

**Interviewee: Reverend Bernt Opsal**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date: 22 May 2003**

**Location: living room of Opsal home, Richfield, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, June 2003**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, March 2004**

Bernt Opsal was born on 4 August 1919 in West Orange, New Jersey, to parents of Norwegian heritage. He graduated from Orange High School in 1937, and Upsala College in 1941, then moved in summer 1941 to St. Paul, Minnesota, in order to attend Luther Seminary. Bernt completed his studies in January 1945, was ordained a minister, and entered the US Navy as a chaplain.

US Navy Chaplain Corps School, twelve weeks long, was at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia. Following this training, Bernt was stationed at the Advanced Base Personnel Depot in San Bruno, California. His primary duty was to interview enlisted men seeking emergency leaves or discharges, and judge whether their cases warranted action or not. Bernt remained on this duty until after V-J Day in August 1945, at which time he was transferred to the USS *Burleigh* (APA-95), a troop transport ship. He made voyages to and from the Philippines through mid-1946, as the ship's chaplain; duties included services, Bible studies, and individual counseling. Bernt spent a brief time at the Brooklyn Navy Yard before being discharged from active duty in September 1946. He remained in the Reserves and was called up during the Korean Conflict (1952-53).

Following his World War II duty, Bernt got married (1946, wife Shirley), raised a family, and worked in Minnesota in various capacities in the ministry field. He remained active well into his eighties. At the time of this interview Bernt lived in Richfield, Minnesota. Reverend Opsal passed away in September 2004, aged 85.

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**B = Bernt Opsal**

**[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 May 22, 2003 and this is our interview with Bernt Opsal. First, Mr. Opsal, on the record, thanks very much for taking time on this rainy day to sit and have a conversation with me.

B: I'm honored to be selected to participate in this study.

T: Let me say so far I know that you were born in West Orange, New Jersey, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1919. Orange High School 1937 and Upsala College 1941. In 1941 you came to St. Paul, Minnesota, to attend Luther Seminary, and you attended Luther Seminary through January of 1945 at which time you entered the United States Navy as a chaplain. Your next stop was Chaplain School in early 1945.

B: *(nods yes)*

T: Let's back up. Let's go to the time when the United States entered World War II. You had just arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the fall of 1941 to attend Luther Seminary and it was on December 7 of 1941 that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the US became involved in the World War. Let me ask if you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

B: I was in the room in the dormitory, one of the dormitories at Luther Seminary, and they had a radio on and they had announced that President Roosevelt was going to give a speech and so we were all there anxiously waiting to hear his speech. We did. There were ten of us from that group that went down to Dr. Gorton's office. He was the president. The next day, Monday, we said to him, "We are able-bodied men and we're proud of being American citizens and part of our church. We'd like to serve. Serve our country and serve our church. What do you have to suggest to us?" So he said, "I'll call Washington." Which he did. And he reported back to us and said, "The word I've gotten is that you should stay here at the seminary as students. If the war is still on you come in as Navy chaplains."

T: When you're finished with your training at seminary, that is.

B: Yes.

T: Did it occur to you, Bernt, to leave seminary and simply enlist in the Armed Forces? You were twenty-two years old.

B: Of course we would probably go in as an officer. No, it never occurred to me. He said we could go in as chaplains. I felt called to the seminary as a student, and I felt I should go there and get my training.

T: At that time a lot of people, young men your age, were going into the service either being drafted or were enlisting. Now as a seminary student you were automatically deferred.

B: Right.

T: Did you, were you concerned that people might see you as someone who was not doing their duty because they weren't serving?

B: No. The congregation I came from was very patriotic, and they understood that if the government recognized the procedure, if you're going to be a pastor you should go to seminary, and now they're saying that if the war is still on you can become a chaplain. So I felt very comfortable in that.

T: So you felt that in a sense staying in seminary was something that was also a duty and that serving as a chaplain at the end of that would be a way of participating.

B: Right.

T: Now you were ordained before you left seminary. Is that correct?

B: What happened was that I went down to the Navy headquarters here in Minneapolis to find out the procedure, and they had me sign papers and so on. Then I said I wanted to become a chaplain. They worked together with their headquarters, their office, and I was called into the Navy by my church to be a Navy chaplain.

