

Robert M. Donlon
Veteran

Thomas Venezia
Shaker High school
Interviewer

Interviewed on
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Interviewer: Would you introduce yourself?

Robert M. Donlon: Sure, My name is Bob Donlon, I live in Niskayuna, and I was in the Navy in 1952 till 1955.

I: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

RD: I started out joining the Navy reserves then went on to two weeks training at Bainbridge and when I came back I had a Greeting from the President. I didn't want to sit in the foxhole; I wanted to stay in the Navy so I volunteered for active duty.

I: What was it like your fist days of active duty, where did you go?

RD: We left Schenectady with a friend of mine and we went to Bainbridge Maryland, we had twelve weeks boot camp. After Boot camp I had a week's vacation and then was assigned to sonar school in Key West Florida.

I: How long were you in Sonar School?

RD: Sonar school was a nine month course then I had to have two years in the course to make sure I had enough time left with them.

I: After sonar school?

RD: I stayed on for another month and a half training shipment from Minneapolis, and then my next Billet was the USS Robert F Keller de419 which was tied up at was at US Navy Gun factory in Washington DC.

I: What type of ship was The Robert F Keller?

RD: It was a Destroyer Escort.

I: What was your Job on the ship?

RD: My job was to be in charge of Sonar, which meant picking up submarines', detecting them and sinking them if we could.

I: What's the function of the ship and what size was it?

RD: We had 210 personnel aboard including ten or fifteen officers. The purpose was to escort and protect convoys from submarine attacks.

I: Is a DE the same thing as a Destroyer?

RD: A destroyer is a little bigger and has a little more men aboard. Basically the same thing but a destroyer has more armor.

I: What armor did your ship have?

RD: We had two five inch guns, four 40 millimeters and maybe half a dozen 20 millimeter guns.

I: In your missions against the subs what was your defense?

RD: We used depth charges, which headed in ward bound.

I: You met the ship in Washington, and from there?

RD: It was a reserved trainer. We used to take out reserves to train them with officers and marine personnel. We moved along the east coast as far as Newfoundland and down near South America near the Panama Canal, Cuba, Liberty Ports.

I: What were the conditions like on the ship?

RD: People tried to say we had less space than a prisoner. We had three bunks stacked on top of each other, it was pretty cramped, and all our clothes were kept in lockers under them. Food was good, I thought we always had good chow, we had a great time.

I: How long were you on the ship?

RD: I was on the ship for a year and a half.

I: Was the time you were on the ship all reserve training?

RD: yeah, we would go out for two weeks and sometimes we would go out for a month cruise. Then we went down to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for underway training for a month which was for mostly Submarine warfare that we participated in. It was interesting we picked up contact ooze coming back from the port.

I: Any good or bad memories of your time on the ship?

RD: I can't remember of any bad times. WE had a nice time, visited many nice ports. We did run into a Hurricane one time and we thought we were going to go down; we lost our stack because we went head on. That was the one time I was scared.

I: What happened to the damage?

RD: We went into the port and go everything fixed up, everything was fine.

I: You were doing a lot of training for the reserve guys, were those guys just passing through?

RD: They were in the two year service and we took them out and trained them on our stations and whatever they were assigned to do on the ship.

I: Probably a costal defense role too right?

RD: well, somewhat we did but it was mostly taking the reserves out for training, and then when we did that we went in with the other ships that were steam and diesel driven.

I: What was the power on the Keller?

RD: we were a Diesel.

I: Was that typical of a DE?

RD: They were about half and half depending on how they were made and where they were made.

I: Is DE still in use today?

RD: Only one I know is the USS Slater down in Albany. I think there is two more, one in Bolivia that s not active and another one in Korea that's being dismantles. The Slater is trying to get parts from them.

I: In terms of the fleet today, what is replaced it? Is there a particular ship that taken the same role?

RD: I think they call them Frigates now. They are faster and have more technology. What we had was like we were in the Stone Age compared to today's ships.

I: During the time you were in you kept in touch with your family?

RD: Yes when we were in we had liberty, if we had a long weekend we could go home and visit our Families. I'd come home about once a month depending if I had any duties, depends on what you want to do.

I: How old were you at the time?

RD: I was nineteen years old.

I: You stayed in for four years?

RD: I was in for two and a half years, the total time before I got a discharge was eight years but it wasn't active duty or anything.

I: When you got, then what happened?

RD: I went down to GE as a draftsman, where I stayed till I retired in 1988.

I: Raised a Family along the way.

RD: Got married, had one son, he's 42, lives up in Clifton Park.

I: As you reflect back it seems like you had a positive experience.

RD: It most certainly was, I loved my experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything; looking back I would have stayed in longer.

I: How did it impact the rest of your life or doing what you did with you career?

RD: Probably maturing more, it was a great experience; I wish they still had the draft so the kids could get out there and experience it.

I: During the time you were on the ship did your ship get any commendations or citations?

RD: the only one we might have gotten was when we came in contact with a Russian Sub down in Guantanamo Bay. Otherwise there was nothing.

I: Did you take advantage of the GI bill?

RD: After I went to Schenectady community college for a year and a half were they paid for the courses and got GI benefits.

I: have you stayed in touch with any of the guys you were in the service with?

RD: One of the guys in coming up to go on the cruise with us on Thursday. He was on the Keller with me, I probably hadn't talk to him in 40 years. Well one day I got a call and I meet him down in Albany for his daughters Graduation. We have been in contact ever since.

I: You are active in veterans groups?

RD: The destroyers escort group here in Albany, I'm the co-chairman and secretary and I issue a newsletter mouthy and set up meetings.

I: What's unique here in Albany?

RD: What's unique here is the Slater. People want to visit the Slater, I get to go down and sleep aboard it and work to try to restore it so it looks like it did in 1944.

I: The Slater's service was about the same time as the Keller?

RD: yes, the Slater was over in the Pacific and the Keller was mostly in the Atlantic.

I: So by the time you were on the Keller it was getting to be an older ship?

RD: Yes, Certainly was.

I: Any other reunions besides the connection you made with the guy you were aboard with?

RD: Individual ships have their own reunions and go around the country; they like to come up to Albany to visit the Slater.

I: You mentioned you did sonar which is still in use, was there anything that was high- tech at the time?

RD: today they can pick up subs from 500 miles, our technology was like the Stone Age compared to today.

I: What was your rank when you came out?

RD: I will come out as a 3rd class sonar man, Pent Officer.

I: What were some other specialties on the ship?

RD: Radar technician, Airplanes coming in and out, surface ships, machinist who took care of the engine, electronic guys, deck force who kept care of the ships appearance, and quartermaster who paid us all.

I: what was the contingent of commission officers on board?

RD: I think we had about ten officers and about 100 men and when the reserves came will would fill it up.

I: When you look at the roll of the Navy during the Korean conflict did they play a critical role in the conflict?

RD: I think mostly the ground forces did a bulk of the work in that conflict, Navy had a smaller role, getting supplies on beaches.

I: anything else you would like to share? In terms of experiences future and past?

RD: Like I said before I personally felt like they should have kept the draft. It's a good experience for the young boys today. The people that you meet you made a great relationship

with them, you bonded with them. The first time I went down and sleep on the Slate with the Michigan group, traveled with them. It made me feel like I was 19 year old again, but found out I couldn't get up the ladders like I used to. Overall it was a great experiences and I wish everyone could experience it.

I: Any final thoughts?

RD: I had a great time and having a good time here in Albany. I get a lot of contacts from people. I get calls from all over the county and it's a great experience for me.