

Interviewee: Reynold Dittrich

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 5 March 2002

Location: basement of the Dittrich home, St. Paul, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, August 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, December 2002

Reynold Dittrich was born 26 June 1925 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is a lifelong resident of the city. He attended vocational school until enlisting in the US Navy in June 1942; following Basic Training and electrician school at Farragut, Idaho, Reynold volunteered for the submarine service and in early 1943 was sent to New London, Connecticut, for training.

In mid-1943 Reynold was posted to the submarine base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where he served on a relief crew, overhauling and repairing submarines. Finally, in September 1944, he joined the crew of the sub USS *Aspro* (SS-309), a Balao class sub, as an electrician's mate, and completed three war patrols in the Pacific. During *Aspro's* seventh and final war patrol, which began 25 June 1945, she performed lifeguard duties, coming to the aid of pilots downed on missions over Japan. On 3 August, she came within several miles of the Japanese mainland to retrieve a downed American fighter pilot. Despite repeated Japanese air attacks, *Aspro's* crew succeeded in saving the pilot. In the interview below, Reynold talks about this rescue operation from his perspective, below deck.

Aspro's final war patrol ended on 13 August 1945, when she moored at Midway Island to commence a refit--it was here that news came of the Japanese capitulation. On 1 September *Aspro* departed Midway for San Francisco; she was placed out of commission in January 1946. Prior to this, in December 1945, Reynold Dittrich left the boat and joined the crew of the USS *Remora* (SS-487), a new Tench class sub, where he served until his discharge in July 1946.

After the Navy, Reynold returned to St. Paul, got married (wife Mabel, d. 1996), and worked as an electrician in the construction business; he worked 20 years at Kehne Electric and 14 years at Northern States Power (NSP), retiring in 1988. Reynold was a member of the American Legion, and devoted much time to the local branch of the Submarine Veterans of World War II. [<http://www.ussvi.org/>]

Reynold passed away on 8 October 2013.

Reynold Dittrich's service on *Aspro*:

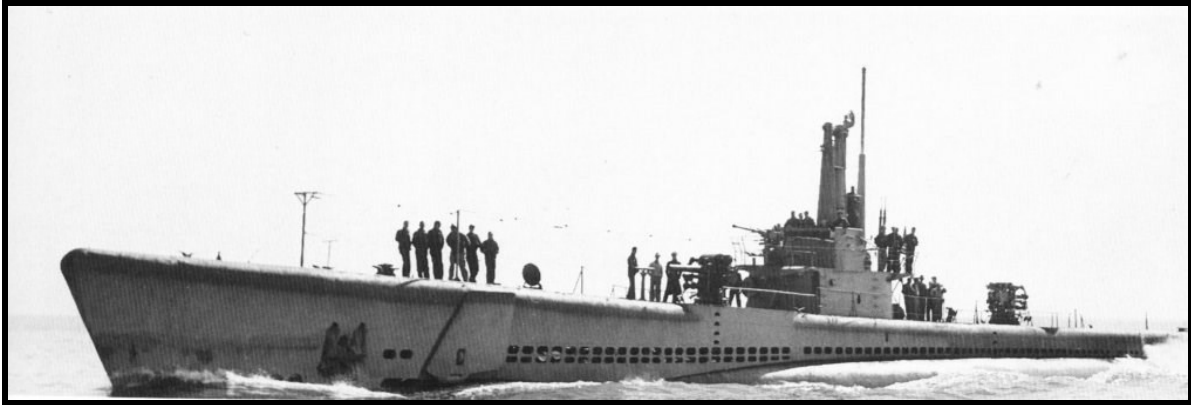
Aspro Fifth patrol: South China Sea, 10 Sep 44 – 14 Oct 44

Aspro Sixth patrol: South China Sea, 13 Dec 44 – 11 Feb 45

Aspro Seventh patrol: waters off Japan, 25 Jun – 13 Aug 45

Source: *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. IA, pp. 430-31.

Aspro (SS-309) was a Balao class submarine
Launched, 7 April 1943. Commissioned, 31 July 1943.



Aspro is shown on 24 May 1945 after a refit at Hunters Point (San Francisco Naval Shipyard), California.

Photo & text from U.S. Submarines Through 1945, An Illustrated Design History, by Norman Friedman (Naval Institute Press, 1995)



Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

R = Reynold Dittrich

[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: This is the 5th of March 2002. This is an interview for the Oral History Project of the World War II Years. My name is Thomas Saylor. This is our interview with Mr. Reynold Dittrich. Mr. Dittrich, first of all, I want to thank you very much for taking the time out of your day to have this conversation.

R: You're welcome.

T: From our conversation earlier [before taping] I understand that you're a life-long resident of St. Paul. Born and raised here.

R: Yes. I was born in 1925. Lived on Rice Street until the time I went in the military. I went to St. Bernard's Grade School and St. Paul Vocational for high school.

T: You finished that in 1942, right?

R: Right.

T: While you were at vocational school were you already thinking about joining the service when you were done?

R: Oh, yes. Everybody that was there was thinking about joining some part of the service.

T: Is that something that guys talked about amongst themselves?

R: I don't know. I wouldn't say that. The war was on. They knew eventually, one way or another, you were going to be involved in it.

T: Did you, when you thought about joining the service, was the thought in your mind of the Army or the Navy or what do I want to do or were you pretty convinced about the Navy?

R: I would definitely go in the Navy. My uncle served in World War I in the Navy. I made up my mind that I was going to go into the Navy.

T: Did you have classmates of yours that also joined the Navy?

R: Yes. One of my very best friends, he died last December. Him and I went to vocational school together. We joined the Navy together. Came home after the war. We were both electricians. Friends until he died last December.

T: You weren't drafted. You volunteered? You joined at seventeen which means your folks had to sign for you.

R: That's right.

T: What was your folk's response to your decision to join the Navy at seventeen?

