

This is a Flint Hills Oral History Project World War II Veterans Series interview with Mr.

Bennie Gomez, 2624 West Ridge Court, Emporia, Kansas. The interviewer is Loren Pennington, Emeritus Professor of History at Emporia State University. Today's date is April 25, 2006, and the interview is taking place at Mr. Gomez's home.

This is tape 1, side A.

Loren Pennington: Mr. Gomez, I should say here for the record that you and I had never met until we arranged this interview yesterday. I would like to have you begin by telling us when and where you were born, who your parents were, and what they did for a living.

Bennie Gomez: I was born at Sanford, Kansas, June 13, 1919. My father worked on the Santa Fe railroad.

LP: What was your father's name?

BG: My father's name was Florence.

LP: And your mother?

BG: My mother's name was Margaret.

LP: I'm under the impression that you lost your father at rather an early age.

BG: Yes. My father died when I was about nine years old.

LP: What happened to you then?

BG: About a year later I was sent to the orphans' home in Atchison, Kansas.

LP: You were there how long?

BG: I was there until I was fifteen years old. I went in there when I was nine, and I was fifteen years old when I came to Emporia, Kansas, from the orphans' home.

LP: What was it like to be in that orphanage?

BG: It wasn't too bad. We had cottages of boys, 100 to a cottage, and everybody had a job to do and my job was working in the dairy, milking cows.

LP: How many boys were in this? Was this just a boy's orphanage?

BG: No, it had girls and boys.

LP: How many children were in this orphanage would you say?

BG: Probably 600 boys and 300 girls.

LP: 900. That's a very large number. Was this something run by the state?

BG: Yes.

LP: Where did you go to school while you were in this orphanage?

BG: I went to school at the orphanage.

LP: They had a regular school?

BG: They had a regular school.

LP: You say until you were fifteen years old?

BG: Fifteen. I graduated from grade school at the orphans' home, and then I took one year of a business course at the orphans' home.

LP: I see. Then what happened?

BG: Then I came to Emporia, and I finished that year of high school at Emporia High.

LP: Who did you live with while you were here?

BG: I lived with Dr. Shonkwiler. He was the county doctor.

LP: That was here in Emporia?

BG: Yes.

LP: That was just for a year?

BG: Yes.

LP: He didn't adopt you?

BG: No.

LP: You were just a foster child?

BG: I was just a foster child.

LP: Then what?

BG: His wife got sick and he moved on in to town, and he didn't need anyone to help him out there on the farm. We were kind of [not understandable] on the farm.

LP: You lived outside of Emporia and worked on his farm for him, too, and went to school here.

Mrs. Bennie Gomez: It's down on 12th, west of Prairie right now where he lived. The house is still there.

BG: Prairie was the last street in Emporia at that time, the west side.

LP: I see. So then, after that year, what happened?

BG: After that, I went to Bushong, Kansas, and lived on a farm about five miles southeast of Bushong, and went to school in Bushong, for one year of high school.

LP: Who did you live with there?

BG: I lived with the Swarner family there.

LP: I heard that you graduated from Admire High School?

BG: The next year I went to Admire. I graduated from Admire High School in 1938.

LP: So you got out of the high school well before Pearl Harbor, well before America entered the war. So what did you do after you got out of high school?

BG: I worked for Paines up there on a dairy for about two years and then I came down to Americus and worked on a farm down there for a couple years.

LP: I think I recall you said something that you met your wife during this time?

BG: Yes. I met my wife in Admire.

LP: You were married before you went into service?

BG: Yes, I was.

LP: How many children did you have before you went in?

BG: We had two.

LP: What did you do during these years before you went into service for an occupation?

BG: Just worked on these farms.

LP: I somehow thought you'd gone to work for the railroad.

BG: Well, I went to work for the railroad in 1942.

LP: This was Santa Fe?

BG: Santa Fe Railroad

LP: Here in Emporia?

BG: Yes.

LP: Doing what?

BG: I worked as a truck driver in the store department.

LP: I presume you were not called up for military service as you were deferred because you were married, had children, and so forth?

BG: Yes, that's right.

LP: Eventually they got around to calling married men with children.

BG: Yes.

LP: You knew you were going to be called up?

BG: I wanted to pick the branch I was going in. The next time they had a group going, I volunteered.

LP: You volunteered for what branch of service?

BG: For the Navy.

