

**Interviewee: James Griffin**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

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**Location: Concordia University, St. Paul, MN**

**Transcribed by: Kimberly Johnson, July 2002**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, August 2002**

James Griffin was born 6 July 1917 in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he grew up and attended Central High School, graduating in 1936. After attending West Virginia State College for two years, 1936-38, and briefly living in Michigan, Jim returned to St. Paul. In 1941 he joined the St. Paul Police Department as a patrolman, a position he held until early 1945, when he decided to enlist in the US Navy. Jim was inducted in May 1945, just as Germany surrendered, and sent to Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago for Basic Training. It was during this time that Basic Training in the Navy was desegregated, and Jim provides his personal perspective of this process as an African-American.

Jim completed boot camp, but VJ-Day in August brought an end to the war before he could ship out. He spent the rest of 1945 and the first six months of 1946 at several stateside locations in Rhode Island and California, and was finally discharged in June 1946 with the rank of seaman first class.

Following his discharge Jim returned to the St. Paul Police Department, rising to the rank of Deputy Chief of Police; he retired in September 1983. Jim served on the St. Paul School Board for seventeen years, and over the years devoted his time to other civic causes in St. Paul. He received an honorary degree from Concordia University, St. Paul, in 1990.

Jim and his wife Edna were married in 1938, and the couple made their home in St. Paul.

Jim Griffin died in November 2002.

**Interview key:**

**J = James Griffin**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation**

**(\*\*\*) = words or phrase unclear**

**NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity**

**Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.**

T: Today is the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, and this is an interview with Mr. Jim Griffin here in my office at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota. First, Mr. Griffin, thanks very much for taking the time to come down here today and be part of the Oral History Project of the World War II Years.

You were born [on 6 July 1917] and raised in St. Paul, graduated from St. Paul Central High School [in 1936]. So you were out of high school when the events of the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 occurred. Do you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

J: I was working as a guard out at the Ordinance Plant at New Brighton, Minnesota, and I was a part-time policeman. You see, when I was appointed, and finished my training, I worked part-time on the Police Department; I had to put in so many hours a week, for a year, before I was appointed permanently. August, that would be a year later, I got appointed, August '42, permanently on the [St. Paul] Police Department.

T: How did you react when you heard the news [about Pearl Harbor]?

J: It was kind of a shock. And I do remember, and I got a chuckle out of it, I heard a lot of white fellows say, "Well, we'll straighten that out in about sixty days." And I says, "It ain't going to happen that way, that quick." "What do you mean? Hell, what can they do?" I says, "It's going to be long. This war ain't going to end in no two weeks, or three weeks. It's going to be a long haul." But you see, that's the reflection of the people thinking about people with dark skin. "No way for them to be able to beat us." Well, they found out.

T: At that point, 1941, were you tempted to join the military yourself?

J: No.

T: Why not?

J: I had a child at home to take care of, and I was on the [St. Paul] Police Department. The first time I got exempted, I didn't put in for one. When they first came out along that way, police and so on and so forth got exemptions [from military service]. They got what they call 4-F's, or something like that.

T: Because of the fact that you were a police officer?

J: Yes.

T: Now, it was until 1945 that you joined the Navy. What prompted you in May 1945 to change your mind, and after almost four years, join the military?

J: Well, Minnesota had the strongest veteran's preference law in the whole United States. Minnesota, if you lived in a city of the first class, Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Duluth, you got absolute preference, if you passed the test. No non-veteran could be appointed until all the veterans on the list there had been appointed.

T: How did you process that bit of information in early 1945? Are you saying that prompted you to join the Navy?

J: Why certainly. If I didn't do that, I'd have been a patrolman all my life.

T: Why the Navy, and not the Army or the Marine Corps?

J: Well, my best friend, a guy named Leroy Coburn, he'd been on the [St. Paul] Fire Department after I went on the Police Department, and we'd been friends since 1929. He was a lot smarter than I was, and of course he knew about these rules. He said to me, he says, "Jim, we've got to enlist. You know the veteran's preference law, don't you?" And I said, "Yes I do." He says, "If we don't get veteran's preference, I'll be a fireman all my life, and you'll be a patrolman all your life." (*laughs*). So we thought about it. He says, "I already went down and enlisted. You'd better do the same." I says, "I was thinking about it." So I went down with him to the Armory, and they shipped him off. He ended up in Virginia somewhere. (\*\*\*) He says, "Boy this is a mess down here; the segregation is really rough here." Of course he was born and raised here [in St. Paul], too. I had written him and told him I had enlisted. I kind of figured... I enlisted, and right after that, VJ-Day came.

T: The end of the war with Japan, August 1945. (*as the interview will make clear below, Mr. Griffin is referring here to VE-Day in May 1945, the end of the war with Germany*)

J: So of course I thought I wouldn't be called then. But they called me. Don't forget, I was still working on the Police Department, and VJ-Day came. About two weeks later, they called me up, and I went out there to Fort Snelling [US military induction center, by Minneapolis]. And on the recommendation of my buddy, they said, "Well, we've got to have some men for the Navy today." I says, "I'll take that." And then of course some smart white guy was there. "Well, you've got to be in good shape to get in the Navy." His attitude, I didn't appreciate it. I says, "I don't think I'll have any trouble with that physical examination. All the guys I've seen in the Navy, I think I'm in better shape than most of them." So they signed me up for the Navy.

Well, they horsed us around out there for a couple of weeks, and finally they took us to downtown Minneapolis, to the old Federal Courts building, across from the old Milwaukee Depot, and swore us in. Then we went back out to Fort Snelling, and they said it wouldn't be long before we would be shipped out. And in that bunch that were going to the Navy there were thirty-three guys, and I was the only black guy there. So I met a guy by the name of Jim Cunningham, from Grand Rapids, Minnesota; he worked on the Iron Range. We kind of hit it off. He was a Highway Patrolman. He says, "Jim, we'll hang together until we get out of here, when the war's over." I says, "It won't be like that." He says, "What do you mean?" "When we hit Great Lakes [Naval Training Facility, by Chicago], I'll never see you until we both get back in Minnesota." He says, "What are you talking about?" I says, "The Army and the Navy are segregated." He'd been up on the Iron Range; what did he know about that? Up on the Iron Range there are probably one or two [blacks] on the whole Range.

