

# Edwin Stevens

December 12, 2013

Interviewed by Thomas Webb

Transcribed by Chris Hansley and Martin Billheimer

Edited by Martin Billheimer

Web biography by Unknown

Production by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Webb: My name is Thomas Webb, and I'm here with Edwin Stevens. Today is December 12, 2013, and we're here at the Pritzker Military [Museum &] Library to talk a little about your military service. So I guess, to begin I'd like to go back before that and just ask you when and where you were born?

Stevens: Well I was born in Sanford, North Carolina. As you can tell [laughs] --,

Webb: You still have a little bit of the accent ...

Stevens: Yeah, in fact, I volunteered at the Civil War Museum and one of the first things they told me is to remember this is Union country [laughs], so I try to remember that. But anyway, I was born in Sanford and then spent a lot of my time in Wilmington, North Carolina. My parents lived there, but in my early days when it was time for me to go to school, my dad was travelling around two different states, Virginia and North Carolina, and so they felt if I could go and live with my grandfather who had a farm in a little town called Clarkton, North Carolina, and go to school that I wouldn't be disrupted with him moving from one state to the other. And so that first year, that one year that I was supposed to be there, turned out that I was going into junior high school when my mother put her foot down and she says, "This is it, you're moving. You're coming back home and all," and I came back home to a sister and a younger brother that -- all I saw with them pretty much was the visiting, coming to the farm and all of this kind of stuff.

So I went back, and I was in North Carolina and went to New Hanover High School and then I went to a business college and this kind of stuff and I was in Wilmington when I got the urge to do something other than just live there. But, in the meantime when I was in high school and all, we—Fort Fisher was right down, just ten, fifteen miles away—and we played, and we had fun down on the beaches down at Fort Fisher and it

never meant anything to us otherwise. And so then, after this and I'm at the Civil War Museum, of course, and now it means something, and I've made a trip or two back to look at it and see it from a different point of view.

Webb: So you said you got the urge to do something different. What then did you do?

Stevens: Well, in Wilmington I went to the recruit[ing] station and my, you had a choice to decide which branch you wanted to go to and of course I wanted to go to the [US] Navy because I wanted to travel and so I joined there and very shortly I was sent to Norfolk<sup>1</sup> to the NTS [sic], the NTC [US Naval Training Center] training center. I got my—I guess you call it my boot training; I got my boot training there. And I put my specialty, my specialty was ... you never know if they're gonna honor it, but they asked you and I told them I wanted visual communications. And so then I was sent to Chicago, Illinois, and surprisingly enough I went to the Sunny Gym<sup>2</sup> which was on the campus of the University of Chicago and this was October of 1941 so they knew—everybody but us, knew that there was a war coming you know, and what of it. But so the Navy had already taken over the Sunny Gym with an agreement with the University of Chicago and so that was turned into a [US Army] Signal School. And so that's where I took my signal training and we slept and everything, and this was a girl's gym that we took over and so the urinals [laughs] was a little different and so, but we did all of our training there. But then for the food we ate in the cafeteria with the students, you know, and all that.

And so when I finished, completed that, then they sent me to Brooklyn, New York, to what was then named the [US Naval] Armed Guard Center<sup>3</sup> and I knew nothing more than to report there. I got there with ... they looked like thousands of people in the area, and I'm walking around and lost and I guess that was a week or so, and you had a spot for your seabag<sup>4</sup> and your stuff and a place, a bunk to sleep on and other than

---

<sup>1</sup> Naval Station Norfolk [VA], headquarters and home port of the US Navy's Fleet Forces Command, est. 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Large campus gymnasium building, named after Bernard E Sunny, 1856-1943, wealthy industrialist and public utilities monopolist.

<sup>3</sup> The US Naval Armed Guard was responsible for defending merchant ships from enemy attacks, during World War II. Men from Armed Guard units trained at centers such as the US Naval Armed Guard Center in Brooklyn. The one in Brooklyn was designated for assignments in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic.

<sup>4</sup> A duffel bag used by sailors and marines.

that, you just eat and do nothing. And on the loudspeaker, I heard my name called and so, to report to a certain place in the center. So I did and there was a lieutenant standing there and he said, "I want you to go get your gear and report back immediately; twenty minutes," he said, "back here". And so I went and got my gear and reported back and we went out to one of those little government vehicles, I forget what it was, but anyway we put everything in and took off to the Port Authority of New York and he parked and we went into this building and I remember walking down a long hall with a lot of rooms and he kept looking for the number and when we came up to the number, he knocked on the door and the door opened and it was a commander, a [US] Navy commander standing there and he says, the lieutenant says, "I've got Ed Stevens here and reporting for you," and he said, "Okay lieutenant, you can leave; I'll take care of him from here".

