Walter T. Larson was born on 26 January 1923 in Danbury, Wisconsin, and graduated from Webster, Wisconsin, High School in 1940. After briefly working at providing fuel for wood-burning stoves, in December 1940 Walter joined the Navy. After Basic Training at Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago, Walter was sent to Seattle, where he joined the crew of the USS *Nevada* (BB-36) in the Electrical Division.

The *Nevada* was stationed at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and was badly damaged and beached in the Japanese attack of 7 December 1941. Uninjured, Walter was transferred to the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV-3), which was torpedoed and damaged in August 1942 at Guadalcanal.

In February 1943 the Navy shipped Walter to Washington, D.C., for Electrical Intercommunication School (EIC); upon completion of the school in July 1943 Walter was transferred to the amphibious force and assigned to the USS *LCI 455*, a troop carrier equipped with ship-to-shore rockets for landing support. The ship participated in several Pacific island invasions during 1944 and 1945.

After more than one and a half years on *LCI 455*, Walter was transferred to the aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill*, joining the ship in May 1945 at the naval base in Bremerton, Washington. With VJ-Day in August 1945, however, the Navy was quickly downsized and many men discharged. Walter spent the time until his discharge in November 1947 working at Bremerton, with Sub-Group One, decommissioning ships as part of this process.

After the Navy Walter held a number of positions for Northwest Bell, retiring in 1983 with thirty-five years of service. At the time of this interview (September 2001) Walter lived in Rogers, Minnesota.

Pearl Harbor survivor, 7 December 1941, serving on USS *Nevada*
USS *Nevada* (BB-36) underway off of the US Atlantic coast on 17 September 1944. Photographed from a blimp of squadron ZP-12.

*Source:* official US Navy photo, #80-G-282709
The aircraft carrier USS Saratoga (CV-3) in 1943 or 1944. The photo was taken from one of her planes of Carrier Air Group 12 (CVG-12), of which many aircraft are visible on deck, Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers (aft), Grumman F6F Hellcat fighters (mostly forward), and Grumman TBF Avenger torpedo bombers.

Source: Library of Congress.
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USS *LCI-455* at the Battle of Okinawa, 1945

*Source:* NavSource Online,

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is the 7th of September, 2001, and I'm happy to be sitting here with Mr. Walter Larson on a nice sunny afternoon. First of all Walter, I want to thank you very much for being willing to spend some time with me. So right off the bat, thanks very much.

W: You're welcome.

T: Well, let's start with a couple of general questions about when and where you were born.

W: I was born in Danbury, Wisconsin, on January 26, 1923. Just a small town, 350 people I think it was at that time, in northwest Wisconsin.

T: Is that close to Superior?

W: About sixty miles south of Superior.

T: Did you go to high school there, too?

W: We had a two year high school in Danbury, and we had the last two years in Webster, which was nine miles south of Danbury. Graduated there in 1940, May of 1940.

T: And how soon after graduation did you decide to join the Navy?

W: Well, I decided to join the Navy in December [1940] because I couldn't get any work. Just the job I had, sawing wood and stuff. I figured I'd get a little experience and maybe do a little traveling at the same time. For three years, I figured that wouldn't be too long.

T: So a three year enlistment.

W: Yeah, I was what they called a “diaper cruise” at that time.

T: Now what does that term mean?

W: Well, you went in under age, at seventeen, and then you stayed until you were twenty-one. It was three years.
T: Were there a number of different enlistment options as far as how long you wanted to stay?

W: Not for me there wasn’t. I went in under age so I had to stay until I was twenty-one, three years I think it was. With the other guys, I think older guys stayed four. When I joined there were nine of us that went to Great Lakes [Naval Training Center, by Chicago], out of Minneapolis. I was the youngest guy, so I got stuck with the papers. And there’s quite a few stories on that (laughs).

T: Now when did you ship out? When did you leave Minneapolis to go to Great Lakes?

W: December 20th, 1940.

T: 1940?

W: 1941.

T: So at that time, you were a full seventeen years old.

W: Yeah I was seventeen.

T: How’d your family respond to you coming home and saying, I want to join the Navy?

W: I can’t even remember. I think I had two brothers working in the city at that time, and I went down in the middle of December. I went and joined an air wing, took an exam to join the Navy, I should say. They said they would send me a letter if I passed, and if I wanted to go I could go then. My folks had to sign a release if I wanted to go.

T: Because you were still under age?

T: Yeah. And on about December 15th, I got a letter from the Department that said to be there the 20th if I wished to join the Navy. So I went and joined. My folks seemed to think it was all right.

T: Yeah, your folks were okay with the idea?

W: Yeah, at that time.

T: Why the Navy and not the Army, for example?

W: Well, I had a brother that was already in the Air Force. In Texas at the time. I don’t know, I just figured the Navy was a much cleaner outfit. I think that was the big reason. I figured at least I wouldn’t be sleeping in the dirt, and I’d get three
meals a day (both laugh). And I kind of liked their uniform.

T: A scientific decision! That’s a good story. Now when you were sent to Great Lakes—and for the benefit of our listeners, that’s down near Chicago—was that the first time you’d been out of the upper Midwest area here?

W: No, we had gone on a trip out West for two or three weeks, my two brothers and my folks and stuff, just before I joined the Navy. And we traveled up on the North Shore quite a bit. My dad used to like to go up to Superior and watch the big trains, bringing in the iron ore from the pits. We’d sit up there and watch them things for hours. Actual traveling, just the one trip out West.

T: So this was your first time to Chicago. Do you have any memories of the experience of Basic Training.

(1, A, 95)

W: Great Lakes was the coldest damn place! (laughs) Oh, that January down there. Boy, I’ll tell you in January that place was cold. We just couldn’t get enough clothes on. In my hometown, my mother was the weather person in the hometown. She took the national weather deal there. And we had one day that was fifty-some below zero. But it was colder in Great Lakes. That wind off of that lake was terrible. I had to stand watch one night, from twelve to four in the morning. I was out there probably an hour and on officer came out there. He says, “What the heck are you doing out here?” I said, “I’m standing on guard duty.” He says, “You get back to the barracks right now.” My feet were pretty near frozen from standing out there just an hour on guard duty by a little shack there. I couldn’t understand why we were out there, either, because there was nothing to guard, anyway.

T: So he chased you back inside.

W: Yeah, he canceled my duty and stuff and told me to go back to the barracks and go back to bed. So I did.

T: Gladly, I suppose. Beats standing up.

W: Yeah, that was really cold.

T: Now when you were at Great lakes, in 1940, the Navy was still segregated, wasn’t it?

W: Yeah.

T: Were there groups of blacks training there as well?

W: I don’t believe I ever saw one there.

T: So as far as you remember it was just...
W: Just whites, yeah.

T: What was it like to be away from home for a long period of time?

W: Well, that first night at boot camp, I never seen so many older guys cry in all my life. And I never so many guys fall out of hammocks as I did that first night (laughs). 

T: Literally, fall on the floor?

W: Yeah. The hammocks were about four foot off the floor. They were falling all night long, and there were guys crying all night long. It didn’t really seem to bother me too much. I got along with it okay. I picked out a couple guys that I liked and we chummed around together mostly.

T: These were all volunteers, in 1940.

W: Yeah, all volunteers.

T: Were these, were a lot of these guys your age, or were there some older fellows there, too?

W: No, I think most of them were quite a bit older than me, I’d say two and three years older than I was. When we left Minneapolis, the night, they gave me the papers because I was the youngest one. I had to sign for anything that was done, like eating on the train and stuff. I got one fellow that I hadn’t seen, oh, he had how many years after the war was over, we went to a survivor meeting, and he come up to me and said, “I remember you, Larson. You still owe me a breakfast.” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “You wouldn’t sign the papers on the train for us guys to eat breakfast. So we had to eat on the base.” They had a better breakfast on the base than they had on the train anyway. But every time I seen him since then he says, “You owe me a breakfast.” (laughs)

T: Sixty years later, it would probably cost you a little more than it would have then, wouldn’t it? (laughs)

W: Well, out of the nine guys that I went in with, I’ve run into five of them since the war.

T: Five guys, five out of nine, wow. Now, Basic Training finished, what month was that?

W: Finished in the first part of February [1941], and we went, we had seven days leave and we went to Great Lakes and we took an examination. I just can’t remember much about this examination, but anyway...

T: It was a written exam?

W: It was written. Our whole company, we went to Seattle to get on the USS Nevada,
the whole company. There was 130 of us, I guess. When we got aboard ship, I don’t know how many days I was there, then they started dividing us up into divisions.

T: Still on the same ship?

W: Yes, on the Nevada. And out of the group, I was the only one that was picked to go to the E Division, Electrical Division. I think there were six or eight of the guys that went to the M Division, Machinist Mates. And all the rest went to Deck Force and gun crews and things like that. I know we lost quite a few of these guys on December 7th.

T: How were those decisions made for who went to what?

W: I think it was this examination that we took before we left Great Lakes.

T: That’s how they determined what you were perhaps best suited for?

W: I think so, yeah, but I don’t know. I was very pleased that I got to be in the E Division, because that really, to me, was the best division in the Navy.

T: Was there a certain status attached to that, too?

