

Interview with John J. Riisoe

Veteran World War II

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Narrator: This is an interview with John J Riisoe, who is 77 years old, born April 9, 1926. My name is Jennifer Keddie and Arturo Chavez and I will be the interviewers. John J. Riisoe is a veteran of World War II.

Narrator: Where were you stationed and please tell us about your experiences?

Riisoe: I was inducted in Kansas City, Kansas. I went to boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, and I was there from November until February 10, well actually December 1st. Then I came home and got married. I went back after seven days to Great Lakes for what they call basic engineering. After I completed that, I went by way of New York City to Newport, Rhode Island and boarded the *USS Frankford DD 497*. Immediately when I got aboard, we went out in the Atlantic Ocean, and they were trying to kill a sub. There were three "tin cans" as we called them, three destroyers, an aircraft carrier, and lots of airplanes and only one Nazi sub. You would have thought we would have got him. We spent three days and nights. We took out six loads of ash cans. Those are the depth charges that they put in racks, and then they go "boom" like that. They go out and they sink and are set to go off at a certain depth. They shake the hell out of everything. The ship just vibrates violently when they go off. Anyway, we never did get him. We thought we did because trash came up, you know, but I suppose they were blowing it out through the torpedo tubes. Anyway, after we left there, we went to New York City. The sub came up in Boston Harbor and surrendered his U-boat and then he took a cyanide pill and killed himself. So he was kind of a radical Nazi.

Anyway we went up to New York City then, to the big shipyard to remove the torpedo tubes from the center of our ship, and we put on two quad 40 millimeter ackack guns that sat right in the center of the ship. They used the torpedoes in the Pacific in order to kill subs and other shipping that the Japanese had, and they didn't need them when they went to the Atlantic. When they were going to the Pacific there were so many of these dive bombers and dive airplanes. The Japs were on suicide missions, kamikaze pilots they called them. Anyway, we were going over to the Pacific and so they put these two quad 40 guns on. During general quarters I was the second loader on the one side of this quad 40. There were two sides of it . . . two pointers and two first loaders, two second loaders, and two third loaders. The third loaders were below the decks, and they handed the shells up to me. I was the second loader and of course there was another guy that was a second loader on the other side. It was quite exciting trying to hand these to the guy up on the turret because this turret was going back and forth so you could point the gun. They were sitting there with wheels, a wheel on each hand and they'd screw these things that made the tip . . . I mean to point the guns where you wanted them. Then they run them up and

down too. So it was quite exciting to get those shells up there because you had to be dancing around on the deck all day.

Narrator: How heavy were the shells?

Riisoe: There were five in a clip and they were about a foot long at least and the shells were about two inches in diameter. Every fifth shell was a tracer so you could tell where they were going, and this was daylight or dark. They had this tracer built in there so you could tell exactly what you were shooting at that way.

Narraator: What was your favorite part of the war and did you get to see a lot?

Riisoe: Well, you get to see a lot of country in the Navy. I probably went close to 70,000 miles aboard ship and on land in less than a year and a half. So I wasn't sitting still very much. The destroyer that I was on, a type of ship in a convoy, goes around and around so that they protect the ships that are in the convoy. That way you get twice to three times as many miles as the other ships go, the ones that are going in a straight line, so you rack up a lot of miles on these ships. Anyway, after we got the quad 40's on at the New York shipyards, we went to Guantanamo, Cuba for two weeks for gunnery practice. We would have gunnery practice in the daytime and then we would go ashore in the evening. They had movies on shore one night and I went to the movie, and when I came back the ship was gone. Of course it scared me pretty bad, but of all the guys that went ashore I was the only guy that they didn't tell that they were going to move the ship at 9:30 in the evening. The show was not over until about 10:00 and I didn't know about it so when I got there the ship was gone. So I turned myself in to the Provo Marshall on the island, and he had a guy take me clear across this island. Well, it probably wasn't clear across Cuba but a part of it. When we got there, I could see my ship out there on the water. I couldn't swim and you had to get there by boat. So I went down to the shore and this guy took me over in a jeep, took me down there and found a guy who was going around delivering all the drunk sailors to their different ships. He needed some help so he took me along. Anyway, it was about 4 o'clock in the morning before I finally got to my ship. We passed it many, many times but the old boy would not let me go because he wanted me to help him lift these drunken sailors who had passed out. (Laugh) Anyway, the reason they had passed out was because the beer over there was like 20 percent alcohol. You didn't have to drink very much of it before you were in la la land. (Laughs)

From Guantanamo Bay, Cuba we went through the Panama Canal to San Diego and then on to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. While we were in Pearl Harbor there was a false rumor that the war was over and all hell broke loose. They started shooting those quad 40's straight up in the air and we were watching the movie on the front of the ship (they call the fo's'cle). Immediately when they started shooting, I went below because I knew that anything that went up had to come back down. (Laugh)

Anyway, it was a false rumor. I forgot to tell you a while ago that I went aboard the ship in the Atlantic on V.E. Day May 8, 1945. Anyway, when we left Pearl Harbor we went

to Japan by way of Okinawa and Eniwetok, which was nothing much but an island with a lot of trees on it and no people. They had quite a large naval base there, and that's where they did a lot of the atomic bomb testing. The main thing I noticed there was that it had the clearest water that I had ever seen in the ocean. You could see down forever it looked like. The guys started throwing spoons off the ship and letting them go down because you could just see them go down and down and down. (Laugh) It was quite a deal, and they finally stopped them because we were going to run out of silverware. (Laugh)

Narrator: Did you know at the time that they were doing the atomic bomb testing?

Riisoe: No! See, they had dropped one of the atomic bombs when we were going through the Panama Canal, the way I remember. Then they dropped the other one sometime after we went through the canal when we were on the way to Hawaii. It might have not been they had dropped the bomb then, might have been when we were between San Diego and Hawaii when they dropped it. The big thing that happened when we went through the canal was that Russia declared war on Japan as they had not done before, and Russia and the United States were allies. I know several of the older fellows got pretty angry on the ship when they heard that because Russia was just trying to get in on the spoils of war at the end of it. (Laughs) Anyway, after we left Eniwetok we went to Kure, Japan which was another nothing place except we got to go aboard a Japanese carrier that had been sunk there. On their carrier, instead of having a wood deck there was a cement deck poured on top of the rest of the ship. That was the big thing I noticed about it. It was sitting in pretty shallow water so you could get aboard it and get on the flight deck. Those flight decks are pretty high; I don't know how far up they were. We escorted some army troops into a fishing village called Wakayama and Yokosuka, in the mouth of Tokyo Bay.

I was also in Hiroshima which is where the first atomic bomb was dropped. The other one was dropped in Nagasaki, but I think Hiroshima was first. There wasn't very much standing there, but there was one building that was an armory that was pretty well made. My buddies and I broke in and got three Jap .21 caliber rifles that had folding bayonets on them. They were called a carbine. We took them back to the ship. We got some ammunition, a couple belts of ammunition a piece.. We swaggered back to the ship and the first thing they did was take them away from us. They gave them to the officers on the ship. Later on we had an L.C.I.(Landing Craft Infantry) pull alongside with a load of Jap .31 caliber rifles. I got the honor of helping them clean those up and pass them out to the different guys on the ship. Most of them had never even been used. They were a lot like our .30-06 caliber rifles but were very crudely made. Anyway, I got to bring one of them home, but I'd much rather had that ...no, it was a .25 caliber.

Narrator: Do you still have the rifle?

Riisoe: No, it was the .25 caliber they took away from us, but I still have the .31 caliber one. But my oldest boy Johnny "sporterized" it. He cut the end of the barrel off, and took off some of the wood, and mad a sport rifle out of it. Without my knowledge, of course. (Laughs) We were over there in Japan quite a while. When we started back to

the United States sometime in November they put 113 armed guard Marines and sailors on board our ship, and we already have 320 guys on our ship. When the ship was 320 feet long and 32 feet wide, I want to tell you, it was very crowded. That's the way I remember the ship as it was a little longer than a football field, and the football field is 100 yards.

Narrator: How many decks were on the ship?

Riisoe: There was the main deck and then there was the deck above it where the quad 40's sat. And then the front of the ship from about two thirds of the way from the back to the front was what they called the fo'c's'le. It was up yet another story. There was a below deck, which was where the fire room and the engine rooms were. There were two fire rooms and two engine rooms on this ship, a forward and a aft for each one. I was in the forward fire room. I was a Fireman 2nd Class.

All my buddies that I went aboard ship with were Fireman 1st, but the reason that I didn't get a Fireman 1st was because I got an 18-day leave through my Aunt Julia who was in the Red Cross. When we were up in New York City changing the torpedo tubes over to quad 40's, there really wasn't anything for us to do. The ship was lying there and all the steam power was off when they were doing this. We got a seven day leave, but I got mine extended to an 18-day leave through the Red Cross because my dad needed help getting ready for harvest. It was the latter part of May that I got to come home for 18 days. When I got back, nobody liked it very well because the Captain only got ten days. (Laugh) They couldn't find enough bad details for me to be on. Anyway, the chief of our division, the E division below decks, said, "John, if you want to take a test, well, we'll put up to Fireman 1st" And I said, "Well now, Packheser, Griff, and Gendron didn't take tests." He said, "Well yeah, but they didn't get an 18-day leave." So I remained a Fireman 2nd throughout my career because I was kind of bull headed.

On the way back to the United States, we ran into a terrible typhoon. They're like a hurricane only worse. All I remember about it was that I was stuck down below in the fire room for three days and three nights with nothing to eat but coffee and some crackers that they had down there. You couldn't get out of the fire room because the water was rushing by on the sides of the ship, on the main deck of the ship. The ship had four five-inch 38 guns and turrets. They set one on the main deck and the other one was up on the second deck, front and back of the ship. When this typhoon was about over I finally got out of the below deck in the forward fire room and I went up on the bridge. Most of the time most of those guns were under water, and this was when the typhoon was starting to get over. I can't imagine what it was the other time (*during the height of the storm.*) Several of the guys told me that they saw an aircraft carrier which we were escorting dip the flight deck and the waves went over the top of the flight deck which is way up there. The dolphins loved it and would come flying out of one wave clear across the air into another wave on the other side. They really have a lot of fun while it is going on. It was pretty bad. Those 113 Navy and Marines had been aboard ships bigger than ours, and when we got in that typhoo, they got horribly seasick. One guy lay on the machine shop floor, up on the main deck inside, for all those three days. When he got up, they took him

down to sickbay, and he had that pattern of that deck all over the back of his body because he never moved. Another guy sat in the galley passageway on a valve that was about 3/8 inch thick and six to eight inches round. He sat on that and he had a crease in his butt clear to the bone from sitting there. They want to die and can't. When you get seasick, you get so bad you just want to die and can't. It's awful.

Narrator: Did you ever get seasick?

Riisoe: No, when we went aboard ship, a guy told me that anytime I felt like I was going to get sick to go down below into the fire room or in the engine room, anything to get down below so there's not so much motion. The Atlantic is always rough, and it is worse in the spring of the year, like in May when I went aboard ship. It's terrible. That's the way I avoided it, and then it never bothered me. I had this one friend named Packheiser from Vichy, Missouri. He was a big guy, about 6' 4" tall. Every time we got into port and he stepped on land, he go sick for three days. He would go around with a handful of crackers and water to drink. He would eat crackers, drink the water, and go over to the side and heave it up. But if you don't eat something you get the dry heaves. They're worse than getting seasick I guess. I never had dry heaves. (Laugh)

Yeah, where are at now? We're in Japan now, aren't we? On the way back we met the *Missouri*, which is the battleship on which Japan surrendered to the United States. It was captained by a guy by the name of Bull Halsey, that was his nickname, Bull. Anyway, they were coming back to the United States after the surrender ceremony which was on the 14th of August, 1945. They had taken the *Missouri* ship (I'm pretty sure it was a battleship) through the Panama Canal before we went through there. They measured the ship and measured the canal. I don't know if you know anything about the canal, but you go into a lock and then they run water in there and raise it up when you are going west. When you are going from the east to the west, you get raised up so you get even with this lake that is higher than the ocean over here. See, the East Coast is lower than that. When they took that ship through they used a 5/18" rope on each side to keep from rubbing the sides, and there was blue paint on the sides of the locks from one end to the other. It was so tight it was a wonder they didn't get stuck in there. You know everything wasn't perfect, but there were guys. They'd take these ropes and hang them down and then they had to stand there and hold that rope until they got to the back end of the ship and then walked forward and come back again. So it took a lot of men to get that ship through there. It was crazy to do it, but they wanted the Japanese to surrender aboard it. That is the reason they took it over, because they knew the Japs weren't going to last forever.

Anyway, we came back in November from Japan. After we went through the Panama Canal again, we had to do what they called speed runs for about five hours each day. They just opened up the ship and let her run just as hard as she could. This tin can I was on, the top speed on it was 38 knots, about 42 miles per hour, a little better than 42 because a knot is a mile and one-eighth. Anyway, when you were back on the fantail, the back of the ship, there was water around you as the ship was dug in so much. There would be water around 10-12 feet above you. When you walked toward the front of the ship it was like walking up a big steep hill. It was sitting in the water like this (gestures

an incline). The tin cans had two screws on them, two propellers on them. They had two engine rooms and two fire rooms and boy they'd get with it. We sailed into Charleston on the first day of December in 1945. A guy was taking pictures of the ships coming under this big bridge. I have a picture of this ship; you can see a guy down there waving at this fella and that's me. There weren't very many people out on the deck because they were getting ready to go out on shore when we got in there, but I happened to be right behind the galley passage way which is in the break in the deck. You can see me waving. You can't tell who it is . . . because the guy was up there a long ways and the ship didn't look very big from where he was.