So he had me come in and put my gear and all in a side closet there and I looked and this little room was packed with civilian men all sitting like [in] a theatre looking front, and there was a commander, the Navy commander had walked up to the podium. And it turned out these men were all captains of merchant ships and they were there because they were forming the very first convoy to go down the Atlantic seaboard. And the reason they were forming the convoy, [was that] the German U-boats were sinking them, sinking these ships as fast as they went down the coast. And it's ironic because we used to live in Wilmington and Carolina Beach, and all was right there, and it was happening right along in that area.

And so we formed this convoy and only had one old, four-stacker destroyer<sup>5</sup> and the Navy couldn't afford anything else and they gave us that, and that particular destroyer was why I was brought in to begin with as a signalman to begin with because they took one of the ships, it was called the [SS] Henry St. George Tucker, and made it the commodore of this convoy which turned out to be three columns of four ships each. And so then we took off from New York headed down the coast toward Key West, Florida in this one destroyer and even that when we got down there, we had lost three ships going down the coast by the time we got to Key West. And in Key West, they had fixed it up to be a safe area. They

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Four-stack' refers to the number of smokestacks on the *Wickes*-class naval destroyers, a 1917 design innovation from the previous model.

mined the area all around with mines at different depths and you had to have a pilot. When the ship got to that point, he [the pilot] would take them in and you'd drop anchor and then when you were going to leave from there you had formed—all those ships would form another convoy and go out.

However, one of the safe areas was Panama and everything was secret and orders were read at a certain time you know, for the captain, but we knew from scuttlebutt<sup>6</sup> and everything else, that if our ship left the safe area, then when you left Panama, you were gonna be on your own and out there and most of the time, the signalman was taken off in Panama and caught a ship and came back to New York for another trip. But many times in the beginning, the Navy made errors and there was supposed to be an order for you to get on the ship. And there's no orders so you'd stay on the ship and you'd go to Calcutta or any of those different places. And that happened quite a bit. And one of the times was when I was on this deal, I happened to be in Sicily because the ship that I had gone into Khorramshahr<sup>7</sup>, which is no more—that's now Kuwait, but it was Khorramshahr before the fighting. And that ship turned out to be in bad shape and it needed engine work or something, so I got as far as Sicily and got off and in a little holding area and was waiting. Then in comes the MV Andrea Gritti, flying the Italian flag and escorted by a naval vehicle and signals was given and they entered the harbor about two o'clock in the morning and it was so hot on the ships and all that a lot of us couldn't sleep and were walking around and then you could see the destroyer escort giving them signals to drop anchor there in the middle of the harbor because they didn't know any more about it other than they had surrendered. And so then I thought that would be a pretty good deal even though I didn't speak Italian, I thought that would be a pretty good deal if whatever they were gonna do. So I kinda kept the radar going and then whenever they decided to have an interview for some people to put on that ship ... one of them, one guy was Italian, spoke good Italian, so he was there, a Navy guy and I got aboard because I got a phonograph

---

<sup>6</sup> Maritime slang for gossip. The term derives from the cask used to serve water aboard ship, a la talk around a water cooler or coffee klatch etc.

<sup>7</sup> Port city in Iran, important for US Persian Gulf Command operations in WW2, especially for lend-lease oil supplies delivered via Iran to the Allied Soviet Union. It should be noted that Khorramshahr still exists and remains part of the Iranian province Khuzestan. It was never integrated into Kuwait at any time, which it does not border, but it is on the Shatt al 'Arab. Perhaps Mr Stevens is referring to the 1991 Gulf War when he mentions 'the fighting'.

record and laid in bed at night and listened how to say house and car and ... and, and that kind of stuff and turns out the guy in the interview knew ... [he] had done the same thing so we made out all right. [Laughter] So I made it onboard and we sailed out. Ah, one of the things that was very interesting is that you learn that if you don't speak the Italian language, but if you can do your hands, you can communicate very well. So I enjoyed it. I had a good time.

