Frederick G. Harris
Veteran

Wayne Clark, Michael Russert
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers

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MR: This is an interview at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY on the 17th of June, 2005. Please state your full name and date and place of birth.
FH: My name is Frederick G. Harris. I was born in Hudson Falls, NY on July 12th, 1925.

MR: What was your educational background prior to entering the service?
FH: I had just finished high school at the time. I had just graduated from White Plains high school in Westchester County. I immediately enlisted in the Navy. That was in June, 1943.

MR: How did you get down to White Plains?
FH: Though I was born in Hudson Falls, I grew up in Queens in New York City. My father had taught at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York. The school moved up to White Plains and that is how I ended up graduating from there.

MR: Do you remember where you were and what your reaction was to the news of Pearl Harbor?
FH: I was living in White Plains then and heard in on the radio. Like many people, I had no idea where Pearl Harbor was. Later you heard more about how serious it was and fellows were enlisting.

MR: Why did you decide to enlist?
FH: my father was born in England, and he served for a brief time in the royal Navy during the First World War. I used to hear some of his stories. He was in the merchant marine also. I had a natural preference for the Navy, liking ships, etc.

MR: Where did you go for your basic training?
FH: I had my basic training in Newport, RI. After basic, I went to signal school, also in Newport. We learned Morse code and signal flags, etc.

MR: Did you learn semaphore also?
FH: No, it was a funny thing that they never covered semaphore at the signal school. It was mostly flashing light, and different procedures for flag hoisting.

MR: How long were you in Newport?
FH: I arrived there in July, 1943. I finished boot camp in September. We finished signal

school at the end of the year. Then, in January 1944, I expected to be assigned to a ship, but we were assigned to a Naval amphibious unit called Drew Unit 1. We were sent by train to New York City, where we boarded the Queen Mary, which was a troop ship at the time. She was the second largest liner in the world. We were just a group of several hundred Navy men among Army men. Most of the men on the ship were Army. The Queen Mary was capable of carrying the equivalent of one Army division. That was nearly 15,000 men and we Navy guys thought we were in the Army there for a while.

MR: So, you must have sailed alone and not in a convoy?
FH: The ship sailed alone because it depended on its speed and secrecy. You never knew when it was going to sail. That was an adventure in itself because she was fast. We made the crossing in about four days. She really rolled at that speed. She would roll over to one side and hang there a few seconds and then roll over the other way.

MR: Did you get sea sick at all?
FH: No, not on that trip. The worst I ever got sea sick was later, off the Carolina coast. That was after the War.

MR: You went right to England then?
FH: Yes, we went from New York to Scotland. We anchored in the Firth of Clyde I think. We were assigned to an advance Navy base at Rosneath.

MR: Were you still in this Drew Unit 1? Did you have any special training?
FH: Yes, we were. We didn't have any special training other than what we learned at signal school. For a while there it didn't seem to be well organized. We had muster every morning, but we were given leave quite frequently while we were at Rosneath. We would go down to Glasgow, which was only about an hour away, by either bus or train. It seemed like we could go back and forth as we pleased, more or less. There was no special training at that point.

MR: So, you had a lot of contact with the Scottish people then?
FH: Yes.

MR: What was your relationship with them like?
FH: They were very friendly. We had a lot of fun with Scottish people, especially in their pubs, where they would sing, etc. We had a lot of fun.

MR: How long were you there?
FH: In the early of middle part of May we were sent by train down to the southern part of England. That's where all preparations for the invasion were getting into high gear. We went over to Edinburg first, and then by train down to the southern part of England. We ended up at a place called Lee-on-the-Solent. The Solent is that body of water between the southern part of England and the Isle of Wight. That is where I was separated. I was in a unique position. I was assigned as a signalman on an Army tug with a Merchant Marine crew. That is where the massive build up for the invasion was taking place. There were thousands of men, supplies, ships, etc. It was really something.

