

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, September 19, 2017, at the home of Stanley Richard Williams. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Mr. Williams who served in the United States Navy and is a veteran of World War II. Mr. Williams learned of the Veterans' History Project through a mutual friend, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

Wheeling, West Virginia, May 11, 1926.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a bricklayer; my mother was an in-home – homemaker.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I have one sister and one brother. I'm the only one left standing.

Were either of your siblings in the service?

My brother was in the service.

Also in World War II?

Army, I think – no, no, probably, uh, he was post Korean, but I don't know exactly.

What did you do before entering the service?

Went to school.

Did you complete high school?

Yes.

That was unusual for that time period in 1940.

My mother was responsible for that. She – I was going to enlist even earlier, but she insisted I had to finish that last year.

When did you enlist, do you remember?

Los Angeles – the official entrance into the Navy was May 10, 1944.

So you were 18 years old –

No, I was just a day before 18 – if I had been 18 I'd have to wait for the draft.

So you enlisted. Did you go in with any of your buddies – or what caused you to enlist?

No, no, it was just me.

Why did you choose the Navy?

I had to, for whatever reason, I had no idea why. But despite the fact that I had never seen the ocean before that, for some reason I had to go into the Navy. It was a deliberate choice.

Did you have any role models – any uncles or relatives in the Navy?

No.

How was your departure for training camp – where did you enlist?

In Los Angeles.

Were you living in Los Angeles?

No, I was actually living in Fontana, California at the time, 60 miles east of Los Angeles.

So your family moved to Los Angeles?

We moved to – my father was moved to Southern California to help build a steel mill for Henry J. Kaiser.

So you were living in Fontana but you enlisted in Los Angeles?

Yeah.

How was your departure for training camp – where did you have basic training?

San Diego.

How did you get to San Diego, by bus, train?

By Navy bus – I think it was driven by a crazy man too.

What did your basic training consist of? Your daily routine?

I had a good training session. I was complimented on my participation in practically everything, but when I had my interview to strike for whatever I was going to do, they had me already scheduled because each of the titles that I would put down, they were asking me, would you rather be a Signalman? And when that was asked of me the third time, I said I think you know something that I don't. And it turned out that in my initial application I put down that I knew both Morse Code and Semaphore, and the Petty Officer said we don't get many through here in boot camp that know both of them. So that set my complete momentum.

Still, could you describe a day of basic training – what did you have to do –

I'll be frank with you, that's irrelevant. If they don't have 150,000 – my military morning and set particularly in boot camp was regimented; it was set.

Well, that's what I'm trying to ascertain. What was it set at – what did you do?

We want your story –

Quite frankly, anybody going through this for the Library of congress is just gonna skip through that because it's – every military day is pretty much preset – period. So if I say 5 a.m., 6 a.m. – no, it means nothing –

Okay. Did you have classroom training during this time?

I had classes in boot camp, yes.

Was it training in further your Morse Code or the Signal Corps?

Not literally there because that was in the process of being determined. But, put this down – that enabled me to be sent immediately to Pearl Harbor to go through Admiral Nimitz's private signal school. And that allowed me, if I made it through that school, I was going to be one of the best of that rate in the Navy.

How long were you in boot camp before you were sent to specialized training?

As fast as they could get me there.

Which is what, a couple of weeks?

It took about a month, I guess, maybe less, three weeks.

Did you go by ship to Pearl Harbor?

Oh, yeah.

Do you remember if it was a regular troop ship or –

It was just simply a transport and I wouldn't have any idea – whatever.

How did you find the overseas passage – encounter rough seas?

Never had any trouble with seas but I've been through every conceivable rough sea you can name including typhoon, so --

You got to Pearl Harbor – what happened when you got there?

It was a regimented detailed criteria where we were trained to augment our skills in both Morse Code and Semaphore.

So you had continued classroom training.

Yes.

And how long did that last?

I think it was six weeks.

At the end of that period, what happened?

We had a choice. Typically, we went on Admiral Nimitz's Flag Staff where we stood watch on SOPA Tower.

What do those initials stand for –

That means Senior Officer Present Afloat.

What was your job there? What did you have to do?

To talk to or receive messages from incoming and outgoing traffic.

Was this American or –

This was in Pearl Harbor; it better be American.

