

Oral History Interview of: William Irwin

Military Service: Navy, 1943-1949

Interviewer: Melissa Kozlowski

Date of Interview: November 27, 2002

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## Interview with William Irwin

November 27, 2002

This oral history interview of William Irwin is taking place on November 27, 2002, at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial in Holmdel, New Jersey. This interview is for the Oral History Project for HS 298 01 (Oral History) at Monmouth University. I am Melissa Kozlowski, a student at Monmouth University. I will be conducting the interview. William Irwin served in World War II. He was discharged with the rank of Chief Machinists Mate. He served in the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters.

*"I was born in 1919, my mother was an organist in the church, and my father was in the choir. About a year after I was born, my mother was diagnosed with consumption, it's no longer spoken of, like diphtheria. My father decided that my mother's health as such that maybe she would live a little while longer if we moved to the country, so we moved from Clifton NJ to Ramsey NJ. Clifton was at the time in the city and Ramsey was really rural. So that's where I grew up." – William Irwin*

Question: How would you describe growing up in Ramsey?

Answer: Well, it was a small town, when we went there there were about twenty-two hundred people in town as I grew up it grew with me, when I finally got out of high school in '37 there were probably 4,000 people in the town. Now, quite a few years later it's up to about 18,000.

Q: What was your family life like?

A: I have two younger brothers, and I have my father and mother, but my father died on my tenth birthday. So, life was a little bit tough for several

years. My father died as I said on my tenth birthday, my grandfather, maternal grandfather, lived with us and he helped hold the family together. It was a bit of a strain but we made it anyway.

Q: What was your relationship with your siblings like?

A: We got along alright. I see them once in a while, not as often as I might. My youngest brother, who was born in '27 lives in Delray Beach, FL, my other brother who lives in Pompton Plains NJ is just two years younger; he has a law practice there.

Q: What were race relations like in Ramsey in the 1940's?

A: That's a strange question, there were about possibly-- as I recall there was one black family in Ramsey. The lady was a housekeeper for the veterinary doctor, and her husband had an auto repair shop. They were the only black family in Ramsey at that time. However,--turn the machine off for a minute.

Q: Was it difficult for your mother to get work after your father died?

A: O, yes! My mother had no specialized training, so she became what was known as a practical nurse. She would go out and help new mothers take care of their offspring; she would tend old people or sick people or anything else...Big job, ten dollars a week. She would sometimes be gone two or three weeks at a clip, where she would go out on the job and I'd keep house. I did the cooking and laundry and so for while I was going to high school, while I was in school.

Q: Did you know much about Hitler when you were growing up?

A: Not really, no.

Q: What was your opinion of Japan before Pearl Harbor?

A: Nothing, we weren't aware of them, except the fact that we could get Japanese toys and Japanese goods, they were junk, cheap.

Q: A lot of people compare the attack to Pearl Harbor to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack. Do you see any similarities?

A: It took us by--it caught us unawares. We weren't prepared for it really, we didn't expect it we had no idea-- I don't think that most of the people-- well--I think that we were too damn complacent in both instances.

Q: What do you think you would have done if you hadn't joined the Navy in 1943?

A: If I hadn't gone in the Navy in 1943 I would have continued on as a machinist. I was working as a machinist when Uncle Sam sent me greetings, and I had to....I was working in a machine shop when Uncle Sam sent me greetings, and I went to—in response to the greetings I went to Newark, and there I went through the tests, the physical tests, for service, and it came to a point where—there was a fork in the road, the left went to the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard, and the right went to the Army. The idea that going to the left meant I'd know where I was sleeping and eating anyway, I went that way. I went through the more exacting physical tests and the last man I saw was a lieutenant commander doctor and he looked me over, he shook his head and said "I'm sorry son, but what do you do?" I said "I'm a machinist." He said, "You're in the Navy

now.” That was it. At that time I had a 26 inch waist, I weighed about 117 lbs, I couldn’t pick up a cup of coffee without spilling it, I’d been working so much I just had the shakes all the time.

Q: How did your family feel about you joining the service?

A: It was the thing to do, no questions.

Q: Did any of your siblings join?

A: Yes, my younger brother, Herb, he’s two years younger than I, was already in the Marine Core, he had been in college and he had somehow signed up in one of the Marine Core programs, and he became a 90 day ordinary

Q: What was the name of the ship you served on?

A: The USS Spangler, S-P-A-N-G-L-E-R, named for a young fellow who was killed in the early portion of the war.

Q: You said it was a Buckley class destroyer?