They needed cargo ships, and this was a beautiful cargo ship so that's why they used it. The only thing is that the Navy did not believe that these Italian officers and this German gun officer, they all decided to surrender. They thought it was something doing, so we had an assignment, the three of us, to keep our ears open and whatnot, and then if we could get our hands on some material and all. Well, when we got back to New York to go over to the port director's office and to have these books because you didn't have all that stuff then, to have these books microfilmed and all, any material we got. So we made friends, and of course being Navy with the guns and the communications, we made friends with that kind of people. And they had a similar thing on the ship, a gun crew, and all of this. So the chief, we learned from the chief petty officer that they had literally gotten tired of Mussolini and all of this stuff that was taking place, so they had decided that this was the time. And so the ship was in Trieste and it was loading troops and it was a lot of noise putting all the jeeps and everything else they would use aboard. So while that noise was going on, they saw the iron bars that keeps your ... when you're swinging the bow guns, the stern guns around, to keep you from hitting the bridge of the ... or strafing that, so they sawed it until it was almost in two and then whenever the ship got out that night, it got far enough out, they saw that, they broke it the rest of the way off and with a spotlight and a megaphone turned around. This chief petty officer let them know this three-inch gun was aimed right at the bridge and one shot from it would extinguish the bridge and wipe everybody off so, "You're gonna steer the course".

They wanted to go to Sicily because we now had, the Americans, had Sicily already. And so it was agreed that they'd let the German troops, that they'd get close enough to shore to let the German troops get off before we got down there. And so when the ship came into harbor, it had no lifeboats or no life rafts because they'd used all of those and so

the officers had no choice. So they were, it was funny, they still stayed on, the Italian officers still sailed the ship even after the government knew, if our government knew, that they did not surrender. But they still sailed and then any of us was on, when I was there, one of our things was they didn't know if a submarine, you had this ship out there and a German or Italian submarine would come up and do some of this. So we were to keep close on it and report anything we saw like that—

Webb: Hmmm ...

Stevens: So it was ...

Webb: Yeah. Wow. [laughs] That's quite the story. Let's go back and fill in a few of the gaps if you wouldn't mind. I don't want to interrupt you, 'cause—

Stevens: Well, you should. I run. My wife says I talk all the time.

Webb: That was wonderful. So in the very beginning, back in Chicago, you said you wanted to be the specialty of visual communications. Why did you pick that in particular?

Stevens: Well, I did that because I thought, "Well, the first place you use lights and you use semaphore and you use flags ...", and in Norfolk training center I saw all of that taking place and it was very interesting to me that the flags, when you hoist the flags out of the flag bag, and each one of them means something. And say you're in a convoy of ships, and in course being a signalman I was in the head ship, so the orders are going to be given by that captain, and so the orders come out and so you put first. There's a pennant and then there's a number of flags that have the numbers on, what course you're gonna take and when you're gonna change to; so you bring this up to dip and then you take your binoculars and look around to see if everybody else is right.

Then you, when you get orders from the commodore, you hoist it up to the two-block<sup>8</sup> and then when he gives the orders, then you jerk it down and then everybody in the ship, well then that's when the ships go in motion. And remember, these ships are eight, nine knots course they could only go as fast as the slowest ship, you see, and they'd be maybe a ten-knot convoy, so it'd take it a while, you know, for the turn.

---

<sup>8</sup> Signal that denotes that orders have been understood.

And then, if you're—you could not do any radio or any stuff that these submarines could pick up, so it was all visual and in semaphore, if the ship's rolling you have a little set of stirrups you stand in and you'd get out there and you'd have a reader and he's reading the message that you're going to send to the destroyer or to another ship or whatnot that maybe had somebody on it, and that was the message and you'd tell them in detail. And then the lights, you'd do the same thing, you know. In the latter part, the light that we used in the beginning, we used a big light like that but later our light turned out to be like a shotgun and you're here and you're pulling the trigger and the little bit of light's going out so it had to be right on, whoever you're sending the light to, otherwise they couldn't get it.

Webb: Is that just because of the enemy or whoever got used to seeing the big lights?

Stevens: Yeah, yeah ... And one of the things that the U-boats, they learned just like we changed everything in convoys and all, then they changed and they'd have what they called 'wolfpacks' and so if you only had one destroyer or two destroyers, they'd go out there and make a disturbance and they'd get that destroyer's attention. And then the other one would come into the middle of the convoy and do the damage, and so you had all of those [U-boats]. And then finally the Navy started building these, what they called destroyer escorts, and they were built exactly for that. They were fast, and they had these depth charges. They called them 'fishnets' and so they would blow it up like this and drop down and it would completely surround the sub and crush it in that thing. So later on they got educated and knew what they were doing, and it worked out.

Webb: Now, you're from the East Coast and you talked about growing up and playing on the beaches. Did you also have experience being out on the open water, or when you were out there on ships, did you have any kinds of problems getting seasick, anything like that?

