

Walter J. Banko
Narrator

Michael Russert
Interviewer

June 12, 2002
Connecticut Street Armory
Buffalo, New York

Walter J. Banko **WB**
Michael Russert **MR**

MR: This is an interview of Walter Banko at the Connecticut Street Armory in Buffalo, New York, Wednesday, June 12, 2002. It is 9 a.m. The interviewer is Michael Russert. Could you tell me your full name and when and where you were born?

WB: Walter Joseph Banko, Coalport, Pennsylvania, a little town in Pennsylvania.

MR: When were you born, sir?

WB: 1926.

MR: What was your prewar education?

WB: Tenth grade in high school.

MR: And did you leave there to join the military?

WB: To join the Navy.

MR: And what year did you join the Navy?

WB: 1943.

MR: How old were you?

WB: 17.

MR: Ok. What was your reaction to Pearl Harbor?

WB: At first I was kind of mad.

MR: How did you hear about it?

WB: Well, I was still in high school at that time. They put it on all the speakers about Pearl Harbor. On the following Monday they did it, because this happened on a Sunday. Sunday morning, I think I was in church, because at that time I think I was an altar boy in the church. People were coming in and they were talking about it. So I think that's the first time I heard about Pearl Harbor. And I was very angry. They snuck up on us.

MR: Were you enlisted, or were you drafted?

WB: No, I enlisted. I was only 17.

MR: And why did you select the Navy?

WB: Me and a friend of mine went in together. Most of the boys that I hung around with were older than we were. They were drafted, because they were 18. They were either drafted, or some of them enlisted. So me and my buddy, who were 17, decided we were not going to hang around this little town with all these girls, we gotta get out of here. So we hitchhiked to Altoona, which was about 25 miles, and signed up for the Navy.

MR: Where did you go for basic training?

WB: Great Lakes.

MR: Could you tell us about some of your experiences there. Was this your first time away from home?

WB: Yes, but I was more or less on my own since I was young. Both of my parents were dead, and I was tossed around from family aunts and grandmas, so from 12 years old, I was kind of on my own. It didn't bother me a bit. I was glad to get somewhere where I knew I was going to get three meals a day, three square meals, and a place to sleep. But, Great Lakes, it was very good, marching and so forth. The one thing I can remember is I couldn't believe so many people in the Navy didn't know how to swim. In fact, when I was there for extra duty, I was up at the swimming pool as a lifeguard. And I couldn't believe how scared people were of the water, because I was always around water, it was always natural. My brother threw me off a sixteen foot deck when I was about two or three years old, and I learned how to swim in sixteen feet of water. I was always

around water, and I could not believe how many people in the Navy didn't know how to swim. They had to go through this basic training before they could go through boot camp.

MR: Where did you go for your boot camp and other training?

WB: Well, boot camp was at Great Lakes, and then from there I went to Norfolk, Virginia for a gunnery school. I think that was a ten week course. And then from there we went to Brooklyn, New York. That was the home base for the Armed Guard, that was a branch of the Navy that was on board merchant ships, cargo ships, and we manned the guns and did the watch and so forth, but the ships were run and operated by merchant marines. Navy gun crew on cargo ships, is really what it was; they called it the Armed Guard.

MR: When did you go to sea for the first time?

WB: Right before Christmas. We were probably halfway across the Atlantic on Christmas Day.

MR: And this was in 1943?

WB: 1943, right. The Red Cross had put some stuff on board before so the lieutenant could give it to us on Christmas Day, like sweaters, candy and stuff like that. At that time, Christmas morning, the lieutenant brought all these packages down. They were all about the same. I should mention this: the captain of the ship, who was a merchant marine, he brought down quarts of alcohol and put them on the table and said "Merry Christmas!" (laughs)

MR: So could you tell us about this first voyage across the Atlantic.

WB: It was very interesting and a little scary, because at that time the German submarines were blowing up a lot of the merchant cargo ships. They had, I guess what they called a wolf pack, like maybe twelve submarines. Two would carry supplies and equipment and the other ten were what they called hunters, and they'd be all around looking for American ships. That way, they could stay out there for months without having to get to port anywhere. And that was kind of scary because they were knocking off quite a few of our ships.

We would travel with about a hundred ships in a convoy, and our lead ship, a flagship, usually a light cruiser and a couple destroyers, and the rest were DEs, destroyer escorts. They were little, small, but they would maneuver fast and they were equipped specially for depth charges. So they'd be running in and out of the columns all the time, you'd hear sirens going.... Every time you heard

sirens going, you figured there's got to be a sub somewhere close. That would kind of shake you up a bit.