R: They knew I wanted to go into the Navy. There was a war. One way or another you were going to go if you were physically able.

T: Did your folks sign without a problem then?

R: They didn't question it.

T: Did you have siblings, brothers or sisters?

R: I just had one brother. He was quite a bit younger than me. He wound up serving in the Korean War.

T: So he wasn't of age during World War II? For Basic Training, where were you sent?

R: The Naval Training Station in Farragut, Idaho.

T: Was that a new part of the country for you?

R: Oh, yes. Every place was new in those days. Nobody went very far before World War II.

T: What did you think about the Idaho area, at least the part of it you could see from the military Basic Training facility?

R: Really nice. Really pretty area with the mountains. This huge lake.

T: You took the train out there with other recruits?

R: Yes.

T: Do you remember that train ride across the Dakotas?

R: Vividly. We had railroad cars that had a sign on the back that said "Do not shoot buffalo from the back of this car." *(laughs)* The windows were loose. The dirt. I

don't know where they found those old cars. I thought they burned them all. That was an experience, just that ride out there.

T: What was going through your mind on the way out there?

R: I really don't think there was anything special. Wondering what was going to happen next.

T: Do you recall yourself being nervous or excited about what was coming?

R: I don't think I was ever nervous. I was just curious. What's going to happen to me when I get there?

T: How would you describe your Basic Training experience?

R: They would get you up every morning, bright and early. Exercises before breakfast. Then training, obstacle courses. They kept you so busy you just never had any time for yourself, that's for sure.

T: Were there guys that couldn't keep up the pace in Basic Training?

R: I don't know. You lost a few guys that would get sick. That's about all that I can remember. One of the guys that I went with that is also an electrician here in town, Tom Smalley, he got sick. He was with us. He got sick and then we never saw him again. We just kept moving ahead in the program and by the time he got out of the hospital he couldn't catch up with us. I never saw him again until I came home.

T: And you had a few that joined...

R: Yes, they just pushed them into a different company after he got out of the hospital.

T: Was this your first time away from home?

R: Definitely.

T: How was it being away from home for such a long period of time a long ways away?

R: I guess I don't have an answer for that. You just do what you have to do.

T: Do you recall a positive memory or a humorous anecdote from Basic Training?

R: No, I don't think I ever saw anything that was humorous. (laughs)

T: Something that sticks in your mind, an incident that summarizes what it was all about?

R: We went to swimming class, you know. They wanted everybody to be able to swim somewhat. They were pretty careful. We had these guys from Nebraska. The only water they ever saw was what they drank. We were standing by the pool and one of the guys shoved me in the pool. The instructors were all excited until they saw me swimming away.

T: You could already swim?

R: Oh, yes. I could swim when I was five years old I think.

T: How did they teach these guys to swim?

(1, A, 118)

R: They never really did. No. They never really did. They'd get them out there but these guys were petrified.

T: Did they get regular lessons?

R: They had a program set up but there wasn't enough time to even teach them to swim.

T: Did you get the impression in Basic Training that they were really pushing people through as fast as they could?

R: Oh, yes. There was no letup. Every day out there. Keep moving forward.

T: How long did your Basic Training last?

R: If I remember right it was only six weeks was all there was.

T: They were pushing guys through in a hurry.

R: Before the war it was three months.

T: They cut it in half.

R: They cut it in half, right.

T: You stayed at Farragut for your school, right.

R: Yes. I stayed there to go to electrical school in Farragut. They had a service school area for the different trades there.

T: That was a big base up there, wasn't it?

R: It was huge. And there's nothing left there today but a monument.

T: Really? The whole place is closed up and gone?

R: It's gone. Every single thing is gone. One of our members has been out there. All there is, is this monument telling you what was there.

T: No buildings left or anything?

R: No buildings at all. It's a state park. They turned it into a state park.

T: Your electrician school was there then. Did you select what you wanted to learn or did the Navy kind of help you pick that?

R: Well, they ask you. Like I said I had gone to vocational school so I asked to go into the electrical part. I was lucky they let me go through.

T: How long was electrician's school? About the same?

R: I think it was the same or maybe it was eight weeks. It was six or eight weeks.

T: So you spent a number of months up there.

R: Oh, yes. I went up there in the summer and left there in the winter. It was wintertime by the time I left.

T: When you were up there did you get weekend passes or evenings off, anything?

R: In boot camp you didn't get anything until they were right near the end. Then you got a weekend, a Saturday or Sunday off. In service school you had off every Saturday.

T: Was there a local town to go to?

R: There was Coeur d'Alene. There's Sand Point. And Spokane. We went there once. We went there by train. We took a train over to Spokane.

(1, A, 160)

T: It wasn't too far though.

R: No. It think it was forty miles, thirty, forty miles.

T: Okay. Because Idaho sticks up there.

R: That's where this is. It's up in the very narrow portion of Idaho.

T: So you've got Montana on one side and Washington on the other side. When was it that you began to think about joining the sub service?

R: Like I told you before, when I was in electrical school, one of the instructors was an ex-submarine serviceman. He was promoting the sub service. So I thought that was a good idea.

T: Did you have to sign up for it while you were in service school? I mean, kind of make a decision about going?

R: Yes. You had to ask to go there.

T: So by the time you finished service school did you know you were going to New London, Connecticut then?

R: Oh, yes. The minute they told you that you were accepted you knew you were going to New London.

T: So you took the train from Idaho straight to New London. Did you get a chance to stop in St. Paul at all?

R: Went right down here on this set of tracks behind my house here. NSP [Northern States Power] used to have a big sign on their building. I remember seeing that going by at night when we went through town. That was it.

T: Did you feel a little frustrated that you couldn't stop in St. Paul on the way?

R: I don't think so. It was no pleasure cruise.

T: The train ride you mean?

R: Right. Oh, this train was much better than the first one.

T: You see, I think there's something to the Navy here. There's old subs and those old cars. Then they give you something halfway good and you think you've got luxury.