W: Well, yeah kind of, because we could wear dungarees during the day on duty, and the rest of them would have to be in whatever the dress code of day was, shorts or whites or whatever. We could roam through the whole ship in dungarees. The deck force didn’t approve of it very much, because we come through there in our dungarees and, boy, they’d give us hell. But we got to go into officer’s country and everything else, anyplace on the ship where there’s electrical problems.

T: Sure, otherwise officer’s country was off limits for enlisted guys, right?

W: Right.

T: You joined the Nevada in February of 1941, and you were on the Nevada at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

(1, A, 191)

W: Yes.

T: Was the Nevada stationed at Pearl Harbor before December of ’41?

W: We moved out, let’s see, when I was on board the Nevada we were on the West Coast, Bremerton [Washington], I think was the home port. There or Long Beach; we went to Long Beach shortly after. But we went out to Hawaii, oh, that must have been April of ’41, something like that. I think a lot of the other battleships went out there about the same time. That time, we didn’t even realize what was going on. I suppose at that time I wasn’t in long enough to find out what was going on.
T: You mean as far as the political tensions in the Pacific, that kind of stuff?

W: Yeah.

T: Was there, were there rumors that flew around or floated around about what might be coming?

W: Yes, there were quite a few of them. I can remember during the summer and stuff, at nights we’d be there in Hawaii and some of the old timers in the E division—we’d go up on the aft deck, it was cooler—they would talk about different things about the Japanese. They figured there would be a bomb, that we would be bombed by aircraft and stuff. Several of these guys I knew were in the China fleet, years before. They had quite a bit of time in the Navy. My first class when I went aboard there, in Distribution, he was an old Chinaman, a Chinese Navy man, who had been over there in China for quite a few years. He knew quite a bit about the Orient, and he used to talk about the Japanese and their air force; he seemed to know quite a bit about it. But nobody else listened to him, just us guys.

T: So there were some people talking already.

W: Oh yeah, we figured we’d go to war eventually. We didn’t know just when, but we had an idea it was coming.

T: Well, can you share some memories of December the 7th? Ironically, as I said before, one of the questions we ask is about where people were on December 7th?

W: I got up early in the morning and went to breakfast. I was going to wash clothes that day, so I went down to the lining shop. There were quite a few guys down there and they were talking. Of course I was listening, because there were a couple of them that never shut up. One of my friends talked and never did shut up. Anyway, I was there for a little bit and this guy come running down the passageway and he was just screaming, “The god damned Japs are bombing the hell out of us. General Quarters! General Quarters!” And about that time, the General Quarters sounded.

T: Is it a buzzer or a siren or…?

W: No, it was a kind of a bell, if I remember right. And then the guy would come in and say general quarters. You used to have to go up, I think we went up port and down starboard, if I remember right. Got topside and there was another striker with me. We were going to start up to the search lights, but this kid, he says, “No, I ain’t going up there.” I said, “Well, if you don’t go to your battle station, it’s a general court martial. It’s one or the other.” He said, “Well, you go first, and I’ll follow.” So we got up there and there were two, three other electricians up there and some other guys on the search lights.

T: How high are these search lights above the deck there?
W: Oh, they're sixty, seventy feet, I would say.

T: So you're up there pretty exposed.

W: Yeah, and there was a guy up there doing special duty, a seamen. He had a machine gun, a .30 caliber machine gun with the old round clip on top. And I don’t know how long we'd been up there. We'd seen quite a few ships being torpedoed down the line. There was quite a bit of fire and stuff. About that time a plane came in and torpedoed us. And as it banked away, we all stood there and was watching him. He wasn't very far away from the ship. We hollered at this kid to start to shoot. And we could see the bullet holes go right in the center of the plane, about every six inches down the center. Must have hit the pilot and the guy in the back end right up through the bottom [of the plane], because they didn't have no armor on the bottom of their planes. It crashed right behind the ship shortly, and the back canopy opened up and this guy started to crawl out.

T: The Japanese pilot?

W: No, the gunner in the back end. He started to crawl out, and the plane started to go down, and he went with it. So they both must have been wounded. I don’t know if there two or three guys in the plane, but it went down and that was it. That’s when I started to think that a person could get hurt. This is for real!

T: Was that something that before that time that had not consciously entered your mind?

W: No, I don't think so, because we trained and everything was automatic. You just did it. I had some kids ask me sometime, at one of the schools where we were talking about it, “Did you get scared?” I said, “No, I don't think at the time I was scared, but that night when we went to bed, then I got scared.”

T: When you could think about it after the fact?

W: Yeah, because there were so many wounded ones and so many dead. You get to thinking that you’re lucky that you weren’t one of them.

T: As an aside, what was the crew of the Nevada? How large was it?

W: I would say it was about between 1350 and 1400, somewhere in there.

T: The ship was torpedoed once that you mentioned. Did it take further torpedo hits?

W: No, we were only torpedoed once, and we had two bombs before we got underway.

T: Those struck topside?
W: Yeah, they struck topside.

T: What about yourself at this time? The ships been torpedoed, it’s been bombed. There’s clearly a chaotic situation. What were you doing?

W: Well we were up on the searchlights there, and there wasn’t much we could do. You don’t use the searchlights in the daytime. We were more or less just watching what was going on. About shortly after that they, I think there was a bomb that hit in dry dock, the [destroyers] Cassin and Downes, and there was a big explosion there, and I know there were some explosions along battleship row from torpedoes. Shortly after that the [battleship] Arizona got bombed. When that thing went up we were still on the searchlights, and that fire must have went thousands of feet up in the air. It really was big and the noise was...

T: This is the Arizona.

W: Yeah, you can’t even imagine the noise it was when it went off. And the fire from there hit us like a blast furnace, the heat from the explosion hit us up there. It was just shortly after that that they ordered us off the searchlights to go below. On the way down we run into Chief Boatswain’s Mate Hill, and he told us to close a hatch that was on the stern of the ship before we went down below. So there were four of us that went and closed this hatch and stuff, and we went down below. We stopped at sickbay, we thought maybe we could help at sickbay. The doctor there, he told us no, we’d be more harmful than we would be good, because we didn’t know what was going on anyway.

About that time, there were a couple of blacks guys that came down. They were burned pretty bad. Their skin was hanging down. And I remember the doctor telling them to go sit in the corner while he took care of some people that were really hurt. So we went down below the armor deck and cleaned some compartments where they’d operated on some of the guys and stuff, and helped wherever we could at that time.

(1, A, 310)

T: How long was it then before the Nevada got under way and attempted to move?

W: I don’t know, it was probably twenty, twenty-five minutes after it started that it got under way and started to move out. We were down below so we didn’t even know what was going on at the time.

T: Could you sense the ship moving when you were down below?

W: No, not really. We might have felt it, but I don’t remember. I remember that we got hit by several bombs on the way out. I think we got hit six or seven times with bombs as we started out of the harbor. And they thought they were going to sink us there so they dropped anchor off Hospital Point. Just before we got there the [destroyer] Shaw got hit. That was in dry dock, it blew off the whole bow of the
Shaw. And after the second wave [of Japanese aircraft] had gotten done with what they were doing, they pushed us across at what is now Nevada Point. I don’t remember what the name of that point was before, Walkerow or something like that. They renamed it Nevada Point.

T: After your ship?

W: Yeah.

T: What was the situation on the ship, topside or below decks, by the time you were anchored there?

W: Well, we were pretty well beat up on the topside. We got about eight bombs up there in the main... I would say, well, I remember one bomb hit number five turret, and killed all the guys in number five turret. Up where the deck, where the captain and all them were, that was pretty well beat up. The bow of the ship was pretty well banged up because part of that was sticking way up in the air. I got a picture of one of the electricians standing looking down in the hole after the bombing was over. It was pretty well beat up.

T: Did your ship take a lot of casualties?

W: No, we had, I think there were fifty-eight killed and one hundred and some that were wounded on the ship.

T: For all of what you’ve described, that’s not very many casualties.

W: Really, that’s true. Where all the bombs hit topside, you’d think there would have been more. But I think our ship was the most decorated ship at Pearl Harbor at the time. We had two guys that got the Congressional Medal of Honor, and I think there were eight or nine that got the Navy Cross. I don’t know how many others got decorated, but there were quite a few. Mostly all topside people.

T: And what were those decorations for specifically?

W: Well, heroism of different sorts, and helping out wounded people up there and different things.

T: What kind of emotions do you remember feeling, either during or after, when the bombing had stopped?

W: I guess I was more mad than anything. I couldn’t believe that they would do something like that without notice or something. But actually, I don’t think we really thought too much about anger or anything else. The thing was to help who we could and get things going as much as we could after the bombing was stopped. After the bombing, the electrical gang, we tried to get as much electricity going throughout the ship, because most of it was out already. And I was picked to go up
to this number five casement and pick up some of the bodies and bring them down so they could be identified. I helped carry two of them. That was all I could carry. They figured I’d be a casualty too, so they told me to leave.

T: It was hard work?

W: Oh very hard. Some of the guys I picked up I went through boot camp with.

T: So you recognized them?

W: Yeah. *(speaks with emotion, then pauses five seconds)*

T: Did that, in a sense, increase your sense of anger, really when you saw people that you knew?