Stevens: No, I got seasick on Great Lakes. [Laughs] No, I don't ever remember ... I did not, to answer your question. First, I did not have that kind of experience out on the water 'cause we were either fishing in the surf or doing this kind of stuff maybe out in a small area, but no experience like that. My experience began, started, whenever I went on these ships. But you get out on the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific but mostly the Atlantic, you

get the reality of it, so after you get used to the rhythm— for a while, when I was down sitting in the mess hall, down below deck and it was ringing and I'd start drinking coffee or what have you— once in a while, I'd have to get up, go back up topside where the air was so I could breathe it because you'd feel kind of queasy. But it didn't take long. I was—that all blew over and we were fine. But we did have, we'd have recruits coming aboard and we'd have some of them you'd have to catch them, because they were trying to jump overboard 'cause they wanted to get off that bad.

Webb: We've talked to some gentlemen in the Navy that were originally from Iowa and it was just a little bit different experience for them.

Stevens: Oh, absolutely.

Webb: So you joined up with the Merchants [US Merchant Marine] before the war started. What was the mood of everybody as you were going along in your convoy watching for these German U-boats?

Stevens: Well, the first thing when I first joined them in October, the war—we had not declared war. I happened to be at the [US Naval] Armed Guard Center whenever Roosevelt declared that we were in a state of war. And so then the whole thing then took on a whole different, different picture because everywhere, everywhere you proceeded [there] was different people talking about what's gonna happen and where we're gonna go.

Webb: The consensus of the group you were with, kind of that we should be at war?

Stevens: Actually, I think I could say that the consensus of the people was totally confusion. [Laughs]

Webb: Yeah.

Stevens: I mean, all of a sudden we're there and most of the people, as you say from Iowa and all, they didn't know Japan, they didn't know all of this and it was just, it was just a bunch of country boys and things, like myself, that were just, "Okay. It's here", but they didn't know much about it other than that. And of course you had the radio, the radio man on the ship and sometimes you'd get this radio coming over and all of these gals

that they talk about, you've got on—you know, Axis Charlie<sup>9</sup> and all this kind of stuff. You'd get by them and listen for the latest stuff going on, but so much of it was propaganda that you would listen [to]. So that's when you, when in a state of confusion, you really didn't, couldn't form much of an opinion on it.

Webb: When you were in the convoy going up and down the coast, how do you even watch for German U-boats? Like, what was the process for that?

Stevens: Basically, each ship, each merchant ship, had a three-inch gun on the bow, a five-inch gun on the stern and four twenty-millimeter guns mounted around the bridge. And so wherever you were, I mean, gun crews were always on duty, they'd take an hour or two hours and then somebody would relieve them and all, but [they] were always on duty. And then you usually had, the merchant marine had a lookout up in the crow's nest and so for the most part somebody was watching the water all the time. And an interesting story: we had taken on in the Navy, six new recruits. They had just come out of Navy gun crew or something like that, and they were sent, and they were told that if you were torpedoed, if your ship was torpedoed, you'd get thirty-day leave. So that's all they were concerned about, [that] they'd get it. So at night, you're coming around and they'd see this thing and of course torpedoes in those days were not submerged—you know they were half above and [half] below. And they'd see this thing coming to them and, "Oh boy, oh boy, we're gonna get thirty days of leave!" The porpoise would go under the ship or on the side of it and go on and they'd be so mad and so disappointed! [Laughs]

Webb: But you did say that you lost a couple ships when you were in the convoy?

Stevens: Oh, yeah, I think I was in three different convoys cause everywhere I went from then on was. Convoys that we lost: three on the first on, but I think maybe one on each of the others. However, you didn't lose them in this case. In the three I said you lost—you're going down. Remember I said you're keeping the shoreline in sight. So if the ship was torpedoed by a [German] sub and in the right place, then they had compartments so

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Axis Charlie' was a musical version of 'Axis Sally', Nazi propaganda radio broadcast to English-speaking Allies to weaken morale, akin to the more infamous Lord Ha-Ha and Tokyo Rose. Mr Stevens is here using the 'Axis Charlie' nom de guerre in general for all of these fascist propagandists.

that compartment was out but the ship was sitting there and usually they went for the engine room so they could put it out of order. But there was local areas that had tugs posted so the tugs would make big money; they'd come out there and do that. And so they'd be notified, and they'd come out and lot of times they could save the cargo by pulling that ship into the harbor. And before the [German] sub, you know, got a chance to finish it off. So we didn't lose; we put the ship out of commission, but we didn't lose all the cargo.

Webb: And the convoy just keeps on going?