R: Yes. *(laughs)* This was a regular passenger train that we went to New London with. There were only twelve of us. So we had a Pullman car. All I can say it was lot better than the one we rode out on.

T: Do you remember how you felt about going to New London? Were you convinced that you'd made the right decision?

R: Oh, yes. I'm sure I had no qualms about it. I was glad to be there.

T: When you got to New London, sub school was approximately twelve weeks?

R: I'm pretty sure it was twelve weeks. There were two six-week increments. Two different parts.

T: And all the people there, of course, were people who had volunteered to join the sub service. What was that experience like up there at sub school?

R: The first thing they did with you was they put you in the pressure tank to see if you could take pressure at a hundred feet. A lot of guys failed that right there. They couldn't get by that.

T: Is it a tank that goes under water?

R: Just a big cylinder sitting right on the ground. You sit on a bench in there and they put fifty-some pounds of air pressure on you. They need to see if you can breathe properly. Most of these guys had trouble with their sinuses and stuff like that. They couldn't handle that pressure.

T: And what happens if you can't handle that pressure? Is there a physical response?

R: It's painful. So they want out. So then they let the air down and let them out and then they start all over again.

T: With people like you who are still in the tank.

R: Still in there. Sometimes it was three times before they finally got them all out of there.

T: How many guys were in the tank when you started? When the thing was turned on the first time?

R: I'm not sure. There was a bench on each side. There must have been five or six guys on each side. Maybe ten or twelve guys in there.

T: How many made it to the very end?

R: I don't remember that either. But some guys didn't make it.

T: What kind of sensation do you feel in a tank like this? You made it through but you must have felt something.

R: For one thing the heat gets terrific. It's just so hot in there the water's just pouring off of you. And, like I say, if you're lucky like me, the pressure didn't bother you. Other than sweating so bad. It's a physical thing. Whether you're breathing through your nose and your mouth and keep the pressure equal on both sides of your ears.

T: It either affects you or it doesn't?

R: Right.

T: You can't prepare yourself for it?

R: No, you can't. There's nothing you can do about it.

T: Now, those guys who didn't pass that test were sent to the surface Navy then?

R: Yes, that's a common joke. Like when my shipmates and I when we meet at the national convention. They always say we were the cream of the crop. I said, "You guys got this wrong. Between the pressure tank and the psychologist, when he got done with you, the ones he sent away, they went to the surface craft. They were the good guys. They kept the cuckoos."

T: So you had to see a psychologist too, right off the bat?

R: After you passed the tank, then you went through a psychology test.

T: What was that all about?

R: To see what you were. You had a written exam and then an oral exam.

T: What was that oral exam like?

R: Ever been to a psychiatrist? They ask you all kinds of weird questions. Like, do you like girls? And things like that. That was really different.

T: Was it one on one thing? Him talking to you?

R: Yes. Just one on one.

T: Do you remember that conversation with that guy?

R: Other than him asking me if I liked girls is about it. *(laughs)* I asked him, "How about you?" I guess maybe that's what got me signed on, when I asked him if he liked them or not.

T: So if one passed the pressure tank and the psychological test then it...

R: Then they finally put you in school. You couldn't get by them. There was no sense sending you to school if you couldn't do it.

T: If you can't take the pressure there's no reason...

R: No.

T: What kind of things... you had regular classes?

R: Oh, yes. Studying the submarine, how it was built. All the different compartments and all the different systems.

T: So the guys on the boat had to understand how the boat worked.

R: The idea that everybody was supposed to be able everybody else's job under emergencies and stuff.

T: Was that different than the surface Navy?

R: Yes. Very much so.

T: They didn't learn different tasks or things like that?

R: No, they were usually assigned to a division and they stayed there, whatever the division was. The deck force or the engine rooms or electrical group or whatever. They just stayed there.

T: And if you're one of seventy guys on a boat you have to be able to do more than one thing.

R: Yes.

T: Was the classroom stuff interspersed with time in a boat out at sea?

R: Yes. I don't remember how often we went to sea whether it was every week. I don't remember. We went to sea as part of the training to see how you actually operated a submarine.

T: Do you remember the first time you were actually on a submarine that went to sea?

R: Vaguely. We went out on one of the oldest submarines they had. An old O boat. It was built before World War I, I guess. They had had these put away and preserved them all these years and they were using them as training ships.

T: Did that give you an indication that you were still convinced that it was the right thing to do, joining the sub service?

R: Well, hopefully we weren't going to be on one of them O boats. We knew that. We weren't going to be on one of them. They were never going to leave there.

T: They were okay for training purposes.

R: They finally phased them out, too. There was only a couple left I think when I left there. They were bringing back some of the boats from the Pacific already that were old boats. Not as old as the O boats but they were old in the sense of making war patrols.

T: Still an upgrade.

R: Yes.

T: How many guys were at this sub school? Was it a big compound? A big place?

R: I don't remember how many people were there. The submarine base itself is there also. The regular submarine base is down on the (***) River and the school sits up on top of the hill. To be honest with you I don't know how many people were there at one time. Quite a few.

T: Guys basically doing the same kind school as you?

R: Right. They were graduating every week. Every week somebody'd be leaving and another group would start.

T: So they were clearly upgrading the sub service by getting more guys into it?

R: Right. They were building new submarines.

T: When you finished at New London in mid-1943, something like that, you went to Pearl Harbor to join a relief crew.

R: Right.

T: How did you get to Pearl? Was it on a sub?

R: No. I took the train from New London to Mare Island, California. We boarded a Dutch ship. We used friendly nation ships. She was a Dutch ship, the *Nordaam*. It was full of troops, full of Army people and Navy people. There were only seventeen of us that went.

T: As far as sub service guys.

R: Yes.

T: Service troops being transferred to Pearl Harbor, were they then sent to different places from there?

R: Through the Pacific, right.

T: This was a merchant ship?

R: Right. It's a regular merchant ship they converted to a troop transport.

