender.

CRONAN: They were very fanatical. But, at the time we went to Okinawa, we had 1500 ships, and that consisted of battleships, cruisers, aircraft carriers, destroyers.

BELT: 1500? In this a mass convoy?

CRONAN: Yeah, you never saw -- You couldn't look anywhere and not see, just hundreds of ships.

BELT: You had mentioned, and I just wanted to get this on the tape, that you weren't allowed to have cameras, so you couldn't take very many pictures.

CRONAN: No, unfortunately.

BELT: And, if they found a camera, what would they do?

CRONAN: Well, on one of the trips, one of the fellows was fishing off the stern, and he caught a pretty good-sized fish and brought it aboard ship. And he said, "Boy, I wish I had a camera." And one of the guys said, "I've got one." He wasn't supposed to have it. So, he scooted down to his locker and come up on the deck, and this was on the fantail of the ship, back here. Anyway, the superstructure is such that they can go all around, up, down, the forward deck. And, he's taking a picture of this fellow holding the fish up, and all of a sudden, you heard this voice, "I'll take that camera." It was the captain standing up there, and saw it. And what he did was he just pulled the film out and discarded it, and he gave the camera back. So, he didn't get a picture of that fish.

BELT: So, this massive convoy that you were in, I mean, you couldn't take pictures?

CRONAN: Nope, they were all official photographers.

BELT: All right, that must have been some sight to see.

CRONAN: Oh, unbelievable.

BELT: Were you attacked at all?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah, daily.

BELT: Oh, daily! Really.

CRONAN: I spent 55 hours, as did everybody else, on our general quarters, I spent 55 hours in that gun tank.

BELT: And, are you firing?

CRONAN: Oh yes. Are we ever. We knock, it was, it's hard to describe. It was almost like a shooting gallery. These Japanese planes, buzzing and screaming, and there was one -- Our hospital ships were painted white, and they had a big red cross on the side, they were unmistakable ships of mercy. And, by agreement, no nation would attack a hospital ship. The Japanese did.

BELT: They would. Did they sink any of our ships in that convoy, do you remember?

CRONAN: Yes.

BELT: They did hit some of our ships. Was your ship ever hit?

CRONAN: Shrapnel, we had shrapnel.

BELT: You had shrapnel. Was any injuries on your ship?

CRONAN: Beg pardon?

BELT: Any injuries on your ship?

CRONAN: Yeah, from shrapnel.

BELT: Oh, some of the men got hit from the shrapnel. Any die?

CRONAN: No.

BELT: No. OK.

CRONAN: We, this forward gun, we were facing towards the island, of course. And, this Japanese suicide plane was coming in, heading right for the hospital ship, off to our port side. And, fortunately, we were able to knock him out of the water. He crashed into the water, right off our port side.

BELT: Wow.

CRONAN: We'd seen him.

BELT: Did you see the pilot?

CRONAN: Yep, when we hit him, the pilot slumped over. And he just went into the water. But, the sky actually turned black. If you can imagine, 1500 ships, of every type, and I mean some of the big ones, just firing at these aircraft. And the shells, when they burst, of course there was a lot of shrapnel from that. But, it was the most awesome --

BELT: How many days did you fight?

CRONAN: Well, the target was that they were going to try to take the beach from 10 o'clock in the morning, and the Japanese airfield on Okinawa by noon. But, they had the beach. What they did, we went in, the main invasion force, went in on the west side. But there was a fake attack came in from east side earlier, and it drew the Japanese over to that side. It was well planned. And they didn't even actually land, our forces didn't. We pulled them over there, and here we come, you know, on the other side.

BELT: So, you took your ship and went right on the beach, and unloaded?

CRONAN: Oh, yeah, and dropped the ramp.

BELT: When you dropped the ramp, were you being fired on?

CRONAN: Oh, there was firing always.

BELT: Constantly?

CRONAN: Constantly. And I don't know how many [unclear]. It decimated the Japanese. It destroyed their ability to fight beyond that.

BELT: How long were you on that beach, to unload?

CRONAN: I think probably a day and a half.

BELT: Oh, you stayed on that beach in Okinawa a day and a half?

CRONAN: Oh, we were there longer than that, but when we unloaded then we backed off and dropped the anchor and stayed.

BELT: So, all the ships are coming in and unloading all about the same time?

CRONAN: You would back off when you were done. And one of our sister ships was the LST 882, which was also Coast Guard manned.

BELT: The 882?

CRONAN: It was hit by a Japanese kamikaze on the port side, right about at that position, just above the water line. And, there were Marines sitting in there, all loaded, gear and all. And, they had, like we did, 200 hundred drums of the high octane aviation fuel. The ship burned completely, all the men and everything. They just simply died right where they were sitting.

BELT: How close were they to you and your ship?

CRONAN: They were right -- As a matter of fact, we got their stern, we towed that ship back to Pearl Harbor. After the thing was [unclear]. And we were damaged. We had a, in a storm, it pounded the ship up and down. We were on the beach. And when you are on the beach, you keep your engines chugging forward to keep you snugged up on the beach, so you don't drift off. And it pounded the hull up on the port side. Shafts about that big and about ten, twelve inches in diameter, they drove each of the humongous powers. It pushed the supports up, and it buckled one, but it was still turning, and it caused, unfortunately, it set it on fire. It didn't burn the ship, but the grease and the [unclear]. And, so what the engineering staff did, they went and cut the structure down, so as to let the shaft drop. You couldn't do anything about the hull. And, so we were crippled, but we still were in operation.

