

Robert Henry Camidge  
Veteran

Robert von Hasseln  
Wayne Clarke  
New York State Military Museum  
Interviewers

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Watertown, New York

Robert Henry Camidge RC  
Robert von Hasseln RH

RH: Mr. Camidge tell me a little about where you were born and grew up.

RC: Where I was born? Croghan, New York, tenth month, fourth day, twenty four.

RH: Is that where you grew up?

RC: Yes.

RH: When did you graduate high school?

RC: Nine years. I didn't graduate.

RH: What was your family like? Large family? Small family?

RC: Large.

RH: What did your father do?

RC: He was a mechanic. He did mechanic work and (unclear), bulldozer. Worked in a wood (unclear), was a lumberjack.

RH: And your mother?

RC: She was a homemaker.

RH: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

RC: Yes...How many?

RH: Yes.

RC: Nine.

RH: Wow that's a lot.

RC: Ten all together. Mine, myself. Eight sisters and one brother.

RH: So what did you do after the ninth grade?

RC: After what?

RH: After you left school what did you do?

RC: I went into the service. Into the Navy.

RH: Why the Navy?

RC: Because my father was in the Navy, I guess. I kind of liked it. My father was on the USS Wyoming in World War I. It was the same for a lot of people who went in. I had no fear of water, that's one thing.

RH: And so you entered in what year?

RC: In the Navy? Forty three.

RH: And where did you go initially in the Navy?

RC: Where did I go?

RH: Yeah.

RC: All over the world.

RH: I mean first.

RC: At first? Oh, I took training at Sampson the naval training station. And then I went aboard an amphibious ship. Cargo attack.

RH: What was it like in Sampson?

RC: What was it like? You mean aboard the ship?

RH: No at Sampson training base. Sampson where you did your basic training.

RC: Yes. Eight weeks.

RH: And what was it like?

RC: Pretty much like all basic training, it was, uh, discipline, they were looking for discipline training. How to do your uniforms, wash them. The Navy did a lot of marching.

RH: Okay. And then from Sampson where did you go?

RC: (Unclear) ....

RH: What did you do there?

RC: We learned how to run (unclear...). And how to understand signals. Flag signals. Ten weeks. Little Creek, Virginia. And then after we trained there, if we qualified we'd go aboard onto a bigger ship to operate on the ship. (Unclear...). We had Little Creek. Then we shipped out of there to England, New Port, England. From there Scotland and then the Mediterranean Sea, for eighteen months. A lot of maneuvers, practice practice and practice. Load them, and load them back up again. Hit the beach. Practice all the time. We were both crew on the ship, but we still had duty on the ship while at sea. And

we'd ride that shuttle back and forth armed with heavy equipment and personnel. Back and forth across the Mediterranean.

RH: Now were you involved in the Normandy Landing?

RC: Southern France.

RH: So you left England then where did you go?

RC: Came out of the Mediterranean. I came home to Boston naval yard for repairs. And (unclear). Was there twenty days. Then we pulled out and went through the Panama Canal for our Pacific duty to finish up over there. I think about that time they surrendered in Europe. We still had to get over to Japan (unclear). So all together until nineteen forty six I was over there. And during that time I transferred to a minesweeper. Three mines around the harbors in Japan.

RH: So you were sweeping for mines in Japan after Japan surrendered?

RC: Around the harbors. Sweeping mines. They planted (unclear). They also had their own people sweeping with their own ships because they knew where they were. We didn't. Had to look for them.

RH: Did you ever have any close calls with Japanese mines?

RC: No, no when the ship was all wood haul and they wouldn't explode over wood hauls. But when we got one we cut it loose so it comes to the surface, we'd send them off maybe a hundred yards and explode it with fifty caliber. I think the boys who had close calls were maybe the mine (unclear). They would (unclear) diffuse the mine. Pretty dangerous work.

RH: Now did you ever have any incidents with Japanese Kamikaze planes?

