

**Irwin Gellen  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clark  
Mike Russert  
Interviewers**

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**Q:** Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

**IG:** It's Irwin Gellen, June 2nd, 1923, in Brooklyn

**Q:** What was your educational background prior to entering service?

**IG:** I completed the undergraduate course for electrical engineering at the CCNY

**Q:** Do you remember where you were, and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

**IG:** Vividly, I imagine most people who lived on December 7th, 1941 would remember that. I was playing touch football with some friends in the street in Brooklyn, near where I lived. I found it difficult to believe actually. I thought it might be a hoax of some sort initially.

**Q:** Did you enlist, or were you drafted?

**IG:** It's an interesting story, I enlisted. It's kind of complex. It's a story of how fate influences the conditions of one's life so vividly. I happened to quite fortuitously live in a section of Brooklyn where the draft board had ample supply of draftees, so initially they exempted, from the draft, all engineering students. Then as time went on they started drafting freshman, but by that time I had moved on to my sophomore year. And then when they started drafting sophomores, I had moved into my junior year, and when I was a senior, we were neck and neck, the draft board and I. It was obvious to me the inevitable was about to happen and the Navy had a program, I think it was called V7, which I tried out for, but because I'm colorblind I was not accepted. Late in the spring of 1944, I had accumulated enough credits at the time to qualify for graduation if I entered a military service. The maritime service came to the city, and they were desperate, I suppose, for people to qualify for a program they had where if you went to sea for three months you could become an engineering officer, a marine engineer. Sounded like the best of all the alternatives available to me, so I took advantage of that. I left New York on June 5th, 1944 on a Liberty Ship.

**Q:** Did you get any prior training or anything for this, or just on the job training?

**IG:** None at all, this program required you to take any seagoing job for at least three months, and the lowest job in the engine room of the ship, I don't even know if this position now exists on modern ships, a job called a wiper. It's self-descriptive, you were supposed to keep the engine room clean. Modern ships are almost hygienic in their cleanliness. The reciprocating engines in the Liberty Ship were far from conducive to

that kind of atmosphere, so they needed people to keep the place, for one thing, oil free so people didn't slide around on the steel deck. I did that, I took one trip on a Liberty Ship, and we went to Scotland, carried the tanks and other heavy artillery pieces. I then was a wiper on a troop transporter, it had been a luxury liner before the war, the S.S. Brazil. It was a very large ship, the first trip we brought them to Liverpool, and brought back German prisoners. The second trip I took on it we went to Omaha Beach where we disembarked Americans onto landing craft and they went onto the beach, this was a month after D-Day. And we brought back more Germans, a lot of them wounded, but ambulatory, and they were brought back to the United States. I suppose most of the Germans ended up working on farms in the Midwest and in Canada. By the way, you're in distinguished company, I have the world's record for seasickness. I found an opportunity to go to a maritime school at Fort Trumbull, Connecticut where for four months I studied engineering, which for me was really duck soup, and it was especially pleasant because a friend of mine from City College and two friends of his from City, the four of us shared a room in the barracks, and since we all had an engineering background, while other people were studying, we were playing, so for four months that was pretty much a lock. We arranged to work in the mess hall during the week for breakfast, to get liberty on Saturdays, so after dinner on Friday, all four of us took a train into New York City for the weekend, and that was a lock. After that the four of us went to a maritime school in Milwaukee. Milwaukee was chosen for this school because the Nordburg Engine plant was there. Nordburg at that time made diesel and they were making an engine for a ship called the AV1, which had a very shallow draft designed for getting into the beaches in the Pacific. The program went down the drain, but nevertheless, the school was there in Milwaukee, so we went there for a month. I went back to sea, I sailed as a junior engineer on a T2 Tanker. We carried 10,000 tons of aviation gasoline. Eventually, it was a torturous route we took, but we ended up in Calcutta. The trip took us through the Suez Canal and the one experience I remember about that is while we were in the canal, I was on watch at about four o'clock in the morning, I went up on deck to see what the canal looked like, and we were in a very narrow portion of the canal, and here was a guy riding a camel along the ship, and we were eyeball to eyeball, I was looking at him, he was looking at me, and the sun was coming up over the desert. It was a piece of that trip that I remember vividly. Also on that trip, in the Red Sea, we were out of sight of land, but there was a sand storm in the desert that filled our ship with sand. There was red dust in the drawers of the furniture, all my clothes, my shoes were full of sand. I just recall that. We went to Calcutta, off loaded, as deck cargo we carried the Black Widow fighters, I think they were used in the China-Burma fighting.

**Q:** Were those aircraft covered with Cosmoline or any kind of protection?

**IG:** Yes, and they had some kind of canvas covering over that as I recall, I don't remember too much about it, I just remember worrying about all the gasoline I was sitting on while we were en route. That trip ended up to be six and a half months, I went, and not in a straight line, but we ended up going completely around the world. And every fifteen degrees further east you go you save an hour, and that hour always happened on my watch. So when I finally got back to New York, I was a day older than everybody else who I left behind, sort of like Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* character, it took us a lot more than eighty days.