T: Were the conditions on board that ship pretty good that you recall?

R: Not really. (laughs) The bunks were five high. I don't know how many guys would be in one of those holds. They only fed you twice a day. There was no breakfast. There was a brunch about ten and there was a full meal in the evening. There was plenty to eat. But it was not a pleasure cruise, that's for sure.

T: How long was that trip over there?

R: Six, seven days.

T: Convoy or just a single ship?

R: We were just all by ourselves. She was a fairly new ship. She could run. It was all by itself.

T: Were we not fearing Japanese submarines then in that...?

R: Evidently not with ships as fast as she was.

T: She could outrun a sub submerged for sure.

R: Oh, easily. They had zig-zag patterns. You could see her turning every once in a while. But she really moved along.

T: When you got to Pearl, you joined a relief crew. What kind of things does a relief crew do?

R: When a submarine comes in off a war patrol there's always things that need repair and cleaning. These relief crews did all of that. The crews came off completely and you took over the boat and cleaned it up and made the necessary repairs for it.

T: So they could go right back out again.

R: They'd go right back out again.

(1, A, 304)

R: They'd turn them around and in three weeks they'd be back out there.

T: Did you just kind of wait until someone told you you'd be joining a boat or could you get yourself to the front of the line?

R: They sent us over the side on this one boat in dry dock and scraped the paint off of her. By the time we got out of there we were so black. This buddy of mine and I, John Dahlbreis, said, "That's it! We're going to get out of here!" So we just went down along the docks and asked for any boat that would take us. And the Aspro took us.

T: So you really moved yourself out of this relief crew stuff.

R: Done with that scraping over the side.

T: Otherwise you could have been there even longer than that?

R: Yes. Some guys didn't care. They just stayed there, on relief crew.

T: So you could have stayed there for three, six, nine months?

R: I'm sure you could have, if you wanted to. Some of these guys had been out there. They didn't want to go back out.

T: So for them relief crew was quite okay?

R: Yes.

T: Did you, when you were on relief crew for those months, did you talk to the guys who came off the boats and kind of get a feeling for what it was like?

R: Yes. They were always telling the stories about where they were and what happened. So you got an idea of what was going on out there.

T: What was it like to listen to guys telling their stories. Did it make you excited, or nervous or worried?

R: No. I just listened to their stories.

T: You told me you got *Aspro* to take you by walking up and asking.

R: I went to the engineering officer and asked him.

T: You asked him if he needed an electrician?

R: Two of us. My buddy, John, was with me. They took both of us.

T: How do you just sort of walk up and say, "Excuse me. My name is Reynold Dittrich."

R: He was Lieutenant Joe Adams. He was one great guy. We asked to talk to the engineering officer and he talked to us and said okay.

T: You knew then that when it went out to sea you would be on it.

R: Yes.

T: How did that change the way you approached the war once you learned that this was real now?

R: I guess I don't know how to answer that question. I don't know if you're nervous or what you are, but you're going to sea. That's for sure.

T: That's what you were trained to do.

R: That's what we were trained to do. We went through the school and worked on the boats. We were going to go out to sea on one.

T: When was *Aspro* built?

R: 1943. She was fairly new.

T: Had a crew of about seventy I think you said.

R: Approximately seventy, a little over seventy. It varied. But it was always around seventy.

T: Did you collect your gear and move onto the boat then?

R: What they let you have, yes.

T: Which was what?

R: Like when I got there I carried this hammock and mattress and seabag all the way from New London, Connecticut. When I went aboard the *Aspro* the chief of the boat who I showed you the picture of, George Murphy, said, "Get rid of that junk. We ain't got no room for that stuff." You just take your underwear and your blues and a set of whites, and get rid of the rest of it.

T: Could you take personal things on board the boat, too? Books or diaries or pictures?

R: You could have a picture album, which I didn't have right away but I did have later. You could have that if you could find a place for it.

T: On a boat that, by your own admission was not very big, what was your personal space like?

R: I was really pretty lucky. I slept in the after torpedo room. There was more room back there than up in the after battery room, where thirty-six guys slept. In the aft torpedo room there were only fifteen of us. And we were spread out, because the bunks were fastened to the torpedo skids. It was pretty nice back there.

T: Was there a bunk that was only yours?

R: Yes.

T: How did you manage your own personal space on the boat? How did you arrange what you had and take care of that space?

R: You didn't have any space. You had this bunk that slid underneath the torpedo. You just pulled it out when you went to bed. You put your blues and your whites underneath your mattress, and kept them pressed that way. You had a locker about fifteen or eighteen inches square. That held everything else you owned. You kept your underwear. You could wear dungarees, they call them jeans nowadays, and some shirts. There was no more room for anything else. That's it.

T: That isn't very much.

R: No, it isn't.

T: Do you remember when you first went to sea with *Aspro*?

R: Yes, I guess I do.

T: How would you describe actually being on a patrol, on a boat that was going to join the war?

R: I don't know if I can describe it. You're busy. You're standing watches four on and eight off. You have a job to do between there. Things have to be done. So you're just so busy you don't have time to think about where you're going.

T: What, as an electrician's mate, what specifically was your job?

R: In the beginning they called you an auxiliary electrician and you roamed through the ship to check motors to see if they're getting too warm and you constantly check the batteries, the specific gravity on the batteries. You had to check them constantly. Like I said, you just constantly roamed through the ship looking for trouble to see if anything wasn't running right.

T: Was there a person who was your direct superior?

R: The chief electrician's mate. He was over all the electricians. There were three electricians on each watch. There were nine of us, and the chief was ten.

T: Did he pretty much assign things for you to do or did you have your own initiative, "I need to take care of these"?

R: He had a work program. What you're to check when you're going through the ship. The other two electricians were on the propulsion board in the back that actually drove the submarine.

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

T: Did you have free time on the ship when you were not working?