On the tug I got to meet a few of the fellas there. It was just a small harbor tug. The crew were a nice bunch of guys.

MR: How many were on the tug?
FH: There was a crew of maybe 8 or 10. We knew the invasion was near and we were just sitting around drinking coffee most of the time. Of course, the weather was terrible then, rainy and windy. We were just wondering what it was going to be like. Everything was very informal. I didn't have a regular uniform. I just wore my Navy blue shirt and dungarees. There was no drill or anything.

MR: Where did you live during that time? Were there barracks?
FH: No, I lived right on the tug. Back in Rosneath we had Quonset huts, but once I was assigned to the tug I stayed right on the tug.

MR: What was your food like there?
FH: The food was good. I saw very little K-rations or C-rations. I was lucky in that respect.

MR: Who was the commander on the tug?
FH: They were all civilians. The captain of the tug was a car salesman from Buffalo I think. He knew something about tugs or ships. Of course, they had their crew of engineer and such. I was just a signalman in case they had any contact.

MR: So, there weren't any Army people aboard?
FH: No. It was just an Army tug. It was ST-761 and on the side it had "U.S. ARMY". It was kind of a unique situation.

MR: That was probably part of the Army Transportation Corpse. I know they did have boats. Few people realize that.
FH: Then, when we finally got orders to sail, the invasion had started. We joined a large convoy crossing the English Channel. That was when there were ships in every direction as far as the eye could see. They were mainly supply ships of the auxiliary class. They were trailing barrage balloons all about. We arrived off Omaha Beach in the last couple hours of D-Day. It was just after dark. We were just off shore and you could still hear the gunfire of artillery and the flashes in the sky. At that time on D-Day the beachhead was barely a mile deep, so you could still hear the action going on. We were just waiting off shore to see what was going to happen.

MR: Was there a lot of wreckage, etc.?
FH: It was night so we couldn't see too much. At dawn the next morning, which was D+1, we were just a couple hundred feet off shore and could see bodies of the fellows that had fallen the day before. They were piled like cordwood against the sea wall, waiting for burial. Boy, we just kind of stood there and stared.

Then we got caught up in the action because we had to bring in ammunition barges and towing supplies in. That is when we got involved in the Mulberry Harbors. As soon as it was light, they began bringing in these huge concrete caissons that were part of the

Mulberry Harbor. I wondered what the heck? They were several stories high, huge concrete boxes, and we didn't know what they were for. We found out that they were part of the breakwater and were partially sunk. Then they brought in what they called block ships. They were old freighters and other ships that had outlived their seagoing days. We pushed them into position to form a breakwater. They would place charges in the holds and blow out the bottoms, causing them to sink and form the breakwater. Then, there was another unit that has four steel columns on each corner. They served as a dock or unloading platform. Those four corners were driven down into the seabed. The platform was designed to rise and fall with the tide. They were connected to the beach by pontoon bridges. Everything had a code name. The pontoon bridges were called "whales". The partially sunken ships were called "goose berries". It was all part of this artificial harbor. I was surprised to find out later that those Mulberry Harbors were one of the top-secrets of the war at that time. The idea was formed about two or three years earlier. But the idea of towing an artificial harbor in sections across the English Channel and assembling it on an enemy shore was unheard of. Many top officials thought the idea was absolutely crazy. But they went ahead with that because they were vital once the men got ashore. They had to have ammunition, food and supplies. So, they became a very important part of the invasion. It took 45,000 workers back in England and Scotland to put the artificial harbors together. There was no way they could hide them during construction and German planes flew over and photographed them but had no idea what they were.

MR: How long were you off the coast of Normandy?
FH: I was off Omaha Beach for a month or so, until the port of Cherbourg was captured. After they cleared and opened Cherbourg harbor I was assigned to a signal station.