Then we finally went down to Great Lakes. And at Great Lakes, then they separated us.

T: What month did you arrive at Great Lakes, Jim, do you remember?

J: Oh, I'd say about May.

T: Now if VJ-Day was August 1945...

J: That's right. As a matter of fact, I was home on leave from boot camp when VJ-Day came.

**(A, 100)**

T: Stopping the tape.

*(interview paused briefly)*

T: Tape on again.

J: When I enlisted, and went down to Great Lakes, it might have been early in July, or late June.

T: We were still at war with Japan?

J: We were still at war with Japan when I got to Great Lakes. And I was there until August. *(pauses; appears confused)* I'd have to check that; I don't remember the exact date of VJ-Day.

T: It was August 15<sup>th</sup>.

J: I was in the Navy by then. *(pauses five seconds)* Of course I stayed there. When I first went down to Great Lakes, the war was winding down.

T: We finished the war with Germany on 8 May.

J: That's where I made a mistake; it was the war in Europe that ended while I was still on the job [as a policeman]. And then I went to Great Lakes. And while I was at Great Lakes, in about, oh, July of that year, they ended segregation in the Navy.

T: Just the time when you were at Great Lakes?

J: I was at Great Lakes when it happened.

T: And when the war with Japan ended, on August 15<sup>th</sup>...?

J: I had just gotten out of boot camp, and I was home on leave.

T: Okay, now we've got it straight.

J: Now we've got it *(laughs)*.

**(A, 133)**

T: So you went to Great Lakes Naval Training Center, by Chicago, in what sounds like June of 1945.

J: Probably about June. Right after the war with Germany was over.

T: Was that a new part of the country for you, Jim? Had you been to Chicago, or that area, before?

J: Well, you see, my dad worked for the railroad, and he could get passes, so I'd ridden trains and seen a lot. Had relatives in California, and we'd been there. So I'd ridden trains all over the country. And never been segregated.

T: What was the Basic Training experience like for you?

J: Well, it was a pain in the ass! *(laughs)*

T: How so? *(laughs)*

J: Typical training. They got you up early in the morning, and get out there and marched you up and down. You did a lot of damned fool things, and learn all about the Navy and so forth. A regular military routine.

T: Very good. I like the way you describe things! Now this was also a time that the Navy, when you got to Great Lakes, was still segregated.

J: Boy was it! Only thirteen black commissioned officers in the whole United States Navy.

T: When you arrived at Great Lakes, you arrived on a train from Minneapolis?

J: Yep.

T: When you got off the train, were blacks and whites immediately split up?

J: In the bunch I was in, I was the only black guy there. So we sat and (\*\*\*) over to the receiving center. That day there wasn't too many guys coming in. I marched over to that receiving center, and I was with thirty-three guys, and I was the only black guy there.

T: And you processed through the receiving center with the white guys?

J: Well, yes and no. We got over there in that receiving center, and we went into a huge room. In squares. And in each square there was a cardboard box.

T: A cardboard box?

J: You stood in it. And they had a couple of guys, what do you call them, non-commissioned officers, and they told everybody to stand in one of those boxes, take off all your clothes, put them in that box. There was a pen there. Sign who you want it [the box] to go to, your wife, your mother, your parents, or so on and so forth. You did that.

T: So you stripped down, into the box, and off you went?

J: Just stood there with no clothes on. The Navy wasn't bashful! (*laughs*). So after that happened, yes sir—I can tell you what happened to me. A young petty officer came up to me, he says, "Are you colored?" I says, "Are you blind?" "Well," he says, "I didn't know, I didn't understand. I thought I'd better ask." Later on I found out, the reason he asked me that was because, from all over the country when they came in there, they never had any black guys mixed in with white guys.

T: So he wasn't expecting that.

J: He wasn't expecting that. So after we did that, why a guy came over to me and says, "Step over in this room here." I went over there, and a guy had a big can with a lot of goo and crap in there, and they put it on with a paintbrush. I says, "What's that for?" He says, "For crabs." I says, "Hell, I ain't got any crabs." "We do that to all the black guys that come through," he says. (*pauses three seconds*) I see a guy standing

there, used to be from up in this area, and he says, "Hell, where are you from?" I told him, "St. Paul, Minnesota." He says, "Them guys up there don't have that trouble. Hell, let him go through." So I got through that.

T: Did you have any clothes on yet?

J: No! (*laughs*). Hell, the Navy kept you without any clothes on for two or three hours! So what happened then, after that was over, and we left that, then I got sent to, got marched down over to the reception center. Where I was walking by, on the way, we went by the black barracks. As we walked by there—and in the Navy everybody says "hi ya mate," that's what they say—so I was going by some black guys over there, and one guy says, he said to me, "Hey mate, where are you from?" And I told him Minnesota. I heard him say, I didn't know what he was talking about, he said, "You'll be alright." We just marched on over there, and when we got to this one barracks there, they put me in this barracks with all these black guys. These other [white] guys went on, and I never saw them again.

T: So there was an area with black barracks?

J: Oh, hell yes. At Great Lakes there must have been a dozen camps, and one of them was Camp Robert Smalls, and that was all black. Robert Smalls was a captain in the Navy that came from the Civil War. He stole a ship from the Confederates and sailed it over to the Union Army. They made him an honorary captain, and the camp was named after him. Everybody was there. But you see, in these areas, there was always two or three all-black companies.

T: How about your non-commissioned officers? Were they black, too?

**(A, 219)**

J: Some of them. But there was only thirteen commissioned officers, and they called them the golden thirteen. They just had an article about them in the newspaper; I've got it at home.

T: Were guys aware of the fact, consciously aware of the fact, that the white guys were one place and the black guys were another place?

J: Oh, heck yes. Sometimes there would be some conflicts.

T: Did you come into contact at this time, on a regular basis, with white sailors?

J: Well, you did, but while you were doing your training, all your training was all black and all white. We'd be down there marching up and down on the granite, and they'd be down there too, up and down. But we never...

T: So you'd pass each other, in a sense, or...?