W: Yeah I think so, because I lost two electricians that were very close. I know there were several, I don't know just how many in boot camp because they never published our names of each one of them at the time, but I think there were four or five that were killed that went through boot camp with me, and I don’t know how many were wounded. But there were quite a few. I lost quite a few friends.

T: Looking at your record of duty, it was only a week later that you moved to the *Saratoga*.

W: Yeah, there were about fifteen of us electricians. They took and put us in pools, according to your rating and stuff. We were on the beach, and they only kept a skeleton crew aboard ship. We went to the *Saratoga*, I think it was December 14th or 15th. When we got there they split us up into different electrical gangs, and I was sent to a motor room. It was an electric drive ship, and they had one electrician and about six machinist mates in each motor room.

T: The *Saratoga*, what kind of ship was that?

W: That was an aircraft carrier.

T: With a larger crew than the *Nevada*?

W: Yes. When they had the air crews aboard there were over 3400, 3500 on it.

T: That's a huge ship. And you were on the *Saratoga* for a little over a year, until February 1943. Did the *Saratoga* see combat action during that time?

W: Yes. We went aboard, and the first trip out we went to the Marshall Islands. They bombed some out there in the Marshall Islands, and on the way back we got torpedoed by a submarine. We pulled into Pearl Harbor and they put a patch on it and we went back to Bremerton for repairs. When we were back there I got leave for fifteen days or something like that. After the raid in December 7th, they gave us a card, a postcard, and you cross out certain things to send home. My folks just got
this card before I got back there.

We got, when we got repaired, it was just after the Midway Battle. We went back to sea, and the next battle that we got in was the Battle of Guadalcanal, the invasion there. We got torpedoed again by another submarine there, and we laid dead in the water for fifty-two hours. It blew out the high tension cell in this electric drive ship. There was a lieutenant commander and a warrant officer and another third class, and I had made third class at that time. We worked fifty-two hours straight and got the ship underway at twelve knots.

T: Man, fifty-two hours straight. Walter, what was a typical day like on board ship?

W: Well, we just had our routine work that we had to do. Underway there wasn’t much I could do in the motor room and stuff. I stood my watches at main control, general quarters, I should say, in main control. Then I stood my watches on generator flats. Other than that, we slept a lot (laughs).

T: What else do guys do on board ship to kill time?

(1, A, 414)

W: Oh, we used to play cards and goof off, write letters. I remember that. That was mostly it, because we stood watch every day, a couple times a day for four hours each watch. The generator flats, that was a tough watch. There were two of us there. I stood watch with a first class electrician, and he was very strict and he got me to know everything I was supposed to know about changing generators. Because we had to change generators every time on our watch. And there was a set of twins that were second class, you had to be at least second class to be a top watch on the generator flats. They secured the inline generator, and everything went blank. So the next day they were both gone; they split them up and sent them to different ships.

T: Off the Saratoga?

W: Off the Saratoga. And unfortunately, I was third class and I got to be top watch on generator flats, with another third class. Very scary. Yeah, it took me about two weeks until I settled to being top watch. I didn’t really like the job.

T: There was a lot of responsibility?

W: The reason I got it was because I worked with this first class all the time.

T: On board a large ship like that, with thousands of men, were there both blacks and whites on a ship like this?

W: Yeah, the blacks were mostly mess attendants with officers. They didn’t hold any rates at that time, just mess attendants.
T: So in your shop, for example, the electricians, there were no blacks?

W: I never had any contact with them at all.

T: On board the ship, were you aware of any kind of racial tension or anything?

W: No, I don't think so, because we never had anything to do with these people. They were more in the officer’s country all the time. We didn't get to associate with them at all, because they never came wandering through the ship or anything that I can remember.

T: Now, by the time you left the Navy in 1947, the Navy had desegregated.

W: Yeah, they were starting to.

T: Did you notice a change by that time? Were you interacting with blacks on a regular basis?

W: The only time I had anything talking to one of them was when I was transferred to an LCI, that was a smaller ship. We had one black on there, and he was a mess attendant for the officers aboard there. He intermingled with us. Sometimes even went on liberty with us and stuff. Other than that, up to that time, I never ran into any of them at all.

T: So, to get back to the action in the South Pacific, Guadalcanal was the last battle that you mentioned. What role did the Saratoga play in that battle?

W: It was air support for the initial landing and stuff, that was about all. I don’t remember how long we were there or anything else, but I remember before we got to Guadalcanal we were at sea seventy-seven days, and never saw any land. Things got pretty hungry. We were down to rice and some awful red meat, they all thought it was horse meat. I don’t know if it was or not. But I went from 177 pounds down to 144 in seventy-seven days.

T: You lost thirty-three pounds in those days?!

W: We didn’t eat half the time. We got fried rice three times a day.

T: Now that’s not something I heard. Was there just not a supply ship nearby?

W: No, there were no supply ships. I remember the destroyers would come alongside and they were out of food, period. They’d throw them some bags of rice down to them, and some of this meat and stuff. I felt really sorry for them guys, because they must have starved.

T: Wow, they were taking the rice and horsemeat from you guys, so they were probably down to basically nothing.
W: About the only thing we had enough of was coffee. We always had coffee.

T: Was there a canteen on your ship?

W: Yeah there was a canteen. But on the Saratoga I don’t think I ever went to it. I did on the Nevada. We used to go up to the gedunk stand, we used to call it, and get ice cream at night, before the war. But on the Saratoga I don’t think I ever went. We were way down the bottom of the ship and we didn’t get up topside too much. Except once in a while when there was nothing going on that night, then we’d go up on flight deck and get some fresh air. But there was usually too much stuff going on up on the flight deck and they didn’t want us people up there at all.

T: So you could spend whole days underneath.

W: Oh yeah, days, never seeing daylight.

T: Wow, was that hard?

W: No, not at that time. Because we had enough to keep us busy, and when we weren’t busy we were goofing off playing cards. We used to play penny ante an awful lot in our motor room. I don’t know what the other motor rooms did, but...

T: There were several motor rooms?

W: There were four. They had four screws on the ship and they had four motor rooms.

T: That sounds interesting that you could go days at a time without being above.

W: To never see daylight.

T: You carried planes on the ship, too, right?

W: Yeah, I don’t remember how many planes they carried, but they must have carried, Saratoga close to one hundred planes.

T: Those were Navy fliers?

W: Yeah, when we first went aboard there were Marine fliers and even noncommissioned officer fliers. After the war started they commissioned all these. Some of these were chiefs, some were first class. They were fliers and stuff. And a lot of Marine fliers. After the war started, it seemed like us guys that were at Pearl Harbor and stuff, they automatically boosted us one rate. So when I got aboard, when all of us guys got aboard the Saratoga, we got there in March, I think they made us all third class.

T: What were you before?
W: Fireman 3rd class.

T: Well, being on a ship for over a year in conditions like that, I wonder if you met people who had a positive impact on you, people who you remember as being good, decent people?

W: Yeah, I had several friends. This one electrician who was our division officer us below down there, him and I got very friendly. He wanted me to take a test to be an officer, so he come down at nights and we’d study math and different other things. So the day I was supposed to take the test, I got up to the ward room and got to the door and I stood there a while, and I said, “Hell, I don’t want to be an officer.” And I turned around and went down below and didn’t take the test. This warrant officer came down that night, and he said, “How’d the test go?” I said, “Well, I didn’t take it.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “I don’t want to be a damned officer.” He says, “And all that work I put in on you? I’m going to beat the hell out of you.” I said, “Take off that shirt.” And he takes his shirt off and I take mine off. And he said, “Oh, hell, I don’t blame you.” (laughs) But he’s the one that got me sent to EIC school.

T: Now what does EIC stand for?

W: Electrical Inter Communications.

T: Did you apply for that?

W: No, he just come down one day and said, “You’re going to school.”

T: Simple as that.

W: Simple as that, he sent me there.

T: Where was the school?

W: It was in Washington, D.C.

T: So you went back to the States, and then by train all the way across?

W: Yeah.

T: By the records you showed me, you were there for about six months.

W: Yeah, just about.

(1, A, 505)

T: And what were you learning that was different from what you did before?

W: Well, I never finished school. I don’t remember just how many there were, there were forty-some of us guys in school. We had come from the fleet, and most of the
guys hadn’t been to school in years, because most of the guys were quite a bit older than I was. They started us out in math, AC and DC problems, and we had to figure out everything on a slide rule, and I had never seen a slide rule. And I think most of the guys in the class had never seen a slide rule. So we had to learn the slide rule. If you’ve ever worked with AC and DC electrical problems, I’ll tell you, boy... I went to the last week of math, I don’t know just how many, I guess for three months we had math, and there were two of us that failed out in the last week. There were sixteen guys with me, fourteen guys left in the class, of whatever we started out with, forty or fifty guys. Most of them had already gone in the second or third week. But what got me was, most of the guys, when they failed out, they sent them to Panama. And I thought, boy, when I fail out, I’m going to go to Panama. I got shipped to amphibs (laughs).

T: So you didn’t make it through the EIC school, at the very end?

W: No, I never got it. After the math, everything was on telephone things. But I got to stay the length of the class because I had received a commendation while I was there for that torpedoing on the Saratoga. For working the fifty-two hours I got a commendation.