Stevens: Yeah, [laughs] you'd better. And uh, it got to, it got so much better—but we got to the point you had a blimp overhead, and you had, you had sometimes aircraft circling, depending on if the areas were very, very acute and they could actually see the shadows of the submarines down in there. So, it got better and uh, lotta times you'd go all the way down the coast later and never miss any ships, you know and all ...

Webb: During this time that you were onboard these ships, was your family able to communicate with you? Did you receive letters, anything like that?

Stevens: Oh yeah, you'd get mail, you know, at a port something like this. But a lot of times you'd go three months, four months, or depending—a lot of times if you were out in the ocean, you know, over, there was no communication whatsoever. And you'd learned a little bit how to handle something. In fact, when I was in Khorramshahr, going into the Persian Gulf, I got a fever and so on, and so the ship that I was on was going into Khorramshahr, to the refinery. And so when we got there, the [US] 69th Field Artillery Hospital was located in in Khorramshahr, so they took me off and put me there in the hospital. And so I was fresh out of the States, so all those nurses and all in that hospital, I had lots of information and the doctors and all was interested in it. And also, I had connections in the ship, bananas and oranges and all of that; they hadn't seen for a long time and so I'd have a couple of my friends would bring over some bags when they was visiting me here with all that stuff in it.

So when it was time for my ship to leave, and I was good enough then that I could have got off, but what they did was put saltwater under my armpits and so when the thermometer measured it, I was still too hot to get out. So I stayed in it when it left. I made one trip, they had an MTS

[Motor Transport Service], a motor transport, and when these ships would come in unloading cargo and all, I took one of the trucks where they turn over, where they turn them over to the Russians on that side, and went through Basra<sup>10</sup> and this kind of stuff. One time. I would never do that again. But anyway, you'd be up on, coming up over the mountains and it was dark, and these little roads was like this and all you [had] was a little pinpoint light of the truck in front of you and you'd go. And all of sudden these white-coated, well they were Arabs, I'm sure they had jumped out on top; they had machetes and you had the bodies of these trucks were loaded with beans and all of that going to the, you know, people. And they would take their machete and slice open the thing and they were pouring it down the hill and nobody could stop. So a lot of times, when you got to the other end of the line, the truck was about half unloaded.

Webb: So you spent a lot of time on sea; you didn't necessarily get mail when you were out in the sea. What kinds of things did you guys do to keep yourselves occupied, other than you know, scrubbing the deck or....?

Stevens: Well, a lot of the times, you know, we'd put into a ports like Oran<sup>11</sup>, places like that, and course that's one of the reasons that I wanted to get into this was to see what that stuff was all about. So you'd take every opportunity to get to explore these areas when you'd come in. Casablanca, and all of these places and uh, uh, I did a lot of that.

Webb: What would you say was your favorite place that you explored?

Stevens: I think I like Gibraltar. [Laughs]

Webb: Why is that?

Stevens: It just, there was a lot to see there and also you're coming with the two meeting<sup>12</sup> and in that time you had, P51's<sup>13</sup>, planes, I think it was, going back and forth across that entrance, you know for some, you know, for

---

<sup>10</sup> Famous city in Iraq; also the country's main port. Located on the Shatt al Arab.

<sup>11</sup> Well-known port town in Algeria.

<sup>12</sup> The Strait of Gibraltar, which connects the Atlantic and Mediterranean oceans. Or Mr Stevens may be alluding to the Axis and the Allies meeting in conflict over Gibraltar itself.

<sup>13</sup> North American P-51 Mustangs. American fighter planes used in WW2 and Korea.

submarines, and all of that; the Mediterranean and all. There was a lot of activity. I think I really enjoyed that area.

Webb: What was your personal reaction when the Declaration of War was actually made? And you said you were in the Armory<sup>14</sup>?

Stevens: Yeah, in Brooklyn, in New York—

Webb: Guard center?

Stevens: Yeah.

Webb: What were your thoughts?

Stevens: Well you've gotta remember, I came from Wilmington, North Carolina, in the South, so I wasn't a brilliant statistician [laughs] to do this. So when it was there, course there was bunch of us together, you know, all sitting around and you'd look at each other in amazement, and—and now we were at war and we couldn't even relate to the, Pearl Harbor and all of this; you know that's where all of this was coming from because we were just new recruits, just almost out of recruit training, you know, what have you ... So, we began to learn as we went along what we were into, but, uh, it honestly, it didn't mean too much to us to start with and one of the things is a lot of my buddies, I didn't happen to have that, but a lot of my buddies were very homesick for at least a year afterwards. I mean, they missed their families, they missed everything, and I don't think that bothered me that much at that time.

Webb: You enlisted for the adventure?