J: Sure, they'd pass each other.

T: How about during mealtimes?

J: Mealtime? In the Navy everything is done on a time basis. You ate at a certain time. And of course the chow hall, when you went in to get chow, there'd be two thousand men in there. What happened was, all the black guys in those days, they were segregated. And another thing they did in the Navy, when you got through eating, they had a big sign up there, "Eat all you want, but eat everything on your plate." They had a guy with a club standing there by that garbage can, and if you didn't eat it, he'd let you out and you'd have to go back and eat whatever was on your plate. What are you going to do?

Then when I had gone by that guy, I heard that guy [from earlier] that said I'd be alright. I found out when I got back what you were [he was] talking about. Because the war was running down and you were getting a lot of guys from the rural South, from places like Alabama, Mississippi, rural Georgia. Those guys had a third or fourth grade education. So what he [the guy from earlier] meant was, coming from Minnesota, I'd be alright, I was going to pass.

When we got there, the next day, they [the other black recruits] were all sitting around there and so forth, and I could see there was something going on there. So I said to one of the [other black] guys, I says, "What the hell is going on here?" "Well," he says, "we're waiting to get 128 men together, so we can start our boots [boot camp Basic Training]. *(pauses three seconds)* And of course I had heard about guys who couldn't read or write, but I'd never been involved in something like that around here [in St. Paul]. So I was kind of shocked when I got in there with that particular bunch, I'd say only about twenty percent of those guys had the equivalent of a fourth grade education.

T: Were a lot of these guys from the South?

J: From the rural South. Now the guys from the urban cities in the South, of course, they didn't have that problem. They came from places like Atlanta or Nashville or places like that, Kansas City. So that's the way it was.

T: Was there friction between these blacks from the rural South and guys from up North?

J: Sometimes there was.

T: What kind of problems did you have?

J: *(pauses three seconds)* Men rub each other. And they'd rub each other. And sometimes a few flare outs, you know, those are the things that happen.

So the first two weeks I was there, we were all in there together, and a lot of those guys didn't have much education, the guys'd be playing cards, and it'd get kind

of raunchy sometimes. I never will forget, after I was there about three days, a kid came in there, I bet he didn't weigh 115 pounds soaking wet, a black kid from Boston, and he came in there. Most of these guys, these Southerners, were older. They said to this guy, "Hell, I'm going to sleep with that guy tonight," joking and so forth. Terrified this poor kid. So the Chief in charge there was a white guy, he said for him to go get his gear. Basic issue, a mattress, sheets, sea bag with all your gear.

In the meantime, you know, we'd got our uniforms, after I got through that place where they were going to paint me with that stuff [against crabs]! I left there, and the next day we got our uniforms. So we'd been there about a week, and everyone had their uniforms. I'll never forget, this kid, his eyes got real big, and all these guys, they were cursing and hollering and carrying on. I said to this kid, I said, "Don't pay any attention to these guys. In the first place they're just kidding you, they're trying to scare you, and so forth and so on. Now go on and get your gear like the Chief told you, and come on back." The Chief said he should get his gear, and come back and take any one of the beds here. Beds in there were three tiers high. So the kid came back, looking around at all these guys, and he said to me, "Where's your bunk?" I says, "Right there." He took the bunk next to me (*chuckles*).

So I was curious. I said, "Where are you from?" He said Boston. Well, at that time Boston didn't have a very large black population. So I said, "What does your dad do?" He says, "He's a dentist." His dad was a dentist out there in one of the suburbs, so that's why he hadn't been around a lot of black folks.

T: These were quite different types of blacks then he'd ever been exposed to.

J: That's right.

T: That's interesting.

J: So anyhow, we stayed there, and after about four or five days, why we... (*pauses five seconds*) On Saturday morning they have what they call--what the hell did they call it? (*pauses five seconds*) Some damned Navy term, where they clean up; it ain't nothing but a clean-up. Field day, that's what they called it. That's one thing the Navy does—everything is spic and span. (*pauses five seconds*) At the end of that week...

**(A, 297)**

T: Had you actually started the boot camp process?

J: Heck no. Each company had 128 men.

T: And you were still waiting for that number of guys.

J: You're ahead of yourself. We were there, and what happened was, finally after I had been there about ten days or so, we're hanging around, and finally after we had that field day, why all of a sudden the Chief came in and told the guys to pay

attention. In the Navy they say, "Hear this. All hands hear this." So he got up there and he called off 128 names, and lined them up there, and brought a couple of drummers down there, and these guys marched off to Camp Robert Smalls to do their boots.

T: Now were you one of this group?

J: No, I was one of fifteen or sixteen guys left over. They marched on off. So I asked one of the guys who had been there, and he said those guys were going to go start their boot camp. He says, "They'll keep us here until they we get another 128 guys, and then we'll go over there, too." So Monday morning comes around, *(pauses three seconds)* everybody wants to know what we were going to do. Well, they said, we got a job for you. They took us down, and they used to bring in the mattresses by the truckloads, because everybody had his own mattress.

T: These are all new mattresses?

J: Brand new. They were packed in moth balls. So we got down to where we were going to unload these things, and I'll never forget—the guy turned out to be from Minnesota, name was Corsten, 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> class petty officer—he says, "Fellows, now, you're going to be here until we get 128 guys together, so you gotta have a work detail. They're bringing these mattresses in, they have to be unloaded. But they're packed in moth balls." Well, we started opening those things, and after a little while you'd have to kind of take a breather, get some fresh air.

So then the guy said, "Well, what we always do, we have one of the new guys act as a straw boss around here. You guys pick your own men." So they had a lot of those guys that couldn't read and write, and I wrote a couple of letters and made a couple of telephone calls for these guys, so they got to know me pretty good, and then someone told them that I'd been a policeman. So we went over there, and the guy says, "How about that guy from Minnesota? How about him being the straw boss?" They all said, yeah, that'd be a good idea. They made me kind of in charge. So things went along for about four or five days, no problem.

T: Were you slowly building up more guys, getting this 128?

