

Interview with Mr. Frank R. Feduik, World War II corpsman, present at Omaha Beach on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Elmhurst, PA, 26 January 1994.

You were born in Scranton.

Yes I was, January 3, 1925. I just turned 69 years of age.

You grew up here and then joined the Navy. How did that all come about?

I graduated from high school in June of '42 and enlisted in the Navy, something I always wanted to do. I knew that in the Navy I'd always have a bed to sleep in at night. As soon as I turned 17 I enlisted but my mother and father wouldn't sign so I had to wait until I was 18 before I was able to join in January 1943. And I never regretted it. It was a good life but I was glad to get out too.

Where did you enlist?

Right here in Scranton. I took my secondary physical in Philadelphia at the recruiting station and then was assigned to a new boot camp in Sampson, NY. That alone was an experience because it was out in the middle of nowhere, frozen Lake Seneca. But we took boat drills. You had to knock the ice down to take a boat drill. It was something different. Of course, when you're young, it's an adventure. You didn't care. You just went ahead and did it.

How old was the boot camp?

I think it was about 3 months old. Then I was amazed when I was told I was going to Portsmouth, VA, to pharmacist's mate school. "Why me," I asked. I never had any medical training and didn't care about it. But I think they went from A-D and E-G and assigned us to various schools. And that's how we were selected, believe it or not. I can only say one thing. Six weeks of training doesn't give you much experience in anything. Actually it was more giving each other needles, how to apply tourniquets, things like that.

Did you learn anatomy?

No. Nothing. Just first aid period. We kind of joked about it. What are we supposed to do after we get out of here? But it didn't take us long to find out.

Where did you go from Portsmouth?

I went to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital for a short time. It

was very short. But I remember distinctly going to a psycho ward where there were a lot of Guadalcanal veterans. Boy, that was an experience. They were young, very young guys and they were completely gone. They were in another world; their eyes seemed to be staring somewhere into space. They were tied to their bunks and there were armed guards watching them. You had to go past armed guard at the door to get in there. They wanted us to know what battle fatigue was and how to cope with it. It depressed us. "Wow," I said, "This is what battle does to you?"

Where did you go after Philadelphia?

I believe it was Pamona Naval Air Station at Pleasantville, NJ. From there I went to Pier 92 in New York. It was an embarkation point, and there I picked up the Queen Mary. But I don't know how many troops there were.

This was 1944?

Easter morning, 1944.

What was your impression of this former luxury liner that had been converted to a troop ship?

Everything was done in secrecy. We had no idea what we were going to do. We knew we were leaving for somewhere because they mustered us out as a group. It was Easter morning when we sailed.

What do remember about the crossing?

Believe it or not, it was so congested that I slept in the big empty swimming pool. They utilized all the space they could. It was just a bunch of guys throwing their seabags down and laying on them. We never unpacked our seabags. You just laid your head back on it and slept. We traveled alone because no sub could keep up with us. We just took right off at 35 knots, or whatever it was.

Who was on it with you?

There was Navy, Army, and whatever.

What did they feed you?

I really don't know. I think we were fed twice a day--breakfast at 8 o'clock in the morning and another meal at 8 o'clock at night.

Did you ever get topside to see what was going on?

Never. I never got up topside. We stayed in the swimming pool for 5 days. We had some beautiful crap games, card games. We didn't know where we were going. We landed at the Firth of Clyde in Scotland

5 days after we left New York. And I'll never forget. We were starved. They put us in quonset huts and left us there. We didn't even know what we were doing there. I was put in charge of 33 men and given a slip with all their names. And they all ended with a P. Most of them were from New York. And these guys were complaining. They were hungry. I went to one of the places where I saw people and told them that we had just come over a day ago and had no food. One of the Scottish men said he could take me across the bay where there was a fish and chips place. "How many do you need?," he asked. "Thirty-five." I took another guy and went across with him to the fish and chips place. I was amazed that they wrapped everything in newspaper. By the time we got across the bay and came back, the fish and chips were cold but we never knew it. We just gulped them down.

Who paid for all that fish?

We had a voucher that I signed. Don't ask me who took the voucher. I told them we were U.S. Navy and they accepted it.