R: Oh, yes. You always had a little time of your own. You'd sit in the mess hall and play cards, mostly playing cards and reading. We had some books along. Just general purpose reading.

T: Did guys kind of hang out with the same people when you were off duty? I mean, did you find friends that you liked to hang out with?

R: There were three watch sections, and you stayed with the people in your watch section.

T: They were all on or off duty at the same time.

R: You met the other guys too, I mean, but you actually spent more time with one-third of the crew.

T: Were people always sleeping on board the boat?

R: Sure, men were sleeping round the clock. It never stops.

T: Is it hard to sleep when there are things going on literally right next to you?

R: It's funny. We were electricians; we were always involved with the engines and the generators and the motors. They used to say, "Watch the electrician when he's sleeping, when the boat changes speed he'll move in his bunk; when an engine starts or an engine stops." Well, it's true. We lived by those engines running, you know.

T: So you get used to sleeping with things going on?

R: There was always noise. You couldn't get away from that. But I was very lucky. I just lay down and go to sleep.

T: What was the food like on board the boat?

R: Good. It was always good. We had two cooks and one baker. Cooks worked a full day every other day and the baker worked every night. He didn't work as long, but he worked at night.

T: So you baked your own bread and stuff on board?

R: Yes. He made all the bread and all the rolls. He was one of my best friends. He lives in Tampa. We visit him in the wintertime. Dick Moll. He was a good baker. Whew!

T: So you had no complaints about the food on board the boat?

R: No, the food was great.

T: How many meals a day were there?

R: Three meals. Three watches. The cooks put out a lot of food, boy. They did a lot of work in one day.

T: The cook basically needed the next day off because...

R: He was up early in the morning to start the first breakfast and it just continued from there.

T: Just making meals all the time because there were three watches.

R: Yes. And the baker. As soon as they got the kitchen cleaned up, the galley cleaned up after the last meal, then he came to work and he started baking. The kitchen was being used all the time. There was somebody always in there.

(2, A, 50)

T: Were there personality conflicts on board the sub?

R: Not very many, if any. That was part of the screening process. All the guys were supposed to be basically the same temperament.

T: They didn't want hotheads, in other words?

R: No, no. I've seen a couple of guys arguing about something, but basically they're all the same. Well, you had to get along with each other. You didn't have any privacy of any kind.

T: You didn't. Speaking of privacy, what about things like bathing and going to the bathroom on board a boat?

R: There was what they called the head. There were two showers in there. There were two stools and two basins. You could take a shower every week if you wanted to. Water was always a problem. We had to make all our own water. Doing it by using distillers. Boil it off and then condense it. So then the water was so pure, then your teeth went to pot.

T: So was there a limited amount of drinking water every day, too?

R: No, you could always have a drink of water. But bathing was a shower once a week.

T: That was the luxury, once a week?

R: Whether you needed it or not.

T: That's right. And the two heads on board the boats, did those empty at night then when you surfaced?

R: Usually. All of this flowed into what they called a sanitary tank. Then we'd blow that tank at sea at night after we came to the surface.

T: And there were two heads for the boat.

R: We had a single head in the maneuvering room in the back, and also we also had one in the forward torpedo room for the officers. Those were individuals. Those blew directly to sea. They didn't have a sanitary tank.

T: Do you remember the first time you actually had a situation where you were in action against an enemy vessel?

R: I remember the attacks were made. Everybody moved to their battle stations and the captain and his officers did all the plotting. They didn't do the firing but they called for the firing, you know, the torpedoes.

(2, A, 108)

T: Was there a case, or more than one, where the boat was forced to dive because a destroyer or another ship was coming back at you or after you?

R: Oh, yes. That was normal. After you fired then they all start running around up there trying to find you.

T: Do you remember the first time that you were actually depth charged on board the boat?

R: Sure.

T: Can you say a little bit about that?

R: I don't know what to say. It's noisy.

T: Was it a merchant ship that your boat had fired on?

R: In a convoy. Destroyers and patrol craft came after looking for you. They're hunting for you. They use the track of the torpedo usually, to try and figure out pretty close to where you are.

T: So your boat dives and do you just sort of wait then?

R: Well, sometimes you are firing submerged. You're not on the surface.

T: But you're down lower than torpedo depth to try to elude destroyers.

R: Oh, after we fire then we'd go deeper. You'd be at sixty-five feet when you fired. That's normal with periscope depth. And then after you fired, then you went lower.

T: When the destroyers or patrol craft came over or near your boat were you waiting for certain sounds or certain things to happen, or was it just hoping nothing would happen?

R: The soundman would be trying to report what he could hear. What was coming from what direction. And he'd relay that and they'd try maneuvering away from them.

T: When your boat got depth charged, could you describe that experience?

R: Like I say, it was just noisy.

T: So you can hear the depth charges exploding outside?

R: Oh, definitely. Oh, yes.

T: Can you describe the noise of what you actually hear or experience in the boat when depth charges go off?

R: Other than just the noise, well, boat always shakes. Depending upon how close they are.

(2, A, 145)

T: What went through your mind when you hear these depth charges or you can feel them exploding?

R: I guess I don't have an answer for that. I don't know what I felt.

T: Did it help to kind of focus on the job you were doing at the time?

R: I guess that's probably it. Everybody was busy trying to do something. Make sure everything was working right. So you didn't have time to sit and think about what was coming next.

T: Maybe that was for the best.

R: That's right. That's exactly what it is. Right.

T: Did some guys respond better to that kind of pressure than other guys?

R: Not in the boat I was on. I mean, I think everybody was just in the same boat. I can't say that I saw anybody different than anybody else.

T: How long typically would a depth charge attack last? An hour, twelve hours?

R: Really I think it depended on how many patrol craft they had. They wanted to keep that convoy moving, too. They'd keep pushing to keep moving and they'd assign a couple of them to chase you. So the time varied really. Sometimes, man, they'd only drop one raft of depth charges and that would be it. Then they'd take off.