LP: Before we get in to that, I'd like to ask you some questions. As you were getting out of high school and as you were going to work, the world was going to pot. Hitler's on the rise in Germany; Japan is moving in the Far East. How much attention did you pay to those things? Very much?

BG: We didn't pay much attention to them. Everything was so far away. They didn't bother me at all until Pearl Harbor.

LP: What about the Depression? Did that have any effect on you?

BG: The Depression was hard. It was hard to make a living and support a family at that time.

LP: Even working for the railroad?

BG: Yes.

LP: Was your work on the railroad a union job?

BG: Yes it was.

LP: Right from the beginning?

BG: Yes it was. It was always union.

LP: You mentioned "until Pearl Harbor." Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

BG: Yes. I remember Pearl Harbor because my brother, who was in the Marines out at Camp Pendleton, was sent to Pearl Harbor right after the [attack on] Pearl Harbor. His outfit was sent to Pearl Harbor and then from there he went on to the South Pacific.

LP: What was your attitude about this attack on Pearl Harbor? What did you think?

BG: Well, I really didn't know what to think about it too much. I really didn't realize how much the problem was until I got over to Pearl Harbor, and we started out on those islands and saw all

the Japanese-controlled islands out there we had to take back from the Japanese. They had quite a fighting force. It seemed like they had more numbers than we had.

LP: Let's see. I have down here that you joined the Navy on June 13, 1944. Is that correct?

BG: Yes.

LP: Where did you go to boot camp?

BG: I went to boot camp in Chicago, Illinois.

LP: Was that at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station?

BG: Yes.

LP: How did you get on in boot camp?

BG: I got along fine in boot camp. It didn't bother me too much. I was twenty-five years old, and it was a little bit harder on me than it was on some of the younger guys because we had ten mile marches and stuff like that, which I wasn't used to. That part of it was kind of rough, but I worked enough to get in good with the MA and he gave me some special privileges.

LP: Who's the MA?

BG: MA was Al Bates, who had been a police chief here in Emporia, and I knew him real well.

LP: How did you get on with the discipline?

BG: I had no problem with discipline. We had a chief who was in charge of our barracks who was a real nice guy; he was strict, but he was nice. You knew where you stood with him and we all liked him. He had a job to do and we knew he had a job to do and we cooperated with him. And he was good to us. He'd give us every break he could give.

LP: How did you go the food?

BG: The food wasn't too bad in Chicago.

LP: You begin to sound like it's going to be [pretty] bad somewhere else.

BG: Yes. I went through boot camp in twelve weeks. I came home on leave for ten days and went back to Chicago. I was there about two days when they loaded us on a troop train and took us to San Francisco, California.

LP: What was the purpose of sending you to San Francisco? What did you hook onto there?

BG: Well, when the ships would come in from sea and they were short on crew they took the fellow who just got through boot camp and attached him to the ship [as it was] getting ready to go to the South Pacific.

LP: What was your ship?

BG: My ship was the DD577 *USS Sproston*

LP: As I recall, that is part of Destroyer Squadron 49. Right?

BG: Yes.

LP: Desron 49; and I believe you stayed in Desron 49 until you got back to the States after the war.

BG: Right.

LP: So you were on that single ship. Did you ordinarily operate with the whole squadron or did you operate independently?

BG: We operated independently most of the time.

LP: Your squadron didn't go out as a squadron; it went out as individual ships?

BG: We were an escort ship and wherever they needed an escort for transports, it was our job to escort the transports, battleships, cruisers. We were to protect them from submarines.

Submarines were our biggest problem at that time and destroyers were actually submarine chasers. We had 10 torpedoes and bunch of depth charges that we could use.

LP: Plus 5 inch guns.

BG: 5 inch guns, right.

LP: Did you have machine guns, too?

BG: Well, no; we had 20 mm and 40 mm guns and then we had the 5 inch guns.

LP: I see. I take it you left San Francisco and probably went to Pearl Harbor?

BG: Went to Pearl Harbor, right. We were in Pearl Harbor about a week and then from there we went to Eniwetok.

LP: What did you do at Eniwetok?

BG: At Eniwetok we took on supplies and fuel [and had a] couple of days of rest. Then [we] headed on to the Admiralty Islands where we were going to join some other ships to escort.

LP: Was this to the island of Manus?