T: What commendation did you get?

W: It was from Admiral Cowers. When I left the Saratoga the exec officer told me I would receive the Bronze Star when I got to Washington. Well, the day they gave me the commendation with honors, it was supposed to be, and when they gave me the commendation, my bubble busted.

T: Because you were expecting something else?

W: I was expecting the Bronze Star, but it was just a commendation from Admiral Cowers. I have a copy of it in my personal papers.

T: Well, you went into the amphibs—now that’s short for what?

W: Well, I went aboard an LCI, which was a landing craft, infantry ship. It was a small ship. I think it was 156 feet long and twenty-three feet beam, and it drew about four feet of water. The object of the ship was that we were supposed to land about two hundred troops on the beach.

T: So two hundred guys could fit on the LCI.

W: We had two ramps, one on each side. We trained off the East Coast. The original crew was twenty-four guys and four officers. We went around to the west Coast. We were sent to go to the South Pacific. When we got on the West Coast, they took the ramps off and put rocket launchers on our ship. We had, I think there were eight or ten rocket launchers on each side, and they carried about twenty rockets. Each rocket was equivalent to a five inch shell, and we could fire these rockets in a matter
of seconds. I think in all there were 420 rockets or something like that that we would launch. Our basic business was, we were supposed to take up the fifteen or twenty minutes between the main big ships shelling the shore and the troops landing. Our object was to hold down the Japanese while the troops were coming ashore.

T: Until the absolute last minute, if possible?

W: Yeah, the rockets had about a thousand yard range, and it was quite a sight when they went off. On the LCI I manned a .50 caliber machine gun. That was my duty.

T: So on these LCIs, you were fairly close to shore then?

W: Oh, we went right up on shore. We would start into shore, and then so far out they would drop an anchor, and that was to pull us off the beach.

T: This was in mid 1943 when you joined LCI 455. Did you see action with this LCI 455?

W: Yeah, while we were on there I think we made seven invasions.

T: Seven invasions?

W: Yeah. We were in the Marshall Islands, and we went to Saipan, Tinian, Peleliu. Gosh, I can’t even remember them all. We worked with underwater demolition teams off of Guam. I can’t even remember it all, but I’ve got them listed someplace.

T: Was your crew at Iwo Jima?

W: No. They went to Iwo, no, they weren’t at Iwo Jima, but they were at Okinawa, but I’d already left the ship by then.

T: In February 1945 you wrote here in your wartime service record. Walter, could you describe a typical engagement where your LCI was part of an invasion?

W: Well, the first one that we went onto was the Marshall Islands. We pulled up on shore and I was on a .50 caliber machine gun, and they gave me an area to cover. I forget how many thousand rounds I fired that day. And the guy that was my loader, he wanted to fire a few, so we traded places and I loaded for him and he machine gunned. I don’t remember how many thousand rounds we fired on the invasion there, but I thought, “Geez, there isn’t much to that.” Because all it was was a little sand pile--

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

W: It was just a sand pile out there, and I remember there was a big block house out in the middle of this island that we could see. The Marines went up there and they put blasting powder in, or whatever it was they used, and when they set that off that
thing was just dust. It just disintegrated. I can just remember that thing disintegrating. There was nothing left. We took some prisoners off there and we took them to the command ship.

T: They were on your LCI?

W: Yeah, we had, I don’t know, four or five of them. We had them in one of the compartments there and I was standing watch over them. I was kind of reading a book, and all of a sudden one of these Japs jumped up and— I was a fast drawer, I could have beat any Western cowboy at that time. I had that .45 [caliber pistol] out and pumped a shell into it and I was ready to shoot him. At that time there was a piece of metal that was leaning against the wall, and this Jap had jumped up to catch this piece of metal. And I almost shot him. It was very close. I just happened to notice that he was trying to catch this piece of metal.

T: To keep the metal from falling down?

W: Yes, rather than coming at me. I thought at first he was coming at me. But we got it straightened out and we took these guys down to a command ship and turned them over to the command ship.

T: You mentioned that you when you were at Pearl Harbor, about the anger you felt when the attack came. Now that you had these Japanese POWs on your LCI, what kind of emotions did you feel towards those guys?

W: I don’t really know, I can’t remember what my emotions were then. I suppose I was angry at them, because I was willing to shoot this guy if he was going to attack me there in cold blood, I suppose you could say. But actually, you get to looking at them, they were just another man like you. They were doing their duty, too, I guess. (pauses three seconds) But I still can’t forgive the Japanese people for what they did. After all these years, I still have feelings against them.

T: The Marshall Islands wasn’t the last invasion you made, you said you made seven.

W: We made several. Saipan was one of the biggest ones. I remember there, we went in ahead of the First Marines. After the war was over, I found out that two guys from my hometown were from the First Marines.

T: Guys that landed on Saipan?

W: Yeah.

T: Was the pattern of these invasions pretty similar, as far as your particular job?

W: For our job, yeah, every one of them where we went in it was the same thing. I think the Marines, they kind of liked our part of the job, because it held down the Japanese quite a bit, to get them ashore.
T: Was there one of these particular invasions that put you in a greater sense of danger than any other?

W: I think Saipan was the worst one, because after they’d invaded and we went back out and anchored for the night, there were several rounds, we thought it was .37 millimeter fired at us, and they were landing within a few feet of our ship. The skipper finally got up and we backed out about another one hundred yards. After that we didn’t have any other trouble. But some of the ships had Japanese swim out to the ships and they caused us a few deaths aboard the ships.

T: With explosives or...?

W: No, they come aboard and they knifed the guys.

T: On board the ships?

W: They snuck aboard ship, at night we didn’t have too much, probably had a couple guys on guard duty. But I can remember them telling about a couple of these ships where they came aboard.

T: One thing we talked about just briefly a little bit ago, Walter, was women in uniform. Earlier you said that on board ships there were never any women, is that right?

W: No, there were never any women on board ship when I was in the Navy. There were WAVES that were on shore duty around, but we never had nothing to do with them. The only time we even ran into them was on liberty.

T: Did you have liberty off of LSI 455 or off of the Saratoga?

W: I had quite a bit of liberty off the Saratoga when we were damaged twice. We came back to the States and had liberty, and they gave us quite a bit of liberty. They gave us, one out of three watches, I think, we’d be on liberty. We got quite a bit of liberty.

T: What do guys do on liberty when they in port?

W: Well the older ones used to go to the bars and get drunk (laughs). And go dancing and things like that. But I was too young to go to the bars, so some of us younger guys, in Seattle we used to ice skating quite a bit. We’d take in movies, did a lot of bowling, and did some sightseeing and stuff. I knew one kid that lived in Seattle at the time we were there, so we would go to his house and rent bikes and we’d bicycle all around Seattle. Eat his mother’s cooking, which was nice at that time.

T: After rice and horsemeat, it must have been! (both laugh) Was it difficult to suddenly be off the ship and from the front, so to speak, and be back in a normal
economy?

W: Yeah, I think you were more relieved that there was no tension there. You relaxed quite a bit. I think that's why a lot of them went to the bars and stuff. Any way to relax, I suppose, that was the big thing.

T: There must have been an awful lot of tension that was built into the experiences you went through?

W: I suppose there was, but after all them years, I thought I did have it, but I forgot about most of it. I suppose we had quite a bit of tension built up. I used to, when I was aboard the Saratoga, when we made some of those raids, everything came over the sound power phones, and we could hear the pilots and things like that. I kind of kept a diary on some of the things for a while, but then, I don't know, for some reason I just quit. Quit writing it down. I wrote quite a bit down on several of the raids we were on, but it got to be the same thing over and over, hearing these pilots say we bombed this, we bombed that.

T: Sounds like you kind of became immune to it in a sense, that it became the norm?

W: Yeah, I would say so, because our training was that you just automatically did things. When you were on a battle on the Nevada, at Pearl Harbor, going up to the searchlights, that was just automatic. You didn't think of the consequences; that was your duty and that was it. Same way on the Saratoga. My duty was in the main control, and on the Saratoga, we had an old chief engineer, he'd been in the Navy, I don't know, thirty years or better. He was an old guy, and he had a hard time getting around. On one of the General Quarters—he always brought an ensign with him, and they sat at a little table and chair on each side. He used to make him coffee. He wanted his coffee so black it would stand up in the corner by itself. And this one day he says, he told this ensign, “Get up, I want to talk to Larson.” He wanted to know about Pearl Harbor. So we sat down and talked quite a bit during General Quarters. I never did get along with that ensign after that. Several times after that I would sit and talk to him, and when we would come in after the first torpedoing, he got sent ashore, because he couldn’t get around fast enough on the ship. The poor guy, he cried like a baby when he had to leave the ship.

T: Why was that?

W: He'd been on board for years, I guess. I suppose he was in his sixties, I would say. He was an old timer. I don't remember if he came up through the ranks or not. But he was up to full command.

T: So they gave him shore duty?

W: Yeah, he got shore duty in Hawaii. He was the nicest guy. Him and I got along real good.
T: What was his name, do you remember?

W: No, I don’t remember.