T: So you completed your studies at seminary, and there was a graduation and you were ordained at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis January 1945, at which time you were able to go into the Navy to accept this position as a chaplain.

B: There was one fellow in this picture that never showed up at the Chaplain School. But all the rest of us did.

T: So you thought he was going to but he never did.

B: I think he took a regular call [as a minister].

T: Which was also an option because he was still deferred, right?

B: Yes.

T: The first stage of your Navy career was Chaplain School. And according to the papers it was the US Navy Chaplain Corps School and this was at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, a twelve week orientation course. What kind of things did you learn in those twelve weeks? In other words, how does the Navy make someone into a chaplain?

B: To this day you have to just look and see (chuckles) I was going to ask you this morning if my shoes were polished because going through the Chaplain School you really... the head chaplain, Chaplain Rafferty, his goal was to produce chaplains that could work cooperatively and work in the machinery of the United States Navy. You should know all the ins and outs, all the protocols and all the regulations so that when a chaplain got out of the chaplain school, he was spick and span. To show you what he did: we went to bed at ten o'clock at night.

T: It sounds almost the way you're describing it, you had your theology when you come into this place.

B: Exactly.

T: So this was not a theological...

B: No. No theology at all. Strictly military.

T: Does this mean that the people, the other men who were there, were Catholics, Lutherans, and a broad range of beliefs?

B: Right. Jewish, too. They were all different beliefs.

T: So theology they expected you had in your suitcase when you came.

B: Right.

T: And their job was to see if you could fit into how the Navy operated.

B: Exactly.

T: So there was no attempt to smooth out religious beliefs. How did you get along with this broad diversity of men as far as religious beliefs?

B: I had no problem. They were in the same boat as I was.

T: All the chaplains were volunteers, right?

B: All volunteers.

T: Stick first to the time here at Chaplain School. How does one, in twelve weeks, how do you get to in a sense fit into the Navy? What kind of things did they do on a daily basis?

B: The first thing you went to a room. First lecture. By the captain. Swings up there with his four stripes. He said, "As far as I'm concerned, you're a bunch of fatheads and pipsqueaks here at this school. That's all you are. A bunch of fatheads and pipsqueaks!" He said, "Young man, why did you come in the Navy? Oh, I suppose your mother came to you and said, my son hasn't served in the service. Why aren't you in the service? So you came in. And you old man, white haired old man, why did you come in? Well, I suppose you couldn't make a living on the outside!" Well, this old man came in as a full lieutenant not as a JG [LT]G; lieutenant junior grade] because he was David Otis Fuller, published books and was a famous preacher in Detroit.

**(1, A, 162)**

T: He was a bit older then.

B: Yes. A bit older.

T: What was the age group here? When we think of recruits we think oftentimes of young men eighteen to twenty-two, but you're all a bit older here, aren't you?

B: Yes. Four years of college and then four years of seminary and some of them had gone to work.

T: So they had come out of congregations somewhere.

B: Yes.

T: So you were twenty-five by this time. How would you rate the age? Were you about the average age or were you younger or were you older than most?

B: I was about the average age, I think. I've got a picture I could show you.

T: So you've got people who are slightly older than average recruits who went into the service. You've all got college education and have been ordained, and in some cases people have congregation experience as well. What's the most important thing that you think you learned in the twelve weeks at Chaplain School?

B: Not that I didn't have it already, but you re-learned respect for the Navy. An officer was to be respected and he wasn't to play a role but he was an officer. In the Navy you found that enlisted men respected the officers and the officers respected the enlisted men.

T: So this respect for authority was important.

B: Yes.

T: When you arrived at Chaplain School in January 1945, you're twenty-five years old and you thought about what this was going to be like. How did you envision the chaplain experience when you arrived there at Chaplain School? What did you think this was this going to be like?

B: I didn't, I didn't envision anything. I was just going to take it as it comes. The adventure. You cooperate a hundred percent. When I came aboard there, I'll never forget. I went over to the dormitory where my bunk was...

T: This was a college. William and Mary.

B: Right. And many of the guys were saying... went into this room there... there were ten of us that went to college.

T: From Luther Seminary?

B: Yes.

T: So you knew some of these people when you arrived there.