We were then assigned to various ships. The group I was with was a tough bunch of guys from New York City--Brooklyn, The Bronx, wherever. And they didn't take baloney from anybody. We got on the ship. It had just come over from Italy. It had been in the invasion of Sicily. It was LST 338. Well, when I saw this thing, I said, "Oh, God. This can't be my ship. It's ugly. What is it?" There was an old saying that if you were assigned to the amphibious fleet in the Navy, you had to have screwed up somewhere. I hadn't done anything wrong and I wondered why I had been assigned to this LST. I spent the rest of my overseas time on that ship.

You had been trained as a pharmacist's mate. Did you have any medical equipment with you?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Just your seabag and personal effects?

That's right.

No weapons, no medical equipment, nothing?

Nothing.

You were getting on an LST and heading somewhere, but you had no idea where.

Exactly.

Where did you meet the ship?

I don't remember if we met the LST in Plymouth, England, Cardiff, Wales, or Southampton. But we were assigned to the ship and we were flotilla 12, Group 36. We were the command ship and we had a doctor aboard, named Dr. [Charles A.] Bream from Pittsburgh. I was introduced to him and shown where my sick bay was, but I still didn't know what I was to do.

What kind of a sick bay was it?

It was about 6 feet by 8 feet and it was mostly for people coming in for a cold, a headache, or whatever they had. There was really nothing on that ship for emergencies from what I could see. Of course, what did I know? I was introduced to another pharmacist's mate who was supposed to get off. He was from New Hampshire. I asked him what my job was and he just told me to stay right there with him. "We're supposed to be the pharmacists' mates on this ship and take care of all these guys." And that was the end of it. There was no other training, no nothing.

You left on the LST on June 4th?

We had already performed maneuvers. We had a bunch of troops put on the ship. We came back from the practice landings, and we were assigned troops. We knew something was going on because they had us sealed. We couldn't get off the ship. Nothing was being said. You could see all these other ships loading up. We knew something was going on but had no idea what it was. Our skipper was an old mustang. His name was [Darrell A.] Stratton, a mean son of a gun. He had been promoted from a seaman to a chief warrant officer, and then made a lieutenant commander during the war. He said, "We're going to France, but we can't tell you where, we can't tell you when. But when we do, good luck." And that was it.

We left on the fourth of June and the water and the Channel were unbelievable. They said it was the worst storm of the century. It was just disaster. There was no way they could land these troops. They were sick. In fact, most of my crew was sick. I was just lucky; I never got seasick. You would not believe it. The ladders were covered with vomit. There was no way you could eat a meal because there was no way your stomach could hold on to it with what you saw. And I felt sorry for these guys. I thought, "These guys have to be unloaded into these LCVs (landing craft vehicles and personnel) and go into battle? There's no way they can fight in this condition."

And so we came back and they postponed it and we left again the following day. And when we did, we left at night.

Were you up on deck during the crossing?

Yes. It was dark. We made sure we always had the English corvettes in sight because they protected us from submarines. The troops had to be fed on the way over. There were two steam barrels aft at the stern of the ship. The troops dipped their mess kits into one barrel of hot water and then into the cold water to rinse them.

What about the weather?

It was a lot calmer than the day before. We carried a big balloon to keep German planes from coming in low and strafing us. because they would get caught in the cables. Every LST had one. We thought it was a joke because it was like announcing to the world, "Here we are under this big dirigible." Later when we got close to the beach, the Germans began shooting at these balloons. They were targets for them. We had been told that if we had to, to cut the cable from the winch. When they started shooting at us, we cut the balloon loose. So did everybody else. You should have seen that bunch of balloons taking off from those LSTs.

General Eisenhower made an announcement to the troops just before the ships left from England. Did they say anything over the loudspeaker about this announcement?

Yes. It was read over our PA system. And I remember getting a pamphlet which had the speech that wished us good luck on our crusade in Europe, but I lost mine. That's how we found out where we were going.

What happened when daylight came the next morning?

We saw flashes. We saw gliders carrying the paratroopers going in. They landed behind the lines. We heard the battleships. I think it was the Arkansas (BB-33) and the Texas (BB-35). It was such a din! They were behind us as we were going in and these shells would sing their way right over the ship. Some of the targets, I would say, were 8 and 10 miles inland. Every once in a while you would hear or see a big explosion way inland and we knew they had hit an ammunition dump or something. It was such a hectic thing, everybody firing this way, beach fire coming at you. They were firing at us from the pillboxes on the beach. Later, I went into one of those pillboxes and you could see that every inch of that beach was covered. I couldn't believe it. How did we land there?

