

**Joe P. Crank**  
**Veteran**

**Mike Russet**  
**Interviewer**

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(Tape 1, side 1)

**Q:** Could you give me your full name and when and where you were born, please?

**JC:** My name is Joe Paul Crank, and I was born in La Union, New Mexico, December 1st, 1924.

**Q:** What was your pre-war education?

**JC:** I had finished my sophomore year in high school and was into part of my junior year.

**Q:** Did you have any occupations before the war?

**JC:** No, just a student, but I worked in the fields and orchards there in the Rio Grande Valley as a kid during summers and weekends.

**Q:** How old were you when you found out about Pearl Harbor?

**JC:** Seventeen.

**Q:** How did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

**JC:** We lived in a little adobe two-room house, and we didn't have electricity. But, in those days, the kids around built crystal sets, and I was listening to my crystal set on the bed one night with the earphones on, and that's when I heard about it.

**Q:** What was your reaction?

**JC:** I didn't understand the magnitude of it at the time.

**Q:** Did you enlist in the service or were you drafted?

**JC:** My draft number came up when I turned 18 in December of '42, so I was deferred until the end of that school year which had been in '43, but I decided to go ahead and just drop out of school and go in. I had a choice of going into the branch of service I wanted to, and I wanted to go into the Navy.

**Q:** Why did you pick the Navy?

**JC:** I don't know why I did, but I always had a real interest in ships and water and so forth.

**Q:** Where did you do your basic training?

**JC:** In San Diego, California.

**Q:** Was that the first time you ever saw the ocean?

**JC:** As a matter of fact, I didn't even see it in San Diego (laughs). But, later on, I did see it for the first time when I went up to San Pedro.

**Q:** Can you tell us about your basic training?

**JC:** It was in March of 1943, and I was in Company 43-128, and I think there's about 120 of us in the company? I've forgotten now how many. Basically, we learned to march, and that's about it (laughs). Rules and regulations and things like that got all of our shots and so forth.

**Q:** How long were you in basic training?

**JC:** It wasn't very long. It seemed like it had just been reduced to four or five weeks, but your company couldn't graduate until you could pass review on the field. You know, marching and going through all your maneuvers.

**Q:** What ship were you assigned to?

**JC:** I was eventually assigned to the United States ship Caution, which was an AM-158; AM is an auxiliary minesweeper.

**Q:** Was that your first time you were ever on a ship?

**JC:** No. I had gone to San Pedro before I was assigned to this ship for small craft training, and we actually went out, on several occasions, on another minesweeper similar to it to learn to do the things you're going to have to do.

**Q:** What exactly was your assignment on the ship?

**JC:** When I first went aboard, we were putting the ship into commission, and we were unpacking and loading and all of that sort of thing. I was a second class seaman, and I did the groundwork, shipping, painting, cleaning, sweeping, and so forth. Eventually, I got a rating and became a petty officer.

**Q:** What was life like on the Caution?

**JC:** Well...what was it like...

**Q:** Could you describe some of your experiences?

**JC:** Well, I can tell you that we put the ship into commission in Portland, Oregon, which is eighty miles up the Columbia River, and when eventually we were ready to go to sea, we sailed down the Columbia River and crossed over the bar at Astoria, and I must tell you that being a sailor in the United States Navy out on the open sea was one of the highest highs I've ever had, and it never did completely diminish.

**Q:** Why did you feel that way?

**JC:** I don't know. Probably because of my background and...I just can't tell you why, but it was a feeling I'll never forget.

**Q:** How long were you on the minesweeper?

**JC:** I was on it for about two years.

**Q:** Could you tell some of the experiences on the minesweeper, what some of your duties were, the ship, its missions, and so on?

**JC:** We sailed first to Pearl Harbor. I think all the ships in the Pacific went to Pearl Harbor first. That was a place where you went from there everywhere else in the Pacific, and when we were there, the war had moved on out beyond Pearl Harbor, and I think our very first assignment was to escort some seagoing tugs with their water barge toes to Majuro, another time to Kwajalein and to Enewetak; these were in the Marshalls and the Caroline Islands; and, the islands, especially the atolls out there, didn't have near enough water to support any number of people, so that was a crucial thing in the Pacific to keep the troops supplied with water, and the Navy supplied with water, and that was something everybody wanted out there. Anytime you got a notice to pull out and head back to Pearl, everybody would give you a call and wanted you to give them all the extra water you might have. We were an auxiliary minesweeper. An auxiliary implies that the ship was built for more than one purpose, and, we had, aside from minesweeping equipment which we were equipped to sweep the Japanese contact mines—those are the big, round ones with the long horns on them that stick out and explode on contact—and we were equipped for acoustic mines to detonate those and...another kind of mine that we could detonate with an electrical current. Besides that, we carried depth charges and hedgehogs. Hedgehogs are small depth charges which are shot out on the front of the ship, and they land in a big circle. They can be directed a little bit to either side of the