B: Yes. And they were standing there tugging on a sheet on a double-decker bunk making sure that there was a corner and that the sheet where they flipped the quarter... they'd throw it up on it like a drum.

T: So it really had to bounce on the bed.

B: Yes. So I said, what are you guys doing? And in my mind I was thinking of this guy and that guy. Their rooms were just a mess. Never made their beds some of them. It was just awful.

T: So you knew though from college, from seminary days.

B: Yes. And I knew about what kind of rascals they were. But anyway, their wives, or prospective wives, never saw their rooms so they wouldn't know, but anyway...

T: Here's this immediate transition for these guys from living as they wanted as young bachelors to having to do things the Navy way.

**(1, A, 215)**

B: I said, "What are you guys doing?" They said, "You'll find out. You'll find out." And boy, what happened was that as an example, one of our fellows... Well, some of

these guys, their wives or sweethearts came to the college at the very end to say goodbye. Because they didn't go home first. They took off from William and Mary College to their assignment.

T: I see. So there was no time in the middle there.

B: No. One fellow had a problem. His room was inspected. White glove inspection. They'd come in, and the furniture, and your white glove, and looked on the floor to see that it was real clean...

T: This evokes images of Basic Training where you're really...

B: Absolutely. Absolutely. Basic Training for an officer. Then we had this one to get us in shape. Some of the guys in the class were kind of heavy. They had put on fat. Boy, there was no fat at the end of this twelve weeks.

T: So there was some physical training here.

B: Oh, yes. Running and all that. I played basketball on the side so I was in pretty good shape, but some of them were real fat.

T: Running can be a problem when you're dragging around extra weight.

B: I remember one guy going around that track. He was huffing and puffing.

T: You've described these as people who came out of civilian life in some cases. They're thirty, thirty-five years old. If you've led a sedentary lifestyle, then you're going to pay for that a little bit. What was the most difficult thing for you, do you think, in making this adjustment to Navy, to military life?

B: I think the chaplain school took away any difficulties. I mean, some of it was ridiculous. Some of the things they expected of you. But, of course, I think it was your attitude. If you had the right attitude there was no problem. I know aboard ship there was a guy, a dentist, he refused to buy black shoes. He wore brown shoes. When you left the ship you're supposed to go up and say goodbye to the captain. He didn't do that. He went into the boat that took you to the dock and made his sign from his nose with his fingers to the captain.

T: The raspberry.

B: Yes. Goodbye. He hated him so much.

T: So there were those who still had trouble adjusting even after...

B: Oh, yes. I don't think the chaplains were. He was a dentist. He wasn't in our group.

T: Among your group of people who started with you at William and Mary, were there some who didn't make it? Who either couldn't make it or decided this was not for them?

B: I don't think so. I think they all made it.

T: So it was a course that people began and got through.

B: Later on there was one of the guys in the class that had a breakdown.

T: During the training course or after?

B: It was after. In the parish. No. No. No. It was aboard ship and I heard that he had had a breakdown. He was assigned to a submarine and he was one of my classmates.

T: So a chaplain on a submarine.

**(1, A, 267)**

B: Yes. One submarine. He was chaplain for a squadron. The officers aboard didn't know how to treat a chaplain. You see, they were out there, officers aboard ships who didn't think of anything else and so they... Like I came aboard one ship. They said, "Chaplain, oh no we get a chaplain. The ship over here has two scuttlebutts, two fountains. We can train you for a fountain." But he wore brown shoes...

T: This is the one with the submarine?

B: No. The one with the submarines... no.

T: Stick with the guy with the submarines. What happened to him?

B: He asked for a private room.

T: On board the sub.

B: On board the sub. So he came aboard and [asked if] he could have some privacy. They said sure, we'll do that. And it was a big joke. So the next day he came. There was a picture of Marilyn Monroe naked on a red carpet that was very famous out there at that time. He went and reported it to the superior officer. He said, "You know, I appreciate art, but that isn't the place. This is where I counsel men and it's very distracting."

T: When did this take place, this incident?



B: I think it was one of my Manila trips.

T So this is a fellow during the period that we're looking at here during the war period who had difficulty with the submarine service and their acceptance of him or difficulty accepting him.

B: I heard that they were reprimanded.

T: Did he stay on the sub? Do you know?