RC: Yes. The ship I was on was USS 9YMS, Andromeda, USS Andromeda, AKA-15, had credit for downing two helicopter planes. Okinawa invasion.

RH: Were you on deck that day? Were you on deck when it happened?

RC: I seen one of them. One of them came at us in a convoy and tried to get the hospital ship. And it was flying too high to miss it and came over to get my ship. The gunners on my ship shot it down. So my ship had credit for two kamikaze planes.

RH: What were you thinking while watching that plane come at your ship?

RC: It happened so quick, I didn't have time to think, but they got the pilot he was drowning, I don't know if he had a life jacket or not but the guy maybe had ten hours of flying time. Sixteen years old he was. The guy was Asian he'd only been flying airplanes. So it looks to me like all he'd been able to do was steer the plane. They don't care, they can't get out, they can't come back, they're locked right in. When they shot it down it landed probably fifty yards from our ship in the water.

RH: How did that make you think about the Japanese; they were willing to commit suicide against your ship.

RC: It only tells me that if you had them cornered in the corner they wouldn't give up. They would rather shoot themselves than being captured. I know about liberty and Nagasaki harbor.

RH: What did you see in Nagasaki?

RC: What did I see? Just chimneys standing, everything else gone, just chimneys. I don't know what to say to that. It wiped out all the village's buildings but the chimneys were still standing.

RH: Do you remember what you were thinking when you were touring the city? What kind of impression did it make on you?

RC: Well I see some of the people that got effected by, they had boils all over their face and looked terrible, it was from the radiation.

RH: Did you think they deserved it or did it make you feel like we had done something wrong or?

RC: Do you mean the bomb?

RH: Yeah.

RC: No. No because I had a feeling about the guys in Pearl Harbor. So I didn't feel sorry for them. Yes the civilians I did but not the military.

RH: Well tell us about when you were (unclear) on a landing craft.

RC: Yes.

RH: And you were involved in the landing in southern France?

RC: Yes.

RH: Was was that like?

RC: Well when we landed there the water was real rough, bad. It was hard getting the boats to the side and army equipment (unclear). Before the invasion they got a German corvette, which was smaller than a destroyer and they sunk it. And all of the people on it, aboard the Germans all boarded my ship as prisoners. And after the war was over there the invasion we took them, the prisoners, to (unclear) Africa, to prison camps. There was twenty nine. We got inside the Congo (unclear) and I was told they were afraid to go back and again. Once they got in they chickened out. In the invasion usually early in the morning and I wanted to cut loose, the sky was flashing, kind of scary. It makes you feel like digging a hole in the ground and hide yourself.

RH: Now was Okinawa worse than southern France?

RC: Yes

RH: How so?

RC: How come?

RH: Yeah.

RC: Airplanes. Suicide planes. In the invasion of Okinawa I was ashore with some other shipmates and on the beach where the harbor was, there was a Japanese suicide plane come along the beach and it couldn't have been seventy feet off the beach and there was an American plane, a navy plane, after him. And he turned in land just before he got there we were watching it. He went in land and he blew up and landed and crashed. I remember the pilot's name, the American plane he was following him. When he was following him up the beach maybe a ship was shooting at him to. He turned in land and dropped his plane, dropped that (unclear) whatever was under him and that blew up. He landed and hit the ground. I went over there and seen it. About a mile inland. I see him there and I remember his name. His name was James (Edward?) Jones, US Naval Reserves Lieutenant James. They pulled him out of the plane, he was burnt, burnt up pretty bad. All his intestines were all out.

RH: Do you know what happened to him?

RC: What happened to him?

RH: Yeah.

RC: I walked away and left. Some army personnel and navy but we left and went back aboard the ship. We had a landing craft boat assigned to us. Then we headed back aboard the ship. Seven days we shuttled back and forth, equipment, heavy equipment. (Unclear).

RH: So what was it like bine a boatman on a landing craft running to the beaches in Okinawa?

RC: How did it feel?

RH: Yeah.

RC: You just got more responsibility if you're operating it than the rest of the crew, three man crew. And uh, (unclear).