ship, and if one of them contacts, they all go off, and hopefully what you're shooting at, at least you'll discover there's something there which is hard to do out there. We had sonar for anti-submarine work and depth charges, and we had K-guns, which were a depth charge, on a kind of a stem that fit down into a short barrel of a gun, and they were actually fired out to the sides of the ship. We had four of those, and then we were equipped with anti-aircraft guns. We had two forty-millimeter, six twenty-millimeter, and one three-inch gun.

**Q:** Did you ever go on a mine sweeping run?

**JC:** Yes, we did.

**Q:** Could you describe what you would do?

**JC:** We went on a mine sweeping run, most every place we went there. There were places that hadn't been swept yet. We were the first ones, too, and sometimes, we went in tandem with other minesweepers, and the formation we got into was a formation that...well, let me explain to you how we swept them. We had what we call a pig and an otter on a cutting cable, a fairly large, very tough cable that would cut the mine anchors. And, when we put it in the water, it would go out at about a forty-five degree angle from the stern of the ship, and that was supposed to cut the mine. Usually, it got tangled up in the mine, but occasionally, it cut one free. But, behind that sweep, another minesweeper would go in the protected area of the preceding minesweeper, and then even another one behind it if it was an open enough space to do that, and at the same time would keep the acoustic hammers going in case of acoustic mines, and we'd do the electrical charge for electric mines.

**Q:** What happened if a mine tangled in this line?

**JC:** If it surfaced, which they usually did, we would shoot it with a twenty-millimeter gun, explode it, and run out of here. That happened quite often, or it happened several times.

**Q:** Did you ever go on any anti-submarine missions?

**JC:** No, not on a mission, but when we escorted these vessels, we were always sounding for submarines. We made contact a couple of times, as far as we know, and we dropped depth charges, but we never knew really whether we sunk one or not.

**Q:** There was a story about going up to Alaska to have a rendezvous with the Russians. Can you tell us about that?

**JC:** As a matter of fact, after our duty down in the Central Pacific, we were sent back for some repairs and refittings, and we went to Cold Bay, Alaska, which was a rendezvous point with the Russians. The war had just ended in Europe, and the Russians were in need of cleaning out the White Sea and the Baltic Sea up there. They needed minesweepers, and we gave those over to the Russians. We would bring about eight or ten Russians aboard, or more depending on which group and what we were going to do, and the same number of our men would transfer off. We would go out and go through all of the maneuvers, procedures, and everything that a ship did, and they had to find out where all the buttons went to. If you pushed a button here or where it rang a bell somewhere else...it was quite involved. We'd go out and do that, and then we'd come back in, would transfer some more off, and bring some more Russians on until finally, they got a full crew.

**Q:** When was this?

**JC:** This was right after the end of the European war and right before the end of the war in the Pacific.

**Q:** How were you able to communicate with the Russians? Was there someone on board who spoke Russian?

**JC:** There was one translator, but at this time I was a quartermaster, having to do mainly with navigation and stuff like that, and there was a Russian aboard who had spent some time in the Spanish Civil War, and he picked up a pretty good bit of Spanish. I could speak Spanish, and he could speak Spanish, so we did a pretty good bit of communicating that way.

**Q:** After you gave your ship away, then you needed to be transferred to another ship or...

**JC:** If I remember right, we were flown from Cold Bay, Alaska to Anchorage. (coughs) Excuse me. And from Anchorage, we took a cargo ship back to Seattle. There, we were reassigned, and I was assigned to the 1st Naval District, which was on the east coast, and they gave me thirty days en route. That was the first leave I'd gotten during the entire war. In the meantime, the war had ended. The war ended, as a matter of fact, when we were in Anchorage, so I got a thirty day en route to Newport, Rhode Island, where they have a large center there for chart portfolios, correcting charts, men making charts, and stuff. I was assigned to the USS Caution which was just being commissioned in the Philadelphia Naval Yard—

**Q:** You mean the Princeton?

**JC:** What did I say?

**Q:** Caution (laughs).

**JC:** No, the new Princeton. There was another Princeton that went down during the war. This was the new Princeton, and the executive officer of the old Princeton that went down—if I'm not mistaken—was the captain of this ship, and he had only one foot. One of his legs was blown off below the knee. Anyhow, we put the Princeton in commission in the Philadelphia Naval Yard, and I went down with the portfolios of the navigation charts and so forth. We cruised around a little bit on a shakedown cruise—you know, a shakedown, that's when you pretend you're at war; about ninety percent of the time, you're on your battle stations—and, it was a real luxury trip for me because it was such a large ship, they had so many luxurious things aboard, and I enjoyed watching the planes. My battle station was way up in the pilot house of the island of the carrier. When I had some spare time, I'd walk around the catwalk towards the back and watch the planes come in and land, and that was interesting to do.