BG: Yes, Manus Island. When they got enough ships accumulated there to make an invasion, we left Manus Island in a string of ships; [we] probably had 800 ships when we left there.

LP: Why this big flotilla of ships? What were they going to?

BG: We were going to the invasion of Leyte, which was supposed to be a real difficult job and it was. It was the Japs' main stronghold. They had lots of troops with lots of airplanes. It was awful rugged country. We met the Jap fleet there and had a little skirmish with them. Then we started back to Hollandia, New Guinea, from there.

LP: Let me back up just a minute before you get back to New Guinea. Leyte, the invasion, comes on the 20th of October, 1944.

BG: Yes.

LP: About the 23rd, the great naval battle of Leyte Gulf develops over the next three or four days which was of course the greatest naval battle in the history of the world. What was your ship's role in that?

BG: We were lined up in Surigayo Strait to shoot our torpedoes at any ship that came in that harbor [Leyte Gulf] that was Japanese.

LP: Surigayo Strait.

BG: Right.

LP: This is coming in from the south.

BG: Yes.

LP: The Japanese made their attack from the north, down through the central Philippines and up from the south.

BG: Yes.

LP: You were on the southern wing. Were you there when the Japanese came in to Surigayo Strait?

BG: Yes. We were there, but for some reason or other, the Jap fleet smelt trouble, and they turned around and left. So we left, too.

LP: So when the Japanese [force finally] arrived in Surigayo Strait, you were gone.

BG: Yes.

LP: There were three desrons there. I think 53, 54, and 29 or something like that; I didn't see 49. I take it you were at sea. You were out of there.

BG: Yes. We started to Hollandia, New Guinea, escorting some transports back to Hollandia to pick up more troops.

LP: Your log says you left on Oct. 24 and the Japanese came into Surigoyo Strait on the night of the 24th.

BG: Right.

LP: So you were out just one day ahead of them.

BG: Yes.

LP: So you're on your way back to. . . .

BG: They called us and we returned back to the battle.

LP: Off Samar?

BG: Yes.

LP: The battle off Samar is the one that involved the escort carriers, Taffy I, II, and III.

BG: Right. The aircraft carriers. Our job was to escort the aircraft carriers that we had in the area. We had three aircraft carriers sunk the first time we got back. Three of them got sunk.

LP: You're talking about the baby flattops.

BG: Yes.

LP: The taffies found themselves facing the main Japanese fleet, battleships and the whole works.

BG: The Japanese fleet kind of turned tail and took off.

LP: Back through San Bernadino Strait.

BG: Yes.

LP: I take it you weren't with Halsey on his famous trip back north.

BG: Halsey was farther up north. He was so far north he could not get there in time to help us so we had to go back [to help the taffies].

LP: So when Halsey was not in a position to help in the battle off Samar, that's when you were called on.

BG: Right. All of the big aircraft carriers were in with Halsey. He had the best aircraft fleet of any of them.

LP: Halsey has been somewhat criticized for being way up there. The Japanese had attempted to draw him off.

BG: Yes. He was out looking for the Jap fleet.

LP: The carriers especially.

BG: Right. They were dodging him mainly when they came on into Philippine waters.

LP: After the conclusion of the Battle for Leyte, you say you went back to—I see on the log here it was Hollandia in New Guinea.

BG: Yes.

LP: And you were there for what purpose?

BG: We went back to Hollandia to pick up more troops and more supplies.

LP: To go back to Leyte Gulf?

BG: Yes.

LP: I notice that in November and December you were also at Manus Island, and you were at Finch Harbor in New Guinea. Also you were in Bougainville.

BG: Bougainville.

LP: What were you doing in Bougainville?

BG: We went down to Bougainville to pick up some LSTs that they loaded the troops on that had been on Bougainville for the invasion of that island. We went down to pick these troops up to bring them back to the Philippines.

LP: You are taking them back up to Leyte Gulf?

BG: Yes.

LP: You also were involved in the later move from Leyte Gulf to the invasion of Luzon, were you not?

BG: Right.

LP: I believe your ship got a battle star for that.

BG: Right.

LP: Can you tell us about that moving to Luzon.

BG: We came back from Bougainville and took these troops and landed those troops in Luzon for the Battle of Luzon. We had 100 LSTs; they probably had 600 men on each LST. We got into a storm on the China Sea out there on the way to Lingayen Gulf. When we got to the Philippines, these guys on the LSTs were so sick, seasick, that they weren't able to walk off of their LSTs.