Stevens: Yeah.

Webb: So you were having the adventure.

Stevens: Yeah.

Webb: I have written down here that you were on about seven different ships, is that...?

---

<sup>14</sup> The Armed Guard Center in Brooklyn was established on the site of a former naval armory.

Stevens: Yeah, one of them—I'll just hit the ones that were interesting, you know. One of them was the [USS] City of Flint<sup>15</sup>, and the [USS] City of Flint, when I boarded that, uh, in New York, most everybody, well the Merchant Marine crew and all, pretty much stayed aboard. There was the same crew and all and they didn't talk a lot and then we, course the armed guard crew that went aboard—they didn't know anything. And so, we didn't learn until we were underway and out there that the City of Flint in 1939 was captured by the German pocket battleship and it was carrying linseed oil to UK. And so the Germans said that that was contraband, and they seized the ship and put a prize crew aboard. Well, the prize crew then was gonna take it to the Netherlands. They did take it to the Netherlands; [they] got in. and politely --The prize crew was seized by the Netherlands; the ship was released, and the captain took it and they continued going to England. Back then, the Netherlands would not, they said, "This is a neutral country and you're taking this ship, we're not gonna let you get away with this." And so they seized the crew and put them in confinement and let the ship go on. Well, we didn't know that when we boarded the ship. We had to learn that afterwards because they didn't talk about it too much. That was one that was interesting. The other that was interesting was the SS Booker T. Washington which was a total African-American ship.<sup>16</sup>

Webb: Un-huh.

Stevens: And it was kind of strange, because here we were in the [US Naval] Armed Guard Center, and by this time we have assembled a number of signalmen, you know, they all like me waited to get out. And you also gotta remember that time: segregation was big and all of this stuff, and so here we had signalmen that all of a sudden got sick and was in the sick bay or something, and others that had maybe thirty days leave left or two

---

<sup>15</sup> US freighter built to honor Flint, Michigan, 1919. It was also the first American ship to be captured by the Germans, in October 1939, two years before US entry into the war,

<sup>16</sup> The SS Booker Washington was one of several US commissioned liberty ships names after prominent African Americans. Washington was a writer, educator and advisor to presidents. It is not clear what was meant by the ship being totally African American. According to [www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil), "The Navy announced on 7 April 1942 that blacks would be enlisted in general service as well as the messman branch beginning 1 June 1942. On 1 February 1943, more than two thirds of the 26,909 African American Sailors were messmen."

week leave; they'd taken that leave because they did not want to go aboard the ship. So, I saw it [as an] an opportunity because I said, "If I get aboard that ship, they are not going to send it in harm's way", you know; it's going to get some particular type cruises. So I joined it. I mean I volunteered, and I got aboard and it kind of gun crew that got aboard was mixed-- so as far as I know, there was no African-Americans in the [US Navy] Armed Guard at that time—maybe if it was it was one or two ...<sup>17</sup>

So the gun crew was aboard. They didn't have any choice; they were assigned, and it turns out in my opinion, was my best points because Captain Hewitt, was—he had come out of school; he had to be good of course, in order to make it to captain to begin with. And he found out that I was interested in navigation, so he'd have me come to his quarters one hour if we were not in harm's way, one hour every night to take navigation from him and he'd had this sextant<sup>18</sup> that he took when he was going to college, and then of course when he went out there, he got a new sextant, so that one was the one I used. And so we'd go out at night, take sights of stars, the moon, whatnot, put it in for correcting courses in there And nobody would know much about that 'cause GPS [Global Positioning System] and all does it now but not then. And so when I got off of the ship, when we got and I was leaving the ship, he was standing by the gangway...he was shaking my hand, he says, "Oh, by the way", and he turns around and hands me a package. And when I get back away somewhere, turns out he had wrapped up that old sextant and given it to me. And I know it was very important to him, that he gave it to me, but it was one of the good cruises that I took.

Webb: Do you still have that, the sextant, do you still have that?

Stevens: No, there was something called poker.

---

<sup>17</sup> "African Americans served often as mess stewards serving meals and attending the meals of the officers and senior non-commissioned officers. On Navy vessels they had a place to serve during "Action Stations". For example, the African Americans serving aboard the cruiser USS Indianapolis, served as mess stewards but their Action Stations were a 5" dual purpose gun mount near one of the funnels and if there was no enemy nearby, they were responsible for moving casualties to the Sick Bay." Email, Paul Grasmehr, 6-17-20.

<sup>18</sup> A sextant is an instrument used to measure altitude in navigation.

