

Daniel Gaponiuk
Veteran

Wayne Clarke
Interviewer

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Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and date of birth, please?

Daniel Gaponiuk: Daniel Gaponiuk, Jr. April 2, 1931. Born in a town of Passaic, New Jersey.

Q: Did you attend school?

DG: Went to school in Passaic, New Jersey, from kindergarten all the way through high school.

Q: And what year did you graduate?

DG: 1948. I graduated from high school, went into the Navy 1951 of May, was discharged in May of 1955.

Q: Okay. In between high school and going into the Navy, did you go to college or did you go to work?

DG: No, I was 16 years old when I graduated, so I was working in a handkerchief mill as a cutter when I came out of service. I was an electrician apprentice. Went to college two years.

Q: Okay.

DG: Got a job as a drafting trainee with I and T in Nutley, New Jersey. I left there in 86 at the age of 55. 30 years of service as a senior electrical, mechanical designer.

Q: Okay. All right. Let me go back to your military experience. When did you go into the Navy?

DG: In May of 1951.

Q: And whereabouts?

DG: Newport News, Rhode Island, for boot camp.

Q: What was that like?

DG: A lot of fun. I had no problem with anything like that. Met some good friends that over the four years, we were still good friends. Little by little. They were all disappearing now.

Q: All right and after your boot camp, where did you go to next?

DG: From there the ship was down in Norfolk, Virginia. It was on an Ad 26, Shenandoah, and it was Labor Day weekend. Supposed to have a 72 hours pass at that time, but we never got it. And they told us someday we're being transferred to a bunch of destroyers. And then in the process, they said there was no drafting department aboard the Shenandoah.

Q: Now, had you gone to school for drafting?

DG: I wanted to be a draftsman,

Q: So, it was going to be an on-the-job training program?

DG: I had drafting while I was in high school. Just about every phase you can think of got aboard that. They said they didn't have any drafting department. They'd have to be on a repair ship, so I didn't think anything of it. They ship us out to these destroyers, told me it would be transferred out at sea. Well, that was on a Saturday. Monday morning, we left for Korea there for 18 months, came back to the States.

Q: Okay, let's go back. What was it like? Did you actually go into Korea?

DG: We were off the shore acting as decoys. We stay out 2 miles out, trying to draw fire from the beach, and the battle wagons were way out on the horizon. They would shoot over us to wherever we told them was coming from.

Q: So you were under fire?

DG: Right? First, 1st couple of days was scary. But talked to an old Boston mate. It was during World War II. We were in a shell line. I said, Boy, I hope they know what they're doing. He says, Sonny, when those shells go over you don't have any problems. The one

you don't hear, that's going to get you.

Q: Now did your ship get hit at all?

DG: No, we were lucky. Our sister ship got hit twice. JC. Owens, they laid a smokescreen, got out. Communists said they had sunk it. Well we came back to the States. It was a big thing in the newspaper. Ghost ship returns.

Q: Now what did they have you doing aboard ship at that time?

DG: I was a radio operator at that time.

Q: So you basically stuck for that job?

DG: No, I was given a choice when I got aboard ship. The third day we were out of sea. The executive officer says, you have a choice of radar, sonar or radio. I said I'll take Radio. Figuring that might be a good thing for later on in life but didn't work out that way.

Q: Okay, so you became a radio operator.

DG: I had all shipboard training because there was no school to go to at that time.

Q: Did you have to learn.

DG: Old fashioned typewriters earphones and when the Morse code would come through you type out the message. Got to the point where I could do 60 words a minute. Which was slow compared to the English. Radio operators do like 100 words a minute.

Q: And once you attain that skill, were you promoted?

DG: I became a petty officer third class. When he came back to the States there was a shortage of radio operators and we were standing all crazy hours, 12 hours on, 8 hours of four off, all you can go to bed. That's all you heard was the code in your ears. So we came back to the States. They had an opening for a storekeeper and as a radio operator we used to print out what they call a plan of the day they give you. Everything was be going on the next day you had an opening for storekeepers. So I went, I woke up the storekeeper officer and I told him look, nobody has a chance to see this so don't tell me somebody beat me to the punch. And I took that. I had to take a cut back in rate from petty officer, third class radio operator, went back to storekeeper SN. He shipped me up to Rhode Island again. To Newport, Rhode Island. Took a ten week course up there.