MR: Do you know what kind of cargo was on your ship?

WB: Five hundred pound bombs. That's why we often wondered... Well, the five trips I made across there, every trip we had bombs, plus some other cargo. I always wondered why we were in the middle of the convoy, but I know now that we were a little protected by being in the middle.

Another thing, that German battleship, Bismarck, used to pop up now and then. We used to call it the ghost ship because every once in a while it would pop up in the Atlantic Ocean somewhere. And it could sit back, because it could fire guns sixteen miles away. Our biggest gun we could shoot, a five inch .38, on the stern, would shoot accurate only six miles. So they could just sit back and just pop shells. If for some reason, they always got... The air force, where ever they were close to any base, would come out there, and it seemed like they would disappear. That's why we called it the ghost ship, it was, you know, a funny thing but a scary thing.

And then, the fog--a lot of fog in the Atlantic Ocean. In fact on one trip across an English cargo ship put a hole in her bow running into us because it was really foggy. When you were up there standing watch, you could hear the water and the waves, and you couldn't even see that far. But they had a program set up every fifteen minutes or every half an hour, you would sound off your code with your horn, your foghorn. Well, say, if you were the third ship in the fifth column, you would blow three [sic] longs, that would give you the column and three shorts, that would give you the position you were in there. So they had that set up pretty good. And then, to go straight across we usually leave Brooklyn, New York, or New Jersey, either one, and usually to go across to England it only took about nine or ten days. But the way the convoy went, we'd stagger all the way across, and it took about twenty days to go across. I guess they did that trying to throw the subs off, because at that time in 1943 they were really blowing up a lot of our cargo ships.

MR: Were you ever in a convoy that was attacked by submarines, where you saw them—

WB: Yes, yes, at a distance, in the far distance, not too close. And another thing, they used to throw mines in there once in a while. I know one time, a ship just off the starboard side of us hit a mine. It didn't sink it, but it put a little hole in it. In fact we got permission, when we used to see a mine floating by, we'd ask the lieutenant if we could shoot at it, because we had a couple rifles. So we'd shoot

at it, and if you hit the [unclear] just right, you could blow them up. So we got a kick out of that.

And, I made five trips across, back and forth on the Atlantic. And on that thing [the form he'd filled out before the interview] I only have the name of one ship, because to this day I can't remember the other ships. There were at least four or five other ships, I can't remember them. They were all cargo ships; they had names like [unclear], they were named, maybe, after some wealthy executive or something like that.

But anyhow, after making five trips, the last trip, an officer from the Navy came aboard with a British officer, and he wanted volunteers—he said volunteers, but really it was “you, and you, and you”. They wanted young guys that were single to gather up their gear and there was a British truck there on the dock. I think there were about six of us from our ship, and we picked up other people from other ships. I think we ended up with maybe a hundred sailors. And we were turned over to the British Army, and they took us in and they trained us in mostly small arms, gas masks, how to recognize different types of gases, and the main thing was aircraft recognition. They had to make sure that we weren't shooting at British or American planes, only at German planes. So that was the big thing, aircraft recognition.

MR: How long was that training, would you say?

WB: I think it was six weeks. After that we got back onto the ship. When we got back, the ship was turned into a troop transport. They had put wooden bunks down in the hatches for troops, and they made it into a troop transport. So we were loaded up with British soldiers—not Americans, British—and we were setting out in the English Channel, at least a couple of weeks. Everyone was getting all shook up, getting disgusted just sitting there. In the meantime, General Eisenhower and Montgomery were making up their minds when they were going and where they were going to invade. So we were coming up with all different kinds of games, boxing matches and wrestling matches. Some guys had a guitar, singing, we were doing anything (laughing) so they wouldn't be so bored. I used to feel sorry for the guys because being down in the hold a lot of them used to get seasick. The merchant marines, they used to have to go down there every night with a garden hose—or a fire hose-- and clean up the deck from the guys being sick. One morning I heard this noise, and I went up on deck in just my skivvies--it sounded like a bunch of trains or something. And I looked up in the skies and there were thousands and thousands of planes, every kind you could think of, and being I went through the recognition, I knew different bombers and fighters, Spitfires, and what kinds... This was about four o'clock in the morning. And I no sooner get back in my room when they announced that

we were all supposed to get dressed and go in the mess hall and have something to eat, because we were all going on general quarters at a certain time. I think, about six o'clock or so, we had orders to move out. So we went across the English Channel to France.