**Q:** What was it like besides the obvious things you did? How did you compare a carrier and the way it handled to a minesweeper?

**JC:** Oh (laughs)! Well, for one thing, I got a quartermaster rating when I was aboard the minesweeper. I did most of my work in the pilot house, and my General Quarters battle station was at the helm, and the minesweeper had a very large helm about three feet in diameter and with spokes that ran out—a beautiful big brass helm. Of course they were power steered, but oftentimes, the power steering would go out, and I'd have to put my foot in the rungs there to bring it around. It was very difficult to turn the rudders. But on the carrier, there was a little steering wheel about this big around as I remember it. (Holds hands up to show approximate measurement) (Laughs) You just could sit there and do it with one finger. Of course, the minesweeper, on one occasion, we had to go back to the after steerage and steer it with block and tackle. We lost our steerage all together—some kind of mechanical failure or something.

**Q:** Did you ever have any experience in kamikaze attacks?

**JC:** No. We were attacked from the air on several occasions, but not kamikazes.

**Q:** Did you ever cross the equator?

**JC:** Never crossed the equator, but we crossed 180th, which was another thing that I wasn't too aware of, and I forget what you called the people. The shellbacks

crossed the equator, and I don't know what you call them when they cross 180th.

**Q:** I think it was tadpoles or something.

**JC:** Was it? (Laughs) It could've been.

**Q:** What was your reaction when you heard about VE Day and VJ Day?

**JC:** By VJ Day, I think it was pretty well in the books that we're going to win, but when we heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped which was not very long before the war ended, my reaction there—I remember it very well—was that we'll never have another war again because we can just decapitate any nation that would attack us. We could just drop one bomb and wipe out the whole darn government. Of course, I know how ridiculous that thought was now, but that was my thought at the time. I had no idea what an atomic bomb was. I knew it was certainly powerful, but that was about it.

**Q:** How did you keep contact with home?

**JC:** When the mail caught up with us, I didn't communicate with hardly anybody except my mother. Whenever the mail would catch up with us somewhere, we'd have mail call, and that was it. I don't know...somebody who was in charge of the mail on a smaller ship. That way, you don't have people for everything. You just kind of make do. I know on some of the big ships, they actually have a post office, mail handlers, and so forth, but not on the minesweeper.

**Q:** When were you discharged?

**JC:** I was discharged in April of 1946.

**Q:** Were there any celebrations at home when you went back home?

**JC:** No. My mother didn't even know I was coming. I just caught a bus home from...I got...my... I was discharged in a place called Camp Wallace, Texas, and I still don't know where that is. Back in those days, they had travel bureaus, and private people that owned the car—you know, cars were very scarce in those days, hard to come by—they would transport people cross-country. Some went cross-country, and they'd charge you to ride with them. And, they turned me out there at the gate of Camp Wallace. There was this travel guy, and two or three of us got in the car and headed for El Paso which was...I don't know how far away it was because I can't remember where Camp Wallace was. But, I went to El Paso, and then I caught a local bus that went out down [unclear]. We didn't live in the city. We lived out in the country. But, there was a bus that went by twice a day. I caught the bus, but threw my sea bag on the bus, and went home.

**Q:** After the war, what were your occupations and your [unclear] back-to-school?

**JC:** During the war, I stayed in partial contact with a childhood friend of mine who was a year younger than I. For some reason, he didn't go in the war, but we played football together in high school, and he had gotten a scholarship to the University of Tulsa. In his letter, he wrote me and told me that he had talked to his coach about me and my high school football, and he said, "Coach said for you to come on up and try out if you wanted to. See if you could make the team and get a scholarship." So, that's what I did when I went home. It just happened to be just about time for spring training at the University of Tulsa. I went up there, made the team, and got a scholarship (camera shutter). And, that's where I got my education.

**Q:** What work did you do after that?

**JC:** I taught school—went right to school teaching. I wanted to be a coach; that was my main thing, but I discovered that you have to teach if you want to be a coach. You can't just coach (laughs). So, I got a teaching job and help at the El Paso High School, coached football there, basketball, and whatever else was in season at the time, and taught. And, I've taught ever since.