Then later, another time, we were out there, they kept us down for eight hours. That's the longest time I was ever kept down, eight hours.

T: How does the mood change or the stress level change as the hours go by?

R: I don't know how to describe that either. You just survive, that's all.

T: Did you remember becoming more tense, or nervous?

R: No, I guess I can't say that it made that much difference.

T: You mentioned a couple of friends that you had on board the boat. Did you make really close friends that you kept after the war?

R: Still do. When my wife was alive we had a trailer. We went to Florida. Dick lives in Tampa and Cliff lives in Port Charlotte and Joel lives in Venice and Jack lives in Jacksonville. We all served together. We'd always get together in the wintertime.

T: Why did you stay in contact after the war?

R: I guess I can't answer that. You were very close friends. Maybe this action that you went through or something bonded you together. And we meet each year at the national convention, too.

T: These are friends for life that you made on board the boat?

R: Yes.

T: You have attended national conventions or boat reunions since the war?

R: Oh, yes. Haven't missed once since 1985.

T: It's pretty important to you then?

R: Oh, yes. To see these guys.

T: At the national convention you see guys from other boats, too, obviously.

R: They're there from the whole submarine service.

T: What's important for you about those national meetings?

R: Just to see those guys after all these years. Just kind of amazing that we're all still around.

(2, A, 202)

T: Yes, because it's fifty-seven years since the war now. When you were on board the boat, how did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home?

R: Just mail. That's all there was. Regular mail.

T: Did you get regular mail deliveries?

R: No! Got no mail deliveries. When you left port you never got another thing until til you came back.

T: They just collected your stuff then for you?

R: There's a big package for you when you got back.

T: When you got back from your first patrol was there mail waiting for you?

R: Oh, sure.

T: Were you one of the guys who read all the letters right away or did you kind of read them a little bit at a time? Sort of spread them out?

R: I don't think I read them all at one time. I know I didn't do that. Just go by the date on them. Read them by the date what was happening back home.

T: Was that important to you? To get mail?

R: Sure. Hear what my folks were doing. My family.

T: Were you a good letter writer yourself, too?

R: Well, I guess I always corresponded with them. You wrote letters while you were at sea. The same thing. You had boxes of mail and got them by the bunch.

T: Did you write things down for yourself when you were out at sea?

R: No, never kept a diary. Nothing. Not very many that I knew did.

T: About photographs. Did you have a camera when you...

R: I didn't have a camera, but I have a photo album with pictures in it from other guys that had cameras.

T: How important was getting mail to the sailors away from home?

R: We were glad to get it. To see what's happening back where you came from.

T: How about getting news? Were you able to keep track with news of the war or news back home in any way?

R: No. When you were out there you listened to them talking. Listened to Tokyo Rose. At night you picked that up all the time. They'd play music for you. For the guys from Minnesota and Wisconsin she'd play "Whoopie John". Oh, man. They knew you were out there. They'd call your boat out by name. She'd say, "Members of the *Aspro* crew..." We didn't really like that very much. (*chuckles*) They had some good intelligence, I guess. We heard that they were winning the war, and we should give up. Just give up. They'd relay messages, too, news from back in the States. It was just a joke, especially the one time she said they had sunk us. We were still listening to her. (*laughs*)

T: You made three patrols all together with *Aspro*. After your first patrol you got back to Pearl...

R: Back to Midway.

T: Did you make any trips back to Pearl after patrols?

R: We came back to the States for an overhaul in between there. We came back to Hunters Point, California, for an overhaul.

T: That was in 1945.

R: Yes. That was in the beginning of '45, and then we went out and made the last patrol. We ended the last patrol the night the war was over. We were in Midway.

T: After your first patrol when you came back to Midway, what transpired then? You were there for a couple weeks?

R: You had two weeks off.

T: What do you do with two weeks off at Midway?

R: Drink beer. Go swimming. Play some baseball, softball, whatever. There ain't much to do on Midway.

T: That's why I asked you. It's pretty small, isn't it?

R: Oh, man. (*laughs*)

T: Was there a separate sub facility or sub base there?

R: Oh, yes. We had a tender in there plus there was a regular land base also.

T: So the boat was overhauled by a relief crew?

R: Another relief crew. There's two. There was always one on the tender and there's another one on the beach. It depends on who you got assigned to, though.

T: So when you came in there you guys got off immediately and the relief crew went to work?

R: Yes. Took her in hand and fixed her up.

T: Did you take new men on at Midway?

R: Always. Always changed people. Never stopped changing people.

T: Is that guys who wanted off or people that the captain wanted off?

R: Well, the officers, some of them just had too much time. They got them off. They had a rotation plan really worked out.

T: Was your second patrol pretty similar to your first one?

R: Yes. It was back up by Formosa.

T: Basically looking for merchant ships?

R: Yes.

T: Were you part of a group of subs, or were you basically sent out by yourself?

R: No, we were always by ourselves. We never were involved in one of those wolf packs. They had it laid out in grids out there. And you stayed within your own grid.

T: And you looked for whatever came by?

R: Right. They were sending you information all the time anyway. Our intelligence was telling us where these convoys were coming from or going to or whatever.

T: Were you, as the crew, were you kept aware of what was going on? Where you were going and what you were looking for?

R: All you had to do is stand in the control room at night. You knew where you were. The executive officer would be plotting where we were, and they'd have the map laid out, so you knew exactly where you were.

T: Your first two patrols were pretty similar as far as what you saw and what transpired on the patrols?

R: Yes. That's the first time we picked up pilots, too, on the second patrol. We were attacking Formosa and getting shot down and we picked up three pilots coming out of there. These were fighter crews. Fighter pilots.

T: Can you describe the first time, or one of the times when that happened? How do you do something like that?

R: I was an electrician, so I never was on deck. I was never a part of picking them up. But I knew what was going on. You'd be looking for these people. They had other aircraft in the air telling you where they were. They'd tell you what coordinates. Where they were. You'd go over and look for them.