LP: Did this big typhoon take place in December of 1944? Is this the one you were involved in or was that a later one?

BG: The typhoon we were involved in was in Okinawa.

LP: That's right. I'm getting ahead of myself here. So you were supporting landing operations [on Luzon]?

BG: That was our job.

LP: How about near Manila? Did you go in there?

BG: Yes. We made three invasions of the Philippines, Leyte, and Lingayen Gulf, and Luzon.

LP: You were one of the first ships into Subic Bay.

BG: Yes. We did escort duties with Task Force 54 from that time on until the invasion of Okinawa.

LP: Were you under attack any of this time during your movement to Luzon, from the air especially?

BG: We were always under attack from the air.

LP: Did anybody get you?

BG: One time we got hit with a bomb that knocked out all our electrical power.

LP: Is that the one that actually didn't hit the ship but hit close at hand?

BG: Yes. So we had to go back to Guam to get repairs before we could operate because we could not control our guns electronically. Everything had to be [done] manually. That's pretty slow for shooting down aircraft.

LP: There is something I should have asked you before that I haven't asked you. What was your job on the ship?

BG: I was a machinist mate in the aft no. 2 engine room. I had a battle station and a 5-inch gun, number five 5-inch gun was my battle station.

LP: When the battle was on, that's where you were was on the 5-incher?

BG: I was in the 5-inch gun for quite some time. For about a year I think. Then after that I was in the repair party on the ship.

LP: Did you use these, were the 5-inch guns used against aircraft?

BG: Yes.

LP: Seems kind of strange to me but you also had the 20 millimeters.

BG: The 5-inch guns, were used for the distance. They could throw a fifty-pound shell four thousand yards pretty easily and pretty accurately. That discouraged airplanes. A lot of times when they would start firing a 5-inch gun, the planes would change their mind and decide to go somewhere else.

LP: Did you have a proximity fuse at this point? One that exploded if it got close to an aircraft?

BG: No.

LP: You didn't have a proximity fuse there?

BG: No. We didn't have that.

LP: Or at least you didn't have it. You went back as you said, and I think this was in early February to Saipan and eventually to Guam. I take it that was to get the repairs from this particular thing. The next big thing, of course, was Operation Iceberg which was the move on Okinawa.

BG: Right.

LP: Can you tell me about your ship's role in that?

BG: We took an armed division up and put them off on a low island about twelve miles from Okinawa for back up; in case we got in trouble landing on Okinawa, they would have a place for a backup crew. Our job up there was just to patrol the area and keep the submarines from sneaking in there and getting the ships in the harbor.

LP: Weren't you in on the preliminary shelling on Okinawa?

BG: Yes.

LP: Let me look here. I see that as early as March 21st, you were at Okinawa, and the actual invasion, of course, was on 1 April. So you were there several days beforehand.

BG: We did bombardment. They had sent people ashore and they had picked out our targets. They would tell us what they wanted us to hit at.

LP: You actually had forward observers on the island then?

BG: Yes. They would tell us what to fire at. We did shore bombardment for about a month. We just went along about three miles from the shore.

LP: So for some days before the invasion and then continuing on you did shore bombardment?

BG: Yes.

LP: How effective do you think that shore bombardment was?

BG: It was hard to tell because we could knock down the buildings but we couldn't do anything to the caves where the Japanese were hiding. We couldn't get them. But we did drive the Japs back to the caves so that when the troops went ashore they didn't meet much opposition at all.

LP: Part of that was a change in the Japanese strategy. They weren't going to waste manpower down at the beaches. They were going to fight from prepared positions.

BG: Right.

LP: Which is going to make them very hard to get out.

BG: In the first week there was almost no resistance at all, and we were sitting pretty until this typhoon came in and then all the ships had to clear out of the harbor and go to sea.

LP: When was this?

BG: This was in the middle of April when the typhoon came. We lost a few ships in the typhoon but most of them got through the typhoon pretty good.

LP: But of course you are going to run into another thing at Okinawa and that's the increasingly heavy use of air attack, particularly of kamikaze. How did that affect you and your fellow destroyers?

BG: We lost quite a few ships to the kamikaze planes. They came in big droves.

LP: They sank fifteen destroyers, among other things. Not to mention damaging another twenty or thirty.