Webb: [Laughs]

Stevens: Would you believe in Calcutta I had a miniature thing of the Taj Mahal and it was made out of ivory and I lost that too? [laughter]

Webb: Well, where were you and when was it that you began the discharge process?

Stevens: Well, I was in San Juan, Puerto Rico when I learned that I had, they came out with—it was advertised in the point system and I looked, and I had more points than I needed to get out. And so, naturally, right away, okay. The wait, my wife—you're anxious you know, what have you. And so I'm looking around to see what was an opportunity. It turns out that there was a chance to go to Panama and in Panama some of the ships coming through were heading right into the States. So I got on, I took that chance and went to Panama and laid around for a while, but then the USS Phoenix, the cruiser, was returning and what they were gonna do was put her out of commission and she was going to Philadelphia. So I thought, "Hey, that's just right", so I got a work permit, something on there, and headed to Philadelphia. Got into the harbor coming into Philadelphia and the master of the ship said over the speaker, "Nobody, nobody leaves this ship until we have unloaded all the ammunition". And there were railroad cars down there where you walked down the ramp; you've got a shell in your arms like this and you're going down and handing it to somebody that puts it in. And gosh, I'm telling you it took forever to load all of those, so I didn't get to go home for, not like I thought I was going to.

Webb: It may have taken forever, but I'm sure everybody wanted to take their time and be—

Stevens: Absolutely!

Webb: —ready. What kind of citations, medals did you get, where you were?

Stevens: Yep. Course I got good conduct and with all of that [laughter] I guess I had good conduct. And I got the service medal, but then for every area that you were in: you know, they had Asiatic, Pacific, and had all of this. So I've got a wall full of those at home, and those medals, 'cause I didn't get anything like the Silver Star or anything like that; I didn't. I think I have one that has, a brass one that has a little star on the end and that

was when we had some trouble in one of the areas that we were in in the Mediterranean, and uh, Japanese got too close and all. But it was just—I mean nothing happened to me. I was on the ship and we got a little damage, but thank goodness, I think a friend of mine that was an engineer, he had come in. He left me and went down into the engine room and we had been talking and he says, “Well, I gotta go report for duty,” and he went down and I never saw him again because he was one of the ones that got hurt, you know. It seemed like anything, they always headed, tried to get the engine room out and then the ship is at your mercy; you know you could do it. And so he lost his life down there with a few others, but other than that, I was extremely lucky.

Webb: You said that was a Japanese attack?

Stevens: It was. I don't want to say what type of Jap airplane it was, but it was. If you were in the area sometimes—and they would come out and they would be close to the water and they would just appear from somewhere, and we just weren't prepared for it, I guess. Of course, I can't say we shot one of them down, but they did their damage and took off. So— but I was very fortunate going through a lot of it in convoy. Uh, one of the convoys, we were next to a ship that had, uh, loaded with high octane gasoline, and when the ships turn in a convoy maneuver, the ship that I was on, it happened to be the [Italian ship M/V] Andrea Gritti, at that time, stalled. The power left it somehow and here this tanker was coming and I could have stepped from the bridge to the bridge of the other ship, that's how close we came together, and who knows if it had rubbed and so. One of the things I remember on the Italian ship at that time: we were all hustling down and being a signalman I was up on the bridge and all of sudden I had the thought, “I don't have my lifejacket. It's down below. I didn't bring it up with me.” And one of the crew, one of the Italian sailors, he looked at me and said, “Here, take mine. You're gonna need it; you're worth more than I am so you take it.” I never will forget that. He handed me it. Well if we'd a hit, the lifejackets wouldn't have made any difference anyway. [Chuckles] They'd have blown us out of the water. So ...

Webb: Was there anybody you came into contact during your service that you remained in contact with after?

Stevens: Not too long. There was a couple of them. One of them, his name was Funkhouser. [Laughs] I'll never forget that. And when he came aboard the ship, he, there was an area of Chicago that you'd have a stage, and you paid to get in there. It was one of those undercover type things. And then if somebody would come up and stay with you, with this boxer and with gloves and all, come up—and if you could stay with it for ten minutes or whatever it was, then you got so much money. And he was the one that was up there, challenging whoever would come, and with him we had some incidents in different ports and all. And ah, if he wanted to go into a house in Italy or somewhere, if he wanted to go into a house, a screen door wouldn't mean nothing: he'd just walk right through it. He was a monster and some people got in trouble with that. And so I remember him, and he was out in Terre Haute, Indiana, so I saw him and another kid from Fort Wayne<sup>19</sup>. Those two, but that's about the contact I had.

Webb: Tell me about the transition from your service into what you did the rest of your life. You've talked a little about it before the interview, but let's get it down on record.