There must have been more ships out there than you had ever seen in your life.

I really don't remember. You were so concerned about your own part that I didn't notice.

With all those shore batteries firing, there must have seen a fair number of splashes and near misses.

Yes. And you would hear the shells coming at you. They sounded like... I don't know how to describe it. You could hear them whirring by and when you saw them hit the water...well if you were in the wrong place, forget about it. Those German '88s were awful. Once you heard them bark and you were still alive, you knew they hadn't gotten you because that shell would be on top of you before the noise got there.

We did get hit by shrapnel every once in awhile. I do remember one incident when we got hit. I don't remember exactly when it happened but it happened during an air raid alert. We didn't know whether the shrapnel came from shore batteries or from enemy planes, or what. I was directly beneath one of the gun mounts trying to set up an aid station under gun number 4, which would have been a 40mm. And as I was coming up the ladder, I heard this noise, and then heard a fellow named Fred Palucci from Jessup, PA, who has since died, say, "Round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows." Evidently, a piece of shrapnel had gotten into the gun mount and wound its way around until it exited. I couldn't imagine how cool he was.

Did you remain topside during the initial landings?

I was topside constantly. I was working the annunciators when we heard the news that we were going in. Even though we were in the area June 6, we actually did not go in to unload until the 8th. At that time I went into Omaha Beach (probably on an LCT [Landing Craft Tank]). There was everything going on, but we went in knocking obstacles over not knowing if they were mined or not.

When you landed, you didn't land right on the beach. You were still in what, 3 feet of water?

Yes. You just could not hit these beaches because of the fortifications. You'd see LCVPs impaled, up in the air. Troops never made it in. The obstacles were just underwater.

Was the tide low or high?

I think it was low because we needed the high tide to get us back out. We got in as close as we could, dropped our ramp, and let everybody go. There was just confusion everywhere. I don't think we hit the right part of the beach. We saw a lot of people completely lost who didn't know where they were. "Where are you from, buddy?" They wouldn't even answer. It was chaos and there was just too much confusion. The beachmasters, who had a tough job, had to go in on

LCVPs. They had to put up a marker. This is for ammunition. This part of the beach is for the tanks to come in. This part of the beach is for the infantry to come in. This section is for the medical people. You couldn't see any of this. You might be a quarter of a mile off your mark, but you had to go in and get your stuff unloaded.

Well, we went into Omaha, and I understand that was the worst part of the invasion. I remember seeing a guy, a sergeant from the First Division, just take charge. Guys just didn't know what to do. He just rounded them up. "Get your cans going and get the hell out of here. We've got to move inland or we'll all be dead." He moved those troops right off that beach and they just kept going. A lot of them had already dug in and were willing to stay there.

Did you get off your LCT at this point?

Yes. We got off.

When you were on the beach, did you see any other Navy corpsmen around?

I didn't see any Navy corpsmen or Navy aid stations. But I did see a lot of Army corpsmen. They had established their aid stations wherever they could. We saw bodies--some were our troops, some were their's. The Graves Registration people were there. We even helped them take dog tags off some of them and pin them on so they wouldn't get lost. I saw people with arms and legs missing, parts of bodies. You just couldn't understand it--guys not even making it to the beach, some of them impaled on iron railings that were in the water. Some were washed ashore. It was complete mayhem, terrible.

Then someone told us, and I don't remember who, "Stay here. You're taking a bunch of wounded back to a hospital ship." I remember the tank deck just being filled with soldiers. We met some kind of a ship, I don't remember what kind it was. We took the men off the elevator and moved them to the top deck and then later hand transferred them to the other ship. If you can imagine two ships bobbing with all this stuff going on and wondering whether this guy is going to slip off the stretcher between the two ships. But that's the way we transferred wounded. Then we went right back to England and got more stuff. We made 60 more trips like that.

Did you treat any of the wounded yourself?

Oh, sure. We were mostly applying tourniquets, giving morphine. When you ran out, you just went and got somebody else's kit and hoped you could find morphine. Then we would mark the patients, what time you had given the morphine because when they were due for the next shot, someone else would see it and give them a shot.

I remember one soldier. He was about 19 or 20. I knew he was in pain so I checked him right out. His leg was missing. He had stepped on a mine right on the beach. He told me he was an Iowa farmer. I gave him a morphine shot and told him he would be okay for a couple of hours and he jumped up and looked at the stump. I don't know where he got the strength, and he grabbed for the stump and he said, "I'm a farmer. What am I going to do?" And I pushed him back and told him he would be okay. He just screamed. He was only 20 years old.