BG: They would dive on battleships and carriers. If there were any carriers around, they would head for carriers. If there wasn't, why they'd attack whatever came by [including] the destroyers.

LP: What is the destroyer role in all of this?

BG: The destroyer role is just escort duty.

LP: But you're also pickets out there. You're the first line of defense against the air attacks coming in.

BG: Our job on picket duty was to keep track of how many planes were coming and what kind of planes they were, whether they were bombers or whether they were fighter planes.

LP: You're out there as spies?

BG: Right.

LP: You're also the biggest target for attack. Did your ship have much success against airplanes? Shooting them down and this sort of thing?

BG: On picket duty you don't shoot at planes.

LP: You shoot at planes if you are attacked?

BG: Attacked only, right.

LP: But you are under attack at some times?

BG: Right.

LP: Did your ship shoot any planes down?

BG: Yes. We shot down a few, not too many.

LP: Your history says ten, most of them at Okinawa.

BG: Yes. Right.

LP: They never managed to hit you with a bomb there then. Or did they ever crash a plane?

BG: No. A bomb never did hit our ship direct.

LP: I noticed that it did get some of the ships in your desron 49 however.

This is tape 1, side B.

LP: Let's talk for a moment about April 12, because that was an important day in World War II and we'll do this over again because of my mistake here. That was the day that President Roosevelt died. I wonder if you had an opinion of President Roosevelt.

BG: I always thought quite a little bit of President Roosevelt. All the troops, everybody that I ever talked to, had a great respect for President Roosevelt.

LP: Did you feel he was doing his duty as President of the United States?

BG: Yes we did. We felt like he was on the job.

LP: As you were on the job?

BG: That's right.

LP: This is in spite of the fact that at home, there was some opposition to him, but you didn't find that in the armed forces?

BG: No. We didn't find that in the armed forces.

LP: What about the military leaders? Say, Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Halsey? What was your opinion of them?

BG: They were great leaders. We didn't ever did hear anybody say too much bad about anybody, either one of them. Halsey was considered a great aircraft commander. He knew his stuff. He knew the Japs like a book. That's one thing about Halsey. He knew what his job was, and he knew how to do it.

LP: Even when at Leyte, he probably got drawn off the map practically and didn't get back to the action off Samar. Of course commanding at Okinawa, overall commander, it's an army operation and it's General MacArthur. What's the opinion in the Navy of General MacArthur?

BG: I only saw General MacArthur once and that was in the invasion of Leyte. He was on a cruiser out there. That's when he had returned from Australia.

LP: "I have returned" he said.

BG: Yes. He was on a cruiser. They took him back on shore. Most of the troops were pretty impressed with him. They had quite a little respect for him.

LP: How about the Navy men?

BG: The Navy seemed to get along pretty good with him. He didn't bother them and they didn't bother him. They did work together. That's one thing about MacArthur. He worked with the Navy and they worked with him.

LP: How about your immediate commanders, say the commander of your ship and this sort of thing? What was your view of them?

BG: We had some good commanders, we really did.

LP: You had several, I know.

BG: We had several commanders, and they were all the kind of guys that you could depend on.

LP: I can remember that one of your commanders while you were at Leyte broke out three hundred cases of beer and coke.

BG: Yes.

LP: How did that go over with the men?

BG: That went over swell. When we went to Eniwetok they gave all the engineering guys a day off because we had been working some tremendous hours on our ship. They took us to the beach and gave us sandwiches. Each one of us got four cans of beer.

LP: Four cans?

BG: Four cans of beer.

LP: I hope that was better [beer] than I got in the Army.

BG: I don't know. I didn't like beer, so I gave my beer away to some of my buddies. I know we had several guys that we brought back to the ship that night that had to be helped back on the ship because they had drunk too much.

LP: You were also, I believe, while you were stationed off Okinawa, continually involved in rescue operations?

BG: Right.

LP: Can you give us any idea of the nature of that?

BG: Anytime a ship was sunk, we always had survivors to pick up; also whenever any of our airplanes got shot down. You only had pilots to rescue out of the water. One of our main jobs was to go out and rescue the guys who had to abandon ship. We took that seriously because we never knew when it might be us out there. So we worked hard at picking guys off the water. That's the same way with pilots.

LP: In all that was going on in the Philippines and on Okinawa, even though you were out there, you were not on the shore. You were out there on the ship so that you obviously didn't meet the Japanese face to face. What was your opinion of the Japanese fighting men?