J: Yes, we were building up guys, we'd get three or four guys a day. Finally about the third or fourth day, the truck driver came in, he backed the truck up there for us to unload. A pretty cocky guy, he backed up there and started telling us what to do. Them guys looked at him, and all those guys were draftees except for about three or four. They had a little rebellion there. I didn't know about it, until one of those guys, those black guys, came over and he says, "I thought you were supposed to be the boss here." And I said, "Well, I guess I am." He says, "That truck driver over there is giving us a hard time." So I said I'd go over there and see what the trouble was.

I went over to this guy, and he gave me a lot of crap. I said, "Wait a minute. Most of these guys are here, but they don't want to be here. You're a civilian, and the Navy guys won't do a damn thing that you tell them to do." He made some smart

crack, and I said, "If you want this done, you go over to that petty officer there and tell him what you want done. He'll tell me, and I'll get the troops to do it." He gave me some lip, and I said, "Now wait a minute. I don't know who the hell you think you are, but don't talk to me like that or I'll knock you right on your ass." He thought about it for a minute and then went and sat down. We got through working that day, we went back to the barracks, and I was a hero. One guy says [to another], "That guy [Griffin] came over, and he told him where the hell to put it. He didn't take no shit off of him." So I was in pretty good shape. It's easy when you're a hero.

T: Yes, it sure is!

**(A, 358)**

J: Now we had those 128 guys, sixty-four lined up by twos, then in the center there were two drummers, and then sixty-four. Then finally, (\*\*\*) , shove off. So the guy started to beat that drum, and we marched over to Camp Robert Smalls.

T: How long was it altogether before your group of 128 was actually put together?

J: Oh, took us a couple of weeks.

T: So you were basically just doing work details until then?

J: That's right. Then we marched over there, then we started the Navy BS, the boot camp procedure.

T: You talked about this earlier, before we began taping. Was it at this time that the Navy desegregated?

J: Yes. We didn't know nothing about it. So we were out there drilling, marching us up and down, you know. It was a hot day there, June or early July, you'd have to check, I can't remember the exact date. And in the Navy, when you're in boots, each company has what they call a child runner, and he runs all the errands, you know. This kid I was telling you about earlier [from Boston], they made him a child runner. So we were out there marching up and down in that hot sun, and this kid came running down there. The guy who was our battalion commander was a Jewish guy named Lt. Kaplan.

T: Was he a white guy?

J: Yes, a Jewish guy, a commissioned officer. And he [the runner] comes back and says, "Lt. Kaplan says report to your barracks immediately." And the guy who was pushing us through boots, he was a non-commissioned officer, he was a black guy. He says, "Well, we'll get on down there in about five or ten minutes." And this kid says, "Boy, I think you'd better come right now. That lieutenant was pretty emphatic." He said okay, and marched us over to the barracks.

Each company, each battalion, had eight companies, but our battalion only had seven. We got there, and the other six companies are already there. The lieutenant told us to stand at ease. Pretty soon one of those staff cars drove up, a jeep, commander got out and walked over, and the guy called us to attention and all that BS. The guy called Lt. Kaplan over and he says, "Read this scroll." He unfolded the scroll, and it says, "As of this date, segregation in the United States Navy will cease." [The commander says], "Camp Robert Smalls will no longer be an all-black camp. This company will stay intact, and there's another black company being formed, that will be the last one, so you'll be the second-to-last one. Get you gear and we'll march off to Camp Downs. Right away." And that's what happened.

T: To clarify, Camp Downs was within Great Lakes?

J: Camp Downs was in Great Lakes, just like Camp Smalls.

T: But it was a white camp.

J: It was all white.

T: So you were now, suddenly, called off the training field, brought to the barracks, told the Navy was desegregating, go get your gear, and we're going to move out?

J: Yep, and we did that right away. So we got together and marched off and (\*\*\*). And like I said, they called a couple of drummer boys down (*laughs*), there were two drummers in between sixty-four guys. And we marched on off to Camp Downs.

**(A, 404)**

T: Can you describe what it was like when you got there?

J: Yes. So we marched out of there. The guy who was pushing us through boots, he was as tough as (\*\*\*), and he knew how to handle men. So they marched on off to Camp Downs. Got around the bend from Camp Downs, not quite in sight of the gate there—this guy who was pushing us through boots, (*pauses three seconds*) name was Blount, they called him Pops, he was about my age. Most of these guys were kids, and I spent my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday in boot camp.

T: Most of these guys were draftees?

J: Most of them were youngsters. Hell, we got right around the bend from there [Camp Downs], and this guy called halt. He says, "Now, fellas, I don't know what's going to happen when we hit this camp, but if there's any problems don't settle it yourself. You tell me about it, and I'll handle it. And another thing, when we march into camp, I want those guys to see the best marching camp outfit they've ever seen." That's one thing about black soldiers and sailors, they were always good marchers. He called us to attention, and we shoved off and marched in there.

He took us down there and got us our barracks and so on and so forth. We started putting our gear away, the kid that was the child runner came down and told our guys what time we were supposed to be there to eat. We said okay. He said, "Wait a minute, better look around." This guy that was pushing us through boots, he said, "You see that up there?" They had a noose hanging up there.

T: How did that get there?

J: *(laughs)* Hell, them guys in the camp put it there! So the [non-commissioned officer] says, "Don't do nothing. Take it easy. We're going down to chow now, and I'll go down and talk to the officer of the day." Of course I wasn't there, but of course everybody found out what he said. He went down and told the officer of the day, he says, "We came in here peacefully. You go hanging nooses around here, we might have a riot here." The officer of the day, the guy that had the hat on that day, had good sense; he says, "That won't happen again." And we never had a bit of trouble.

T: When you guys looked up and saw that noose hanging there, over the rafters, what was the reaction among the guys in the room?

J: There was kind of a rough reaction. The [non-commissioned officer] says, "They think we're going to stay in here and take all the crap off these guys, they've got another thought coming." And that's just what he told the officer of the day. He said, "If you don't straighten up, we're liable to have a riot here."

T: Was it your impression, Jim, that the guys with you in the room that saw that were more angry, or more scared?

J: I think they were angry. No sense in being scared at that particular time. Hell, there were 128 of us, we figured we could hold right up against any of them guys in there.

T: After this incident, you went down to eat? Eating with white guys?