I think we went back to England that night. We went back to France about four or five different times in that same area. We heard the English troops were having a hell of a time. They were just a few miles inland and were getting pushed back to their beach head at Gold Beach.

So we went up the Thames River, loaded up with British troops and went back to Gold Beach. They were just a few miles inland and were getting pushed back. And we got stuck on the beach. Our ship backed off and there we were with the British troops.

Were you armed?

Yes. I had a sidearm and a carbine too. And a medical kit. I began wondering how I was going to get back aboard my ship. I ended up staying on the beach all night. I could see the small arms fire coming right at us. You could see the flashes. I thought, "I'm not a British soldier, I'm a sailor. I want out of here."

Did you get any sleep that night?

I don't think so. The next morning, an LCVP picked us up and took us back to the ship and then we got out of there back to England.

You said earlier that you went up into the German pillboxes. When was that?

It was probably a later trip once the beaches were secured. We unloaded our tanks or whatever we were carrying and had an hour or two. We went up the beach and got into those pillboxes. I was only 18 or 19 at the time but I recall how totally amazed I was. Wow! The fortifications. How long did it take them to build this? How did we ever get in here? The walls were so thick. There were charts all over the place identifying every inch of that beach. The obstacles, the mines--it was all on those charts. As far as warfare was concerned, those Germans had everything. I saw these wooden bullets in the fortifications. They were pink. I didn't know what they were. We picked them up. They were to be used for close combat. They were supposed to shatter when they hit and slivers would fly out. The Germans believed that if they could wound a man instead of

killing him, it would take three or four other men to take care of him.

You had mentioned that on one of the trips going back to England you saw buzz bombs [V-1]. What was that like?

I give so much credit to the English people. Later on I saw what these buzz bombs--these V-1s and V-2s had done to England. I couldn't believe it. It seemed like they knew where every church and every school was so they could demoralize the English people. They were living underground like moles. But their spirits never gave up. They were tough. I've often said that if I had anyone as a backup as far as combat, give me the English. We used to pass through the Pas de Calais region. The white cliffs of Dover were on one side of us and we'd see these buzz bombs coming over. We were told to get rid of them if we could. You could hear them coming. They sounded like an old Model T. We got one from the ship. It was really something. We let out a big roar.

Your LST had both 20mm and 40mm guns.

The 40s were the ones that got the buzz bomb. You'd see them coming and kind of lead them.

I want to tell you about one of our own airplanes. It was one of the spotter planes. We were on the beach. I can't tell you what day or hour it was of the invasion. It seemed that when one ship would open fire at aircraft, everybody in the harbor opened up. And whoever was in the sky had no chance, friend or foe. I remember this one unidentified plane coming in on the radar and some ship, it wasn't us, opened fire with their 40mm guns. Every third or fourth round was a tracer. This poor plane just did everything to let them know that it was friendly--trying to get out of the line of fire. But they were just relentless and they finally got him. It turned out to be one of ours. And we were so dismayed. He was just spotting for the troops. It always amazed me that some poor guy up there doing his job lost his life. Why did it happen? It was just mass confusion.

I understand that at one point your LST went up the Seine River to rescue some French underground troops. What was that all about?

Our skipper, LCDR Stratton, who I told you about, volunteered for everything. I don't care what it was. There are two mouths of the Seine and we were told to go up the left channel under the cover of darkness. We didn't know how deep the channel was and had been told that the channel was mined. We poked our way up without a light and when we got to a certain area, we got a signal. There was just

a mess of French underground soldiers who, evidently, had been fighting for years. They were starved, unshaven, and wearing disheveled clothes. They were the FFI, the French Forces of the Interior. We picked them up and got out of there.

How soon after the original D-Day landings did this happen?

I'm not certain, perhaps several weeks later. I don't even recall what we did with them.

How many corpsmen besides yourself were on your LST?

Just myself and another corpsman and Dr. Bream. And the reason we had a doc on the ship was that we were flotilla command group 36 so we would have a doctor. I think there was one doctor for every three ships in the convoy.

How did the three of you get along?