Usually we were running on the surface, looking for them. You're going too slow submerged. You run on the surface and look in the vicinity where they are until you find them.

T: Were these guys wounded generally?

R: None of them that we had were wounded. Some of them were banged up a little bit, but they were not wounded.

T: Now when you take them on board your boat you're in the middle of a patrol. They stay with you until you go back to port?

R: Those guys on that second patrol, we just offloaded them to another submarine that was going home. They came by at night and we transferred them to another boat and they left and went home. But the last ones we picked up at the end of the war there we brought them right back with us.

T: You must have found a way to make space for these guys on board the boat.

R: That didn't concern us enlisted men. These were all officers. All pilots are officers, so they are treated as officers.

T: You had an overhaul after your second patrol back at Mare Island [California]. Did you spend a longer period of time in the States then before you went back out?

R: We were here sixty days. Everybody got thirty days leave. Got to go home.

T: Did you come back to St. Paul then?

R: Oh, yes.

T: What was that like, seeing your folks and your neighborhood again?

R: Great. It was really great. I got home.

T: What do you talk about when you come home like that? I mean, you could probably talk for months and months and months about what you've been doing.

R: No, you don't. They tell you, "Don't talk to nobody." You're not supposed to talk about it.

T: They knew what boat you were on though, right?

R: Oh, yes. Well, they had my address. Your boat's name is right in the address.

T: So what kind of stuff were you not supposed to talk about with your folks?

R: None of our operations. Like where we were. They knew I had been to sea, because they didn't get any mail.

T: But they couldn't know where you'd been or what kind of things you had done?

R: No. Even your letters were censored so you wouldn't tell anybody where you were.

T: When you wrote letters did you sort of censor yourself?

R: You might as well, because they're going to cut it out anyway. You just tell them, "I'm fine. Eating regularly." That's about it.

T: Was your incoming mail censored?

(2, A, 320)

R: No.

T: In those kinds of letter you got whatever they wrote to you.

R: Yes. Whatever your folks wrote to you.

T: When you left Mare Island, it was the third patrol, and by this time it was mid-1945.

R: It was the spring of '45 when we went back out there. This time we went up to Japan. By that time the Japanese Navy was pretty near nothing. We were primarily up there that last run to pick up American pilots that were shot down [over or near Japan], because they were bombing Japan just day and night.

As far as the boat was concerned, nothing changed. We were fully armed. It's just that... we got one small ship up there, is all we got. But the rest of the time was chasing around picking up these pilots. We picked up a total of seven.

T: One of the times you picked up a pilot, the last one, was near Tokyo Bay, right?

R: It was early August [1945]. It was in the outer bay of Tokyo Bay. About two miles from shore. They just said we were going in to get this guy. He was in a boat that they had dropped to him from an American sea-rescue plane. It was no little boat, it was seventeen, eighteen feet long. Had a sail, and a motor. The B-17s were rigged to drop these to these people if they were a long ways away from any other help. They'd go in and drop a boat to them. He could have been further down the bay or something, and it would take hours maybe to get to him. Instead of leaving him in a life jacket or something, they'd drop him this boat.

We were running on the surface, and the fighter craft are supposed to protect us until they ran out of fuel. Then we were kind of on our own the last mile or two to get to him. The Japanese sent out a seaplane from shore, to get us. The guys on deck, they saw this plane take off from the shore. It was a seaplane. They saw it take off. Our gunners shot it down.

T: Was your boat shot at or bombed by this seaplane?

R: Yes. Not by the seaplane, by a different Japanese plane. We got bombed. The plane dropped one on each side of us. Just missed us.

T: As a guy below decks, is it frustrating to not be able to see what's going on or is it better not to see what's going on?

R: I never got up above. Electricians didn't go up above. I could hear a lot of it over the speaker system, though. I think you're better off not knowing what's going on up there. *(laughs)*

T: And that was the last action that your boat actually saw before the war ended.

R: Yes, that was it.

T: You spent V-J Day at Midway?

R: We were in Midway, yes. We got to Midway the night before the war ended.

T: Where were you when President Roosevelt died in April of 1945?

R: We were on our way back out. After the overhaul. From Hunter's Point, which is in San Francisco.

T: How did you and those on board the boat react when you heard the news that the president had died?

R: I guess it was no surprise. There was word around that he was sick. I don't think it was really any big surprise to anybody that he died.

T: What was the emotional reaction? Were people kind of upset about that or it didn't really matter?

R: There's Vice President Truman there to step in. Chain of command is going to go on.

T: Did you feel an impact of the war ending in Europe when you heard that the Germans surrendered in May of 1945?

R: No. The war in Europe never did seem to concern any of us. We had no part in it whatsoever.

T: So in a sense the war against the Japanese was the focus because that's what you were in.

R: Right. The whole Pacific. That's all it was about. We had no ties to Europe whatsoever.

T: What about the end of the war in the Pacific?

R: We ended the last patrol the night the war was over. We were in Midway.

T: At Midway, when you got the news about the Japanese surrender, how did people on the boat react?

R: *(laughs)* Everybody got drunk.

T: Would you describe that feeling as one of relief for yourself?

R: I'm sure. Everybody was bound to be relieved. We were done. There was no more shooting.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 379.

T: Was it about that time that you heard about the use of the atomic bomb?

R: We were at sea when the atomic bomb went off. Well, we didn't know then it was an atomic bomb. Just a huge... they bombed the city and then they turned right around and hit Nagasaki right three days after that.

T: At the time, when you heard about the destruction, did you feel that the US government was correct to use the atomic bomb?

R: We didn't know what atomic weapons were. We had no idea what was going on.

T: Since then, as we have become aware of what was used, how would you say your feelings have changed about that?

R: I hope they never have to use another one. We'll destroy the world if we do.