J: What happened, you see, all the companies would sit together. We was sitting together over there, but there was white guys, companies, other battalions and companies around there.

T: Describe the mood in the dining hall.

J: Kind of quiet. Nothing spectacular. Didn't hear any beefs.

T: More quiet than usual, or just kind of normal?

J: You see, that was our first day there, so we didn't know what was going on before we got there! *(laughs)*. And I imagine they didn't have any trouble, 'cause everybody

there would be white. *(pauses three seconds)* Everything went alright, things went along fine.

T: Did your group of 128 complete your boot camp then?

J: Yep. On the second day that we were down there at Camp Downs, the first integrated company came marching by. We were all standing by the fence, watching these guys going by. Out of 128 guys, I think there were about ten black guys. That's the way it was.

T: Your company, your 128, was still all black.

J: Yes.

T: You just completed your Basic Training at a camp that had been all white.

J: Yes.

T: Then came these integrated companies after that.

J: That's right. We were the second-to-last all-black company.

T: How would you characterize the mood around the camp while you were there?

J: [At] Downs it was pretty good.

T: Never any racial incidents there?

J: No, I don't think we had any issues there. Then, you see, with the Navy everything is competitive. They had, after we'd had field day, on Saturday we'd have softball games, or *(pauses three seconds)* all kinds of competitive examinations. We [blacks] dominated that. After we got there we won every god damned thing they had.

T: The sporting contests?

J: The sporting contests.

T: Your company?

J: Our company won every damned thing! *(laughs)*

T: Did you meet any, did you see any women in uniform while you were at camp?

**(A, 461)**

J: Not in boot camp, hell no!

T: Were there any nurses or drivers or admin[istration] people?

J: They had them there [at Great Lakes], but where the troops were, they didn't. Because, you see, they had women in the Navy, but the women trained at a different place. Where the women trained, there were all women.

T: Were the WAVES also at Great Lakes?

J: They had some there, sure.

T: But you didn't come into contact with them at any time?

J: No. Not that I remember.

T: Jim, is there a person from your boot camp experience who made a real positive impact on you, somebody you remember as a real good guy?

J: Yes, the guy who was pushing us through boots, I think he did a hell of a job. But I met some pretty nice guys, and of course we had some guys who were college men around there. Had they been white, they'd have gotten a commission. After we were there, why, I think that did happen. Oh, I guess we'd been there about four weeks and now I was a master at arms, you know, (\*\*). So I'm sitting on my bed, and a guy came down and says, "Say, there's four white guys out there, and they want to see you. They heard there was a black guy down here, and they wanted to talk to you." These four white guys out there, it's a small world. One of those guys, they had had a grocery store on St. Albans and Rondo [streets in St. Paul]. Another one of those guys, his father was the sheriff of Ramsey County [St. Paul is the county seat of Ramsey County], Tommy Givens. And another guy, white guy, by the name of Dick Rudy, used to play at the Hallie Q Brown community center [in St. Paul]. And I've forgotten the other guy; those three guys I remember.

T: They know you were there?

J: Yep, they went down there. They were very cordial. So that made a big impression on all those guys. "Hell, if they accept him all right, we won't have any trouble." And do you know something? That guy that used to play at the Hallie Q Brown [center], after the war, he went on the [St. Paul] Police Department, he was the president of our union for about seven or eight years. White guy, he came from (\*\*) in St. Paul. You see, down by—do you know where Jackson Street is?

T: No.

J: That's where the old market used to be, down about two blocks east of the Public Safety Building. Used to call that the badlands. *(pauses three seconds)* It was a slum.

And anytime you find low income residents, there's always black folks there, and Mexicans, poor whites. And that's where this guy came from.

T: How did you know him?

J: I didn't know him at that time. I got to know him later on.

T: When did you leave boot camp?

J: In August.

T: After VJ-Day?

J: No, V-J Day happened the day I got home. When you finished boots, you got ten days leave.

T: So you finished boots, came home for leave, and then you found out right when you got back here to St. Paul about VJ-Day.

J: Yep, in August.

T: What do you remember about VJ-Day?

J: Well, everybody was screaming and hollering, happy it was over. Including me.

T: What did you do, do you remember?

J: I was there with my wife, and I had one child, no, I had two children at that time.

T: How about the people in your neighborhood?

J: A lot of the people in the neighborhood where we were living at that time, I was living at 716 Carroll [in St. Paul], and everybody, of course they were happy, the mood was real happy all over town. The war was over.

T: What did that mean for you personally, now? Instead of going back to a nation at war, the nation was at peace. What happened to your Navy career?

J: They started discharging guys. Of course, I got a break 'cause I was older than most of those guys. Everybody that got through that process, they gave you a little thing that you pinned on your jacket, they called it a "ruptured duck." I got my ruptured duck, put it on, and then when I got back home for good[, in June 1946,] I had to go back to work. I didn't have any money.

T: It was June of 1946, you said, when you got out of the Navy.

J: And I went back to work on June 10<sup>th</sup>.

T: What did you do in the Navy, then, between August of '45 and June of '46?

J: Not much of nothin'.

T: Where were you stationed?

**(A, 516)**

J: When we left Great Lakes, they sent us to Davisville, Rhode Island [south of Providence]. That was a Seabee base, but we didn't know that until we got there. Then we shipped out of there, and we went to Port Hueneme, California [naval base north of Los Angeles].

T: Go by train?

J: Yes. We had a train there, all Navy guys. Everybody on there, outside of the cooks, was black. Strictly a Navy train, everybody on there was in the Navy.

T: But was a black sailor.

J: A black sailor, except for the officers.

T: What about the desegregation?

J: I know, it was integrated when we went, but what I'm talking about is on that train. This was bad news, see? We got there, and what they did was... Another thing that happened in the service, you know, guys from small towns, especially black sailors from the South, they would never like to say they came from a little town in Mississippi. They didn't never want to tell anybody. "Where are you from?" "Jackson." "Where are you from?" "Chicago." You could listen to some of those guys talk, and you knew damn well where they were from! (*laughs*) But that's the way it was.