**Q:** What were your particular duties?

**IG:** Marine Engineers operate and maintain the steam plant, on a steamship of course, the steam plant, the propulsion engines, on a tanker, the main engine is used for driving pumps to offload cargo and maybe they can be used to take on cargo, though usually the shore side facilities have that provision, I mean for on loading. I also sailed on a Victory Ship, and this is after the war ended, I was still subjected to military service if I stopped sailing. On V-J Day we were anchored at the mouth of the Ganges and it was almost a year later I left the maritime service completely, and during that period I sailed Victory ships, and interestingly enough, farm animal population in Eastern Europe had been decimated during the war. So [unclear], which is a branch of the United Nations decided to send farm animals to Eastern Europe. The Victory ship that I was on, would have been converted to carry mostly horses, there must have been 2000 horses, and some cattle too, and that ship smelled like a barnyard, you can imagine. And I made two trips, we took the animals to Gdynia, which is a seaport in Poland.

**Q:** Were you ever given liberty at any of these ports?

**IG:** Yeah, but usually for a very short time, tankers, unlike cargo vessels, offload very quickly. On that long trip, the one where I went around the world, included two different trips to Abadan, which is on the northern end of the Persian Gulf, on the second trip we came in on my watch and I never had a chance to go ashore, we were ready to go back out to sea in a very short time. But on cargo vessels the offloading takes a longer time, so I usually had a day or two if I could swap shifts with somebody, I could make it a continuous stay ashore.

**Q:** Do you recall hearing about the death of President Roosevelt and your reaction to that?

**IG:** Yes I do, but I don't remember where I was, I wasn't at sea. I don't remember what I was doing, but I do remember hearing about it, it shook most people. I guess not only Americans, but the entire allied community was shaken by that.

**Q:** Do you recall the reaction on the ship to both V-E Day and V-J day?

**IG:** I was in Times Square on V-E day, I don't remember what the circumstances were that allowed me to meet two friends, one in the 5th Air Force, and one in the 8th Air Force, they had both come back, they completed their missions, and I was home at the same time and the three of us went to Times Square, to celebrate V-E Day. V-J Day I was anchored in the mouth of Ganges, the reaction was, what a wonderful thing it was.

**Q:** Do you remember hearing about the dropping of the atomic bombs and your reaction to that?

**IG:** We heard about it, most of the people felt it was just another war incident, we couldn't attach any significance to it. You always hear about super-this, or super-that, we didn't appreciate what was involved in that, but we did hear about it.

**Q:** On a merchant ship did you have the same initiations and so on when you crossed the equator as any others?

**IG:** Yes, not only the equator, but the International Date Line. Neptune came on board, I thought it was sophomoric and overdone, but everyone seemed to have fun about it.

**Q:** So when you were discharged from the service, being in the maritime service, did you have the G.I. Bill?

**IG:** No, merchant mariners didn't get veteran status until about fifteen years ago.

**Q:** Now, do you join any veteran organizations, now that you're eligible to do that?

**IG:** I support the American Merchant Marines Veterans, I pay my dues, I don't attend meetings, and I'm not a joiner.

**Q:** Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you, like those three friends?

**IG:** Two of them fell off the radar, but the one who was my friend before the war, we have maintained very close contact, in fact we were supposed to meet yesterday, but his wife is ill so we postponed it for a couple weeks, but yes, I have maintained contact with him.

**Q:** How do you think your time in service, you alluded to this at the beginning, how it changed or had an effect on your life?

**IG:** It's a psychological thing, I can't really explain it, but that's a very short period in my entire life, and yet, in thinking about my life, that portion of it plays an unusually large block, and I don't know why. I guess it because it was the first time I was away from home, it's the first time I was on my own, a lot of firsts took place. I didn't have any frightening, in fact the most frightening moment I had in the whole war, I didn't learn this until afterword, but when I was in the Atlantic, the battle of the Atlantic had already been won, but it was not revealed to us, and the press and the government in general acted like the war in the Atlantic was still in a very hot situation. We were in convoy, and someone dropped a depth charge near us, in a liberty ship, the hull shaped like this [gesturing a U-shape], and in the engine room the backs of the boilers are vertical and there's a narrow passageway you can pass between the hull and the boiler and I was in that little passage way when this depth charge went off near us, and when you're down near the waterline, sound is amplified considerably, and I thought the boiler had exploded, and in my mind's eye I could see all this cascading hot water coming down on me and I got out of there rather quickly. Except for practice fire, we carried the [unclear] armament, there was a five inch gun on the stern, a three inch on the bow, and some fifteen millimeter anti-aircraft on the bridge. We used to practice with that, not we, we had Navy armed guard on board, but I never saw any real action.

**Q:** Did you wear any kind of special uniforms or just regular civilian clothes?

**IG:** When I was not at sea, like when I was at the maritime schools, we wore uniforms that were very Navy-ish, in fact most people couldn't even tell the difference. When I was at Fort Trumbull I was Chief Machinist's Mate and I had the same uniform on that Navy personnel would wear.

**Q:** Well thank you very much for your interview.

**IG:** Well, thank you.