Came back to the ship. They had a ship, I guess it was about maybe six months later. They had an Atlantic fleet examination. I took it and I got it. So I got back up to SK three. Then later on SK two second class. Betty officer when I got discharged.

Q: Okay. And you gave us a list of all the places you've been to Port of Call. Out of that list, what was your favorite?

DG: Well, I guess Japan was my favorite place. If I would have stayed in, I think I would have got duty over there. But they promised me everything. Then they wouldn't give it to me. So came home, went to enlist in the Air Force. They promised me the same thing wherever you want to go. The day I went to get sworn in. So I want to see my orders. You can't do it, I said. My arm just fell off my shoulder. Goodbye. Then I got back to my girl again and we got married. And that was the end of Navy career.

Q: Okay, so you decided not to stay in the Navy?

DG: Right.

Q: And when were you discharged?

DG: In May of 1955.

Q: Okay. All right. Did you cross the equator?

DG: Went across the equator. International Dateline, I don't know how many times, but I'll tell you, they crossing the equator was one hell of an experience.

Q: Was that the worst?

DG: They crucified us from 430 in the morning till 430 in the afternoon. Shaved hair, hair off. Some guys had half of it taken off, some with an eyebrow missing. And they saved the officers for less. So as you go through the initiation now, you become what they call a shellback. And then all the officers come through. So if anybody had a bone to pick with them, boy, they could do whatever they wanted with them. That was great. International dateline. I don't know how many times I crossed that.

Q: Now, was there a ceremony for that?

DG: No. Got certificates for all of that at the equator. International Dateline. I got two other ones up north, the Arctic Circle. One hell of an experience. They would take me right now. I'd drop everything here and I'd be gone.

Q: How was the food aboard?

DG: Couldn't beat it. A good place to sleeping. Quarters were very confined, like three deck side. Whoever was on the bottom one, he had the worst place. The guy on the top was the best place if you didn't fall out of your bunk, if you were drunk and bathroom on there. We had no toilet bowls. It was like half an old fashioned boiler cut in half with legs on it. You had wooden seats with a little cut out and that's you sat on there maybe five, six guys. And as the salt water come through, ran out and then down into the ocean. I got some pictures of that.

Q: But you enjoyed your time aboard?

DG: Had a hell of a good time. Witnessed a lot of things. It was a ship. I don't know if you remember back in guess it was later part of 52 was a flying enterprise. It was a Norwegian merchant ship, and it was sinking in the English Channel. We almost went down through the whole storm. It was the worst one in 50 years. We got into port, into France, and I was radio operator. We're cleaning up. All the radio shack had water in it. Living quarters were flooded. I could show you events that were ripped off and all we were cleaning up. I hear this SOS. And everybody said, yeah, sure, you been drinking. I said no. It's an SOS. So sure enough, we listened to it, contacted Washington.

Washington said there was two destroyers. Our ship and the JC Weeks came into France, and both skippers were on a beach. Washington says, Get them back, and whoever's in best shape, we were in worse shape. We pumped all fuel, the food and everything over to them. They went out. Guess they were there for maybe about four days. In the meantime, they welded all the vents and everything shut. We took our supplies and we went out there for ten days. There's an English tugboat come out to pull this in. Also a French tugboat come out. The skipper wouldn't let anybody else, just the English tugboat. And we hit a second storm, and that really broke her back. I got pictures home. I try to find them. If she's laying like this. The day that she sank, skipper was on top of the stack. He just jumped off in time. It was the English tugboat come in, picked him up. The first mate jumped overboard, got him on. They pull away, and then she went finally what she did, she come up nose first and slowly went down, and you couldn't see anything. Then it was a loud explosion. She come back out. The whole bow was ripped apart. Then she went down. And as a result of that, our ship got a medal. All the crew got medals and everything. Big play up. Turned out he was a bad news. He was running contraband to Korea. Caught another ship, ran in the Indian Ocean, and they found out also they took his license away. So it was another good experience and some

funny experiences. We're down on Midway Island. I don't know if you ever heard of albatross. Big seagulling bird, beautiful in the air. When it comes in for landing, they fall upside down and flip. All the legs are made for landing on ground. They call them goony birds as a result.