MR: Going back to Normandy, were you ever under fire there?
FH: Yes. We got a lot of air raids at night. We had air superiority during the day so it was at night when the Luftwaffe would come over. They came about every night and bombed the beach head. That was when there was all the noise of anti-aircraft guns. The famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle said that it was the greatest concentration of anti-aircraft fire ever in an equivalent space. I can believe that because you had to figure all of the Army anti-aircraft units on shore and all the Navy ships in the harbor, plus the block ships had anti-aircraft guns. When all of those were firing at once the noise was terrific. There were two Mulberry Harbors. One was at Omaha Beach and another was at a British beach. We would first see the tracers shooting up from the British guns and knew they would soon be over us. They did a little damage, but the worst destruction we had was from the storm that hit the French coast about two weeks after D-Day. That really did a job. It has gale-force winds and waves. A lot of the ships and small craft were breaking loose from their moorings. Our tug was out there trying to aid some of the ships and barges that were in distress. The storm lasted three days. It did more damage than any of the bombing raids did. It virtually destroyed the Mulberry harbor at Omaha Beach. The one at the British beach survived pretty well. I think they salvaged some parts from us to reinforce the British harbor.

MR: That was Juno Beach I believe.
FH: Yes, there were Gold, Juno, and Sword beaches in the British sector.

RM: So, for the time that you were there you were helping out during the storm and bringing supplies in.

FH: Yes, and we were maneuvering some of caissons for the artificial harbor.

MR: What kinds of weapons were carried on the tug?
FH: I don't recall seeing much of anything. We weren't issued any kind of gun, a rifle or pistol, or anything. It was a civilian crew and I doubt they had any kind of training. Their job was strictly to do the work of the tug. The only thing we had to be concerned about was all of the shrapnel flying around. We stayed under cover in the tug. It was really quite a nerve-wracking experience.

MR: Did you directly from there to Cherbourg?
FH: Yes, after the storm. I think Cherbourg was captured on June 26th. A few later I was assigned to the signal station. I went by truck and we went through some of the villages. We were right off a place called Vierville. I remember, a few days after the beach was secured (we knew we were somewhere in France but didn't know where), a couple young boys came down. I tried to ask them where we were, using my high school French. They got a kick out of that and said Vierville!, Vierville! We walked along the beach sometimes. There were mine warning signs everywhere in German.

Driving through the villages from Omaha Beach to Cherbourg, we saw a lot of destruction. It was really a mess.

MR: All of this time you were still in your Navy uniform?
FH: Yes, blue shirt and dungarees. Everything was still informal. When we got to Cherbourg we were assigned to the signal station at Fort du Homet. That was an old fort, dated 1857 or so. It was occupied by the Army. We were at a Navy signal station up at the top of the fort. The rest of the fort was Army. Our job was to position and contact ships in the harbor. We weren't bothered too much by air raids then, because most of the fighting had moved inland. But it was interesting.

MR: How long were you there?
FH: I was at Cherbourg until January or February of 1945. Then we were sent over to an advanced Naval base at Plymouth, England. A small group of us went back there. I was in Plymouth when Germany surrendered. It was really wild with the VE Day celebrations.

My Grandmother was living in Southampton, England during the war. She refused to leave her home and Southampton was a large seaport that was heavily bombed earlier in the war. A lot of those English people were pretty spunky.

MR: Did you ever get to see her or anyone else while you were there?
FH: Yes, I was able to get leave and see her and other relatives sometime in May I believe. That was when I got to appreciate what they went through. They had very strict

rationing and that lasted until well after the war ended. Yet, they offered what they had. I felt guilty imposing on them. It was an interesting experience.

MR: Do you remember where you were and what your reaction was when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?
FH: I was in Plymouth then. I was quite shocked, as a lot of us were. We didn't know how much his health had deteriorated during the war. And to me, being a teenager at the time, he was a sort of father figure to me. I was brought up during the Depression in the 1930's. He had the "fireside chats" on the radio. He encouraged people during the Depression and early stages of the war. So, we felt pretty badly at the time.