So when we got to, we had to go to Port Hueneme, we were in what they called an outgoing unit. We were there for three, four days. Then you found out the real Navy. You had a bed—the guys'll tell you—you go to bed at night, laid each leg on that bed, and put your shoe under there, so nobody else will steal your stuff. And then of course we made a (\*\*\*) then. So we went to Chicago.

T: Into Chicago?

J: Chicago. There was a town there, I can't think of the name right now. You know, you could get on the god danged train and go in there.

T: So Port Hueneme was on Lake Michigan?

J: No, I'm talking about Chicago, before we had gone to Port Hueneme.

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

T: Side B of the interview with Mr. Jim Griffin on 13 September 2001.

J: So what happened then, I got thrown in with a group, there were about forty-five or fifty of us. They had some other guys, who had been in other companies. So we, at this place, they would back the train up and down (\*\*\*) when you get on. So we got down there, so after we got on, about forty-five or fifty of us, they went through the same routine. They had to have a guy in charge. How I got to be the master of arms, the guy in charge in boot camp, the guy that they had picked out to be that, he couldn't handle it, so they picked me. And I stayed the master at arms in boot camp. So when we got down there, they did the same thing. (\*\*\*) We had to have an officer with us, we had to have a train sheet, and you pick the guys. So all the guys you'd been rooming with for the last twelve weeks. We put up with him for three, four days.

**(B, 023)**

T: Is this on the way to Rhode Island?

J: So we got there to Rhode Island.

T: What did you do in Rhode Island, Jim?

J: Nothing (*laughs*). Going down there, they had us doing all sorts of silly things that the Navy does. Just to keep busy, because the war's over. So after we were there for a few days, about three days, and I'm sitting in my bunk.

T: Around September 1945?

J: Yep. It was the fall, September. We knew there was a train coming out of Boston, going through Providence [Rhode Island]—we were just outside of Providence, [at Davisville], a submarine base—every hour. So we got (\*\*\*) that we should get liberty. On weekends when we got liberty, hell, (\*\*\*) to Boston or Chicago.

Well, anyhow, I'm sitting around there one day and a guy came down and says he was looking for Jim Griffin. "Right here." He said, "Well, we got a few assigned jobs here that don't call for a rate [job specification in the Navy], you just appoint them. You got a pretty good rapport with the troops here, so all the jobs that are worth a damn except one have been taken." I asked, "What's that?" "Mailman," he says. I says, "I'll take it." So I did. Now down at this place, (*pauses three seconds*) this was integrated.

T: In Rhode Island?

J: In Rhode Island. And we didn't know we were at a Seabee base until the guy told us that. One guy, we did something, and one guy says, "That ain't what we did at Great Lakes." And the guy, the Seabee, an old salt, says, "I don't give a damn what you did at Great Lakes. This is a Seabee base, and we do things different." I went down to that chow line, and I was in that chow line about an hour before I got a chance to eat.

T: Long line?

J: The service in those days was a series of lines. You went from one line to another. I says, I got to come up with something to beat this line. The guy who was the master at arms in the chow hall was a black guy about 6'4" who must have weighed about 220 [pounds]. Big guy, and he didn't have no foolishness in there. When he told those guys to get their asses lined up, they got in line! (*laughs*) All the cooks around there were white. So anyhow, I could see this guy... I am no Rhodes scholar, but I could see he wasn't a very educated guy. Second day I said, damn, I got to figure out something. So I went up to this guy, and he says, "Get back in that line." "Now, I just want to talk to you, and when I get through talking, I'll get back at the end of the line." He kind of smiled and said, "Okay, what's on your mind?" I said, "You're the boss here, aren't you?" He says, "Sure am." "I tell you what," I says, "you give me the list of all your men down here that work for you, under your jurisdiction, you make a list, and give it to me. Those guys won't have to stand in that mail line. You give me that list, and I'll pull their mail, and when I come down to chow I'll bring it to you, and you can call off the guy's name and they won't have to get in that line." He says, "That sounds pretty good. When do you want to start?" I says, "Tomorrow." "Go on in and sit down," he say. So I sat down, and didn't have to get in that line.

The next day, I came down with the mail. I said to this guy, "Here's the mail, you can call it off." He says, "No, you call it off." (*pauses three seconds*) I had him right—he didn't read too well. So I read the names off, and everybody came up and got their mail, and everybody was happy. And I stayed the mailman as long as we were in Davisville! (*laughs*) And I didn't wait in line anymore!

Well, here at Davisville, we had been there about a month, and they had us doing some kind of Navy crap. We learned about the Navy, tying knots and doing all that Navy stuff. So you know what they did then? (*pauses three seconds*) I used to go into Providence on liberty, on the weekends I'd go to New York, because they had a train, as I said, going from Boston to New York every hour. And we got off at noon, well, we'd all be down there, all the people from Davisville would be down to get on that train, and it'd be full of guys going into New York. If you were on that last train going out of New York to Boston, and you were late, you were AWOL [absent without leave]. (*pauses three seconds*)

So I used to go into Providence. And then we were horsing around there, and there was not much there. Finally, one day, one morning, it was about 3:00 a.m., and I heard this damn racket, the guys were hollering and screaming and pushing. Nobody was mad, but they were just having a lot of fun. So I got up to look out

there. (\*\*\*) And all those guys were black. So I said to them guys, "What the hell is going on out there?" He said, "That's the 30<sup>th</sup> Special battalion, that just landed in Boston harbor from London, England. There's 1500 of them." They were raising hell. The next morning we went down to chow hall, and there was some confusion. All the cooks were white, and there was a mixed crew normally in the chow hall. When you throw an extra 1500 mouths, people in there, that makes a mess with the chow line. Boy, I'll tell you, the tempers were getting mad. So they had a big hassle down there.