(1, B, 175)

T: Walter, what are instances of difficult times on ship, when guys were unable to do their job, or broke down?

W: I can’t really remember anybody breaking down on anything. I think everybody pretty well did their jobs. I don’t suppose our job was like the Army, where they were out on the battlefield. Doing what you do, like electricians, we took care of the electrical part of the ship. And as gunnery, maybe if I’d been up on a gun, like an antiaircraft gun or something, maybe it might have been a lot different then. But our jobs, we didn’t really get to see the battles. Down below, the only time I ever got to see anything was when I got on the LCI. Then I was topside. We were all topside! (laughs)

T: There was no below decks, was there?

W: When we went to rockets, they increased the crew to fifty-four guys and brought another officer on, five officers then. Because they had to have more seamen to load the rocket launchers. When I first went aboard the LCI, I was the only electrician aboard. Then when they brought on the rockets they brought on another third class electrician, and I made first class aboard there. This third class used to always call me boss, he never called me by my name, he always called me boss. We went to a reunion in Florida, about five years ago, and he had emphysema pretty bad and he couldn’t come to the reunion. But he got on the phone and he called us and talked to us. And the first thing he said to the guy that answered the phone was, “I want to talk to boss.”

T: You attend Pearl Harbor survivor reunions. Is that primarily how you identify yourself from your war years, as a Pearl Harbor survivor?

W: Now I suppose I do. But we used to go to a lot of Nevada reunions and I think we went to eight, ten Nevada reunions. Until the fellows I knew, there were only a couple of them left, most of them are all dead by now. I think there’s only about two that I still remember that are still alive, guys that was in the E division while I was there. Then I go to quite a few of these LCI reunions. That’s a smaller crew.

T: Is that a reunion for your LCI, or for all of them?

W: Well it’s for all the LCIs, but we only do with our own ship. Each ship there. There were a thousand LCIs and the national LCI reunion, they bring in any ship that was an LCI, the crews. But our crew just does our things together and stuff at the national. But the guys that our originally, the first twenty-four that was aboard the LCI, most of them are dead now. The guys I used to run around with, they’re all
dead. So the guys on the LCI were younger ones, and came on board the ship after I had left the ship, so I don’t even know them any more. So we missed last year [2000], that was in Reno. The next one’s going to be in San Antonio. So we kind of got the word from some of the old shipmates that we had better be there (laughs).

T: I have talked to guys were on one ship for a long time, and that’s the way they identify themselves. But for you, it could really be a number of different things, because you were on several different ships. You were on the Saratoga for well over a year. Is that also an identification you make for yourself?

W: Well, I’ve never gone to a reunion for the Saratoga, because the guys aboard the Saratoga were just more or less the guys in my motor room. There would probably be eight, ten guys, and I know some of them are gone. The two officers I worked with on the main control, they’re both dead. And the other third class, he was killed off of Frisco. I don’t know about the machinist mates, I haven’t had any contact with any of them after I left the ship.

T: You left LCI 455 in February of 1945. You did note here on your wartime service that you extended your enlistment in 1944. Were you eligible to get out of the Navy then?

W: Well, you couldn’t go, they would have made me a Navy reserve and stayed for the duration, or until you had your, what, eighty points I think it was, after the war. I didn’t want to have that R [for “Reserve”] on my name. For some reason I wanted to be USN, so I shipped over and I think I got four hundred and some dollars for shipping over pay at that time. When I went over there, they asked me if I wanted to be a reserve, and I says, “No, I don’t want that damn R behind my name.”

(1, B, 259)

T: It would have been USN-R then right?

W: Yeah.

T: I see.

W: Because when I went in, the USN there were only about 150,000, and the rest were all reserves.

T: Now you left LCI 455 and had a couple more ships before the war ended. What was the next one you were on?


T: Before you were on the Bunker Hill were you on board another ship?

T: I went and transported back from Eniwetok Island, and I came back on an ammo
ship. They put us in divisions when we came back. There were nine of us that left the LCI 455 at the time; I didn’t come back on the ship. I went to the E Division, they sent me to the E Division, and I was supposed to stand watches with the E Division. The chief came around and he says, “Hell, you’re first class, you don’t have to stand any watches. We got enough personnel. Just come and drink coffee with me. That’s all you have to do.” So that’s what I did for twenty-one days, coming back to the States here. I and the chief got along good.

T: Seniority has privileges?

W: It sure as hell did!

T: So you joined the Bunker Hill in May of 1945?

W: Yeah, something like that. I was in Schumacher, California. I had come back from leave after this. There were three of us first class electricians. We were sent up to Bremerton to go aboard the Bunker Hill, because they’d lost some people [at Okinawa, from a kamikaze attack] and some of them were being transferred. So when I came aboard the ship there, I found out that I was senior first class electrician, which didn’t go over very well with the crew.

T: Why was that?

W: Oh, they didn’t like outsiders; they wanted their own people. So us three guys were all senior.

T: But you were an outsider, though.

W: We were outsiders. We came aboard ship and it didn’t sit well with the crew at first. Each one of us got a section; I got to be IC electrician. I was in charge of IC. One of them got to be lighting shop, and one was in distribution, I guess.

T: What’s IC?

W: Inter Communication. Because I went to IC school, that’s why I got that. But it wasn’t too long, I and the bunch got along pretty good, so we did a lot of liberties and stuff. Most of them, they recognized it. One thing about it was, one day we were all together in one of the ships. The division officer, he was kind of a cocky guy, and I was asking him for a little leave, three days or something like that they’d give us. We’d just come back from thirty days leave, but everybody was getting leave, we thought we might as well get a little bit more. The officer he came out and he says, “Larson, you know you came aboard this ship to replace fighting men.” And that didn’t sit too well with us three guys. And I said, “Well, sir, I think I got more overseas time than most of the electrical crew has got time in the Navy.” He kind of looked at me and about that time the yeoman stepped out of the office and he said, “That’s right, sir, he has.” That ended it.
T: That ended the conversation?

W: Then we got a seventy-two-hour pass, the three of us. When we came back to the ship he was gone, thank God, I never got along with him.

T: Off the ship?

W: Yeah, he transferred to someplace else.

T: These guys that saw you as an outsider, fellow enlisted guys, how did they make you feel uncomfortable, or an outsider?

W: Well, they just didn’t want to take orders. They thought they’d rather take orders from the other guys. There were some first class aboard and I think there were two first class in IC at the time. One of them made Chief, the senior one made Chief when I came aboard. Him and I got along good. They just didn’t like the idea of a new guy coming aboard ship and giving orders. But it wasn’t too long that we started going on liberty together. We got to be pretty good buddies, the other first class and I, we had good times aboard ship.

T: You were on overseas duty most of the war, weren’t you?

W: Yeah.

T: During that time, how did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home?

W: Oh, we wrote letters. I wasn’t much of a letter writer at that time. I’d get a letter from my folks and then I would write back. I supposed I’d write a letter every couple, three weeks. But our mail wasn’t like it is today; it might take a month for our mail to get back home, or to get a letter from back home a month, maybe longer than that. That was the only way we had to communicate. The only other time was when I got on the stateside, and I’d call my mother once in a while, not too often.

T: That was in 1943.

W: Yeah.

T: How about for other guys? Was it important for guys to get mail, to have regular contact?

W: Yeah, I think so, everybody, when they had mail call, when you got a letter usually you went off by yourself and read it. If somebody got a package and some goodies, then everybody was there to get some of it (laughs).

T: So they couldn’t find a place to sit by themselves!

W: But when you got mail you usually went off by yourself and read your letters.
T: You could tell some guys getting good news, and some guys getting bad news?

W: I remember several of the guys that went on liberty, or went on leave and got married when they were on leave, and they’d get a “Dear John letter” after a while. It was kind of hard for some of those guys. You’d try to help them out by talking to them. I know several of the guys that got “Dear John letters” on the LCI 455, I kind of acted like a chaplain, I suppose, to a couple of the young ones who got married, who then found out when they were out to sea for about a year that there wives were pregnant. That was pretty hard on them for a while.

T: You were on the LCI 455, and you were born in 1923, so you were twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old and does being in a situation like a war force maturity upon a person?

W: Oh definitely, I think so. I think I grew up the day of Pearl Harbor. I think a lot of us did, because we were kids before that. All of a sudden you’re a man, and you have different responsibilities, different feelings. I think you were like me, Pearl Harbor was when I was eighteen, but you wondered if you’d be nineteen. I think your thinking changed quite a bit overnight.

(1, B, 357)

T: That’s interesting. Did you find that with a lot of guys?

W: I think so, yes, because they would talk different. Their subjects were different. I think they were more serious than they were before the war had started.

T: In just their conversations with each other?

W: Yeah.

T: I find that interesting, how on the LCI 455, younger kids in a sense, would talk to you.

W: Well, but quite a few guys aboard the LCI 455 were older than I was. The one thing I think that I had on the LCI 455, there were only two of us that had ever been to sea. That was the skipper and me, we were the only guys that had ever been to sea.

T: The rest of them had not been?