Well, I don't know, maybe you got Japanese signals too –

How did you adapt to military life? Now you've been in a couple of months, how did you adapt to the barracks, social life, food, etc.

As far as that, I've never had any trouble. Of course I've had trouble in other places, but technically speaking I never had any trouble.

At the age of 18, how did you know Morse Code – where did you study it?

From Scouts –

Boy Scouts?

Now, here's the funny thing. I learned Morse code in order to be able to talk to by letter to my best friend, who was in a different homeroom. Of course if we gave this – if I gave my letter to a teacher knowing that he was going to come into the next class, you knew that she was going to read it. Well, if I wrote your name in Semaphore, which I can still do, you see why it was completely unintelligible to anybody else.

I see. Well, it's like Gregg shorthand; unless you know how to read it, no one else is able to do so. S-e-m-a-p-h-o-r-e – correct spelling.

Did you stay at Pearl Harbor? What happened after your six weeks of classes?

I told you, after the six weeks we went on his staff.

What did that entail

He had to move his headquarters to Guam and as a consequence he had to cut his staff in half. And since we were the latest, we were also the ones that were released. I was assigned to a mortar ship.

What was the name of that ship?

Nothing, it had three numbers #352; that's what they were.

What were your duties on that ship?

Strictly as a Signalman; I was the head signalman for that ship.

Does that involve sitting at a teletype or sitting at a machine – what does that involve; I'm not familiar with that.

I was always on the bridge and being a signalman you were visual communication – not radio, not computer – in fact, computer wasn't even there –

But did you work with flags or anything?

If I, like for instance, (indicating) – hand signals, semaphore is hand signaling.

Oh, hand signals, I see.

You don't need to put that down – everybody knows what semaphore is.

How about your children and grandchildren who may read this one day – will they know what semaphore is – for uninitiated people like me who are not familiar with that type of communication, especially younger people, it needs to be explained.

Oh, okay, I see – I would just say visual communication.

That's good. Did you continue doing that throughout the war? How long were you in the Navy?

Two years.

So you were in until the war ended.

Oh, yes.

Where were you when the war ended?

In the Philippines.

Why don't you just continue with your service story – you were discussing #352 Mortar Ship – how long did you stay on that ship?

Until I was discharged.

So you continued in that capacity – where did that ship go during your time on it?

I'll give you – if you wish to put this down, put it down. The first invasion we went to was Iwo Jima. The second one was Okinawa. There were two other small ones connected with Okinawa that is not on my record so I don't even have to mention them.

Did you see action in these places? Was your ship attacked or bombed?

Oh, yes.

Well, that's what I'm looking for – descriptions of things like that.

I'm sorry, you're in the wrong place.

You don't want to describe that?

No. Because it was so involved and so technical that if anything like this comes up on the computer they could just forget it. It's not for me to bring that up. I went through the invasions, yes, I had, for instance I had six kamikazes that tried to hit us, let alone the ones we tried to knock down. We had suicide swimmers, suicide boats, we had all kinds of dangers, but this mortar ship was always so close to shore that we were practically always within small arms fire. So, there's no way that an interview is going to bring that out.

Well, it depends on what you want to talk about; if you don't want to talk about it, then it won't.

No, no, let me tell you something about me. When I was discharged I walked out of that discharge center and FORGOT the war. The war was completely done; it was over and done with; forget it. And so to this day, as of right now, I do not have one vestige of evidence that I was ever in the Navy except for the discharge papers,

Hmmm.

I have no pictures; I have no photos; I have no remnants; I have nothing.

And that's deliberate.

Because I just – like I say, I walked away from the war and it was over and done with.

Well, that's not unusual; most servicemen, in fact, many of the men that I interview have a difficult time talking about it but they do –

I wouldn't have any difficult time talking about it but it's rather irrelevant because nobody – for instance, some neophyte reading what I went through wouldn't understand it. Let me give you a clue about a mortar ship. A Mortar Ship was based upon an LCI hull which had to be flat-bottomed hull. The standard Army 4.2 inch mortars were welded to our deck. Now, mortar was a 25-pound, probably 2 ½ feet long – anyway, it's standard. Anybody that's ever known about that mortar would understand what the shell was. It was propelled by powder rings which were inserted into the proper position prior to firing. Each ring was approximately, giving the shell a thousand yards. Now, the best that we could do without endangering the unit itself, without having it blow up in our face, was ten rings, which would mean 10,000 yards. But in order to get beyond that, we would frequently have to go all the way in to shore, which meant that we had to drop the anchor maybe 300 yards out, and depend on it pulling us up off the shore.