It seemed that we really didn't have much to do with each other. Everybody just had their job and they did it. I don't remember going to the doc and asking him anything. The only communication I had with Dr. Bream was the time we were ready to go back to the United States. He said, "Frank, I can give you a chief petty officer's rating if you stay in England after the war is over." I said, "Doc, I'm going back with the ship. I'll stay a second class. I'm happy the way I am. I want to get out of here."

On one of your runs from England to France, you once talked about transporting snow weasels. What were they?

It was a comical thing. We were called the workhorse of the amphibious fleet because we had made more channel crossings than any of the other LSTs. We knew that something was going very badly because we were in port and were told to go to these hards--cobblestone ramps. They were built specifically for LSTs to go in and beach themselves in England to load up.

Do you remember what town they were in?

I would say it was Plymouth or Portsmouth. We happened to load up with these strange little tanks called snow weasels. We had no idea what they were for. We were told that our troops were being overrun at the Battle of the Bulge, as it was called later on. The Germans had infiltrated our lines and we had to get those snow weasels over there. We dashed across the channel at night and we traveled alone. These trips usually took 8 hours. We arrived the next morning. There was always a red alert on the beach because you didn't know when the planes were going to come in even though the German

Luftwaffe was just about through by then. The skipper hollered over the PA system. "Open up the doors and get those tanks off. I've got a bunch of French soldiers getting on and they're going to take these out of here. We gotta get off this beach." The French soldiers didn't know what to do. They got aboard and he kept hollering, "Let's go." We would get the elevator and drop them down and they'd go in 3 or 4 feet of water because we never really had a dry spot to land in. I jumped into one of the first ones. There were some controls, one for the left tread, one for the right tread. I just hit the button, started it and away I went. I don't think I got a hundred yards up the beach when I ran out of fuel. At least, I think I ran out of fuel. Well, everybody thought where I stopped must be the bivouac area where we were supposed to leave them so they stopped too. We came back to the ship and started laughing. We didn't know if anybody came and picked them up. It was such a crazy thing--such chaos. It was funny things like that that made you laugh later on.

I understand you sometimes brought back German prisoners.

Yes. One of my best friends, who backed out of the Navy when I took my physical, was named Andy Banko. We had said that when the war was over we would tie on a jag and have a helluva good time when we got back. After I got in the Navy, I didn't hear from him for about a year. And then I got a letter from him. He was over in Italy and he said something about going to take some mountain called Monte Cassino. I was elated that I had heard from him. He was a PFC in the infantry. I wrote him back reminding him of how we would celebrate once the war was over. At that time, I got a mail pickup in France. I got my letter back with deceased stamped on the back, killed in action.

At that time we had a bunch of German troops we were taking back to England. One of my jobs was to make sure the lister bags had water for these troops because we still had to treat them humanely. But to me, right then, they weren't human. Here my best buddy had just been killed. We had three or four of our men with machine guns facing the prisoners on the tank deck just in case they started an uprising. The prisoners were arrogant, very arrogant. I got in between them and I'm looking at these guys and thinking, "I'm giving you guys water and you just killed my buddy?" And me with a sidearm. It took everything not to do something. I had no sympathy for them because I knew what they had done.

But I ended up elated. Once we brought them to England and we beached our ship, the English people and soldiers were waiting on both sides. I was so happy to see this. When we opened our doors

and dropped the ramp we told them, "Mach Schnell, get out of here." They started walking up the ramp and as they hit the shore, these English soldiers and civilians began whacking at them with sticks and doing a good job on them. It helped me. I was up on top of the ship watching them and saying, "Give it to them."

How many trips did you make carrying POWs?

It had to be a dozen.

How many would there be at a time?

The tank deck would be loaded. I don't recall how many people the tank deck would hold. I would say hundreds at a shot. They were well guarded by guys with machine guns standing on a parapet. These prisoners were tough, hardened soldiers. I don't know where we got them from. Later on, we started getting what they called the German home army and Russians. I'm Ukrainian and I could understand a little Russian and I could hear some of them talking, plotting about how to do different things, how to make up stories to get something to eat. I'd be listening and would say, to them--if I could find one who spoke broken English--"Why did you fight against us? You're Russian." And they said, "The Germans were behind us, you were in front of us, and they used us like a buffer. We couldn't back up because if we did, they'd shoot us. If we went ahead, the Americans would shoot us." I knew it wasn't the truth.

These were probably the Ukrainians.

Russians, Ukrainians, right. I forget what they called them, a home army or something.

This, then, was later on.

Yes, near the end of the war.