RH: How many soldiers and marines did you have on board?

RC: I would say about one hundred fifty. And we had all the military equipment, tanks, jeeps, two and a half ton trucks, and rations all aboard the ship. We all unloaded and made a trip to the beach with it. The first wave, the first bunch of boats to go was in, that's the worst wave to be in. Like in over the Mediterranean we invaded France they had mines set on poles it would blow the boat up. You'd see some on the bottom as it went in the first wave I wasn't in the first wave. They caught hell. Now in Japan the biggest war was getting past the coral. These boats were pretty thin, they were quarter inch steel. And they'd hit that coral and punch a hole right through them. So they welded a plank underneath them and they'd run into them. We spent seven days there shuttling back and forth. I would've gave anything to get aboard ship to take a shower, brush my teeth. After seven days you're pretty dirty.

RH: So for seven days you just ran around the clock.

RC: Yes, wasn't allowed back aboard the ship.

RH: So you just continued operating.

RC: Yeah. In Okinawa you're in that hot hair field. We were ashore looking for souvenirs which we weren't supposed to be doing. But we wanted souvenirs. I ran across a young Japanese woman she was tied between two trees spread eagle, hands up here and feet here (gestures). And she was shot. We left after seven days there, went to Hawaiian Islands and picked up more troops, equipment and went back again. I think it was two weeks she was still there. When chief seen her they took her down.

RH: Any idea what happened to her?

RC: I think their own people shoot them. I don't believe the 1<sup>st</sup> marines did something like that. It must've been pretty got out there because we was gone two weeks and we came back we could still see smoke and fire inland. April 1, 1945, April Fool's Day, when we invaded that. I did see a lot of suicide planes flying around trying to hit the ships, most of them got shot down. Like I said, they only had ten hours, one guy, that's all they had to shoot the plane, to shoot into the ship.

RH: So after Okinawa what happened to you next?

RC: What was I in?

RH: Yeah, how did you get back to the states and when did you get back to the states?

RC: I came back to the states in San Pedro, California on a minesweeper. I came home and went to, uh, across the states in a boxcar converted into living quarters. And we ate on a (unclear) and slept in there. Went to (unclear), long Island and got my discharge.

RH: And what happened to you after the war?

RC: I got a job at a paper mill in nineteen forty eight. And about nineteen fifty five I joined the Naval Reserves. And went on cruises, the Virgin Islands, Cuba, (unclear) Ocean, and Great lakes cruise. The one in Cuba was cancelled, they cancelled it and went to, uh, Puerto Rico. At the time they were having trouble there.

RH: Your naval reserves center was in Watertown?

RC: Yeah.

RH: And you were also a member of the naval militia at the same time?

RC: No that is the naval militia.

RH: And, um, which ship did you go away on?

RC: On those, different ships. There were destroyers, (unclear) ships, mostly destroyers. We trained with the regular Navy.

RH: Uh, Where were these ships birthed?

RC: What?

RH: The ships you went on for annual training, where were they birthed?

RC: For training?

RH: Yeah.

RC: We trained all the time at sea like the regular navy.

RH: Um, where would you go to get on the ship you were going on (unclear)?

RC: Brooklyn navy yard. Mostly all in Brooklyn navy yard.

RH: Were there any ships here in Watertown?

RC: No

RH: They didn't do any training on these small vessels (unclear)?

RC: No there's no water around here. The Great lakes but they never done it. Like I said, maybe one crew out of Chicago in the Great Lakes, two weeks.

RH: Did you go with the other guys from the Watertown Armory or did you go on your own?

RC: Own my own.

RH: What were drills like at the Watertown Armory, what would you do on a drill?

RC: What would we do there? We trained there and, uh, we'd go over to Fort Drum and fire, most of the training was done there, in the armory.

RH: What would you fire at Fort Drum? Rifles?

RC: Yeah.

RH: (unclear) was everybody in the armory training the same things or were you a member of a crew?