BG: We gave them our respect because they were fighting men. You had to give them that credit. They had lots of guts. They did what the Emperor told them to.

LP: What their commanders told them to?

BG: Right. They were a fighting machine. If the commander told them to jump off a cliff, they'd jump off. That's how well trained they were. The Jap force was really large. They had a large number of men.

LP: You mean in the kamikaze squads?

BG: In all of them. Even on the ground. They had a lot of guys on the islands, too.

LP: Now I don't know about you, but if a commander told me to jump off a cliff, I wouldn't do it. How about you?

BG: I don't think I would either.

LP: Unless there was some good sensible reason for doing it. But yes, I think it's undoubtedly true that they were perhaps very much like some of the suicide people that we have operating in Iraq today. I've often thought that there is some comparison between the Japanese fighting mentality in that war and what's going on in Iraq at the moment amongst the suicide fighters on the other side. But I haven't seen that comparison made. June 24, 1945, is when you were actually ordered back to San Francisco for refit and repairs. You had gone back to Saipan and you're on your way. On this trip back, you're coming from Okinawa, going through Saipan and coming to what? San Francisco?

BG: We had to come through Pearl Harbor.

LP: Pearl Harbor. Then where?

BG: Then San Francisco.

LP: How about that trip back? Anything happen on that trip that bears a notice?

BG: We ran into a Jap submarine after we left Saipan. This Jap sub was an I-36, the biggest they had. He was surfacing and firing at a freighter with a 5-inch gun when we came upon him. We could see him surfaced. We all presumed that we would torpedo him. They passed word over the back mike to stand by to ram him. Before they could ram him, he went under the water. As we rolled over him we could see him underneath our ship, diving to the bottom.

LP: What did you think of that idea of ramming that submarine?

BG: We were all holding our breath as to what was going to happen.

LP: I take it you'd never rammed anything before?

BG: We rammed an aircraft carrier one time.

LP: Accidentally or on purpose?

BG: Accidentally.

LP: You mean you ran into him?

BG: We zigged. We should have zagged.

LP: It knocked a couple of holes in you?

BG: He knocked one anchor and chain completely off, and knocked a hole in the side of our ship, about eight by twelve. They had to take it into dry dock and reweld it as soon as we got down to Manus Island. We put into the dry dock, and they welded it up and fixed it back up.

LP: You got back—I'm trying to figure out the date here. You got back to the San Francisco area on July 14th and the next day they dissolved Desron 49, and you were assigned to Desron 55.

BG: Yes.

LP: You went into dry dock?

BG: We went into dry dock for an overhaul.

LP: How long did you stay in dry dock?

BG: We stayed in dry dock until they dropped the A-bomb. And when President Truman signed the treaty with them, all the workers left our ship. So we had to go back and finish the job that they had started.

LP: Which was?

BG: Finish overhauling it.

LP: You mean for the day?

BG: We had to finish the job up because they left.

LP: What did they do, go off celebrating?

BG: Yes.

LP: How long did they stay celebrating?

BG: They never came back. Most of them went home. They were from other parts of the country. They were just there during the war and they thought that with the war over, they wouldn't need them anymore. They left.

LP: What did you think of President Truman's decision to drop the bomb on Japan?

BG: I think it was good decision. He saved a lot of lives.

LP: If you had been President Truman, you'd have done the same thing?

BG: I believe so. Japan was pretty well fortified up there, and we would have had an awful time invading Japan. You've got to have something like that to turn them around.

LP: You think then that the invasion of Japan would have been very costly?

BG: I'm sure it would.

LP: Did you get that impression from what you saw happening on Okinawa?

BG: Yes we did.

LP: Okinawa was the biggest group of casualties in the Pacific War?

BG: Yes. They showed at Okinawa that they weren't going to give in easily.

LP: They might be losing the war, but that doesn't mean they were going to quit?

BG: That's right. They weren't going to quit. It took something like the atom bomb to make them decide that they wanted peace.

LP: You haven't changed your mind over the years? You still think that same way?

BG: No, [I haven't changed my mind]. I think that saved a lot of lives.

LP: Well, you're home. Does your wife come out to California?

BG: Yes. When we went into dry dock and I came home on leave, my wife went back with me to California. In fact we were on our way back to California when they said the war was over.