Wow!

So you're not going to hear anything about mortar ships from anybody that you interview. **Probably not. Well, that's why I need an explanation of it, because people do want to hear descriptions like this. I don't know why you think that they don't; they certainly do.**

Well, I'll give you a clue. Just about three years ago I was introduced to one of the Commandants at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station up here. And I told him I was on a mortar ship and he says, "never heard of it."

All the more reason why you need to explain it.

No, they have a – we were so important to the war that a lot of the Marine invasion forces – they knew what we were capable of and could do – and did. But, insofar as information, unh-unh.

All right. From your vantage point on this LCI, what were your emotions relating to combat? Did you witness casualties or destruction of villages?

This is totally ridiculous – was I scared?

I didn't say were you scared. I asked did you witness it?

No.

Everybody is scared.

There is something like 64 different words that explains the word "fear" and scared is one of them; tension is another; and it goes on and on and on. So there isn't anything in combat in which you are not fearful to some extent. But it has nothing to do with your performance. In some people it helps their performance; in others it deteriorates.

I understand that. We're asking about your experience

From my standpoint –

Yes, from your standpoint.

It simply was something I had to do and I did it.

Okay. So, what was the highest rank you ever achieved?

I was only a 3rd Class Petty Officer.

Did you receive any medals or honors?

Not anymore than just the responsible ones.

Some men have a shadow box – display case with medals on the wall –

I've never fooled with that stuff. Sure, I've got medals upstairs, but that's –

Okay, that's one of the questions here – what medals did you receive?

No, I'm not even gonna tell you.

Okay.

Makes no difference.

How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service? Did you meet guys that you kept in touch with after service?

When I told you that this officer made my life miserable, that also alienated me from the crew because if they got friendly with me, he'd slap extra duty on them.

Oh, I see.

And so I had a rather strange –

I see, it was not a happy, not happy, but – I know what you mean.

Also, I did not drink, I did not smoke, I did not carouse, I did not go after women on liberty. That separated me from a lot of men.

Right. How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home.

By letters.

Strictly by letters, no phone calls or anything?

No. We had no way of making a phone call.

Could you tell how long it would take a letter to reach you from the mainland?

I have no idea. Sometimes it took better than a month for the mail to catch up with us.

Normally it was about two weeks. So what were your recreational or off-duty pursuits if you were not a carouser?

I didn't have any.

Did you play cards, read, on the ship I mean.

Until the crew found out that I was thumbs down, I played Hearts and Pinochle, but that's it. Never played poker, and since I didn't smoke and didn't play poker, I always had money on the books so I was frequently being tapped.

Okay. How about – did you ever write letters for friends who were not able to write their own letters?

Yeah, I wrote what letters I could write.

Not your own letters – I mean for other servicemen, to their girlfriends?

No, no, I never did that.

A lot of men did that especially in the Army because some only had a 3rd or 4th grade education – a lot of those soldiers – and couldn't write their own letters. If you had a high school education –

That's another thing that probably isolated me too because despite just a high school education, I was very well educated, and it came out. It became obvious. I was the only one on the ship that liked classical music.

So there was quite a difference between you and the average sailor, I would say. You told me you were in the Philippines when the war ended.

After – we were sent back from Okinawa to get ready for the invasion when the war ended and they immediately took our mortars off and sent us back to the Philippines. And the last eight months I was in the Navy was in the Philippines taking Philippine soldiers back to their homes.

So you were transporting them?

We put them on the ship and transported them – since we were flat bottom. All of the ports had been bombed out; there were no piers or anything to tie up to, so we just had to let them loose.

Wow! Okay, did you have one of those ships that the top comes down and men can go out of it?

We have; that was the way the ship had been originally built, but we didn't use it at the time; we didn't use that.

Okay. How did you return home when the war was over? By ship?

Well, I was released to a station for discharge for being sent back to the States from the Philippines.

Did you return by ship?