RC: A unit. Yes (unclear) the army does the training. We did one day a week every Tuesday night after I got done with the Naval Reserves they went down to once a month. Same as the National Guard. But we had, if you had a little bit of rank you had to train other people new or young people as part of my job. But getting back to over in the Pacific, after the invasion of Okinawa we were anchored in (Poocahari? Unclear) harbor. And they wanted volunteers for minesweepers. Well I didn't want to but I headed out. So I had thirty six points and you had to have thirty eight points or they'd transfer you. My ship came home, that was one of the most disappointing time in the Navy. I wanna come home. I couldn't I had to go aboard the minesweeper.

RH: When you were in the militia were you ever called out for any state emergencies?

RC: No, but the National Guard did.

RH: When did you transfer to the National Guard?

RC: Right here.

RH: What year did you leave the Naval Reserve?

RC: Seventy two I believe.

RH: And did you come right over to here?

RC: Yeah (unclear) I was talked into the National Guard.

RH: How come?

RC: Well its handy here, it's close by. I live nearby here. And it's, uh, kind of a challenge, I wanted to see how it was in the army then the navy.

RH: Was it hard getting used to the army? After all those years in the Navy.

RC: Not really, no..no. Nope.

RH: What did you do here? What was your job?

RC: Here? Automotive mechanic. I did the same thing in Fort Drum, I worked in uniform down there. You had to belong to the National Guard or navy reserves or anything to get a job in Fort Drum. I worked down there until sixteen years ago. I retired from everything.

RH: Where at Fort Drum did you work?

RC: New York Yutes.

RH: And did you basically worked as a mechanic there also?

RC: Yeah.

RH: Technician?

RC: Yeah.

RH: How did you like that job?

RC: I liked it.

RH: How come?

RC: I like mechanic work, that's all I can say. I worked on military equipment, did a good job, they didn't push you too much. I worked on personnel carriers, tanks, (raiders?), jeeps, everything you could imagine.

RH: And this was equipment that was being used by units? The equipment was stored there and the units would take them out for training, then give it back to you?

RC: Yeah.

RH: Did you notice anything about how the equipment worked, did it work well? Did the troops take care of it well?

RC: I don't follow you.

RH: What did you notice about the equipment after the troops used it and brought it back?

RC: The troops?

RH: Yeah the soldiers who took the equipment to go train with, they trained with the equipment and they'd bring it back to you, right?

RC: Yeah.

RH: Did you notice anything from the way you got the equipment back? Did the equipment work well? Did they take care of it?

RC: What we were doing is we would repair equipment. The National Guard units would borrow it, sign it out, they'd be inspected before they took it out and we brought it back to be inspected for any deficiencies. If anything (unclear) broken they'd pay for it. We'd fix it that was our job. Then they'd come back (another year?) and drove all the same equipment. If it broke down they had to pay for it. During that two weeks' time, training.

RH: And you retired there the same time you retired from your position in the Guard in Carthage?

RC: Yes I retired from the National Guard technician and retired as a sixty five year old for Social Security. It all come at once.

RH: What year was that?

RC: That was sixteen years ago.

RH: You said you'd been called up for some state emergencies?

RC: Yes.

RH: Which ones?

RC: Uh, the prison strike in Dannemora. We went up there for two weeks. And I stayed in the prison I wouldn't get out, I had to stay there for the workers and took charge of the place.

RH: So you actually worked as a prison guard?

RC: Yeah.

RH: What was that like?

RC: Well it's different watching these prisoners was a different ball game altogether. What you see normally. We did have trouble, what they did like, prisoners did like the National Guard. I think it was because we treated them better than regular prison guards. They liked us.

RH: Where did you live when you worked in the prison?

RC: While I was there? Right in the prison.

RH: Did you see anything unusual or anything out of the ordinary happen?

RC: (Unclear) The only thing I seen that was unusual was the National Guard (unclear) man hole covers, they figured they'd go down them.

RH: What about the prison guards? What did they do?

RC: They weren't there. They were on strike outside.

RH: Any other state emergencies?