A: It was a Buckley class destroyer, destroyer escorts were vessels that were 306 feet long, about 35 ½ feet wide , they drew twelve feet of water, and they bounced around like a pea pod in the rainstorms. My ship was built upside down. It was built in Bay City, Michigan, where a small shipyard developed a system where they could build ships upside down so that all the plates were welded together, down welding. It’s easier for people to weld down than it is to weld up, overhead. And so they devised this scheme, and they laid the main deck on a frame, erected the partitions on that, fastened stringer and then ultimately plate to it, and then welded the

ship together down welding and eventually put two large hoops over it, and then with two cranes they picked up one side and rolled it over to where they could install machinery and other things, and then they launched it sideways, unlike—yes, its hard to believe, they launched it sideways because the steam in which they were launching it was not very wide.

Q: What naval action did you participate in?

A: Not a whole heck of a lot. We spent most of our time convoying and escorting. We'd run around escorting freighters, troop ships, and carriers, we called them jeep carriers, they were merchant type ships that were converted to air craft carriers, they were small, they worked, and we spent our time working with those people. We also spent a good deal of time conveying—well it seemed like it was long, anyway—escortng water barges. Water barges were just that. At many of the atolls the small islands out in the Pacific, there's no way to get water. So they would, the navy would have these big barges that they would take from a place where there was drinking water available, load them up and take them to the atoll where there was no water, so the people stationed there would have water. At one time in our watch, we made a whole 50 feet in 4 hours in a storm. It's illogical that anyone could ever measure that, but that was what the navigator indicated, that we had made—in 4 hours, we had made 50 feet.

Q: Please tell me about your naval training.

A: O...A week after I visited the draft board in Newark, I got on the train in Ramsey and went to Newark, and ultimately changed trains and went down to Bainbridge, Maryland where I was in boot camp for 13 weeks. After about the third week I think we managed to get, have one of our group members come down with—scarlet fever or something like that, and consequently we were in quarantine for the whole thirteen weeks, we didn't get out to see the movies, or get to drill on the drill fields with others, or anything lese. We were—we lived a very closed life, almost as if we were in a nunnery. And then after that spell, I got a week off to go home, went back to Bainbridge—o, Bainbridge training camp had been known as Tome School. It was a school of the level with Exeter, Philips Exeter Academy up in New England. The navy took over this and built facilities. After my initial leave, I went back and was shipped to Boston; I was in school at Wentworth Institute, which was a training school for machinists' mates. Wentworth Institutes claim, at that time, was that they created the superintendents and foreman that were able to interpret the work and construct the work that was designed by MIT engineers. They considered-- it was considered a very good school. I was there for four months, and at the end of the period I managed to come out as a machinists mate second class. I went in as a fireman third, which was about as low as you can go, I came out a machinists mate second class. It was a BIG change. I went from 54 dollars a month to 96 dollars a month,

and that was that. Incidentally, I was the—I had the second position in the class of 250 people

Q: How difficult was it to adjust to living on a ship?

A: It wasn't difficult, believe it or not. The most difficult part was getting over the first round of seasickness. But, from Wentworth institute I was sent to Syracuse, NY where I spent a month in the Carrier Corporations plant where I was trained—I guess you could put trained in quotes—in refrigeration equipment. From there, I was shipped to Bay City, Michigan, where my ship was under construction. I got there a week before it was supposed to take off. So, we visited the ship and got acquainted with it, before we really went aboard it, and then on one—I think it was a Friday afternoon in September of '43, we went aboard, and left Bay City, went around the northern tip of Michigan, and the following morning we were at Chicago, where the vessel was on display for three days as part of a war bond drive. Then we went through the Chicago drainage canal, which incidentally is a huge open sewer, through which most of the sewage of the city of Chicago flows. Yes it stinks, then down through to Joliet Illinois. In Joliet, they fastened some huge pontoons on the side of the DE. Now—so, your question about getting used to the ship, we went aboard when there was nobody there practically, we had 13, 17 of us I think or something like that, so we had the ship to ourselves, and we had a wonderful time getting used to things. So, it was very simple.

Q: Could you describe your living quarters on the ship?



A: Well, they were spacious initially until we got the crew onboard! So when we went from less than 20 to over 200, it became a little bit close. We had several—the proper word isn't room, but areas, partitioned off in the ship, in which we had bunks three deep, we each had a locker space about 24x24x18 deep, and you been up to see the Slater, so you know the compartments in the stern, and you probably saw the locker spaces we had under them, but they were filled with other materials when you were there right? So you saw the compartments, the living compartments. They weren't spacious, the racks were what, thirty inches wide? They were spaced about 22 inches apart, fat boys had a problem, I didn't, and we had mattresses, oh about an inch and a half thick, we each had two blankets and a mattress covers, actually cotton bags that we slipped our mattress in, we didn't have sheets, we changed the mattress cover every while, once in a while, and that was it.