BELT: Was this scary for you? I mean, what are you thinking? That your ship is

crippled?

CRONAN: I don't think you have time to --

BELT: You didn't think you were going to sink?

CRONAN: No, no, no. We weren't in danger of sinking. You never knew when a submarine might pop a torpedo into you.

BELT: So, they give you the orders to take this other ship back to Pearl Harbor?

CRONAN: We towed it to Pearl Harbor, and, by the way, they salvaged that ship. It was so totally destroyed, we put a crew of about ten, twelve men on it, of our crew, aboard the ship, and they had evacuated all of that crew off. I guess dispersed among others. They actually built an outhouse, if you will, over the stern of the ship. There was no power of any kind aboard the ship. And, our cooks fixed food for them, so they could last a little longer. Because they were on a towline. We towed them. From Okinawa to Pearl Harbor was probably, we were crippled, so we were not capable of doing --

BELT: So, how many in your convoy going back together? Just you and that ship going back? And you are going back to Pearl Harbor?

CRONAN: And, of course, we are damaged, too.

BELT: How long is the trip? Do you remember how long the trip would take?

CRONAN: Well, it was at reduced speed, so it was probably at least half again as long as it normally would take. It was probably a week, ten days.

BELT: Do you ever have nightmares about that fight?

CRONAN: Nope. I dream. There isn't a night that goes by that I don't dream. But, I probably killed more Japanese after I got home from the war, than I saw. In my dreams. And they were pretty horrendous. One of them --

BELT: So, you did have nightmares?

CRONAN: I guess you could call them that. They were just terrible dreams, that you'd wake up shaking. One dream that we were under attack by Japanese planes and all of our ammunition was locked up in the ammo lockers, and nobody had the keys to the locker. And we were trying to literally tear the steel decking up, and you can't do that. Kind of a wild time. But, as I say, we were fortunate, and I don't recall. I don't know, you draw from inner strength. I don't recall ever being afraid to the point where I couldn't --

BELT: So, you didn't lose anyone aboard your ship, then?

CRONAN: Um, no,

BELT: I mean, a battle like that.

CRONAN: No, we were lucky. Now, the 882, some of their crew were lost.

BELT: Was that the only one that was damaged, the 882?

CRONAN: Oh, no, no, there were some that were totally sunk.

BELT: Oh, OK

CRONAN: Maybe they would get what they could off of it, the crew and some of the supplies, if possible, and transfer them to other ships. But, actually, we dominated that, even though the Japanese got some licks in.

BELT: Dominated the battle?

CRONAN: And, they, they really had lost the war even before that, but they had a lot of fight in them. And, you know, they had a lot of holes, like tunnels, and they fought from the tunnels. And there were some terrible scenes, the Marines used flame throwers. They would actually just fire them into the tunnels. And what they were allowed to take pictures of, later on in the [unclear].

BELT: Did you see, you didn't see this?

CRONAN: No, I was on board ship. But, when I was on the mid to four watch [*midnight to four a.m.*], it was 12 o'clock, up on the bridge, and the same officer that

anchored way too soon, he was the OD [*Officer of the Day*], at that time. And I was watching, and I saw this plane coming from the north to the south, over the island, and we were anchored a short way out. And I was looking through binoculars.

BELT: And, this is the Philippines you are talking about?

CRONAN: No, this is Okinawa. This is after the horrendous --

BELT: OK, after the battle.

CRONAN: Yeah, but there was still a whole bunch of Marines fighting on shore. And I saw this plane, and it's running lights were flashing. You know, like this. And I watched it, and I said, "Sir, take a look at that plane, that looks like a Japanese plane." And he took the binoculars and peered at it, and he said, "Nah, that wouldn't be Japanese. They got the lights on." He hadn't any more than said that, and here was a Japanese plane that dropped a bomb on an ammunition dump, and it felt like the 4th of July. It was shot down. But, it was a Japanese plane.

BELT: Wow.

CRONAN: I wasn't positive. You know, we were told --

BELT: But, they don't normally have their lights on.

CRONAN: No, and that was one of the ploys that this guy used. And, he almost got away with it. Except when he dropped the bombs.

BELT: Do you ever keep in contact with any of your crew from that ship?

CRONAN: We are, I don't know, you could probably answer it better than I. The veterans that are dying at the rate of, what, a thousand a month, or something like that, the World War II Veterans. Yeah, we -- Matter of fact, here are some of the pictures of some of the --

BELT: So, you had a reunion for this ship, only?

CRONAN: Yeah, my wife and I went to a number of the reunions. By the way, this is what they call the Sunday flag. It was flown aboard ship when you report. I know you

don't want to count them, but there's only 48 stars on that particular flag.

BELT: Why is that?

CRONAN: Because Hawaii and Alaska were not states.

BELT: Oh, yeah, that's right.

CRONAN: And they are now. But we still had that flag.

BELT: You were going to tell me about this. You brought to me a strange looking wooden carving.

CRONAN: It's a flying fish.

BELT: It's a flying fish. OK.

CRONAN: And the story that goes with that has to do with a gentlemen in one of these pictures, here. But, one beautiful, bright, sunny morning we were, and I don't remember exactly where we were heading, or anything else at the time --

[Interview ends in mid-conversation]

END TAPE 1 SIDE B