B: He cracked up and went to a hospital and was here for a while.

T: Continue with the story about this chaplain on the subs.

B: There was as picture of Marilyn Monroe naked on this carpet. So they thought that was funny. The officers did. They had some cloth... what do you call that cloth that you can see through?

T: Gauze or something?

B: Yes. Like that. They draped him. Draped Marilyn Monroe. Ha ha ha. It was funny. But he cracked up and went to the hospital. A lot of us were wondering what would happen to him now?

T: When you say cracked up, what do you mean?

B: I don't know. I wasn't that close to him. But that's what he said. He cracked up. He wasn't himself. But they called him to active duty again. I mean an assignment. They were taking care of him and so he came out and I knew him as a pastor later. He was a fine pastor.

T: But the stress of that particular situation was too much for him.

B: Too much. What it was, was ridicule. He was sincere and wanted to do a good job with the men and there were men aboard that ship that needed a chaplain and then they ridiculed him that way. Word got out among the enlisted men and officers, what they did to him. He was demeaned.

T: So in your duty, you weren't always accepted or weren't always looked up to. There were those who looked on chaplains with derision or with...

B: Yes. There were some that way. But usually you turn your cheek. You had to be a Christian and you had to love them. I had one fellow on board who was a...

T: This is the USS *Burleigh*, APA 95?

B: Yes. He claimed that he had slept with every color skin on the face of the earth and I believed him. His language was extremely foul and so on. He was the one that said: We needed a water fountain, now we've got a chaplain. As a chaplain I was also athletic officer and librarian.

**(1, A, 323)**

T: On board the ship.

B: On board the ship. My job was to get athletic equipment to be used.

T: Hang on with experiences from the *Burleigh*. Let's take things in chronological fashion here. And I'd like to go to your first posting and that was at San Bruno, California, and I believe that was the Advanced Base Personnel Depot. Is that correct? Now when you got to San Bruno can you describe your duties there? Because you got there right around May of 1945. The war against Japan was still on. What were your duties there at the Advanced Base Personnel Depot?

B: My primary duty was report for duty at the chaplain's office. There was a group of us there.

T: A group of chaplains?

B: All chaplains. The main chaplain was a Missouri Synod fellow who was a lieutenant commander. He was trying real hard to become a commander. He didn't make it when I was there. He may have made it later. The chaplains that were there for any length of time took turns in preaching. I wasn't there long enough I guess. We had some very fine chaplains. Fritz Norstead was one. He died. He would have been a good one for the interview. His brother was General Norstead, head of NATO in Europe.

T: You and the other chaplains here. Why were you specifically at San Bruno? Not just to preach, obviously.

B: I think they had charts and they had openings and they would pick out who they think would do well there and they would know enough about the base to fit him in.

T: So describe your duties here. What were you doing at San Bruno?

B: I reported for duty at my desk there. My main duty was to interview men who came in.

T: Are these enlisted men or officers?

B: These are mostly enlisted men. Very few officers.

T: Why were these enlisted men coming through this facility?

B: Somewhere along the line they had indicated they wanted to go home.

T: So they were scheduled for duty in the Pacific and instead they wanted to go back home.

B: Back home. After we interviewed them, some of them, were legitimate. Others we found out were just faking it. They felt they should be returned home and not sent out. We had to verify their story.

T: You talked with them I guess, one on one?

B: These enlisted men?

T: Yes.

B: Oh, yes. They'd come in. "Chaplain, here's my story."

T: So they were here. You were sort of checking their stories out in a way?

B: Right.

T: Did you talk to them and then make calls or write letters to verify these stories?

B: I wasn't doing letter writing. But the enlisted man would have to have their story verified by the Red Cross.

T: I see. So your job was, in a sense, to provide your opinion on this particular person and this story.

B: Yes. Some of them, I would use different questions and so on. Not to trick them, but to follow them up. It was obvious it was a fake. A lot of them were legitimate, though.

T: If you can, provide an example of a person who came in to you. What kind of story did they tell you and how did that conversation go?

B: They might come in and say that their brother was hurt in an automobile accident. I know I had a case like that. With that they would try to get home. But we got a message on board ship that here's a fellow...

T: Stick to San Bruno first. Let's do things in order.