LP: The bomb [is dropped] on August 6, and the war is declared over on the 14th after they dropped the second bomb.

BG: We were on our way back to the ship.

LP: By train?

BG: On a train, and they had word on the radio to all personnel to stay where they were and don't get out on the streets. If you were in a hotel room, get in there and stay there. Don't get out in public.

LP: Why did they not want you out in public?

BG: People were just kind of crazy at that time. They were glad the war was over. They were tipping over cars, having fights in Oakland, California. We couldn't believe all the mess they had out there.

LP: Did they think that you Navy boys would join in the riots or contribute to it in some way?

BG: They figured we'd probably contribute to it.

LP: They weren't afraid that the civilians were going to hurt you or something of the kind?

BG: No. They didn't want us getting mixed up in it.

LP: They didn't want you over-celebrating. How long was it before you actually got out of service there?

BG: That was August. I didn't get out until the following March.

LP: What did you do for that six months?

BG: I stayed out on the ship and helped decommission the ship. The ship went to San Diego, and we decommissioned the ship there.

LP: That ship went into the mothballs. But later on it came out did it not?

BG: They put it back and commissioned her in the Korean War and also the Vietnam War.

LP: Of course, you weren't on it at that time?

BG: No.

LP: When you did get out, did you consider staying in the Navy or staying in the reserves?

BG: I stayed in the reserves. I thought I'd get a better shot at the Navy by being in the reserves.

LP: At this time you had reached what rating?

BG: Machinist mate third class.

LP: You stayed in the reserves as a petty officer third class?

BG: Yes.

LP: How long did you stay in the reserves?

BG: I stayed in the reserves until the Korean War started.

LP: You got out then? Why?

BG: They wanted me to go back in. They wouldn't give me my extra pay to go back in. I didn't have to sign unless they were giving me my machinist mate second class, but they wouldn't give it to me. [They said], "You'll get it at the port where you check in." I said, "No, I'm not."

LP: You wanted it before you went on active duty, and they'd said we'll give it to you after.

BG: I wanted to be sure I was going to get it. I said, "I'm not signing my name to any papers until I get my assurance that I'm going to get this money for my family."

LP: How many children did you have by this time?

BG: We had three children. It was taking all the money I was making third class to support them. I had no money to operate on myself at all.

LP: I believe you told me that one of the reasons was you got an allowance if you were petty officer second class that you didn't get as a petty officer third class.

BG: Second class, they would pay your family so much money.

LP: Meanwhile, obviously you had returned to civilian life. What did you do in the first weeks and months after you actually got out of active duty in March of 1946?

BG: I went back to work.

LP: For whom?

BG: Santa Fe. I had to, to keep my job, seniority. I had to go back within a certain time.

LP: You got to accumulate seniority while you were in the military service.

BG: Right.

LP: This was here in Emporia?

BG: Yes.

LP: You stayed with the Santa Fe then for the rest of your occupational career?

BG: Right.

LP: How many years was that?

BG: 42 years.

LP: What was the final job you had with the Santa Fe?

BG: I was foreman on the loading docks in Topeka for my final job.

LP: Is that a union job, too?

BG: Yes.

LP: I wasn't aware whether foremen were included in the union or not. How did you get along?

Were you a strong supporter of the union?

BG: Yes, I was.

LP: Why was this?

BG: I felt like the unions did a lot of good for us. We got pay raises pretty regularly, and we had pretty good work conditions that we got through the union that we wouldn't have had if we hadn't had the union.

LP: Was this one of the railroad unions?

BG: Yes.

LP: This was not the CIO or AFL?

BG: No.

LP: This was a separate railroad union. You didn't at any time then go back to school or anything like this?

BG: No.

LP: Did you use the GI Bill at all?

BG: Yes. I signed up for a diesel course. But I never did get it all completed.

LP: Did you use the GI Bill for any other purpose, like buying a house?

BG: No.

LP: How about veterans' benefits and medical benefits and things of this nature?

BG: Yes. I get my medicine through the VA.

LP: Do you have an opinion of the GI Bill? Do you think it was a good idea to make all of these things available to veterans?

BG: Yes I do.

LP: You're not just saying that for your own purpose but you're saying that in general?

BG: No. I'll tell you what. When I go up to the VA, I can't believe how many people are up there that have been in the military that need help. If it wasn't for the VA, they would not be able to get that medical help that they're getting up there because the cost would be too much.