MR: Did you ever get to see any USO shows?
FH: Not really. In fact, I heard that after we left Omaha Beach and went to Cherbourg, Bob Hope and those folks were in that area a few days after we left. We missed that, but we got to see some of the local USO shows, but most of those were back in boot camp at Newport. I remember one when Gypsy Rosalee performed. The place was packed and as soon as the show was over they had to set the room up for midnight mass.

MR: When did you return to the States?
FH: It was sometime in July of 1945. We went by train from Plymouth back up to Scotland. The Queen Mary was waiting there in the Firth of Clyde. She was loading up with a lot of soldiers that had seen combat in Europe. That was quite a sight, as we had been overseas for about 18 months. We came back to New York City and saw the Statue of Liberty and the city skyline. It was a great feeling. You knew you were back home after seeing how the people in Europe had suffered. They had been in the war a lot longer than we had.

MR: Where did you go when you arrived back in New York?
FH: As soon as we got off the ship we went to Jack Dempsey's. We'd heard so much about that place, we thought we'd go there and have a few beers. I think at that time they charged a dollar for a glass of beer and we thought that was outrageous. We hung around there for a few hours. Then I think I was on a 30-day leave. In fact, I was visiting relatives up here in Glens Falls when Japan surrendered. Then I went back to New York City. That is when I was assigned to a ship. I got assigned to a sub chaser, PC-1252. She was down in Miami, FL at that time but we were stationed near Newport, RI., at Melville, RI. We ran from Melville down the coast to Key West, FL. That was in the late summer of 1945. In October, 1945 they had a big Navy Day celebration in New York City. They had a huge Naval review on the Hudson river. They had all kinds of ships, battleships, cruisers, aircraft carriers, destroyers, etc. It was really quite a show, and our little ship was part of the flotilla. We were going up the Hudson to get into position and we came across this huge cruiser (huge to us of course). Our captain said he wanted to know what it was and he told me to signal them and ask. Here I am and I haven't signaled anything except a couple small ships before and here is this cruiser. So, I challenged this cruiser and he gave me the name and hull number. It was the USS

Honolulu. I felt kind of foolish, but it was quite an experience seeing all of those ships. A lot of them had combat records in the Pacific.

MR: When were you discharged?
FH: I was discharged in March, 1946. That was at Lido Beach, Long Island. From there I returned to White Plains.

MR: How were you able to keep in contact with the folks back home during the war?
FH: At that time, I might have had a girlfriend that I wrote to, but not very often. I wrote to her the first few months I was in, but then we kind of lost contact. Aside from my father I didn't maintain much contact with anyone.

MR: Did you ever make use of the GI Bill?
FH: Yes. At that time, I was interested in becoming a commercial artist. I had always liked to draw and sketch. I got a job at Rockefeller Center in New York with an advertising agency. They knew I was interested in art. I got a job, starting out as an office boy. I never really got involved in the art work, but I could see how it was done.

MR: Did you ever use the 52-20 Club?
FH: I don't recall what that was.

MR: For 52 weeks you got $20 a week. It was like unemployment insurance for those being discharged.

FH: Oh yes, I do remember getting some mustering out pay in a lump sum.
MR: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

FH: No. One time I went to a meeting at the American Legion, but for some reason I just couldn't get involved.

MR: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone you served with?
FH: Not right away, but when I moved up here to Hudson Falls, there was a fella, Dick Cline, who worked at the Woodbury Lumber Company. I still keep in touch with him now. He was on one of the tugs as a signalman also. We were both at the signal station at Fort du Homet. I didn't get in touch with him until several years after the war. He had kept in touch with another fella that we knew when we were back in Scotland living in the Quonset hut. I only got in touch with him about two years ago. Now I wish that I had kept in closer contact.

MR: How do you think your time in the service had a effect on your life?
FH: I was quite an experience, coming right out of high school and meeting people from all over the country.

MR: Tell us about these pictures.
FH: (shows photos and drawings)