Yeah, naturally.

Was it a rough passage? How were the conditions on the ship going back home?

I don't know how long it took; probably took about ten days.

Were rations adequate? There was no problem?

I never had any problem.

How was your reception by family and friends? You weren't married then?

No, I did not get married until I was 54.

Oh, really? Wow!

Then we just passed our 37th Anniversary, so --

Congratulations! How was your readjustment to civilian life? What did you do?

Three weeks after I was out of the Navy, I was a counselor in a boys' camp in the high Sierras. I told you, I left the war behind me --

How did you get that job?

I was recommended by somebody; I still don't know who.

Have you had any contact with fellow veterans over the years?

No.

Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

I do now; both the Legion and the VFW -- and I may not be long for both.

How did your wartime experience affect your life?

How am I supposed to answer that?

However you want.

No. No. I'm being liberal. I'm a better than average psychologist, so what does that question mean? How do I know? As far as I know, like I said, the war was completely beyond me. I never joined the Legion or the VFW until just six years ago because I could never see myself sitting around a bar telling war stories.

Right.

I could tell war stories; tell you a lot of them.

But that's what I want to hear -- I want to hear your war stories.

No. I'm not gonna tell you the war stories. You don't want to hear about the five Marine pilots that were shot down by our own people.

Oh, accidental, what do they call that -- collateral damage?

Well, this wasn't. This was totally unnecessary; it just blows my mind that -- in fact, our Captain got on the bullhorn and screamed during the shutdown, "If any man on this ship fires a shot I'll hang him." And that -- we may have been the only ship in the anchorage that didn't fire on those pilots.

Well, you saw a lot of unholy occurrences.

I saw a lot of things you don't know about --

What did it do to you, that's what I'm asking. How did it affect you? How did you feel when you returned home? Were you bitter? Were you just glad it's over --

No. I had, in fact, I loved the Navy. I mean I loved the ocean. I never had any problem; despite the roughness of the seas I was never seasick. So I could just as easily have stayed in the Navy as not.

Why did you leave? Why didn't you stay in?

The first influential person that I had after I got out of the Navy said, "Oh, you can't stay in the Navy. You've got to go to college."

Oh, and did you?

Yes.

Did you use the G.I. Bill for college?

Yes. I wouldn't have been able to go if it hadn't been for that.

Where did you go to school?

Long Beach and Long Beach State.

In California. And what did you study there?

Psychology and English mostly. And Art Major, that I gave up so you don't even have to mention that.

Okay. So, the final question, questions I ask everybody, not just you. You understand that – what are the life lessons that you learned from military service?

What did you take away from that experience?

To hate war.

That's true. So it had no real psychological effect –

I cannot tell you that I did not have any influence, but I couldn't tell you what the influence may have been, because whatever the influence may have been at the time, I evidently sidestepped it pretty well. I never had any nightmares; I never had any ulcers; I never had any health problems – nothing. But I did come out of the war with nerve deafness that the Navy has since declared – that the Navy wasn't responsible for it. And I laugh at that. Well, my hearing was good when I went in and it was bad when I came out.

Right. Right. Do you remember your date of discharge?

I think it was June 7, 1946.

So you were in for two full years and a month. That just about does it. You served your two years and they were pretty exciting years – explosive years, I guess.

I probably saw more of the war than most others that you're going to be interviewing.

And that is the attraction and detraction of a war that size. I'll give you the ones that I feel

have been solely neglected – sorely neglected. And that is the women and the ones that stayed at home. We did not go through the war every day. For instance, it would take us weeks to go across the Pacific, and so all we're worrying about is a submarine attack. Here at home you had to wonder what was going on every day.

Yes.

So psychologically you probably went through more of the war than I did; and that's the way I think about it.

Well, I was little then.

It's difficult – even the ones that were foot soldiers, like on D-Day at Omaha. That General could have been court martialed for how he decided to go into that beachhead. He wasn't, of course, because he was already a four-star General. But, he depended and relied on what Intelligence had told him. Well, Intelligence had been completely wrong. So I could sit here all day and talk to you about the war in various situations, but it has nothing to do with me personally.

Okay. Well, I'm glad I caught you at home today. Those are the only questions that I generally ask people. If there's anything else that you would like to say, feel free to contact me.