Q: Could you describe an average day on the ship?

A: It would be very difficult because there's no such thing as an average day. We stood watches, most everybody except the radio gang and the officers, stands 8 hours a day watch. You're 4 on, and 8 off. So you spend 4 hours on watch then you're off 8 hours, to sleep, eat, do other work or write letters or whatever, and then you go back on watch again. So its four on and 8 off. Now, once under way at sea on convoy duty, you might be on mid watch, that means you go to work at 11:45 and you--I would spend four hours in the engine watching over the equipment-listening, checking

gauges and other things hourly, and come off at 4 o'clock, and write up a log when I was ready to go off and indicate that the routine tests and inspections had been made and that conditions were normal, and then go off watch at quarter to four, turn in, and at 5 o'clock turn out for general quarters because we would go to general quarters about 5 o'clock every morning. At general quarters we stood ready in case submarines or anything else was visible in the water, so we could take action. We'd be—we'd secure from general quarters usually about time for breakfast. After breakfast we were free to work and whatever the assignment that we were given happened to be. It was frequently equipment to be disassembled and ready to be worked over, one of my jobs was—I was the operator of the machine shop, that's a big deal. I had a lathe, and I drill press, and a grinder, and some hand tools. I did maintenance repair work. Then at 11:30, chowdown would be called, and we'd eat and go on watch quarter to 12. Then from 12-4 you were on watch. At 4 o'clock we came off watch and possible 4:30 or 5 o'clock general quarters would be sounded because it was generally understood that the submarines were more active at dawn and dusk than they were the rest of the day, so that was a time that was a hazardous time. So, you prepared for that period.

Q: How would you describe your relationship with your shipmates?

A: We were not—we were not awfully close. We could go off on a liberty together, but we didn't bond up very strongly, not like you kids do in college today.

Q: What were relations like between the enlisted men and the officers?

A: Standoffish.

Q: Were there any African Americans aboard your ship?

A: The Navy did not take backs in—except as mess men. Now, at one time when I was first class the chief asked me—he said “it looks like we’re going to have to take some”- he used the term niggers, he was a southern boy- “we’re going to have to take some niggers in. Do you object to them?” I said, “No.” He did. We never got them.

Q: What was your view of the captain of the ship?

A: Ooh—our first captain, we didn’t see much of him. He had been an Academy man that means he had gone through Annapolis. He was small, and rather standoffish, and he was only with us I believe about six months and then his executive officer took over, and we didn’t enjoy him at all because he was—he was hard-nosed, exacting, gruff, and not friendly. He just wasn’t a very happy man. He was ultimately replaced by other men that were easier to get along with. The final captain I worked under on that ship was Captain Edwards, who was a New York lawyer, and he was a swell guy.

Q: What were meals like aboard the ship?

A: Good, generally. I can’t say I—someplace in here, I do have, I think, a menu that was passed out at one of the – Christmas, I don’t know maybe I didn’t bring it with me. But the—we would have celebration meals that were good. Our cooks were pretty good. We had a baker that was good, he

made breads, rolls, cakes and things. There was no fault with the food, it got monotonous after a while, but it does at home.

Q: Was there any entertainment, or movies shown on the ship?

A: O yes, when we were in port we could have movies on the fantail, and if we could swap around and pick up movies we could have them on the fantail some nights. But it was only in port-- that was the only entertainment we had. O, in some places we could pick up Tokyo Rose on the radio, people like that some propaganda shows. I remember when we were down off Guadalcanal, in that area, there was an armed forced radio station we used to listen to, they put it over our loud speaker system, and we would listen to the Ativan cocktail hour and things like that. Ativan was one of the medications they used to counteract yellow fever, or something like that, I don't remember what. We'd listen to the Ativan cocktail hour, there were several shows of that type but it was all basically propaganda information—and forties music, big band music type shows.

Q: How would you describe the behavior of the sailors on liberty?

A: Well, normally we didn't have liberties after we—well, let's say it this way. We went into commission on Halloween in '43. A week later, we took off to Bermuda for shakedown. Shakedown is a period during which they test out the quality of the ship and the crew. You go through tests and drills, and more tests and more drills. We left Bermuda to go to Boston; we arrived in Boston on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December that year. Liberty—I'd say over the course of the liberty period about two thirds of the crew got pretty

well polluted. Some of the lads got into trouble; a couple lads never came back. We left Boston on Christmas Eve, about 8 o'clock, in '43, and wound up in New Orleans. We had a couple days in which we took on stores, materials. We left New Orleans about 8 o'clock New Years Eve. About half the crew was sober.