B: His brother was hurt in an automobile accident, and so that was easy to verify. You could get that verified by the Red Cross. Found out what hospital he was at. But

the details, the chaplain didn't have to go into the details. I gave it to a yeoman, and the yeoman took it and went out from there.

T: Were you in a sense sizing up the person to sort of to see whether you thought this was right or not?

B: Oh, yes. You'd want to do that. The poor guy, if he had a legitimate excuse he could go home, and wouldn't be expected to go overseas at that time. He should be able to not go.

T: Can you talk about another example of someone who came into your office there that you spoke to at San Bruno that had a story and talk about what they told you and how you dealt with it.

B: Could you repeat the question?

T: If possible to provide another specific example of someone's story. How you listened and how you decided what to do.

B: We interviewed thirty men a day.

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.**

T: So you were seeing thirty people a day, you were seeing a lot of people at this institution, at this base. There were a lot of men who for one reason or another didn't want to go out to the Pacific.

B: Right. And for the men the next stop off was Treasure Island, by San Francisco [then a major US Navy base].

B: Yes.

T: If their stories weren't approved they would go to Treasure Island and be sent out.

B: Yes. If they weren't approved. Yes.

T: Again, can you think of another example of a guy who came in. Tell us the story that he shared with you.

B: One guy said his grandmother was dying, and he wanted to go home for the funeral. He said he was very close to his grandmother. It was legitimate; he got home.

T: You would approve them, or they might be approved rather, for a brief return home and then back out.

B: Sure.

T: Can you think of an example of a story that you heard that you wondered about or that wasn't necessarily true?

B: There were so many stories they gave me. Many were black and white. For instance where the grandmother died and he wanted to get home for the funeral, the Red Cross could verify it.

T: Other stories must not have been as easy to check. Did people come in with stories of marital problems or things like this?

B: Yes. In cases like marital problems, this we learned to work through the pastor. Sometimes we could get the name of the pastor and you could write to him and tell him what the problem is. Maybe he could help solve it. Help him before he came home. In some cases the pastor would write back and send a message. No, it's too far gone. I know the case well.

**(1, B, 434)**

T: So this means that the men you're talking to might have to wait there at this facility for a while until all the details were checked and they could be either sent home or sent to the Pacific.

B: Well, they didn't wait very long. The Red Cross was key.

T: So you worked through the Red Cross offices to check a lot of these things out.

B: Yes.

T: What kind of impression did these men make on you? Was it easy to sympathize with them or did you see them as guys just trying to get out going to the Pacific?

B: If you talk to thirty men a day for a few weeks, you could sense whether they were sincere or not. And of course, they still had to verify their story. I'd say, "If you can't get this verified..." Some of them, when they heard this, they said, "Excuse me, chaplain," and they'd leave.

T: You'd tell them their story had to be verified.

B: Yes.

T: Did you have people actually get up and say that?

B: Oh, yes. Or, "Chaplain, I'm changing my mind." So in that case, no message was sent back to ask them to verify.

T: So not all these stories were legitimate. Do you think you got a pretty good feeling of reading people and whether they were honest or not?

B: I think it's a gift. I think that I get it from my father and mother; they had very good sense of sizing up people. I don't think everybody should be a chaplain.

T: Now there were other chaplains at this same place in San Bruno. So if you're all seeing guys every day there were a lot of guys cycling through this place looking to have stories either approved or denied.

B: That's why it was called Advanced Base Personnel Depot.

T: Depot means they were just there briefly, right? They were in and out.

B: Yes. And then they were sent to Treasure Island, and then overseas. They got to Treasure Island. They were aboard ship.

T: When you think about the time in San Bruno, what was perhaps the most rewarding part of that job for you? How about the job of interacting with these men? What was the most rewarding part of that for you?

**(1, B, 492)**

B: Meeting people. Getting acquainted with real fine men, men with real fine character.

T: What was the most difficult thing about that job at San Bruno, California, for you?

B: One of the most difficult jobs was killing time.

T: Really? At San Bruno you had time to kill?

B: The office was open from eight to six.

T: And then closed on weekends?

B: No, we took turns on weekends.

T: So you had time on your hands.

B: Oh, yes. I became a proficient bowler. Which helped me later on.

T: Did you interact with other chaplains when you were there in your free time? Or with other officers? Who did you spend your time with?