W: That’s right, they were all reserves when they came aboard. They came in later in 1943 into the Navy. The skipper, originally he was chief boatswain’s mate, and they made him a lieutenant commander and he took over an LCI. He was really a nice guy. Him and I got along good. I think he understood noncoms better than the officers, because all the officers were 90-day wonders [three-month Navy program that trained officers]. Our executive officer on that LCI, he was from Boston. He
thought he was just a little bit better than the other guys aboard, even the other officers. Him and I, we didn't see eye to eye. We had quite a few arguments.

T: And he was an officer?

W: He was an officer. When I was there, we went to fire school. There was quite a few of us, ten of us went to fire school. And the ten of us were all supposed to have liberty that day. They got us up about four o’clock in the morning and sent us to fire school. I was the senior petty officer and this one officer went with us. We got over there and we were a little rebellious; I guess we didn't do everything that was supposed to be done.

We were fighting a boiler fire. My crew came down one hatch and the officer was coming down another hatch to fight this here fire. Well, we spotted the officer and we turned the hose on him. Well, when we got aboard ship we were all on report. The seamen, they were restricted for the rest of the time we were in Pearl Harbor. There were a couple coxswains, they were restricted for two, three weeks. I was supposed to have a general court martial. It went on and on and on.

Engineering officer come up to me and told me to go apologize to this officer. I said, “There’s nothing to apologize for. It was an accident.” We all claimed it was an accident that we’d hit him. Finally one day somebody asked me if I could go on liberty, and I was restricted aboard ship. So I went into the skippers office, and the skipper and I had quite a talk and nothing was said about it. I forgot to ask him about going on liberty. When I came out of the captain’s cabin this guy said, “Did you get liberty?” I said, “Geez, I forgot all about it.” So I knocked on the door and stuck my head back in and I said, “What’s the chance of liberty?” He says, “Oh, get the hell off the ship.” (laughs)

That was the end of it. I never heard no more about it. But the exec and I didn’t get along too good. Thank God I left before he became the skipper, because it was shortly after I left that the skipper was transferred and the exec took over the ship. He’d have probably broke me (laughs).

T: Was this kind of friction between you and this officer, was this fairly typical, or unusual for officers and enlisted men?

W: No, I think there was quite a bit of friction between officers and some of the senior petty officers [non-commissioned officers]. Because some of these 90-day wonders would come aboard, they were college kids and a lot of them had the idea that I’m better than you are. I think there was quite a bit of friction with some of the officers. I got along best with some of the warrant officers and some of the higher up officers, like your commanders and such. I got along good with the commander who was the executive officer on the Bunker Hill. His nephew was in my gang, my IC gang. He used to come down and have coffee with me once or twice a week, and we’d talk about different things. I think the guys who went through Annapolis were much better officers than these 90-day wonders. These guys were just out of college and they thought they were better than you were.
T: Where did they train these 90-day wonders?

W: I don’t know. I don’t know if they came right out of college and were trained right at college or where. I don’t have any idea.

T: They needed an awful lot of officers and they needed them really fast.

W: Oh yeah, they needed them. Because the ships, they grew so fast. When we went aboard the *Nevada*, my group was 130 men, and I know there were one or two companies ahead of us that went aboard there. Because I would say sixty percent of the crew, maybe, had never been to sea.

T: Wow, sixty percent.

W: I think pretty close to that. Because there were an awful lot of seasick guys when we left Bremerton and went to Long Beach and we hit a big storm. And boy, I’ll tell you, there were seasick guys all over that place.

T: That must have been a mess.

W: Yes, because when we came aboard, we stepped down in the lower deck, on the ammunition conveyer belt, was where we were supposed to sleep on. Me and another guy said, hell, we couldn’t stand it, there were so many of them getting sick down there. So we headed topside, him and I, and we got by sickbay and they had a great big barrel, great big dill pickles. They gave us each a dill pickle, and we went up topside. We couldn’t go on deck, because it was so rough. We got talking to a boatswain’s mate up there and asked him if we could sit by the hatch and get the fresh air. And he said, “Sure, sit there.” And it came time to go to bed and we asked him if we could bring our bedroll up there and sleep on the deck. He said, “Yeah, come on bring your bedroll up. There’s a couple bunks you can have.” So him and I, we got off the deck below, so we didn’t get sick. Oh, but it stunk down there, it was terrible! *(laughs)*

T: Did you ever have problem with seasick yourself?

W: No, I never got seasick in all the time I was there. I don’t know if it was the dill pickle that helped me or what *(laughs)*. But fresh air was the big thing. Get fresh air and get away from these guys that were sick.

T: Is getting seasick something that you get over after a while, most guys?

W: Yeah, you get over it. When it smoothes out, then you’re okay again. We went fishing years ago out on the West Coast with my aunts and uncle, brothers in law, I guess it was. Going out salmon fishing. And it was rough, it was one of the roughest days they’d had. I think she took some pills, she started to get sick. But got her outside and she was okay. I didn’t get sick. One of my brothers in law didn’t get sick. The rest of them were so sick they couldn’t even fish. I have to show you the
fish I got that day. A thirty-seven pound, ten ounce king salmon. It was the biggest fish that day brought in. But before we went out on the boat, they were selling tickets for the biggest fish and they were $2, and we didn’t buy one. So when it came to weigh in, here I had the biggest fish, I lost $150 on the biggest fish for the day. And lost $500 for the biggest fish of the week. Because I didn’t buy that $2 ticket! (laughs)

T: Let me move on to a new subject. Do you remember where you were when President Roosevelt died, on the 12th of April, 1945.

W: I must have been on the Bunker Hill then.

T: Close to it, because you listed that you joined the Bunker Hill in May 1945, so you must have been...

W: I don’t remember. It was on the LCI 455, I guess, but I don’t know.

T: Do you remember hearing the news about the president dying?

W: We probably heard it from what’s her name there in Japan. We used to get quite a bit of news from her all the time. Tokyo Rose. Yeah, we used to get a lot of news from that. The radioman used to listen to that at night and then tell us about it. That’s probably where I heard it. I don’t remember. I can’t even remember.

T: So that didn’t make a real impact on you, it sounds like.

W: No, I don’t think it did, because I didn’t have much use for that SOB. I think he sold us out at Pearl Harbor, and I still believe that he knew the Japanese were going to strike there. And I think him and the other military leaders that was there at the time, they all should have been court-martialed. They figured the object was, what they lost at Pearl Harbor was nothing, to get us into war. I realize they felt they had to get us into war, and they wanted Japan to strike first. But I often have thought about the guys that got killed at Pearl Harbor, what their parents thought, when some of this news came out that Roosevelt and the military leaders at that time knew that they were going to strike Pearl Harbor.

T: About thirty years ago a film came out called *Tora Tora Tora*. Talked about the day, gave the Japanese version of Pearl Harbor, and the American one. The film suggested that the US could have known, and could have prevented this.

W: I just read a book, I’ve got it here, a couple months ago, *The Day of Deceit*. And according to the guy that’s writing this book, he’s gone through the archives in Washington, D.C. and dug up a lot of this stuff on communications and stuff. According to that book, they tracked the Japanese fleet all the way from Japan.

T: So according to this book, they knew they were on the way.
W: Kimmel and Short, I think they got the short end of it, because they never ever got the news from Washington. MacArthur got it down in the Philippines, but they never gave it to either the heads of Hawaii. And why not, when they had machines right there to decipher some of this here stuff? But I go along with a lot of Pearl Harbor survivors—we still think that we were sold out.

T: You see yourself as sacrificial victims, in a sense?

W: In that book it says that Roosevelt said something in a meeting that the 2500 people that got killed were a small sacrifice to get the US into war. I often wondered about the families that lost these people out there, these young guys, eighteen, nineteen, twenty year old fellows. It cut their life short.

T: A different perspective.

W: It sure is.

T: Let me ask you a couple other things. Do you remember V-E Day, on May the 8th, 1945. Were you already on the Bunker Hill by that time?

W: Yeah, I probably was. V-E Day [in May 1945], let me see. Yeah, I think we were in Bremerton at that time, and I think I had liberty that day. I had a girlfriend, and we were going to go to a bar and see if we could get a drink. She run into her uncle where she was staying, and he wouldn't let us go into the bar. We were going to go into Seattle, and he said, "No, you ain't going to Seattle." So we, I don't remember just now what we did there in Bremerton, but I know we didn't go to the bar and we didn't go to Seattle. I think we went to a movie instead, if I remember right (laughs).

T: What kind of reaction was there among the guys?

W: They figured that everyone from Europe would be coming over to help us. They talked a lot about the invasion of Japan, and they figured that there was going to be an invasion of Japan. They realized that if we did invade Japan there would probably be a million American casualties. When we heard that atomic bomb went off, God, what a blessing that was.

Several years ago, when I was still working downtown in Minneapolis, there were a bunch of protesters about the atomic bomb. I was working in the FBI building at the time. I come out to go home, the day was over, and this guy was standing out there. He started talking to me, and he said, "Wasn't that terrible, to drop that atomic bomb there on Japan?" And I said, "Yeah, it was, a lot of people got killed. But, by the way, were your father and grandfather in the service?" He says, "Yeah." I says, "Well, you know what the chance of you being here today if we'd invaded Japan?" He said, "No, what do you mean?" I said, "Well, they figured there would be a million casualties. Chances are your father or grandfather would have got killed and you wouldn't be here today." He kind of looked at me, and he said,
“You know, I never thought of it that way.” I said, “You better start thinking of it that way.” Because there would have been a lot of these people who wouldn’t be here today if we’d invaded Japan.