Q: Okay. Any other experiences you want to mention?

DG: We tracked a whale for a half a day. It was a submarine. And when we came back to the States, our patrolling duty was from Key West, Florida, up to Newfoundland.

Q: Let me just stop this for a second, okay? So you tracked a whale.

DG: Right. We found out it was a whale. We thought it was a submarine and we picked up one down off the coast of Key West. It was inside the three mile limit. I don't know if I should say this. We got the word to ram it. We figured it was a Russian sub. That thing outran us underwater. We could do 30 knots. It was already probably one of their nuclear subs.

Q: So it got away.

DG: Right. But we were told to make it look like an accident, really, just to see what they I was on a blockade for Guatemala that time. They were bringing in all kinds of weapons and stuff, and it was a big force to pull up alongside of a ship and say, what are you carrying? He could say bananas. We never allowed to go aboard them. And one night there was a Swedish ship going through on the horizon. Radio had to tell them to stop and they kept on going. Well, we used to have movie call on the rear end of the ship. They turn a gun mount around and showed a movie on the side of the gun tub. As they did that, it was in a direction where that ship was. Well, they stopped dead in the water. I guess they were going to start shooting, but all that stuff, you can't go aboard them. Every time we turn around, our hands are tied. Even today, with all the weaponry we have today, they don't have to worry about North Korea with launching a missile. They can blow it up as soon as it leaves the pad.

Q: Okay. Once you were discharged in 1955.

DG: I got a job working as apprentice electrician. \$0.95 an hour. Showed you what the money rate was at that time. From there I got a job as a drafting trainee with ITT. And over the years as I progressed, went from a detailer training to a detail layout and designer, and then senior designer. And if I would have known I was going to live this

long, I would have stayed with them. I had a heart attack after my wife had passed away a couple years later, prostate cancer. And there was seven of us. We were working for Saudi Arabia, putting all their communication system across the desert, and we're working with the microwave dishes and all. Lab was on one side of the wall, we were on the other. Seven of us in line. I was the first guy to come down with it, and I was lucky. I had two young urologists at that time. They call them radioactive iodine crystals. Today they call them seeds. 40 treatments. Rest of the guys had operation. The shortest one was two years and the last one was seven years. I worked with these guys for 30 years. They were like brothers to me and they all went. I had two more friends that I grew up with. Same thing. Talked into an operation, lost control of their bladder and all. And there are two other guys listened to me. They're still doing good. That was the reason I came up here. I figure, well, I always love to hunt and fish. Might as well go up there, enjoy whatever time I have left. A long time ago, I'm still here.

Q: Now. You mentioned you went back to college.

DG: Yeah, as soon as I came out of school, I went nights.

Q: Okay, so you made use of the GI bill?

DG: Well, I was using that then. What happened? I bought a house. My wife had a baby. My father and mother were in bad shape. I was going carrying 19 credits, just like a full time student going nights and Saturday mornings, come down with a good case of ulcers. Doctor says, well, you have a choice. You either quit your job, go to school, or you quit school and keep your job. I had to do that then. I was going to go back again. And there were several guys that went through their four years of college nights. They offered them a job to come back as a young engineer. They were making more money as designers than a young engineer coming in. That was the end of the schooling.

Q: Did you stay in touch with anyone you were in the service with?

DG: I still do. We have a reunion every year, different places. This past one was up in Connecticut where the sub base is, and there's quite a few. Surprisingly, there's more World War II vets alive than Korean. We have some now, also Vietnamese war veterans. Also Desert Storm. Not too many of them. Young guys just don't seem to be interested.

Q: Do you belong to any of the veteran's organization?

DG: I belong to American Legion and VFW. That's all. I used to have a subscription to the Tin Can Sailors. It's a monthly paper. It comes out all about World War One, two Korean, Vietnamese, all different ships, the different battles they were in and all. So that's an interesting thing, too.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

DG: I could say it was the best four years of my life. I did my job, never got into trouble and all. And you get promoted as you go along. And I stayed in. I had four years of sea duty. If I had two more years, sea duty, if I shipped over, could have been eligible for chief, and then after that, probably warrant officer. And God knows what would have happened. I probably would have stayed in for 20.

Q: Okay. Do you want to hold up some of those pictures?

DG: Sure.

Q: Tell us about them. When was that taken?

DG: The picture was 1951, but I think I got this about a year ago. Bob told us the Navy Memorial, they have that on the wall. They'll have your name, but if you want to see all the information, you get that on a computer.

Q: Okay. All right, got it.

DG: This is the one about further back. Okay. We came back to the States in California.

Q: All right, got it. Okay.

DG: This is a bigger version showing all four ships. 775. That was what ship I was on Blackmore.

Q: Yeah. Okay. All right. Okay.

DG: I don't know if you'd be able to see these.

Q: Oh, yeah. I can focus.

DG: Another picture stuck here. The states finally got control of Inchon. It was a port of

embarkation debarkation. They allowed us to go ashore there.

Q: Okay. All right.

DG: This was the ship home for four years.

Q: Okay. And you know what eventually happened to the ship?

DG: Yeah. It was over in Vietnam when a desert storm and all, and they finally let it go. I guess it was around 1992. They sunk it. I was home on boat leave just before went overseas.

Q: Okay.

DG: There's another one here with a buddy of mine who was in the Air Force.

Q: Okay. Is he still living?

DG: Yeah, he's still alive.

Q: Okay.

DG: This is a plaque that my daughter's got. Has a picture of myself, the ship, the ribbons, medals, the radio operator and storekeeper badges. At the bottom it says Dan Gaponiuk Jr. May 51 to 55. USS. Willard Keith. dd 775.

Q: Okay. All right.

DG: This was our sleeping quarters. Three racks high. The guy on one, first one is folded up so he can get into the lockers.

Q: Okay.

DG: That was the worst place to be, guys coming back drunk, you step all over, you throw up all over in the top bunk. Yeah. Just about enough room to move around with your shoulders, maybe spirit. The top bunk was the best place, but if you were drunk and fell out, it could be a bad place. This is the storm I was telling you about in the English Channel. We almost sunk that. They took off the deck treads that you normally had a chiseling hammer to get them off. All the lifelines were ripped off.

Q: Okay. All right.

DG: This was an air vent that was folded up.

Q: Wow. Okay.

DG: It's a steel bulkhead door going from the back part of the ship up to the fo'c'sle all bent out of shape.

Q: Okay.

DG: That's all caused by the storm. And this is normal cruising water coming over the main deck.

Q: Okay.

DG: I think that's all the pictures I have. Wait a while. Did I show you the one still in here? This one is funny.

DG: Oh, here we go. This is the best one. No toilet bowls about that before.

Q: Yeah. And that's what you sat on.

DG: Right. Sometimes you have six guys there all at the same time. No privacy.

Q: Okay. All right. Thank you very much for your interview.

DG: You're welcome. Had a good time.

Q: Okay. And you mentioned your daughter put this together for you.

DG: Yeah, my oldest daughter.

Q: Okay. This way I can zoom in on.

DG: If I can give some of my ribbons for my grandson. Taking for show and tell. Well, this is show and tell.

Q: Can you name them? Tell us what they are?

DG: I got a piece of paper here, and I'll go across. What can I do with that? You wouldn't have it in there, would you?

Q: Starting off with that looks like the right yeah. Is that the first one? The Navy Commendation Medal.

DG: First one is accommodation ribbon. Next one is a good conduct medal.

Q: Okay.

DG: Occupation service medal, national defense medal, Korean service medal, UN Korean service medal. And we have a UN medal on the second row. Expert pistol shot medal, expert rifleman, rifle medal, combat service commemorative medal, Korean defense commemorative medal, overseas commemorative medal, and the United States Navy commemorative medal.

Q: Okay.

DG: The bottom is radio operator, petty officer, third class. Right on the left, it's storekeeper second class. On the bottom, we have a little medal there with my name. This year, I was on service and USS Willard Keith, dd 775.

Q: Okay. All right, great. Got the whole thing.

DG: Of all the medals. That's the ribbons you would wear on your uniform. Picture to ship while we're overseas. I should say we came back from overseas, but I don't know all the names, the ports we had hit.

Q: Can you just tilt that a little bit? I'm getting some glare there. Yeah, this way? That's fine. Okay. Yeah, that's a nice photograph. Okay. Got it.

DG: All right.

Q: Thank you again.

DG: You're welcome