What other cargoes did you carry besides tanks, troops, snow weasels, and POWs?

It's ironic, considering that I spent the rest of my career working for the railroad. One of our jobs was to carry railroad cars. We had rails welded onto the tank deck of the ship. We pulled up to the hards in England and railroad engines and cars were wheeled right onto our ship. We also had special hards in Cherbourg and Le Havre which had rails. We would go in and connect to these rails. The cars were then pulled by an engine right off our ship as if it was part of a rail transportation system. It was fantastic.

Before I started running the tape, you mentioned an incident

involving a cigarette. What was that about?

On one of our crossings, we had gotten an order. A German wolfpack--a bunch of submarines--was supposed to be in the Channel because a German U-boat had just sunk a transport with a group of American army nurses aboard. It happened near Cherbourg, right inside the breakwater. They had told us to go back to England to get some more nurses because they needed them badly. We went, got nurses, and were heading back. It was on one of these trips that the cigarette incident happened. When we crossed the Channel, we were traveling by ourselves with another LST. We had no escort and our top speed was 8 knots; you're not going very fast and make a good target. Everybody had to be on alert. Each man depends on the other on a small ship. Everyone had to do his job.

We were traveling at night and noticed a glow. Since I had my phones on I could hear the crackling. "What is that," someone said. "I don't know, it looks like its around gun number 6," which was a 40mm. Evidently, one of the guys had lit up a cigarette--unconsciously, I don't know. But someone caught it and we took care of that incident our own way. We relied on each other; we had to. This guy endangered the ship and every one of our lives for a lousy cigarette.

So, you really worked him over.

It was done quietly, without any fanfare. The officers must have heard about it, but they never said a word.

There was another incident I remember. We had a guy from, I believe, West Virginia and he kept saying, "I've got to get off this ship. I'm going crazy." We used to sleep in three rows in our cots and at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning I heard screaming going on, yelling. We had little blue battle lights at the end of our bunks. That was the only means of lighting at night. I could see someone running around chasing something. What was going on? Someone yelled that so and so had gone crazy and was running around with a knife. It turned out to be the guy from West Virginia. Evidently, he had gone berserk. He didn't harm anybody and they disarmed him. About 3 or 4 months later, one of his friends got a letter from him. He had gotten a Section 8 and then got a beautiful job back in the U.S in a defense factory working all kinds of overtime. We were the guys who were nuts. That was something I always remembered.

You said earlier that you were at the annunciators. What was a corpsman doing up there?

You were assigned different places during battle stations [general quarters]. You could be at the annunciators or anywhere

they wanted you.

Did you have battle dressing stations on the LST?

Yes, two up forward.

So, as a corpsman, you had other jobs.

Oh, yes. We were supposed to do other things. There was nothing unusual about being assigned to a 20mm gun. You were amidships, strapped into this thing. You have one loader and you stay there. I was assigned to a 20mm. There was a magazine and I was the loader. If they needed you to take care of casualties, you did that. If not, they would think nothing of telling us to help out on the guns.

When you were at the annunciators, what was your job?

Listen for the captain's orders. I had earphones. I would be told, "Flank speed ahead, one-third behind, one-third forward. The skipper was right above me on the conning tower. He would relay his orders to me. I had to repeat each order back to him. If he said, "All ahead one-third," I would say, "All ahead one-third, sir."

As a corpsman, then, you were running the ship.

I often thought that they must have known I had some brains because they wouldn't have put me in there. On a small ship, you do about everything. I remember being sent aft to what we called emergency steering. Many times when your steering went bad you steered from the rear of the ship. You were there with another man. All the orders were relayed to you aft. Nobody wanted to go aft because that's the only place a torpedo could hit you. The LST had a 12-foot draft and up forward it was between 7 and 8. I believe a torpedo had to have at least 10 or 12 feet of water to hit the understructure of the ship. When we would travel in convoy under a submarine alert it seemed that the ship was front-heavy. Everybody would be up forward even if they didn't belong there. We'd say, "What are you doing up here?" We used to feel sorry for the guys who were aft on emergency steering. Once a torpedo hit an LST you were done, forget it.

Did you ever run into any of those German E-boats?

Oh, yes. They were dangerous like our PTs. They would come in out of the fog. You would hear them, not see them. They'd throw their fish [torpedoes] at you and away they'd go. I think they put our PT boats to shame.

Did you ever see them launch torpedoes?