T: So was that the sentiment among service guys, the guys aboard your ship, for example?

W: I think so, I think they were all happy to see it get over with, without having to go to Japan and invade Japan. Yeah, that shortened the war up by at least a year, I’m sure. It would have taken a year to invade Japan. If we’d have invaded Japan, there would have been more Japanese killed than there were in those two bombs. But the thing that people don’t realize is that the fire bombing of Tokyo, more people were lost in the fire bombings [fire bomb raids on Tokyo from the B-29s] than in the two atomic bombs.

T: Walter, you stayed aboard the Bunker Hill after the war ended. Did you have leave after V-J Day, to come home?

W: No, I didn’t. I was on the decommissioning crew, and we decommissioned the Bunker Hill. Then I was sent, after that was done, all the reserves were all discharged, and it was just a skeleton crew. Then I left that and I went into, I can’t even remember the name of it... Anyway, at the Navy Yard there, and my job was on decommissioning of other ships. I had to stay, because I was regular navy. I worked on a couple different ships, we decommissioned them. One of them, we built a system, that through the telephone system, I had to drop a (*** ) system that we put down in the bilges of each of the ship. Two metal strips and we tied it down to the bottom of the ship, then we went through the telephones system, so if they shorted out, it would tell which compartment was shorted out. I worked on that quite a while and got that going throughout the ship. It was working really good, and one day we come there and here’s the chief, there was supposed to be a chief there, but he never ever came around. He took all the credit for it. Boy I’ll tell you, my crew was pretty mad about him. He didn’t even come around for a long time after that. He got all the credit for that (*** ) system, for the running of the bottom of this ship, and he didn’t have nothing to do with it. It was all my idea.

T: We kind of glossed over the V-J Day celebrations [in August 1945]. How did those compare to those for V-E Day?

W: I can’t remember, but I don’t even remember if I was on liberty for V-J Day or not. If I was, it was probably in Bremerton there, in Seattle. I suppose I went out and celebrated. I don’t know if at that time I was old enough to go out to the bars, so I suppose I ended up in a few bars. The thing I remember is that we couldn’t buy a drink. The guys that worked in the shipyard there, they bought all the drinks. Everything was free. A lot of the shipyard guys there, in the bars, they just bought us drinks, all you wanted. You could get as drunk as you wanted to get.

T: Without spending a dime.
W: That's right.

W: Now you left Bremerton when you were discharged, in November 1947, is that right?

W: Yeah.

T: Did you come back to this area?

W: Yeah, I got married in 1946 and we had a daughter. My wife was from Iowa. I came back to Iowa and went to work for Northwest Bell Telephone Company.

T: Down in Iowa then?

W: No, in Minnesota, I had to go--

**End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.**

W: I went to work for Northwestern Bell telephone Company. I was sent to St. Charles, Minnesota, on the line crew. I worked on the line crew for two years I guess, something like that. Then I was transferred to Osage, Iowa, as an installer/repairman. I worked in Osage for about ten years. While I was there my wife passed away from cancer.

T: I'm sorry.

W: We had three girls. Then I met my current wife at her uncle's funeral. We had never met before that. And two years later we got married. She had two daughters and I had three daughters, so we had a big family for a few years. We've been married now going on forty-four years. Our kids, you'd think they were all regular sisters. They sure get along good. We had some bad times, but we had an awful lot of good times. Her and I used to do an awful lot of fishing. We used to go to Canada and fish an awful lot. We'd take the kids along and we had a camper and we'd go way up to Flin Flon, Manitoba, to fish. It was really good Northern fishing. We didn't even want to fish in Minnesota after that.

T: Walter, when you think about readjusting after this—you were in the Navy a year and a half after the war ended, two years actually.

W: That was good duty after the war ended. We got liberty every night. It was just like going to a job.

T: An eight to five job?

W: Yeah, that's about what it was, eight to five, but the only thing was, is that we always carried a little ditty bag with us when we left and we kind of helped ourselves to a few things aboard ship. I picked up a complete set, maybe I shouldn't say this... But everybody did this. I think I ended up with a set of silverware, about
regular silverware. I wanted to get the officer’s silverware, but somebody beat me to it! (both laugh) But everybody was taking stuff from aboard ship, they’d take it home. Because a lot of the stuff they just threw out on the docks and some of these here, what’d they call them back then... I can’t even remember what they’d call them, but they’d come there and take them.

T: Like scrap handlers or something?

W: Yeah, stuff like that. So all the sailors, they all lived on the beach, and we just had a false bottom in our ditty bags and we always had dirty clothes to go home every night with, and we’d put a few pieces of silverware in the bottom of the bag and the officer, he’d sign us out. We’d go through the Marine guard and they’d just, we’d hand them the paper and they’d let us go through. I got a set of twelve, I think, the silverware.

T: Was it a lot of ships being decommissioned then?

W: Yeah, there were quite a few ships being decommissioned. I don’t remember, I think I worked on three different ships.

T: Were they scrapping these ships then, or selling them?

W: No, we put them in mothballs, most of them. It was quite a process. They mothballed all the guns and whatever equipment was topside was all mothballed. And they sprayed things. Just like a fine netting around everything on topside so it wouldn’t deteriorate. I think these ships, after a few years, sitting out there in the water, they rusted through on the bottoms. How many of them ever ended up in scrap, I don’t know. I supposed the majority of them by now are all scrap. How many years they left them there in the channels in Bremerton, I don’t have any idea. I know they’d tow them out and anchor them someplace.

T: Now you didn’t join the reserves after you were discharged, did you?

W: Yeah, I went in when I got discharged and I joined the reserves. And I was in the reserves until I had sixteen years of service in by the time... I was in Osage working at the time. I had to go to Waterloo for the meetings and stuff. They gave me an ultimatum to be there by six o’clock at night, to sign over for another extension, for another four years. And my boss wouldn’t let me off work before 5:00, so there was no way that I could get there. So I just called them up and told them to discharge me. I just gave it up.

T: Were you called up during Korea?

W: No. I thought I might be, but I guess that was about the time I told them I was done.

T: When you think about the readjustment process, when you finally were
discharged, what was most difficult about the readjustment to civilian life?

W: Getting to work. I lived in Belmont, Iowa, at the time, and I was working up at St. Charles, Minnesota, and I never had a car. I would have to get on the bus Sunday and go up to Rochester, and then transfer to another bus to go to St. Charles. There were no hotels in St. Charles, so I stayed in a foreman’s house, he’d rent me a room and I stayed there. Then Friday night, one of the guys that had a car would drive, and he’d take me to Dodge Center, and I would catch a train from there that was a slowpoke and I’d get back to Belmont about two, three o’clock in the morning. Then the same thing over again. That went on for I don’t know how long. Finally my brother in law bought a new car and I bought his old car. After that I could drive to work; I’d leave late Sunday and go over there.

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T: That must have been murderous though.

W: It was for... Then I got transferred to another crew in Chatfield, Minnesota, so we moved up to Chatfield. There were another guy and his wife, and we rented a house together. From there then I got to know the second line pretty good, and he had me transferred to Garner. I was truck driver at the time, and they needed a truck driver at Garner, which was just about fifteen miles from Belmont. So I was transferred over there. I was there less than a month, and then I got transferred. They asked if I wanted to go to Osage, Iowa, to be an installer/repairman, and I jumped at that. Then I moved my family up there to Osage, and I was there ten years.

T: And Osage is how far from the border with Minnesota?

W: Oh, it’d be about maybe twenty-five miles. Just east of Mason City. It was a nice little town at that time. I really enjoyed the town. Got to know an awful lot of people there.

T: On the other side of the coin, what did you find that was real easy about making the transition back to civilian life?

W: I don’t think I had too much trouble, because I had to support a family. The thing was I had to get a job. And all my relatives, or my wife’s relatives I should say, in Iowa, they all wanted me to go to work down there. They wanted me to go work for the hardware store, some of them, and that didn’t appeal to me because I didn’t see any pension on the end. Another one wanted me to go to be a milk driver, to go around and pick up milk and cream from the farmers and stuff, but that didn’t appeal to me. So I said I’d go up to Minneapolis, and my uncle up there was an architect at the time. I thought, well, he could help me get a job. He knew several people in NSP [Northern States Power, a utility company] and some in Northwest Bell. So I went to NSP first, and talked to some of them over there. Their jobs would be traveling jobs. It’s be three months there, three months there, building high tension cells. That didn’t appeal to me at all, being away from home all this time, so I
went to Northwest Bell and met the friend of my uncle’s there, and he got me a job at Northwest Bell.

T: You had a number of different options, it sounds like, employment wise.

W: Well, yeah I did. But I wanted something that at the end of the line had a pension, and something with half decent pay at the time. The pay wasn’t too good at the time. I got $50 a week, and part of this was on the job training from the government. They paid $20-some dollars something. I think Northwest Bell paid me $30, and they paid me $20.