We went to Gold Beach, a little north of Omaha Beach because we had British soldiers. Now the problem there was – it was only about a six hour run from where we were to where we were going. But the Germans had what we called Big Bertha, a big gun on the side of the hill in France that was on tracks. And it would come out, and it could fire about twenty-two miles or something like that – that could reach quite close to Dover, that little town there. And of course, we were in the middle, so that's really what they were shooting at, the ships. The destroyers put smokescreens up, but the English Channel is only so wide, so they knew where we were at. I had to stand up on the bow because I was the first loader on the 350 on the bow, so standing there on the bow, a lot of times, maybe a hundred yards or so, I'd see a big shell going by. We were lucky, we never got hit. Some ships got hit. They had some tugs there. The English Channel wasn't that deep, either. They had tugs pulling the ships that were hit off to the side to keep the lanes open.

So when we got as far as we could go in to Gold Beach, we threw the jacob's ladder over the side, which is a rope ladder, and that's the way the soldiers had to get off into smaller craft, like LSTs, all kinds of... There were even some personal, people had donated their little cruisers. There were all kinds of little ships there. And they'd get off and go to shore. The big thing was, those guys would go down the ladder. Their packs were probably about eighty pounds or more. Some of them would slip and fall in the water and drown, the poor guys never had a chance. A couple trips after that they smartened up a little bit, and I think it was the Navy Engineers or Seals who used to be there when they were unloaded, in their diving suits, so if somebody did fall they could pull them up and save them. But before that, people would just drown.

So we would unload there, then we would go back to England. Every other day we'd be back to France with another load of soldiers and equipment too. I think about the third time, we started to take Canadian troops in, and after that, one trip we had some young Polish soldiers. They had escaped up through Spain or something and up to England. England trained them and gave them a uniform and a special color hat, and we were taking them back in. I got to talk--I'd hang around my grandmother who was Polish, and I could understand but I couldn't talk very much – but there was one guy in particular whose name was the same as mine, Walter, so I got to know him a little bit. I used to give him some ham and eggs. In my bunk area he'd seen some magazines, you know Superman and

Batman, and he went crazy over those things, so I gave them to him. I don't know what he ever did with them.

But we'd shuttle back and forth until the war was over. The other hazard was the buzz bombs. These five hundred pound bombs that the Germans come up with, and they put a wing and a little propeller on them, and they put a junky motor on it – sounded like a washing machine motor – and they would shoot them towards London. They really did a lot of damage to London. The way they did it, they'd fill them up with a certain amount of gas, and when they ran out of gas, naturally they had to come down. That was their strategy – they'd fill them up and when they ran out of gas, they'd come down (gestures bomb falling). So a lot of times the British fighters, the Spitfire, they found out that if they got close enough, they could tip their wing and hit the wing of this bomb and throw them off course. But where they were throwing them was down in the English Channel, where we were. So that was a little dangerous.

Then after the war, orders come aboard and we are supposed to get dressed up, put our leggings and everything on, dress uniforms. We were going to march in victory parades. We only had a few rifles, and we didn't have a flag with a staff, we had to borrow some from the army.

MR: Where were you when you heard about VE, Victory in Europe, do you recall? And your reaction to that?

WB: No, but I was glad that big gun, Bertha, after we were there maybe a month or so, the Army Engineers parachuted down and took that gun by hand combat, that's the only way you could get at them. Because at that time we didn't have bombs that could blow up that kind of thing. So I was very glad to hear about that thing! (laughs) Because we faced that thing every other day, and our luck – one of these days – is going to run out. But we were lucky, it didn't.

I must have been on board ship. I stayed there till the war was over, back and forth the whole time. And like I said we borrowed a flag and staff from the Army. And we went, I think, to Manchester, England. They'd send the guys to all these different times. I should have put on that sheet where it says when was one of the good times. That was one of the good times because girls and women would throw flowers at us, and coming up and kissing us, and there was all kinds of parties all night after that. They didn't have too much to eat or too much drink, because they didn't have that much. I know at one party I went to they had elderberry wine, and boy did I get sick on that! (Laughing) I'll never drink elderberry wine again!

MR: Did you end up going to the United States after that and marching in a parade?

WB: No, not marching in a parade, but I got sent back to the States. The war was still going on in the Pacific, so I was transferred to California, Alameda Naval Base right under the Golden Gate Bridge. I could look out my barracks and see the Golden Gate Bridge. The crazy pilots a lot of times if there was no ships, instead of going over the bridge they'd go under the bridge. I used to get a kick out of watching that. I got put on an aircraft carrier out there, we were putting on all new ammunition —

MR: Do you know what carrier that was?