Stevens: Well, when I came out, I actually was in the Great Lakes [Naval Base] when I came out and because when I had enough points and I finally got there, I had to go for separation at the Great Lakes before I could get home. And then I had pretty much decided that I wanted to be some kind of a salesman. So I think close to my first job was a company called Relhost Optical Company in Chicago. And they sent me to Muskegon, Michigan, to manage that branch and I had no experience other than I was the manager of the thing and sell[ing] glasses and this kind of stuff. They had a doctor that would examine the eyes and you'd come out with it and you're trying to sell them the best package you can get, you know, for it to go. And I remember one time, oh I guess I'd been there six months or less, and the doctor had an emergency somewhere in Michigan for him to go home. And he had given me a little bit of training, so here I am in there and not wanting to slow things down, I'm sitting there and I'm examining eyes. And so these three people came in and one of them needed to have his eyes examined. Turned out they were inspectors from Ann Arbor, Michigan, and so they told me, the one guy,

---

<sup>19</sup> A town in Indiana named after a colonial fort; not a military base.

said, "Look, you did alright, but in case you don't know it, you gotta have a license and all to do this." [laughs] So that was my tenure at the optical place and then I went with a company called ADT which is American Doors, checking on buildings that are security, and this kind of stuff and I did that for a while. And, but most of mine— [I] stayed as a salesman.

Webb: I guess I should ask why you stayed in Chicago, in the Great Lakes area if you're originally from down South?

Stevens: Well, my, I married a girl from Chicago [laughs], that pretty much is the answer. She was from the Chicago area. And course she was down with me, you know, in Wilmington and all of that. And Wayne grew up going to...and not Needham Broughton in Raleigh and all, and so we all finally wound up in the Chicago area. And I went there because I had a job with the steel wire rope company and just ventured from there and then finally, wound up with the Nike White Company, which is a Kenosha company and there I was. And then I retired from there.

Webb: Were you able to use any of your newfound navigational skills in your personal life? Do you go out and do you go out and sail or anything like that?

Stevens: [laughs]

Webb: No?

Stevens: No. It was good information and good knowledge, but I didn't get to use it out of the water.

Webb: Was there anything that I didn't ask today, or that you wanted to talk about that we didn't discuss?

Stevens: No, but one thing that might be of interest is that being in the Navy, you would think you were, would be an excellent swimmer. [That] was the case that when I was in NTC [Naval Training Center] training in Norfolk, one of the things they required is you to be able to swim and all. And it was in the wintertime and I went into the room where the pool was and I'm looking [at] all these sailors around and when they come out here, they're shivering all over the place and it didn't take long for me to realize that this water was cold! And so I said to the instructor I said, "What do I have to do to pass?" He said, "You jump off the end, go down to the

other end, and come back; and if you make it, you qualify.” And I knew darn well I was going to do that ‘cause I wasn't going to, I didn't know anything, I just went there and kicked off and came back and crawled out. He said—he gave me the okay.

I was pulled out three different times. Well, actually, one time was when I was young in Clarkton, North Carolina. We had a swimming hole and we boys would run back and forth along that and I missed the log one time; it was slick and I fell down and some of the guys had to pump me a little bit to get, you know, that going. But then I was in Oran and was walking along the beach there and I saw a bunch of people out on like a raft and they were jumping off and they were swimming and all of this. And it wasn't that much of a distance; it didn't look like it for me. So I decided, “Well I'm gonna go out there to that raft where they are.” And I didn't realize that halfway out, the bottom fell out and it was over my head. So when I got there, it so happened that somebody on the raft was looking and the next thing I know they had me up on the beach and laying down in the sand, was pumping and they'd got me out.

So it was three different times that episode took place and one time we were in, I think it was Casablanca, and we were at anchor out in the water and we could see bathers up and down on the beach. And so we thought, “Well, we'll put on our life jackets and we'll go ashore and be up there a little bit.” And so we put the lifejackets on, got over there and spent some time. Heading back and this guy who was a buddy of mine, he and I were coming along and all of a sudden, he looked at me and he said, “Your lifejacket seems to be very low in the water.” And so we began to pay attention to it, and it was an old lifejacket and what it was, was giving out on me. So before I knew it, he was under me and he got my lifejacket off and he put his on and he was a terrific swimmer. And he took off to swim to the ship and I used his lifejacket. I mean those kinds of things are something else. But that's about it.

Webb: Alright, well, I really appreciate you taking the time to share your story with us today.

Stevens: Well, I think if running my mouth will help you out [Laughs], I'm glad to do it.