LP: This is especially true with prescription drugs and things of that nature. Tell me about your family and children.

BG: I have three boys and one daughter.

LP: What are their names?

BG: My oldest boy's name is Michael, and Sharon Kay is my daughter. I have a son named Alan, and a son named Stephen. They all have good jobs. My son Michael has a real estate company in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sharon is the office manager at the Chamber of Commerce. Alan works for a chemical company in St. Louis and has a good job. Stephen works for Exxon Mobil in Beaumont, Texas.

LP: How many of your children have gone to college?

BG: They've all gone.

LP: All of them have gone to college?

BG: Except my daughter.

Mrs. BG: She's taking courses. They all have degrees except her.

LP: Have you been at all active since you left service in veterans affairs, veterans organizations?

BG: I'm a life member in the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

LP: You belong to the American Legion?

BG: I belong to the American Legion in Emporia.

LP: Do you consider yourself a strong supporter of the veteran organizations?

BG: I am at least of the American Legion. I don't do as much in the Veterans of Foreign Wars as I should because the group I belong to is from Carbondale, Kansas. It's just too hard to get up there for their meetings.

LP: You don't belong here in Emporia?

BG: No. I'm a life member in Carbondale. I've never transferred my membership down here.

LP: Do you have a good opinion of veteran organizations?

BG: Yes. I do.

LP: You think they are good for the country?

BG: Yes I do. The vets [VFW] have a real good program, and so does the American Legion.

LP: How do you think your wartime experience has affected your later life, or has it?

BG: I can't say it really has. I was fortunate enough to come home without any injuries, which was more than a lot of guys.

Mrs. BG: The adjustment was horrible.

BG: Yes.

LP: Why was the adjustment horrible?

BG: Just getting back on track after you've been in the Navy, doing things different. It takes a while to get back into a routine.

Mrs. BG: Seemed like the kids and I ought to operate like the Navy.

LP: This brings up another thing that I should have asked you before. Did you receive any special decorations or honors or awards while you were in the service? Obviously, you got battle stars, as the ship got five battle stars.

BG: I got five battle stars and a good conduct medal.

LP: That's better than I got.

BG: But that's about the extent of it.

LP: The United States, when you were a small child, was pretty much an isolationist country; as you yourself said, "I didn't pay much attention to what was going on in the rest of the world."

Now as a result of the war and the years afterwards, America has become very heavily involved in world affairs. What's your view of America's world involvement at the present time?

BG: I have a real fond memory of all the guys I served with on the ship. Whenever I see them I'm always glad to see them. Whenever we get together we have a good time.

LP: I know you're a firm goer to reunions and this sort of thing.

BG: It's good to get back to see your old buddies. The friendship that you develop is a lasting friendship.

LP: Do you think that World War II, as you look back on it, was a proper war for the United States? An ideal war? Perhaps "ideal" is the wrong word, but it was a just war; it had to be done?

BG: It was a just war and it had to be done, that's for sure.

LP: What do you think about the wars that America have been involved since then.

BG: I think that the one that we're in right now—I don't think those guys are getting a fair shake.

LP: Why do you say that?

BG: Today those guys who are getting injured and stuff like that, when they come back to civilian life, if they're injured, they're going to find it a hard go. Even though they've been hurt in battle, there's no company [that's] going to take any mercy on them just because they got injured in battle. We are going to have some guys who will never be able to do the things again that they did before they went into this war.

LP: Do you think that the present war in Iraq is justified in the sense that World War II was justified?

BG: I think it was a big propaganda mistake.

LP: Where you have supported President Truman, if you were President Bush, you wouldn't have done what he did?

BG: No, I don't believe so.

LP: We've talked about quite a few things here. We are coming to the end of the tape and is there anything else you want to talk about that we haven't talked about that you want to put on before we close down here?

BG: Well, the only thing I have to say is that the experience that I learned while I was in the Navy I wouldn't trade for anything in my life because it was wealth of experience even though it was kind of hard at times. I learned, while I was in the Navy, that things don't come easy. Some things you have to do that you don't like to do. They are necessary.

LP: Let me ask you this question. If you were the same age and America was in the same position would you do the same thing again?

BG: I probably would. Yes.

LP: That's probably a good place to close.

BG: Yes. I probably would.

LP: Thank you very much.

BG: Thank you.

[Interview ends side B, count 387.]