

**John Lewis Dutko
Veteran**

**Lieutenant Colonel Robert von Hasseln
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Interviewers**

**Interviewed on March 1st, 2002
Culver Road Amory, Rochester NY**

Q: Mr. Dutko, tell me where and when you were born.

JD: I was born in Weirton, West Virginia

Q: When was that?

JD: July 27th, 1922.

Q: Is that where you grew up?

JD: We lived there for 5 years and then we moved to East Rochester, NY

Q: Why did you move to East Rochester?

JD: My Dad's work. Work was slow in West Virginia so we moved to East Rochester.

Q: So you basically grew up in Rochester?

JD: Yes

Q: And when did you enter the Navy?

JD: November 2nd, 1942

Q: Were you in high school at the time?

JD: No, I was working.

Q: What were you doing?

JD: I was working in a paper mill.

Q: Why the Navy?

JD: Why the Navy? I guess I thought it was a better life than foxholes.

Q: So tell me in November of 1942 when you went to the Navy, where did you go first?

JD: We went to Newport Rhode Island. That's where I had my training.

Q: Okay, and from there?

JD: From there I went to Boston, Massachusetts...waiting for assignment. While I was waiting for assignments, they had a...they needed men in the armed guard. We were the gunners on merchant ships. So, we were called down to the conference room and at that time it was a volunteer service since it was a dangerous assignment. They just wanted volunteers. So I volunteered for that.

Q: How soon after that did you ship out on a merchant ship?

JD: Probably a couple weeks.

Q: Which one was it? Which was your first ship?

JD: Oh gee...

Q: Was it the SS Penelope...

JD: Penelope Barker.

Q: What were your duties aboard the Barker?

JD: We manned the guns.

Q: Did you have a particular gun that you manned?

JD: On the first ship that I was on I was on a 20mm.

Q: And later on were you on other types of guns?

JD: Yes. 3 inch 50. 5 inch 38. 5 inch 51. We had different duties on different ships.

Q: Were you a gun pointer? A gun layer? Loader?

JD: On the 20mm I was a gunner. On the 5 inch 50 I was the gun captain.

Q: Did you ever have the occasion to fire the guns in combat?

JD: Yes.

Q: Tell us about that.

JD: Well we were always subject to submarines, and our duty was to...secure the ship. We had the safety of the ship. And the civilians run the ship- the merchant seamen. We were the Navy Gunners.

Q: Right

JD: And we made...we were the first ships into the port where they needed us. We carried ammunition, tanks, all kinds of equipment. And food supplies. We delivered the cargos.

Q: Were any of the ships you were on attacked?

JD: Yes

Q: Can you tell us about that?

JD: Well, on the John Brown in Italy we were under fire constantly going through the Mediterranean Sea to Naples. We were fired upon daily.

Q: Now that name is somewhat familiar to me. Is there something significant about that ship?

JD: Yes. John Brown is a museum. It's the only liberty ship on the east coast that is still in service.

Q: Have you ever visited her since the war?

JD: Yeah it was in Buffalo two years ago.

Q: How did that feel being aboard your old ship?

JD: Real good, real good.

Q: Well, tell me about it. What did you feel when you walked on?

JD: It just brought back memories.

Q: Did you bring family with you?

JD: No

Q: Were you by yourself?

JD: Well we had 12 guys that we...we have a little club that we were in the armed guards service. And we kind of took the people on tours of the ship.

Q: What were some of the things you told people you took on the tours?

JD: How the guns operated. How the watch was- we stood watch. Just normal everyday life aboard the ship. I've got pictures aboard the museum aboard the ship. It's a museum. It's anchored in Baltimore now. It made a trip over to Normandy, I think two or three years ago.

Q: While you were aboard the John Brown in the Mediterranean, were you basically under air attack? Or what is I submarine attack?

JD: It was mostly air attack in the Mediterranean. But we made...we were at the Anzio Beachhead when it was under fire. We made a southern France invasion. We were one of the first ships in. My first trip was to the Persian Gulf in 1942. So we were in Basra, Iraq at that time. And then I made a trip to Murmansk, Russia. Which was one of the worst trips we ever made. Submarines and aircraft...we were under fire all that time. But our ships were always...I don't know how many were sunk in the merchant marines.

Q: What was it like when you were under attack? What were you thinking?

JD: Well were young kids, 20 years old. We just did our jobs. Went to the guns, did what we were supposed to do. Probably didn't know any better. It was a good life. We traveled a lot, I saw a lot of the world. Saw a lot of the different ports. We had liberty in all the ports so we could spend a week or two in all the ports that we went to.

Q: Well that must have been very interesting. I mean coming from Upstate New York.

JD: That's what I say we had a chance to see the world.

Q: Any particular port you can recall that was...?

JD: Well Bombay [Mumbai], India. Hobart, Tasmania. Iraq.

Q: Any one stand out in your mind the most? The one you enjoyed the most?

JD: Not really. Murmansk, Russia was different. Seeing how these people live up there in the cold, what their life was like.

Q: You were in convoys most of the time.

JD: Most of the time.

Q: Other ships would get hit in the convoy.

JD: Yeah we had ships sunk in our convoy.

Q: You would see this?

JD: At a distance, yes.

Q: Did you ever wonder if you were going to be next?