I was there, and got to know pretty much about the phone system in Osage. Then when my wife died I transferred to Minneapolis, because I didn’t feel that any of my family was left down there in Iowa. Although my sister and brother in law, they took care of my three kids for pretty near two years after my wife died, then when my current wife and I got married, before we got married, I transferred up to Minneapolis. I went on a crew up there as installer/repairman.

(continues to discuss details of work history in the 1950s and 1960s, unrelated to themes of this interview)

T: Let me ask you one last question. It’s about what the war meant, and what it means. When you were active duty during the war, what do you feel the war meant for you personally at that time? How would you summarize that?

W: Boy, that’s a hard one. (pauses three seconds) I don’t really know how to explain that. I suppose I was fearful at the time because Japan was going so crazy, taking over territory. I actually figured if they would have landed troops December 7th, during the raid there, they’d have taken Pearl Harbor and Oahu. I thought about the chance they might invade the West Coast. So I suppose my idea was, do what you could to save what we could. I didn’t think we’d get built up as fast as we did after Pearl Harbor. But I guess most of us at that time, we didn’t know what kind of a war effort we had back in the States, how big these manufacturers and how fast they operated. With the destroying of the fleet, at that time the majority of the fleet... Although we were still obsolete, we were still World War I ships, we didn’t have the antiaircraft and stuff. How fast did our country advance, so fast that they did in rebuilding these ships and building new ships, and building up our military everywhere, aircraft and all those things. It was absolutely unbelievable. I suppose us out there, floating around out there, we didn’t really realize the stuff going on back here in the States.

All we were doing was sitting out there hoping that we could get more equipment and more ships and more everything. Because at the first, we didn’t have a hell of a lot. A lot of these people in the United States, even today, they didn’t know how damn close they are that they weren’t speaking Japanese. Or German. If the war would have gone a few more months, Germany would have had the atomic bomb or Japan would have had the atomic bomb, too. We were just luck that we
were there first. Just like at Midway [in 1942]. If things didn't go the way they did at Midway, that we sunk their four carriers, and they'd have got ours, it could have been a completely different war. They could have invaded any place they wanted to, if we'd lost those carriers at that time.

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T: Did you feel then that you were a young guy doing a job, or were on a moral crusade to save...

W: I think it was just that we were just doing a job that we were trained to do. You didn't think too much about the other stuff. That was up to the officers to do all that thinking. We weren't required to think. More or less, we were trained to do something and that's how we were. That was our job. It was up to the leaders. You were told to do this, and that's what you did.

T: When you reflect back on things now, from much later, fifty years after the fact, what does the war mean for you now?

W: Well, one thing about the war, it advanced our civilization more than any time in the history of the world. Modernized more stuff, I should say.

T: Technology you mean?

W: Yeah, technology, well not only that. Look at the jobs it created at that time. We've had quite a bit of prosperity since World War II. And it made things better for the citizens here in the United States, in the whole world, we improved living conditions. There was a lot of destruction, I realize that. You can't help but have. People had jobs and had prosperity, come after the war, due to a lot of this destruction. But I think it improved life from what we knew as kids, to things we never ever knew that we would have. We never knew we'd have washing machines and dish washers and stuff like that. As a whole, I suppose, that's the way civilization advances, is through war and the knowledge of improving different things. As a whole, you look back at all the destruction, and all the death, and all the crippled people that came out of the war, was it really worth it? To get all the advancement, for all the sacrifices that these people had to make?

T: How do you answer that question?

W: I don't know, I can't really give you an answer for it because a lot of people paid the ultimate price (with emotion) and I lost a lot of friends. (pauses five seconds)

T: One last question. Do you have a favorite personal memory about the war that you'd like to share?

W: Well, I suppose about the one I remember most was when that guy shot the airplane down at Pearl Harbor. I can still visualize those bullet holes going into the
bottom of the airplane and then it crashing.

T: It crashed into the water?

W: Yeah, it went down into the harbor. And the guy trying to crawl out of the back end of it. Seeing the plane going down, and this guy with his hands up and going down with this airplane. You know they were both killed, and you wondered when was your time going to be? Because you didn’t figure you had a year to go. I know a lot of the guys got the feeling that they’d never come back. I used to have them talk to me about that, getting killed and all this here.

T: Guys were convinced that...

W: Convinced they were going to die, right. And I’ll tell you, it got to be a pretty big problem with some of them--

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

W: It got to be a problem with some of them. In fact, I think some of them almost got to the point where they were sick over this problem.

T: Worried about whether they were going to make it?

W: Worried if they were going to make it or not. I think there were quite a few of them on this LCI that had this problem. The younger guys, because we went right up to the beaches, and guns were firing at us. Though the LCI I was on, we never got hit with anything while I was aboard it. But several of the LCIs got hit and lost men, and I think quite a few of our crew at that time thought there time was up, because it only took one shell. I think quite a few of them aboard ship had, what do you call it, fatalism? They used to talk about it now and then aboard ship. They thought they’d never get back home again.

T: Would you say these guys, in a sense, went to pieces, or were they able to stay up and do their job?

W: No, they were there to do their job, because you were trained. Your jobs aboard ship were more or less automatic, because you were trained to do this at a specific time, and that’s what you did. You didn’t think of the consequences or anything else. You didn’t think you were going to get hurt or killed or anything else. You just went there and did your job. I think it was just more or less due to the training that we got that things become automatic to do your job.

T: So at that time, these thoughts about the fatalism or being convinced that they weren’t going to make it were put aside, in a sense, and people were worried when they had extra time on their hands?

W: Yeah, I think it was just when you didn’t have nothing to do. You were just laying
around waiting for the next invasion or the next place we were going to go. Because I can remember when I had work after the war was over. We were at a meeting down when I was on construction crew, and there were quite a few of us that believed in predestination. We got talking about this predestination and, oh boy, I remember the foreman. He got really up in arms about it because he was pretty religious. I said, “Well, I can recite you a couple instances where I feel there is a predestination.” Because I remember on the Saratoga, there was a bunch of guys in a huddle, and one of the guys right in the middle got killed, from this bullet. And things like that, I think, makes you think that there’s a bullet with your name on it someplace. I think several of the guys on the crew felt the same way, but the foreman he broke us up in quite a hurry. But I think there was quite a bit of talk, even aboard ship, on predestination stuff. You had a certain time to go and, if not, you were a lucky one to come home without a scratch. Which I did—I never got a scratch.

T: Do you think about that afterwards, even now, that you somehow came home without a scratch and other guys didn’t?

W: Oh yeah, I’ve thought quite a bit, why was I one of the lucky ones that never got hurt? Or why was I in the right place at the right time? Like the one where we got torpedoed off of Guadalcanal, on the Saratoga. The first torpedo hit us and the ship was turning. If the second torpedo would have hit us, it would have been in our compartment. It just missed the stern of the ship. So things like that, kind of makes you wonder. Was it your time, or wasn’t it your time?

T: Does that kind of approach make it easier to get through days when you face potential danger?

W: Yah, I suppose it did. I don’t think you thought about it all the time, but it was in the back of a person’s mind. Am I going to get through this next invasion, or am I going to get through this next thing without a scratch? Or am I going to be one of the wounded ones? Or if I get wounded, how am I going to go home? Am I going to go home without a leg or without an arm or without sight? I think that weighed on most peoples’ minds at one time or another. You see so much of it, and I have seen quite a few people killed. You kind of get hardened to the fact that death didn’t really mean that much at the time. I don’t think you mourned that much for this one or that one at the time. Although we had burials at sea, when the service was over, it was forgotten. That’s the way it was with me, anyway; you just put it out of your mind. Because if you were going to sit there and dwell on this stuff, that too many of your friends were gone, well, you’d go nuts.

T: Walter, is there anything else you want to add before we conclude?

W: I suppose I skipped some stuff through this interview. I don’t remember if I told you I helped to carry the bodies out of turret five there on the Nevada. I know there were some of the guys there that I went through boot camp with, and that was very
hard. *(with emotion)* I think... On other ships I went to several burials at sea, but none of them was really close to me. Because you usually stayed in your own division. The ones you worked with were usually the ones you went on liberty with. Except on the LCI 455, where it was such a small crew. Everyone was friendly there and you associated with everybody. On the LCI 455 I got closer to most of the guys than I did on the other ships I was on.

T: More so than on the *Saratoga*, for example?

W: Yeah, because we were tighter together. We were on a smaller unit and we were all bound together. We all slept in the same compartment, and we ate at the same tables. Although we had different ratings, it didn't make any difference when we went on liberty. We went with whoever wanted to go on liberty, or whoever had liberty at the time. So I think on the LCI 455 we got much closer. Everybody kind of figured they were a brother to everybody. But before the war, to go back on some of the things, our ships were more or less divided. The competition was between different divisions and different ships. The Marines and things like this were more or less all competing against one another in sports and everything else. But when Pearl Harbor happened, everybody was a brother. You could even go to a Marine, and he was your brother if he was there. I guess I’d have to say you had to go through it to realize this. Even the Army guys, you used to give them bad times on liberty and stuff like that. They’d get in a lot of fights, Navy and Army and Marines. On liberty and at times. Then after Pearl Harbor, if you were there, you remembered together.

T: A very nice thought to close things with. I want to thank you very much, Mr. Larson, for the interview.

W: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW