

**Ralph J. Gruner
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewer**

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Terrace at Beverwyck
Slingerlands, New York**

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

RG: Ralph Joseph Gruner. And what else do you want?

Q: Where were born?

RG: Born in Englewood, New Jersey.

Q: And when were you born?

RG: March 14, 1928.

Q: Alright, and did you attend school there?

RG: Yeah, in Englewood, New Jersey I went to school. Bergenfield, I'm sorry. Bergenfield, New Jersey is where I started in school.

Q: And did you graduate from high school?

RG: I graduated from high school...

Q: And what year did you graduate?

RG: 1946.

Q: 1946. So, you grew up actually during World War II. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor by chance?

RG: Probably in Englewood.

Q: Now, during World War II, did your life change much with the war effort? Did your family experience any sort of shortages of food or anything like that?

RG: Well, I never knew who my father was because my mother divorced him somewhere when I was still a baby. And we were constantly moving around from house to house to rent a room.

Q: Okay. Did your mother work?

RG: Yes, she usually worked in restaurants making cakes and things like that.

Q: Okay. During the war years, when you were in high school, did you participate in any kind of scrap metal drives or anything like that for the war effort?

RG: Well, I did different things as a Boy Scout. And I don't remember what I did anymore.

Q: Okay, that's fine. And you mentioned earlier you entered the service in 1946?

RG: Yeah.

Q: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

RG: Well, I signed up for the draft. I was still in high school then. I went back to my house, and my mother told me that she wasn't going to sign me into the service until I came out of high school.

Q: Alright, so once you graduated from high school, you went into the Navy? Or did you work for a while?

RG: I didn't. I knew that when I signed for the draft that I was going to end up in the Army and I didn't like that idea. So, I went down to the Navy and signed up for them and he asked me, what time do you want to, when do you want to come in here? I said, when I graduate from high school. What date do you want to come in?! And I said, as soon as I graduate. What date do you want to be here?! And I said, I'll come in on the 26th of June. And he said, okay, we'll have you, because you passed medical checks and all that.

Q: Where did they send you for your basic training?

RG: Norfolk.

Q: Was that your first time away from home for a long period of time?

RG: Yeah.

Q: And what was basic training like for you? Was it difficult?

RG: No, it wasn't difficult, but it was supposed to be for five weeks. The fifth week came, and they didn't release us from the boot camp for the next week, and then the next week, and then the next week. About three weeks before we finally got out of there and we didn't know where we were going, but we were going to get in a ship down in that area. The Navy at that time was asking whether you wanted a big ship to go on or a small ship. And I thought that one for a while, and I said, no, I don't want a big ship, because I was thinking that would be an aircraft carrier. And they have so many people in there that you never know everybody on board. So I said, I'll take a small ship. So I ended up on a cargo ship as my first ship and they didn't tell us where we were going, but we knew we were going south. So I figured, well, maybe we're going to have to go to where the Japanese

are still holding the island. And when we crossed the equator, then they told us we were going to the South Pole.

Q: Alright, now when you cross the equator, was there any kind of celebration?

RG: Yup, they had, I forget what the name of it was.

Q: They called you a shellback or something?

RG: Right, and a fellow that I went in with, knew what it was all about, and he said they're going to have, well that had a swimming pool put up with canvas on board the ship, and they would ask you, what are you?! And if you said anything but the right word, they keep dumping you down in the water until you could finally answer the right word...

Q: Do you remember what that word was?

RG: I think shellback.

Q: Okay. Or pollywog or something?

RG: Yeah, pollywog is what you were called all the time. My friend told me, tell them you're a shellback. What was it you said?

Q: A tadpole or pollywog?

RG: Oh yeah, a tadpole I think was the word that stopped them from dunking me down. So I gave him that word right away, and that was it. I got one dunk under and out.

Q: Okay. Now aboard ship, did you get any kind of training, on the job training, for a specific job?

RG: Well, basically, you're always getting trained, one kind or another and... they gave good care.

Q: Now, what did you do aboard ship mostly?

RG: Seamanship, whatever they wanted you to do. Scrape, paint, or... work keeping the ship in good shape.

Q: Alright, so after you crossed the equator, what happened next?

RG: Nothing really. Well, I did all kinds of work that they put you through for training.

Q: And did you go to the South Pole on that trip or later on?

RG: Yes, we had material in the cargo area and we had, let's see, there was two cargo ships, a communication ship, and a Coast Guard icebreaker because the Navy didn't have icebreakers at that time, and a submarine. And when we got down into the ice pack, the submarine couldn't take the damage, so the Coast Guard kind of had to take it out and we were sitting in the ice pack, the ships,

until the icebreaker got back again. And then we went into the South Pole and tied up on the ice packs.

Q: Okay. Now, what about your clothing? Was your clothing adequate? Did you have heavy parkas and winter gear?

RG: Yes. Well, they didn't have heavy winter covers, but they had enough stuff to put on that would keep you warm.

Q: How long were you down there for?

RG: We left and the only time you could get in there with a ship was summertime. So we got in there and the temperature, summertime, 40 below zero.

Q: Wow. How long were you down there for?

RG: We were down there until we unloaded the metal plates for making an airport. We didn't do the work, we just unloaded the ships. Until when we came out of there, in came a Navy icebreaker and he was the captain of that ship. He was told, when we were going out, that they get at the end of the line and don't go around us and do what you want to do. And he didn't do that. He came around us when we were breaking through the ice packs. And when he passed us, he broke off a great big piece of ice and it came back to our ship and broke our rudder off, just like a piece of toothpick. So the Coast Guard icebreaker had to tow us out of there and the Navy had to bring the other ships out. So we went to Australia to get repaired, get a new rudder, and we were there for about five weeks.

Q: Now did you get to get off the ship?

RG: Oh, yeah. We went on liberty while they were repairing us because they put us in a dry dock. And I found out years later that that was where all these World War II ships. The American and all the other countries that were working on our side and they were repaired if they were damaged.

Q: Now what was the name of your ship?

RG: Merrick. USS Merrick.

Q: Merrick. Okay. And what did you think of Australia? Did you like it there?

RG: Yeah, the people were very nice and had us to their houses for liberty, our liberty, and...

Q: For a meal? For a meal? For supper?

RG: Yeah.

Q: Alright, now after five weeks, once the ship was repaired, did you go back to the South Pole again?

RG: No.

Q: While you were down in the South Pole, you mentioned Admiral Perry or Byrd, I'm sorry. Now, did you get to see him at all?

RG: No.

Q: But you knew he was down?

RG: I think he was on the communications ship.

Q: Alright, now, whereabouts did you guys go next?

RG: We came back to the States, and I was put on a ship that was smaller than a cargo ship. It was an APD...

Q: Now by APD, what does that stand for?

RG: It was like a small ship, Auxiliary Personnel Destroyer. Yeah, it was a small destroyer, actually.

Q: Alright, and do you recall the name of that ship?

RG: I got a picture of it, and I can't remember what the name of it was.

Q: Okay, that's alright, but it was an APD?

RG: I liked it because it had four landing watches on board and I was trained to land and drop the ramp. I got trained on that and later on I became a Boatswain Mate. And it was getting close to my time to come out and it wasn't long that I did. I was in for three years and that was getting down to that.

Q: Did you consider re-enlisting at all?

RG: Well, that ship, remember at that period of time with the Navy, and I don't know whether they still do it today, but on the third year... what was the question you asked me?

Q: I asked you if you considered re-enlisting?

RG: Well, I went down to the South Pole and when I got back, this ship was in San Diego and it got me around in different places. One place, we went to, we went to China. Went over there to pick up the Ambassador and his people and get them out of there because China was going through the Communists taking over. We had to get them out of there. So we got to China and to get there we went through, we went out of Alaska, went through the, oh, what they call a passageway. And that was a beautiful sight to come through there. Where else did we go? Well, that type of ship would take either Marines or underwater demolition teams. That was our job. But the shooting had all stopped by then, but it was still rated as being in...

Q: Hostile territories?

RG: Well... where we had some Marines on one time that was going through boot camp training and we dropped them off at an island off of Alaska. And at 2 o'clock in the morning, they woke me up, and the other boat handlers, and I'm thinking, it's 2 o'clock in the morning, what the hell are they getting us up for now? And it was to go back to the island and pick up the Marines. I said, we just put them in here today and tomorrow was the day that it's 2 o'clock in the morning. And we picked them all up, and brought them back to the ship. And I was a Boatswain Mate by then and the group officer that was in charge of them said to me, you got any type of work that my people can do? I said, you can't get it from me, you have to get that from the Executive Officer. So he said, okay. Well, they ended up scraping paint and all that kind of stuff after they did their morning...

Q: PT and exercising?

RG: Exercising. So, I said to him, the officer, what the hell happened to these guys? And he said, a bear came in through the campsite and the Marines ran out and left their weapons behind. I said, they didn't learn, or weren't taught, not to ever leave their weapons alone? He says, that's what they were supposed to do, but they didn't do it. They just ran like hell and got out of the campsite. I said, they're lucky the bear didn't tear them apart then.

Q: Now, how was the food aboard ship?

RG: Very good. The Navy was known to have good food.

Q: And what was your living quarters like, your sleeping quarters? Did you sleep in hammocks or the jibs?

RG: Hammocks

Q: Okay, and what about entertainment? Did you have movies or did you ever get to see any?

RG: They would have movies every once in a while, not every day.

Q: And when were you discharged from the Navy?

RG: Right on the third year in San Francisco.

Q: And once you were discharged, did you go back home right away?

RG: Yeah...

Q: Back to New Jersey?

RG: Yeah, and I got jobs. Well, I wanted to be a designer of airplanes, and I went to a school in New York City that would train you for it. But they interviewed me and they said, what do you want to do? I said, I'd like to design airplanes. Well, did you go through college? And I said, no. He says, then I can't

train you for that, but would you mind being a mechanic on airplanes? I said, I like airplanes so much. Yeah, I could do that. So they trained me for that.

Q: Had you ever flown before?

RG: No.

Q: No. Okay, so you were an airplane mechanic?

RG: Yeah, I was an airplane mechanic in 1951 with United Airlines. And... At that time, we just had piston planes. We didn't have jet planes yet. They didn't come out at that time. We used to do the inspections, 100 hour checks and things like that. And... Oh, when you went in at that time, when United hired me, they told me that they only have openings, being that you are coming in at this time, you had to go on midnight shift. And that was all right with me. I had no problems and I came out. I didn't leave United for 34 years. I stayed with them. Oh, when I first started with them, the fellows that had already been there said to me, if you want to be a foreman, you have to get it by the 10th year or you'll never be a foreman. And it was right on the 10th year that I became a foreman. And I stayed as a foreman and I didn't want to go any higher because going higher, desk job. And one thing I hate is sitting around and doing paperwork. I had enough with filling out log books without doing any other paperwork.

Q: Now, did you have an A&P license?

RG: Yeah, that's what I wanted before I went with United. And I wrote to American, United and Eastern and I got messages back from them, letters back from them that I'd have to go down for their training. And I figured, well, Eastern Airlines was owned by, he was a famous...

Q: Was it Howard Hughes? Let's see, there was Howard Hughes, Eddie...

RG: I think so. He offered the lowest payment, so I skipped that one. Now it was between United and American. And... Howard Hughes's place was down in Florida. And I didn't want to go down there for training, go for training down there. And they didn't pay as much as American and United did. So it was between the two of them. And I decided to go to...not American, oh, United. And I stayed with them for 34 years.

Q: Now, did you make use of the GI Bill?

RG: Yes...

Q: And you used the GI Bill for your A&P license and training at all?

RG: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Alright. And did you join any veterans' organizations?

RG: No.

Q: Did you stay in contact with anyone you were in service with?

RG: I'm still in contact with some of them that I did work with.

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

RG: It taught me a lot of things. In other words, I basically grew up with not only the Navy, but learned different work things after I got discharged.

Q: Alright. Okay, well any other incidents or anything you can think of during your time in the Navy? Anything you want to talk about we might have missed?

RG: Not that I can think of.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your interview.

RG: You're welcome.