WB: The Hornet. It was damaged once, but it was reconditioned, and it was in the bay in Alameda. We put all new supplies on it, and we were ready to go out to sea because they were planning a big invasion of Tokyo. And that's when President Truman gave the ok to drop the atomic bomb. So after they dropped the atomic bomb, after a couple days, I got back.

MR: What was your reaction when you heard about the atomic bomb?

WB: I was glad, because I knew there would have been hundreds and maybe thousands of Americans killed. Japan was well fortified, and I knew there would be a lot of people killed. Some people said, yeah but it killed a lot of women and children. And I say yeah, I know, and I feel sorry for that, but did they feel sorry when they snuck on attack on Pearl Harbor and killed a lot of people there, women and children? I don't feel a bit sorry, in fact I'm glad because I know it saved thousands and thousands of lives. If anybody says anything to me right now, I'll defend the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Then they took me off the ship again, didn't know what to do with me because of the point system. The Navy had a point system that they were discharging people, and I was young, not married, so I didn't have too many points. So they didn't know what to do with me. So they stuck me in charge of the galley on the night shift, and so that's where I gained about —

MR: This was in California?

WB: Alameda, California. And I think I gained about 55 pounds those last three months in the Navy. (Laughs) If I'd known that ahead of time, instead of being a gunner, I'd have signed up to be a cook! They had planes coming in all the time, being an air base, so one of our duties was when a plane come in, it'd have a crew of maybe twenty or twenty-five men, so we used to make up box lunches.

We had a regular cook, he used to do all the cooking. We didn't do the cooking, but we used to make them up a box lunch. It was very nice, sandwiches or chicken legs, a couple urns of coffee. And our driver would take them over to the barracks or wherever they were. So that was one of our main functions at night, too, anybody coming in who was hungry, we took care of them.

From there, when I was getting close to having enough points, they shipped me to Shoemaker, California, and that's where I got discharged. And my buddy, I had to wait for him a couple weeks to get out, so I just hung around Oakland a couple weeks waiting for him. When he got out, we hitchhiked across the country.

MR: Now this is this Bill Bigger you were talking about?

WB: Bill Bigger, right.

MR: Did you keep contact with him?

WB: For a long time, last few years – because he came back to Buffalo.... Well, we hitchhiked across country and we went to his father's place because his father had a dairy farm and two sawmills. I was in no hurry to get home at that time.

MR: Where was that?

WB: Merion, Michigan. So I stayed up there for a while, worked on the farm and in the sawmills. And then a little before Christmas I started to get a little homesick, because I had a lot of sisters and a brother back in Coalport, Pennsylvania, so I says I'm going back home. I got discharged in April and here it was almost Christmas and I wasn't home yet. So I'll go home for a little while.

So I left there and went home. And at that time the government had set up a program called the 52-20 club. They'd give you \$20 a week for 52 weeks to give you a chance to get organized, find a job or do whatever. Most of us younger guys just drew the \$20 and did maybe odd jobs. When baseball season opened up in the spring, we all went out and played baseball. We were at different little towns playing baseball, all season. (Laughing) And when the season was over I come to Buffalo, I had an aunt up here, lived right near the Chevrolet plant on River Road. So I came up here and got a job with General Motors right away, and stayed at my aunt's.

That's where I met my wife. She had a big house there and rented out some of the apartments, and my wife was in one of the apartments upstairs. So this one night, my buddy and I were going out to a dance and I needed my pants pressed.

So I said to my aunt "You got an ironing board handy so I can press my pants?" And she said, "No the girl upstairs borrowed it. She's probably through with it; go upstairs and see." So I went up and knocked on the door, she come to the door, I introduced myself. And I said "I understand you've got my aunt's ironing board and iron up here." She said, "Yeah, but I'm through with it." I said "Well as long as you got it here set up, how about pressing my pants?" So she said "Ok," pressed my pants, and she's been doing it for it'll be 54 years next October. October 2nd we've been married 54 years. People ask me how I met my wife, and I say "Pressing my pants."

So the only other thing connected with the service, was I joined the Legion later on in life. Last week I just got voted in as Commander of our Post.

MR: Now what Post is that?

WB: It's 838, Clarence Center Post.

MR: How long have you been a member of the Legion?

WB: The New York State, Albany one for maybe thirty years ago, but the local one, I'd say maybe eight years.