RC: No. We didn't get called up for anything while there.

RH: So how did it compare to being in the army National Guard compared to being in the naval reserve?

RC: I liked the army national guard because I didn't have to go far from here, home Fort Drum. The navy you're gone for two weeks and sometimes you don't know where you're going either until you get on the ship. As far as the rough water it didn't bother me, I never had a fear of water. I've seen some bad water to. Destroyers when I was in ( ) ship the destroyer escorts were all about a mile away. I used to watch those destroyers up and down the rough water sometimes you couldn't even see them. If your ship was in a ( ) you couldn't even see it. I'm talking about three to five foot waves, but I used to think that I never want to go on one of those ships, cause of how rough it was. And I ended up going on them when I got into the naval reserves. Then I didn't think it was so bad.

RH: What else happened after the war? Did you get married? Have any children?

RC: Yes. I got married in forty eight. And have six children and my wife passed away and I remarried.

RH: Now what do your children do now?

RC: Well, one of them works for the paper mill, and ones in Kentucky, works in the tobacco fields, and another one she's the house wife.

RH: When you look back after all these years what stands out in your mind the most about your time in the navy?

RC: What comes to mind? Well sometimes my mind drifts to it. I'll never forget it, once you're done there. You never forget it.

RH: What would you say the thing that is most memorable? What stands out the most in your memory about your time in the navy?

RC: Okinawa Invasion. Brings back memories more than anything.

RH: Why's that?

RC: It was rough. A rough one. You know suicide planes you're on the main deck and you've got one coming towards you, where's it going to hit the ship. (unclear). When we were out at sea on AKA 15 drilling gets you up in the middle of the night. General quarters practice drill. Practicing all the time. The people who didn't have a drill...(unclear) mass confusion. While they're training all the time, the drills.

RH: Do you think your time in the Navy changed your life in any way?

RC: No. Nope. When we went into the invasion in France the night before we hit the beach they had a call together for a meeting and told us that some of the new guys wouldn't be coming back at all. You know you had it on your mind a little bit. A young kid like that, nineteen years old. Some of you won't come back. I was lucky a lot of our people did come back. And they told us if we couldn't sleep to write a letter home that night.

RH: Is there any advice you'd give to somebody who's going into the military nowadays?

RC: Advice? You mean what service to pick?

RH: No just how to get by, you know whether you should think about it.

RC: No I don't know what to tell you on that. If I had told twelve different people that went into the army that you should go into the navy cause of the clean life. You know where your meals come from? You think they worry about the sand, the mud...

RH: Well we're coming down towards the end of the tape. Any last thoughts, anything you'd like to say that we haven't covered?

RC: Nope.

RH: Why did you volunteer for the interview?

RC: Well they said they were looking for information some of the things they didn't have.

RH: One thing we didn't cover. Tell us about the cannon. The cannon that you restored.

RC: Oh the cannon. Well the colonel (unclear) met some high ranking officers down in Albany and said they wanted to find somebody who could rebuild a cannon. He told them he'd do it. He thought he had men who could do it, the people in the National Guard. They brought it up in a truck. It was all in pieces, it was rotted away, the barrel and wheels. He approached me on it. He said I hear you do wood working, you can build a cannon wheel. I told him I'd never don't it before but I'm not afraid to try it. So he put me on it and another guy a machinist, he was doing the machine work. Between the barrel and all the iron work, I did all of the wood working. It was a challenge, I liked doing it. First time I ever did it, it turned out good.

RH: What did you use for plans?

RC: We had those other pieces that were rotted in there. Like the bolts inside the wheel and the sealer all around.

RH: How did you make the metal tires?

RC: We used the old ones.

RH: And how did you clean up the tube?

RC: They polished and polished and buffed and buffed with the buffer wheel.

RH: Did you find it difficult to make the wheels?

RC: Yes. Yes, there's quite a trick to it.

RH: Now what happened to the cannon?

RC: It's in Albany.

RH: Anything else you'd like to add?

RC: Nope.

RH: Alright, well thank you.