JD: You never knew. We lived day to day.

Q: Did that change the way you lived or the way you looked at things?

JD: I don't think so.

Q: How did you get along with the merchant sailors?

JD: Very good.

Q: Was there ever any resentment that they were making more money than you were?

JD: At first. But we found out that they were doing a job, and we were doing our job. There were people that didn't get along with the merchant seaman, but all our crews got along.

Q: Did it ever bother you that they were making extra money for shipping out and they didn't have to go?

JD: We had some resentment. We volunteered for what we did so we couldn't...

Q: Did they ever assist you on the guns?

JD: Oh yes, yes. They helped us, they were very good at that.

Q: Were there ever any occasions when the merchant sailors said, "We're not going to do that, that's not our job?"

JD: No. Not on our ships. Maybe other ships yes. But we had a good understanding with them.

Q: Did you ever feel that it was unfair that you were under Navy discipline and they weren't?

JD: No, because we weren't that disciplined in the armed guard. Regular guys- we did our job and they did their job. We would help them if we could and that was that.

Q: How many sailors were on the John Brown?

JD: We had anywhere from 20 to 40 Navy men depending on what kind of a ship you were on, what the armament was. The John Brown was a transport cargo ship. We carried troops and we carried cargo. So we had more Navy men on there.

Q: What was the highest ranking naval person aboard?

JD: Probably a Lieutenant. Mostly an Ensign.

Q: And when you went to see the John Brown in Buffalo were your guns still there?

JD: Yes.

Q: Did it come back to you how to operate the gun?

JD: Yes, oh yes I have a picture of it over there. We've got a club that is armed guard from Rochester and merchant seamen. And we meet once a month over at the Country Buffet. And we shoot the bull, talk about old times. There's two or three of them that were on the Brown.

Q: And you meet with the merchant sailors?

JD: Yup, we have lunch and get along very well with them.

Q: Now you were in the Pacific also weren't you?

JD: I was in the Pacific and the Atlantic.

Q: Any differences come to mind when sailing the Pacific and the Atlantic?

JD: Well the Atlantic was rough. Going up to Murmansk was snow and ice. Our guns froze. It was a rough trip. They were all rough, we were always under attack. Always on alert.

Q: Would you say it was stressful?

JD: I don't think so. Like I said, we were young and probably didn't know the difference.

Q: What did you do after the war?

JD: Got a job, worked. [Chuckles]

Q: Did you get married? Settle down?

JD: Yeah I got married. Five children, 52 years. Very happy.

Q: When you think back to your time in the Naval Armed Guard, what do think of the most? What strikes you the most?

JD: I think it was very interesting. Learned a lot, saw a lot of the world that I wouldn't have seen if it wasn't for the Navy. Never got hurt.

Q: Do you think it changed your life at all?

JD: I can't tell. I don't know what it would have been if we had those four years as civilians. But I wouldn't give that up for anything. It was the best part of my life.

Q: Now, tell us about the medals you have here.

JD: Well I have the regular ones here. I have the Philippines liberation medal that I'm proud of. I have two medals from the Russian government that was sent to us 50 years after the war, thanking us for what we did- bringing the supplies over. Which was nice. And the rest of them are the ordinary: Good Conduct, Asia-Pacific, and European Theater.

Q: What's this one?

JD: That's the Good Conduct Medal. I guess everyone got that. [Chuckles]

Q: And you know which Russian medal is which?

JD: Well...they're probably both...one's for the 50th anniversary of the Russian something or other, and I got a paper that explains them. But there's one that's in Russian. Got my name up there in Russian. It's something different.

Q: Good, well any last thoughts? Anything you would like to add?

JD: I don't know.

Q: Anything you would like to tell the people viewing this in the future? Things you learned that you would like to pass on?

JD: I'm proud for what I did in the service. And I think any man or female should have some service time for their country. You appreciate your country more if you served for it or did something for it.

Q: Well thank you very much.

JD: It's kind of hard to uh...I don't know what it would have been like in the army. I imagine they were under the same system.

Q: I would imagine it would get a little difficult at times being so cramped.

JD: We had a tough time.

Q: How did you make it work? How did you make it all work?

JD: Day to day. It was the life we chose at that time. I enjoyed it. I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

Q: What did you enjoy the most about it?

JD: Traveling, seeing the different ports, different people. Now I see the change in these countries 60 years after we saw them. They're all built up. Take that Basra in the Persian Gulf. There was nothing when we were there. Once in the Persian Gulf a man came up to me and asked me if he could go aboard and get a drink of water. I said sure. We got to talking and he worked for the Anglo-American oil company. And I asked him what his name was, where he was from. He was from...I said I was from east Rochester and he said well so am I! I asked him what his name was, and he told me. I asked him if he had a daughter and he said yeah. I can't remember what were name was. I said I went to school with her and graduated with her. He had left home. She thought he had died but he had skipped out on his family and went over there to work. But being from the same town and that far away it was a coincidence.

Q: Did you ever tell his daughter you saw him?

JD: Yeah, but she said my father was dead. She didn't want to know about him.

Q: Must have been interesting for him, meeting someone from East Rochester.

JD: Yeah.

Q: So you never went back to the sea? You came home and..?

JD: No, no I didn't even care about riding in a boat. I mean I would but I never cared about going back.