Q: Were you able to receive mail?

A: Periodically we'd get mail. It didn't come—well, to eventually catch up with us. At that time, we were using what was known as V mail. V mail—both ends of the—the senders and receivers were involved. You could buy the V mail paper and if you were writing to me, you would write on a V mail sheet and put a stamp on it and take it to the post office and they would send it to a processing center where it was photographed, er, microfilmed. And then they would ship the microfilm, print it, and we would get little letters about this big, squeezed down. And when we wanted to write, sometimes you could write and it would go back on microfilm and sometimes it would go back in real letters.

Q: Was your mail censored?

A: Anything leaving the ship was censored, unless you were an officer.

Q: How often were you able to contact your family?

A: By mail?

Q: Were you able to make calls to them at all?

A: Heavens no! There were no telephone wires in the middle of the Pacific. Cell phones hadn't been invented.

Q: How would you compare your experiences in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters?

A: I was only in the Atlantic for a short time and it was rough as all get out. But, on the other hand in some of the typhoons in the Pacific it was rough too. The Atlantic was much colder; I was able to maintain a vacuum in the condensers much easier. But that's not important.

Q: Did your ship ever suffer any damage?

A: We hit something one time, we don't know if it was a whale or something else. Or, we ran aground, but we managed to bend one of the propellers, and as a result we got an awful lot of throbbing, like a tire with a very worn spot, and eventually we had to have one of our propellers changed. Incidentally, we had two propellers, and when they changed the propeller, they replaced the one that was damaged, it didn't have the same pitch as the other one, so we had to run the shafts at a—other than equal speeds. Can you imagine that? That's like having an 18 inch wheel on one side of your car and a 20 inch wheel on the other side.

Q: What did you think of FDR as a president?

A: It didn't make any difference, we didn't know. I didn't vote for him.

Q: What was your position of the kamikaze pilots?

A: We didn't—I wasn't aware of them really, bluntly. I never encountered any, I know that they were dedicated like everyone else was, but that's about all.

Q: How did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

A: We didn't know anything about it till well after it was over, but I thought that it really saved an awful lot of lives. And when I learned about it I was pleased, because it put an end to an awful mess that might have taken an awful lot more lives.

Q: Tell me about your discharge.

A: Well, when the war was over, we were sitting in...turn off your machine for a while.

Q: Did you enroll in the University of Maine immediately after leaving the Navy?

A: Before. I had a friend who, when the GI Bill came out, decided that I should go to college. So he did some investigating and decided that I had three choices. He thought MIT might be good, no RPI might be good, that's up in Troy, Stevens would be good, and then he had a certain affinity for the University of Maine. He said that RPI would be good, but I couldn't afford it, he knew my financial state. He said that Stevens would be good and I could afford that maybe if I lived at home, but if I lived at home, I would be living with my mother and he thought that was not going to be good. So, he suggested I got to the University of Maine. So, that's why I started the--I started as soon as I got—we had made these rough plans before, and then when I got out of the Navy then we finalized them.

Q: Did the government fund your schooling?

A: The GI Bill paid everything, and then some.

Q: What did you go on to do as a career?

A: I—my first job was as an engineer in the conveying business, I worked for Webster manufacturing out in Tiffin, Ohio, doing structural steel work for—designing structural steel work for conveyors. Bulk conveyers, you know, coal, ice, ore, and that sort of stuff, grains.

Q: Through the years, have you kept touch with nay of the men you served with?

A: O yes, a few of them. Only recently, we had no establishment for keeping contact, so—that's another story. My wife's sister and her husband live in Oxford, Maine. My brother in law was a selectman up there, that's like a member of the town council. As such, he was a part of a soil conservation program up there. Well, we were up there on vacation one time, and he invited us to go on a bus trip wit him that the soil conservation people were going to make, to see what sort—what the conservationists were doing up there. I got talking to one of the fellows on the trip and discovered he was a member of the Destroyer Escort Sailors Association. So, he gave me an application, which I promptly sent in, and became active in the Destroyer Escort—I had lost track of all the fellows, you know, I had gotten out at a time—a group of them went of in one area at one time frame, and I went off in another group at another time frame, and I went off by myself, when we finally got paid off. We did not leave the ship as a large group; we went off as we could be spared at that time. So



eventually, I got involved; I met this fellow who was a Destroyer Escort sailor, and gee in woke me up again. So, I got involved.

Q: Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in the interview?

A: I think we've covered a lot of things, that weren't on your paper!

### **Conclusion of Interview**