**Q:** Do you belong to any veteran organizations?

**JC:** I don't know.

**Q:** Do you ever go to any unit reunions?

**JC:** Went to one reunion for the 29th minesweeper division, which I didn't even know existed until they finally contacted me, and I found out about it. That was out in Portland, Oregon. It happened to be in the same place where we put the minesweeper in commission.

**Q:** Are there any other experiences you like to mention?

**JC:** Our last landings were...our last invasion that we participated in was Saipan, and we spent some time there sweeping and patrolling. For some reason, we went back to Pearl Harbor from there and then went back to Saipan again. The second trip there, they had the air base information (camera shutter), and the bombers were going from there right all the way to Tokyo—all the way to Japan—and we were assigned a segment of the run to Japan out at sea in case we had to pick up flyers, downed pilots, people like that. And on our first trip to Saipan, we swept mines, and we patrolled. Saipan and Tinian are quite close together. The Japanese were coming over from Tinian at night, and we had to patrol. We were

one of several that patrolled that strait between the two islands there, and that was when I had probably my worst experience there. It was a very sad thing. We patrolled up to one point of the island there, and I think Saipan was probably the first island that had a civilian population on it. There were civilians, women, men, I think probably some Japanese soldiers and personnel, that were jumping off the cliffs there. I've read about those since then. I hadn't heard about them for years until recently, and I remembered seeing...and I wondered why that had never made any...nobody ever thought about that, but that was kind of a sad, sad thing to experience.

**Q:** How do you think your military service affected your life?

**JC:** Oh. I tell you, when I was assigned to that little ship, when I first walked aboard it, I knew my life would never be the same. I didn't know how I would be different, but I knew I'd never go back to the plowed fields of the Rio Grande Valley, I can tell you that (camera shutter). It's affected my life, and I can't imagine what I would have done if World War II had never happened. I'd have probably been a farm laborer like my father was.

**Q:** Were you a plank holder on the minesweeper?

**JC:** I was an owner of a plank, from commissioning to decommissioning.

**Q:** What do you mean by that?

**JC:** It's just a term they use. If you're a part of the crew that puts the ship into commission and you stay on that ship until it goes out of commission, maybe you have to stay on it continuously—I don't know—then you're considered to be a plank owner, or holder, of the ship (camera shutter).

**Q:** All right, thank you very much. Why don't you hold up some pictures of...  
(Shows a picture of young Joe Paul Crank)

**JC:** (Sees picture and laughs) Which one is that?

**Q:** That's you as a young man, a seaman.

**JC:** Oh, god. What a contrast that's going to be, I think.

**Q:** Well, you haven't changed very much.

**JC:** Yeah. That's nice of you to say that. (A person holds the picture next to Crank's face; camera shutter)

**Q:** And, this is a photograph of the minesweeper that you were on. (Takes a

picture of the minesweeper and holds it up to the camera)

**JC:** Yeah.

(Camera zooms in to focus on the image)

**Q:** How many men were on the crew of the minesweeper? (Camera zooms out to focus on Crank)

**JC:** I believe there were about sixty-five, and about nine or ten officers.

**Q:** Here's a photograph of the commissioning and the entire crew. (Takes a picture of the commissioning crew and holds it up to the camera; camera zooms in to focus on the image)

**JC:** Yeah, that's our little crew there. That's the number of men. However many you count, that's how many we had. (Camera shutter; some people in the background chuckle; camera zooms out to focus on Crank) On the carrier, there was like five thousand crew members (laughs).

**Q:** Right, thank you, Joe.

**JC:** Well, you're more than—

(End of tape 1, side 1)

(Tape 1, side 2)

**Q:** (unknown due to tape skip)

**JC:** I actually came to Cambridge from Texas. We came up here one summer to visit my wife's sister and brother-in-law. He was in the army engineers, and he was put in charge of the Hudson River locks. You know, the navigable waterways are under the control of the army engineers, and they lived over by Schuylerville—down between Schuylerville and the battleground—and we came here to visit one summer. I tell you, I thought this was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen in my life. Of course, it was in the summertime (laughs). My wife and I decided we wanted to move up here, and then we were surprised...we found out you can actually get a job here. They even want teachers. You could buy land; you could buy a whole farm and stuff; you couldn't do that out west. So, we went home, and we got everything ready. We sold some property and resigned from our teaching positions there, and—after we had gotten jobs here—we got our jobs here first, and then we came up here. I haven't had any desire to leave here since.

**Q:** What year would that have been?

**JC:** That was in '67. I taught school at Cambridge for seventeen years after that, and then I had to resign—I wasn't sixty, and I had to resign. I couldn't read the morning bulletin, and I was getting too blind for that. So, I've been retired for sixteen...seventeen years? You can't beat that, can you?

(End of tape 1, side 2)