T: Mr. Dittrich, your enlistment was such that you stayed in the Navy when a lot of guys were already going home. How did that impact you, watching guys getting discharged, going back to their lives and you were still in the Navy?

R: It didn't bother me. I knew I had time to serve, and I was going to do it. That's all.

T: Did you like the Navy well enough to re-up when your four years were done?

R: I thought about it for a while, but then I decided I better come home and see what it was like, and I never went back.

T: Was it the right decision to get out?

R: Now I would say it was the right decision. I had a great life. A great family.

T: Did you second-guess yourself then, after you got out?

R: I suppose at times. I was a Second Class Electrician in the Navy. I had a pretty good life. I came home, and started right at the very bottom of the pile back here again. But that's life. Just go on.

T: It would be easy to second-guess when you realize what you gave up and what you came back to. Let me ask you how you spent the time between V-J Day and your discharge which was ten, eleven months.

R: We came back to the United States. A bunch of us came back to the United States and put the boats into mothballs, as they called it. I got transferred off the *Aspro* to the *Gar* and took the *Gar* and five other boats. We went around to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Those boats eventually became reserve-training boats at different cities around the country. The *Gar*, I believe, wound up in Cleveland, I think, as a training boat for ROTC people, that sort of thing.

And when we got off the *Gar* I got transferred to the *Remora*, which was a brand new submarine. It wasn't even in commission when I was first assigned to her. Put her in commission, and took her on a goodwill cruise through the Caribbean and back to New London. We became a school boat. She was still a school boat when I got discharged in July of 1946.

(2, B, 437)

T: *Remora* was one of those boats that was in production when the war suddenly ended?

R: Apparently two other boats were almost done, and so they decided to finish them and put them in commission.

T: It sounds like they weren't quite sure what to do with them anymore.

R: Well, they knew a lot of the old boats had to go. Some of them were beat up pretty bad. You have that much invested in them you can't just leave them.

T: You finished the war at New London?

R: Yes.

T: Discharged in July 1946, you said.

R: July of 1946.

T: What was your initial reaction to being out of the military, when you were discharged?

R: Once again, I don't know how to describe that. I was home.

T: Do you remember the very first thing you did when became a civilian? You were discharged in New London, were you?

R: No, I was discharged right here at the airport, in Minneapolis. There used to be a Naval Station out here. I could never figure that out, why I wasn't discharged in New London. I came home on a fancy train. I came there and spent one night there. I took the streetcar home the next morning.

(2, B, 469)

T: So were you able to go literally almost right home, from Minneapolis to St. Paul?

R: Just got on a streetcar and came on home.

T: Do you remember the very first thing you did as a civilian?

R: No. But it was good to be back home.

T: When the war was over, were you able to tell your folks some of the stuff that you weren't able to talk about when you were in the war?

R: Yes. Like picking up this pilot, I told them things like that.

T: What would you say was the hardest thing for you readjusting to being a civilian?

R: Once again I don't have an answer for that. I just went back to work.

T: Were you one of those guys that you'd say had an easy readjustment?

R: Oh, yes, definitely.

T: You were living at home with your folks at first?

R: Sure.

T: You had been away for four years. How were you a different person than the guy who walked away four years before?

R: I was a man by that time. I left when I was a boy. I was seventeen when I left.

T: If we had asked your folks, "What's different about Reynold since he came back?" what would they say, do you think?

R: My ma would probably say to get him to stop drinking.

T: Is that something you picked up in the service?

R: I guess so.

T: Was that a common thing for the guys when they were off duty?

R: Pretty much so. During the war anyway.

T: How about if I asked your dad? If I said, "How has Reynold changed since he went away to war?" what do you think he might have said?

R: My dad and I always got along well. He was a great guy. Of course, I also went from a hundred and fifty pounds to a hundred and seventy-five pounds.

T: So you looked physically different?

R: Yes. I was a hundred and fifty-three pounds officially when I went in the Navy. When I came home I weighed a hundred and seventy-five. I grew two inches. I was a full-grown man by the time I got home. I was twenty-one years old.

T: When you look back at the time, what do you think the war meant for you personally?

R: Like a lot of the guys say, I enjoyed it but I would never want to do it again. How's that?

T: Overall, would you say your time in the Navy was a positive experience for you?

R: Definitely.

T: If someone asked you in what ways was it positive, what kind of things would you say?

R: I think mostly meeting all these different people which you would have never met any other way, and the different lives they led. Where they came from, how times were. All of us were in tough times during the Depression. I was always amazed, I guess, by the southern guys. They had it even worse than the northern guys during the Depression. Made some great friends. Life-long friends.

T: When you reflect on it now, many, many years later, what's changed about the way you look at yourself and your war experience?

R: I don't know how to answer that question.

T: Would you say that you had a job to do, or was it more a moral crusade?

R: It was just, your country was at war. They expected every able-bodied man to come forth and do his job. That's all. No hero. No nothing. We'd used to kid around and say we were working for the government.

T: Last question. In what ways do you think the war changed your life?

R: It's like I say, I had a different outlook about a lot of different people. Before World War II nobody went very far, you know, and you didn't meet a lot of people. People lived in a small isolated area usually. This kind of broadened your look at life, all the different people you had met. Like I say, to me it was a great experience.

T: Do you think your life might have taken a different path if you hadn't joined the Navy and gone to war?

R: No. I was planning on joining the Navy anyway, war or no war.

T: So for you the war was just part of that Navy experience?

R: Yes. A buddy of mine, Hank, he and I both said, when we get out school we're going to join the Navy for four years.

T: We happened to be at war, but you joined anyway.

R: Yes.

T: Do you think your life after 1946 was different because of your military experience?

R: Not really. I got a job and I stayed with it. I was an electrician. I started in vocational school as an electrician, and I was an electrician in the Navy. By the time I retired I had forty-seven years in the trade. It was a good life.

T: I want to thank you very much for the interview, Mr. Dittrich. I learned a lot of interesting things from you.

END OF INTERVIEW