About a week went by, and at the Seabee base they would always have a tavern, where you get beer, snacks, and stuff like that. The guys who ran that thing, you called them master at arms, they had the power of arrest, they were a pretty rough bunch of guys, and they were a pretty prejudiced bunch of guys. They were all white, these guys. So when you went down to that place, on the wall they had a sign, "If you dirty up, clean up." Do you know what these white guys would do? Some white guy would leave his stuff on the table, and they'd grab some black guy and tell him to clean it up. That had been going on for two or three weeks. And now with various Specialists there, that ballgame changed right away. These were all black guys. They told one black guy, who was a petty officer first class, he says, "Clean that up." The guy says, "Clean up what?" He says, "All that trash you see there." He says, "I didn't dirty up, and I ain't going to clean up." The guy was going to put him under arrest, (*pauses three seconds*) and there must have been about nine hundred black guys in there, and they said, you ain't going to take him out of here. Four or five guys start looking around, (*laughs*) and they could see they meant it! Bad numbers. So in the meantime, this black guy who was a petty officer first class, he tried to talk to the guys, and they wouldn't listen. So he left. In the Navy, they have, where the officers stay, they call it barracks officers' quarters, BOQ.

T: Barracks officers' quarters.

J: So the guy who was kind of the head man for these black guys that had just come in from England, he went down to the barracks to get the commanding officer. There was some pushing and shoving going on, and I said, uh oh, we're in for a riot here. Well, pretty soon this guy came back and he had the officer who had been the commanding officer of this group over there in England for three years. He got down there, and looked around, and he hollered something, and nobody paid any attention to this officer. He called on those guys that were masters at arms, he says, "Fire a shot in the air." They did that, and that got everybody's attention. They have a saying in the Navy, all hands hear this, all hands hear this. This officer climbed up on the table, and he was a cocky Irishman, and he says, "I'm so-and-so and I'm the commanding officer of the 30<sup>th</sup> Special battalion. We're not going to have any trouble here." He looked over and he says, "The cooks are complaining because they put all these extra rates here." There was a chief in charge of them, so he called the chief over and he says, "Get all those cooks out of there." The chief says, "You can't do that." "Don't tell me what I can't do." This was the Navy, and if you were a commissioned officer, your word was law. So [the cooks] came out of there. Then he said to the black petty officer, he was first class, "Get our crew that's been feeding us

for the last three years, and put them in there.” This one chief, he was a black guy, he says, “You can’t do that.” He says, “Don’t tell me what I can’t do.” Of course this guy was in the Navy, and he knew that when an officer said something, you had to do it. There was no option. That broke that up, and we didn’t have any trouble.

T: That was a close call, though, wasn’t it?

J: It was a close call. *(pauses three seconds)* Things kind of cooled off, and then about a week later, we got orders, we’re going to shove off to Port Hueneme, California. It’s near Oxnard, California, about sixty-five miles north of Los Angeles. I’m sitting down, and we’d been on liberty, came in there, and they said we were going to shove off in a couple of days. But I had all my gear packed, and I said, I ain’t going to unpack all this crap. So I went down on the springs, like most of the other guys did. I think it took two or three days to get us off. Finally I’m down there, and a guy came running and he says, “Come on, I want to talk to you. In the next couple of days we’re shoving off for Port Hueneme. There’s going to be 233 guys in this draft. I am going to put you as the enlisted man in charge. You have no trouble with these other guys.” Now at that time I was only a seaman second class. I says, “But there ain’t rated men [men with higher rank than Jim’s seaman second class] in there.” In the Navy, if you’re a rate, most of those guys won’t do nothing a seaman tells them. So anyhow, he took me down for breaks, and he comes out and says, “Seaman second class and two hundred others will be shipping off from Davisville, Rhode Island, at 0400,” and all that crap. So I says, okay. I got down there, the train backed up there, and we all got on the train. We started for Port Hueneme.

T: Now how many guys were on this train?

J: I got the orders in my scrapbook at home, 233 enlisted men.

T: Black guys and white guys?

J: All black. Officers were white. So we shoved off. God dang it, we got on that train, I says, “The war is over now. They’ll be putting us in the holding tank, it’ll take us a month to get to California.” It seemed like a month, but we got out there in about ten days. Made a lot of stops.

So anyhow, the first morning, the car I was in, there was two officers traveling in a car. The officer in charge of the draft, and me. The guy who was in charge, he had a private stateroom, and the two officers under travel orders, they had a, lower berths. I was out there, and I had a lower berth, and of course the boss was there. The next morning, the boss comes in and says to me, “Say, muster the train.” That means to call the roll. We didn’t have any room; you could get up and move around any time you wanted to. I said, “How the hell am I going to muster these guys?” He said, “Just muster them.” So I started up, we were the last car, and I started up to the first car. Guess there must have been about twelve cars, plus a place to eat. I went through there, and the guys were raising Cain. No problems, you know, everybody was doing alright. So I got to the front of the train, and I says,

“There is no way we can keep track of all these guys. What am I going to do?” So I sat down there and BSed a while, then I started back. And I got back to the end of the train, and I says to the lieutenant—now if you’re a lieutenant in the Navy they call you “Mister”—I says, “Everybody present and accounted for, sir.”

The second day out, we got to St. Louis, Missouri, and I’m close to home. Course they didn’t go into the railroad station, they put us out in the [railroad] yard, that’s what they do with troops. So we got to the station, and I had a SP [shore patrol, the naval military police] band on my arm. I thought, I’ll go in that station and call home. I got up there, and the guy saw this, they had SP’s around there, and he grabbed me. “What are you doing with that on your arm?” I says, “Well, I’m in charge of the draft on here, and I came up here [into the station] to use the phone, I’m going to call home.” “Don’t give us that shit. You’re under arrest.” They were going to take me to the brig. I tried to explain to them, but they wouldn’t listen. So we were marching through there, and I’m standing between these two guys, and we meet the commanding officer of my draft. I said, “Wait a minute. That officer over there, he’s the head man for our draft. Ask him.” One guy walked up, and of course he saluted, and says this guy says he’s got a train draft off here in the yard, and so on and so forth. Officer says, he’s right, and he just looked at me and let me go (*laughs*).

**(B, 280)**

T: Was that the end of it?