I don't know what to say; I admire people like you who take this thing on, because I also know is that what you're going to get, as far as I'm concerned, 70% is going to be irrelevant insofar as history is concerned.

Well, I think the reason is that they just want to get people on the record – service men, especially the World War II veterans, just to get their take on it.

But here's my argument – sure, I went through a lot of, you might say, "combat". Insofar as the war itself is concerned, where did we go from there? We could just as well have left that out and the war wouldn't have changed.

Hmmm

Except in a few instances I haven't mentioned.

Well, it's over and done with and now they want to, not rewrite history, but just hear it from the people who took part in it. For instance, right now, I don't know if you're aware, right now on Channel 11, public access station, the Viet Nam War is being chronicled – a ten-part series – have you seen it? The Ken Burns series about the Viet Nam War -- Did you see it?

No, I probably -- - I have been doing interviews and recitals in Aurora, before we moved here, and it was all on the Pacific War. But I started to get all kinds of questions about the European War, so I figured I'd better learn something about the European War so I can answer some of these questions. I probably know more about the European War now than I do about my own war.

Oh.

These are two books that I have authored and published; this is the first one; this is strictly on the war and the veterans in it. I like to write in verse. I couldn't do art and calligraphy anymore so I took up writing in verse. Right now, in my computer, I'm writing a story about the time they tried to steal Lincoln's body, you probably don't know anything about that –

I think I did hear about that – let me chronicle this book – Richard has produced two booklets, I would call them –

No, they are books of poetry.

These are soft-cover books – the first one is entitled “ America: Freedom, Veterans and YOU”, verses by Richard Williams. Although his first name is really Stanley, he goes by Richard all the time. The second book is “America: A Potpourri of Fun, Inspiration and Humor” by Richard Williams. Everything is in verse.

I attended one function in which a four-star General was the top speaker and he bought this book. And he wrote me a commemorative letter since thanking me for the book and especially the poem in here “ANGEL FLIGHT.” I don't know if you know what Angel flight is.

No, I don't.

When the fallen military person is brought back to the United States by military means, they are brought back on a special transport attended by Special Duty people, and they are called “Angel Flights” – it's a very distinctive flight because the coffins are still in the ship with the flags over them, etc.

Richard is quite an accomplished author and he is writing another book – what is the title of the new book?

I don't have it – haven't decided on a title.

I'm going to read something from the book "Misery doesn't need company; it has hypocrisy to live with; bigotry and cynicism to work with; and suspicion and doubt for bosom companions." And here is a 9/11 Reminder – the Truth About Terrorism – very interesting – The Empty cup – How long did it take you to write these –
I'm very fortunate – when I start writing, I just keep writing. I keep telling people I'm not really an author, I'm a stenographer and someone's telling me what to write.

These two books were published by Tradewinds Co., Aurora, IL. The first in 2013 and the second in 2015. These books are not an interview or anything; they are verses that Richard has written over the years – over the last few years, I believe.
I think – they're about as old as my blindness and that's about 12 years old.

Oh, for the past 12 years he has been writing these. Even though you are legally blind today, is that right, you are considered legally blind?

I have macular degeneration.

But you can still work on the computer.

Yes. But I can't see the monitor until I use a magnifying glass to see, so I better be a better than average typist.

Okay, I have to decide what to do with these booklets, but, we are through with the interview. If there is anything else you'd like to add – I will bring you a draft copy of this interview for your wife to read –

Oh, yes, she can do anything she wishes.

She's your editor, right?

No, believe it or not I doubt whether she has picked up either of those two books to peruse them.

Really?

She is too much involved – I am more or less the blame for this; she is considerably younger than I am and at the time we got married, talking to God, I said I don't know what you have for this union, but I better make sure that if I'm taken she's going to be able to stand on her own two feet. Believe me, I could vanish, and she wouldn't miss a beat!

Ha, ha, okay. Well, it's been very eye-opening – I appreciate you allowing me this interview on short notice. Thank you for this interview and for your service to our country. (other conversation not transcribed herein).

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Addendum: Included with this transcript is one booklet of verses entitled, "Freedom, Veterans and YOU" – special notice taken of the "Honor Flight Chicago" portion beginning on page 50 – authored by Richard Williams