No. I never saw that but occasionally we would get a report, "Wake, 16 degrees forward on port side." Then you would see this little wake as the fish went by and wonder where it come from?

Could you hear their engines?

Yes, they were very loud. Years later when I worked for the railroad, I was talking with an engineer I had just met named Bob Malott. His name sounded familiar. I asked him if he had a son named Bob Malott because I had graduated from Tech High School with a guy by that name. He said he had a son but that he had been killed in the Navy. I told him I had also been in the Navy. I asked him what kind of ship he had been on and he said an LST. I told him that I was on an LST too. He stopped the engine and said, "We never knew what happened to my son. Can you tell me?" I asked him what number the LST was. Well that ship had gone out pre-invasion in the fog and some German E-boats sunk it. There were very few survivors. They went out ahead of us and that's the group they hit.¹ That guy was so glad to finally hear what happened. He had never gotten an explanation from the Navy.

Did you see it happen? Were you participating in the same exercises?

No, we didn't see it happen because of the fog, but we heard on the radio right away that it happened. Our group was the next to go in for that maneuver. They never knew what hit them. Those E-boats came in out of the fog, whacked hell out of them and that was it.

It really is a small world.

Yes. In fact, I remember another incident. I was on the beach back in France and I heard someone yell, "Hey Duker." I hadn't heard that name since I was in high school. I turned around and here comes this GI running toward me. Here was a guy named Walsh from my hometown that I could not stomach when I was going to high school; we hated each other. We were always fighting. Yet we hugged each other like he was my best buddy.

¹ On the night of 28 April 1944 nine German E-boats came out of the fog off Slapton Sands near the Devon coast where the Allies were practicing landings. Two of the LSTs were sunk with the loss of 700 servicemen.

You said earlier that Dr. Bream asked you to stay in England after V-E day.

Periodically you could get promoted, but you had to take a test. Really, it wasn't much of a test because you knew what they would ask. But it gave you an opportunity to move up the ladder. If they needed a second class pharmacist's mate and you were a third class, they might promote you to keep you on the ship. Bream had told me he would put me in for a chief petty officer but that I would have to leave the ship. I said, "Doc, I'm going home. I want out of here. I'm not leaving this ship" Our skipper had told us that we were going to hear a lot of scuttlebutt about when we were going back to the states. But he went on to tell us not to believe any of it. "When the day comes when we are told to go back, and we are going to be the first ship because we were here the longest, I will let you know," he told us. It was on a calm day, I remember, when the loudspeaker came on. "Now hear this, this is your commanding officer, LCDR Stratton. Gentlemen, we are going back home." There was complete silence. You'd figure everyone would be jumping up and down. Nothing. We were just glad to get out of there.

We went to Belfast, Ireland to load up with supplies and it took us 23 days to get home. Don't ever cross the North Atlantic in an LST. Those waves were 60 or 70 feet high. You'd be on top of the world and all of a sudden you would come crashing down. We couldn't sleep without tying ourselves into our bunks. A lot of time, it seemed that we were losing ground. Often we would lose sight of the convoy because the waves and swells were so high. I would stand on the stern and watch the front end of the ship bend. I wondered why it didn't crack. How could metal like this be so giving? I could look and see the ocean below and then you would be in a swell and see the water above you. I still marvel at how that LST was designed. That thing had a flat bottom. There was no prow whatsoever. We just pushed the water ahead of us.

I remember pulling into Norfolk, VA. They had all these ships with water spouting and everything. They told us that the guys who were to stay on the ship were going to go home first for a 30-day leave. The guys who had 18 or more months overseas were going to get second leave and be transferred off the ship. We got second leave. We went to New Orleans. That's where the guys who had been on leave were to relieve us. When I got home on leave, I found that I had been assigned to another ship, an LCI, landing craft infantry.

This wasn't good.

No. No. No. I was supposed to pick up the ship in Norfolk, VA. There had been rumors about the invasion of Japan. But not an

LCI. You would be there right at the first crack of that gun--at H-hour minus one. I just didn't want to go back. I was on the bus to go from Philadelphia to Norfolk, when the [atomic] bomb was dropped. I knew the war was over. And all my orders were canceled. I got on the ship but never went to the Pacific. At that time I had enough points to get out. They assigned me to Lido Beach, LI, and from there I went home.

I didn't like the amphibians at the beginning but I was proud I served on an LST. It was an experience. I was a young kid and everything was an adventure to me. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.