J: That was the end of it. I thought to myself, I started following that officer around. (\*\*\*) Lot of guys around there, and I didn’t want to risk getting caught and there wouldn’t be anyone to get me out of there. So we went back to the train. The next day we pulled into Amarillo, Texas. (*pauses three seconds*) Out in the yards, of course. Couple of guys [on the train] came up to me, they said, “Hey, we want to get some candy bars, we’re tired of eating all this god damned Navy grub,” and so on and so forth. I says, “We can’t go (\*\*\*). I can’t go any further off here than you can.” He says, “Yeah, but you got his ear. Why don’t you tell him, we’ll give you the dough, and you go up there and buy some candy bars.” I says, “Well, that makes sense.” So the guy who was in charge, I told him about it, and he said that sounded alright. So I collected the money from the guys and go up there, and get any kind of candy bars they got, because during the war they didn’t have the regular stuff anyhow.

I walked into the station in Amarillo, Texas, 1946. I says, “Give me ten of those, and ten of those, and ten of those.” He didn’t say nothing. “What are you talking about?” “Hell,” I says, “I want to pay for them.” He says, “You can’t buy nothing in here. We don’t sell to no colored people.” That’s in a railroad station in Amarillo, Texas, in 1946. What the hell could I do? Nothing.

T: Uniform didn’t make any difference.

J: Hell, no! Had on my [Navy issue] dungarees, just like everybody else on there. Hell, everybody knew we were sailors. And they wouldn’t let us buy a candy bar.

T: How did that make you feel right then and there?

J: Pretty (\*\*). I thought, what the hell kind of a place is this? But anyhow, that's what happened. Well, we finally got to Oxnard, California, Port Hueneme is just outside of Oxnard. We all piled off that train, first officer came up and says, "Jim, call the muster." I thought, oh these folks, I hope we haven't lost any. So I got off there, and got up there, and the guys are lined up by twos alongside this train, over two hundred. I called the muster, and we didn't lose a man.

T: So nobody got off.

J: Nobody got off. So everybody was satisfied.

T: Did you finish your Navy career out there at Port Hueneme?

J: That's right, I stayed there until I finally got out. They shipped me down to Terminal Island, just outside of Long Beach, and that's where I just got out. I got out there, and I got transportation back to St. Paul. June of '46.

T: When you got back to St. Paul, then, in June of '46, how was it to see you family and kids again?

J: My family wasn't there. My wife had gone to stay with her sister, out in California. And she was going to West Virginia before she came home, so I got back home, and I was there by myself to get things rolling again.

T: And you started working right away again, at the Police Department?

J: Hell, I didn't have no money, so I went down right away. And of course I was looking for trouble, I walked in there to see a guy named Frank Schmidt, he was Assistant Chief at that time. "Hello, Jim, how you feeling?" "Fine." So we BSed a while, and he says, "I suppose you want to go back to work." And I says, "You're dang right, I ain't got any money." So he says okay. Finally I said to him, "I'd like to go back to my old crew." He said he was going to put me on days [shift], the old crew was going on midnights tomorrow night.

T: So you started back literally right away.

J: Right away.

T: Was it hard, Jim, readjusting to being a civilian?

J: Heck, no! *(laughs)*

T: Pretty happy to be out?

J: Hell, yes! That Navy wasn't my cup of tea!

T: It did provide you with the ability to call yourself a veteran, though, didn't it?

**(B, 334)**

J: Yes, it did. I was a full-fledged veteran.

T: How did that veteran status benefit you after the war?

J: Well, when I took [Police Department] examinations and (\*\*). You had to pass the test first. Then I got ahead of all non-veterans.

T: Because you could check the box that said veteran.

J: That's right. Veterans they gave, when I made sergeant, 140 guys took the test, and I ended up number five [on the list].

T: So you did well on the test anyway.

J: So they, I can show you where racism comes in. Guy named Bill Konapatry (sp?), he and I are good friends, yet he said to me, "Jim, I never realized how bad racism is among the men here. I was down taking a shower, and the guys were on the other side of the row of lockers, and they were talking. One guy said to the other, 'I guess you're on that sergeant's test. What number are you?'" They had a rule, they didn't skip anybody. Wherever you finished on the list, that's where you got hired. So the guy says, "I think I'm number ten." "Well, you don't have nothing to worry about, but you ain't going to get to be no sergeant." "What do you mean? Chief's talking about appointing nine or ten guys off that list." "Well, ain't that Griffin ahead of you? I think he's number five." The other guy says, "They'll never make a nigger the boss on this job." I never told that guy I knew that, because I had that pegged in the first place. I knew he was a racist guy. What made it different was that we had a union now... [Later], the head of the [Police Officer's] union said, "Well, men, everybody's in there. I guess everybody wants to know what's going to happen on that sergeant's examination. Well, I went in to see the Chief, and told him I know the men are going to want to know what's going to happen. He said, the top six veterans on that list will be appointed."

T: So being a veteran mattered.

J: Guy that was number one [on the list] never got promoted. He wasn't a veteran.

**(B, 374)**

T: Let me thank you for sharing your recollections, especially of boot camp and the segregated Navy.

J: You see, another thing is, coming from St. Paul, it was different from coming from where a lot of those other guys came from. Went I went to Cathedral School, there was only ten of black kids in the whole school. When I went to junior high school, I guess out of about 1200 kids there might have been fifty, and when I got to Central [High School], there were 2200 kids, and there was only of us [blacks] there. So naturally I had different ideas. I didn't get discriminated on the streetcars or the parks or the schools here, and these other guys, they had lived under segregation all their lives. Every day. So my ideas were different.

T: Yes, you mentioned that. That was something, it gave you a completely different perspective, too, didn't it?

J: Yes. I think, I had, so many white people don't understand, my perspective, from my background, was a thousand miles from a guy whose dad was a sharecropper in Alabama.

T: And so maybe they approached situations differently, you think?

J: I had been speaking up all my life, so this being down there [in the South] for a few weeks wasn't going to change. So I had a few conflicts, I had a few conflicts. I had a few conflicts with a few of those black guys, too. You know, that's another thing white people have a problem with. You're black and I'm black, they [whites] think we think alike. And that's the biggest lie ever told. You go your way, you make your decisions, and I go my way. Like I told that guy [at the mess hall, earlier], "Wait a minute. You're Irish, aren't you? You Irish all think alike?" He said no, and I said, "What the hell makes you think that we all do?"

*(interview continues briefly on unrelated subject)*

**END OF INTERVIEW**