There's some other things I can tell you about. This ship I was on was a 1650-ton class destroyer. Later on they made much larger destroyers, 2150 and a 2200 class. We had four five-inch 38 turret guns and two quad 40's on the ship and a few 20 millimeter guns that a guy strapped himself in and did his own pointing and shooting. The magazine was about as big around as a 15-gallon barrel. It just sat in there and had shells running around and around in it. It was a pretty lethal gun. They used them a lot to shoot mines, floating mines that had broken loose. Mines are always tethered below the ocean and they once in a while break loose or a minesweeper comes along and cuts them loose and they float to the top. The minesweeper doesn't shoot them or anything. What you have to do is you have to hit these knobs that stick out on them. And they use these 20-millimeter guns. When they hit these knobs, they blow them up so they don't sink other ships. This tin can I was on was commissioned in either Bremerton or Tacoma, Washington. I'm not sure because I wasn't there in 1943; that was the year I graduated out of high school. It went through the Normandy and Sicily invasions in the Atlantic before I went aboard, so it had seen a lot of action. They mostly stayed off shore and used the five-inch ,38s to just pound the hell out of everything on shore. These five-inch 38s were big shells; the shell itself was five inches across. The brass was about I'd say two feet long. They were hand loaded back in the turrets; they had a lot of their ammunition up in there. When the gun fired, the breech came open and the shell came back out and this thing dumped it off so it went off the ship into the ocean. Whoever was loading it, had to lay this big shell back on the reloader, and then they pushed it in and closed the breech door. I was never up in one of them, so I'm not exactly sure how they worked, but there's a lot of brass in the Pacific Ocean because all the shells that were used went over the side, which is a terrible waste.

Narrator: What brings memories of the war back to you?

Riisoe: What brings back memories? Well, mostly when I see it on TV,

Narrator: What are your feelings about war?

Riisoe: Well, there was nothing we could do about that war because the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. Up until then we were helping the war in Europe. We were on the Allies' side. Everybody was against the Nazis and Germany. When the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor, they had some silly idea they were going to take over the United States. It was ludicrous . . . it really was. There was no way they could have done it, but they had

people worried. If they would have come on over here after they attacked Pearl Harbor and if they would have sent those carriers right on over here, they probably would've had a pretty good foothold on the West Coast before we whipped their butts. But the way it was, they decided to withdraw. That really saved us because we had a chance to make up a lot of stuff. Of course we were already making a lot of war materials, airplanes, ships and what not.

I remember the war in Europe when we went to invade Germany on D-Day . . . this sounds like a pipe dream. But I remember one day we lost 700 airplanes. That's a bunch. That sounds crazy, doesn't it? I had a brother-in-law over there, a guy by the name of Lawrence Edman who was a pilot in a B-24. He disappeared during this time and I don't know what happened to him. It was awfully hard on my sister because she just had a baby son, born on the 19th of February I think it was, and she got notice that her husband was missing three days later. Later on, I think it was a year afterward, they declared him dead. Then a guy showed up in England who was the tail-gunner on his plane, so they reopened the whole investigation again. Come to find out that this tail-gunner was on the plane the day before. When they went to take off, they had a full bomb load and a tank of gas and one engine conked out on him. It was a four-engine plane. They couldn't get it off the ground and he set it down with that full bomb load; it scared that tail-gunner so damn bad that he disappeared. So the next day they gave my brother-in-law another plane, and he took off and had a different tail-gunner. The first tail-gunner didn't show up for a year, and they had thought he was gone; well this tail gunner got saved—probably spent a little time in Leavenworth for deserting. (Laughs)

Narrator: What is your opinion of the war in Iraq?

Riisoe: Well, I think it was unnecessary. I don't think Iraq was much of a threat to us. We have enough atomic stuff to annihilate the world, but it would really be stupid to ever use it. If you blow everybody off the face of the earth and kill every living thing, you can't live in a nuclear waste deal. It would be stupid. In one way though, I really don't think the war in Iraq was too bad. Sadaam was terrible to his own people, and I think that part of it was fine. The trouble is we got ourselves in a jam now. It is going to be pretty hard to get out of it because we've got the people who are for Sadaam against us and against the Iraqi people. So we really haven't changed a whole lot. It's going to be a bad situation. I don't know how it will come out. One never knows.