MR: Do you go to any of the reunions, or have you had contact with any of your —

WB: That's something I never got.... This Bill Bigger, I did have...well after we were married and I think we had two kids, we went up to see him. And him and his father weren't getting along too well. He got tired of working at the sawmill, so he came back with me to Buffalo, and he got a job at [unclear] here in Buffalo. He was around Buffalo for four or five years, then he met some girl. And they went back up to Michigan, and that was.... Thirty years ago, and I haven't seen..... The first few years I used to get a Christmas card from him, and I used to send a Christmas card. But the last twenty years or so, we just... And those three guys that you had pictures of, I have no idea where they are. Because I have friends, like this one good friend of mine, every couple years they go to different states and have conventions, different conventions. He was in the Air Force. But I never did anything like that. I feel sorry about that.

MR: You mentioned that the thing that made the greatest impression on you was the efficiency of the Navy. What do you mean by that?

WB: Because it seemed that every place we went, every port we went, we could go to the Naval Office, and the paymaster was always there and we could collect

our money. No matter what they did, they were always well organized, like when we came back from overseas, well we sometimes would be given a seven-day leave. When we came back to the Armed Guard Center, we'd have to go get on a different ship. That's why I say I don't remember all the ships. We'd go up on the balcony and they'd call out our names and they'd get a group together and they'd take us out and put us on board another ship. But the only thing I didn't like was it took so long for me to get out, with the point system!

MR: When you did the special training with the British Army, how did the Americans get along with the British?

WB: Good, we'd get along very good. You know, I always stop and think now: I can never remember eating there. I was wondering what the heck we were eating? Now what did we eat there? We used to take a lot of Spam over to them. In fact, two of our cargoes were filled with mostly five hundred pound bombs and the other one was usually filled with supplies, medical and food, Spam and powdered milk. Roosevelt and Churchill were pretty good friends, so they came up with a program, they called it the Lend-Lease program. And I think General Marshall ran it. The idea was the Americans would lend these British, France, Russian, and even Italy food and supplies and stuff like that, and then after the war they were supposed to pay us back. Well, France and England might have paid us back, but I don't think — because you have to remember after the war was the Cold War, and I don't think they ever paid us back. So, I always wonder: what did we have for breakfast? And I can't remember eating, and I must have eaten!

MR: How would you say your service affected your life?

WB: Like I said, being 17, the war really didn't bother me too much until after, years later. I used to walk out on deck, and the German fighters would be coming over, and we used to have to fire guns up there, but it never bothered me. I never thought "Hey, I might get killed!" I never thought of this. Of course, it did hurt me when I used to see these bodies floating around in the bay, all bloated up, dead, that used to upset me a little bit. But outside of that, I don't think it changed my life. It might have made me more independent, but like I said, before I went in the Navy I was independent. From twelve years old I was almost my own boss, I did almost what I wanted to. So getting in the Navy, to have the three square meals a day — I was more satisfied with that than with anything else.

MR: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WB: Five sisters and one brother.

MR: Did he serve in the military?

WB: No, because he had an accident in the mines and he lost one of his eyes, so he only had one eye. In fact, myself and my oldest sister are the only two living right now. My oldest sister is 82, and my younger sisters... One was killed in an auto accident and different things.... They're all gone. I'm the baby, I was the baby, and my oldest sister... When my mother died I was only about three, so my oldest sister, more or less, like our mother. She was about thirteen. She had to quit high school to take care of us because my father worked in the coal mines and couldn't take care of the six kids. She she more or less took care of us, and she's the one that's still living yet. And me the baby.

MR: Do you have any children?

WB: Yes, I have two sons and a daughter. My sons, none of them had to go in the service, it was always in between... Korea or something like that. They were never drafted. My oldest son is a supervisor for Simonelli Construction here in Buffalo, and the other one works for a contractor. My daughter has three boys, and me and grandma are running all over because it's baseball season. The three of them play baseball, so we're helping them out; in fact, we've got a baseball game tonight we've got to go to at 5 o'clock. Like I said, we've had our ups and downs in life and hard times and bad times. Right now it's good times because I'm retired now, living on New York State pension and Social Security, and my wife has a little pension and Social Security, so we're getting along.

MR: Do you think there's anything else you want to add?

WB: No, just as I said, it was a great experience being in the Navy, and I often thought if I would have stayed in there for my 20 years, I could have retired at 37! But I was anxious to get out. Really, I liked it in there, I don't know why I would have been anxious to get out. I never had any problems, discipline problems. One time I was late getting back from leave, I got my dates mixed up and I was a day late, and the officer just gave me a little chewing out, he understood. In fact that's the only time I remember getting called in for anything. Like I said, if I'd known at the end of my Navy life, I would have joined up to be a cook.

MR: Well, I want to thank you very much for coming in.

WB: Ok.