*(Brief pause in tape.)*

T: You mentioned that while you were there in San Bruno, which is near San Francisco, that a Norwegian Lutheran Church in San Francisco found out about you.

B: Yes.

T: How did they find out about you first of all?

B: I'm a talker.

T: So you were networking with people or...

B: And (\*\*\*) . I wasn't looking for a call or anything. But I'd go there. But in the church there, the Norwegian Church, they didn't have any Norwegian services so I didn't get involved in that but it came up at certain times. Before I left the pastor took me out to lunch and said when the war is over if you'd like to get a call to this church you can have it. I'll recommend that you get it. Especially since you can talk Norwegian. You see, there are a lot of fishermen there from Norway.

T: So there was a Norwegian population in San Francisco that you could have...

B: Yes.

T: I see. Now in August the war ended. You were in San Bruno, the San Francisco area there, when the war ended against Japan, in August 1945.

B: Yes.

T: What do you remember about V-J Day?

B: I was sent just outside Market Street there, and there were two or three, I think at least three, sailors that saw me and came toward me. I was in uniform. And they said, "There's one. Let's take him." What they were doing is, they were tackling or scuffling with officers.

T: Physically accosting them?

B: Yes. Yes. I thought, this is no place for me. So I headed for a church, where they were having a Thanksgiving Service for V-J Day. A service of thanksgiving. I wanted to be there for that.

**(1, B, 552)**

T: Did you go to that service?

B: I went to that.

T: Talk about what you remember about that service.

B: It was a service where they had singing and they had prayers of thanksgiving. It was very fine.

T: Was the mood in that service one of jubilation [or] more one of relief?

B: Both I think. Both. We rejoiced that God answered prayers; that the war was over.

T: What about on the streets of San Francisco as you observed?

B: That was terrible. There were sailors there who were drunk. On Market Street they break the windows of the liquor store and walk in there and grab the whiskey bottles or whatever. People just went nuts. There was one, there was a statue on Market Street, a little platform you went up. Some finally got up on top of it. They knocked the statue down off the platform and a girl went up there and took off all her clothes.

T: And it was on top of this platform?

B: Yes, so everybody could see. It was like a big statue. And they knocked the statue down and the platform was there and some girl, civilian, I think, went up there and presented what her dimensions were.

T: It sounds like the scene you're describing is one of...

B: Hilarious, uncontrollable, what do you call it?

T: Jubilation, but also with an edge. You mentioned earlier about enlisted men chasing or threatening...

B: I don't know how prominent that was, but I experienced it. I don't know what they would have done with me.

T: You didn't wait to find out though.

B: No, I didn't.

T: How much time did you spend in San Francisco that particular day?



B: I don't know.

T: Were you there that day by design or by accident?

B: By accident.

T: You happened to be there. So you were in a sense able to see things that you wouldn't have gone out to see but you were there anyway.

B: No.

T: Did you go back to San Bruno then from there?

B: Yes.

T: What went on at San Bruno? Anything?

B: Not that I know of except... Many sailors in the Navy drink to excess. And I'm sure there were those who did.

T: This job at San Bruno, in a sense interviewing, it sounds like, hundreds of thousands of people over the weeks, of deciding whether people should go out to the Pacific or not, with the end of the war, did that traffic decrease?

B: Well, no. As a matter of fact it could increase. They still needed sailors out there. When the war was over the sailors still didn't want to go. "Why should I do that? Let someone else do it." Another sailor, he was on board ship and he was due to go out again, he said, "Let someone else go out there. Someone who hasn't gone there. I don't want to go out there."

**(1, B, 607)**

T: So because there was a need for transporting, supplying, there was still a lot of ships going out and these guys felt that since the war was over no thanks anymore.

B: Yes.

T: So in a sense you still had business here at San Bruno, for a while, of interviewing people or making the same kind of decisions about people. Whether they should go out, be sent to duty or not.

B: I didn't have anything to do with that now.

T: No. But when you were at San Bruno after the war was over, this business didn't stop. In a sense there was still traffic of men coming in and out of this facility or not?

*(Brief pause in tape.)*

T: So you just said that the traffic slowed down but didn't stop completely. From San Bruno, in the fall of 1945, and actually into 1946, you were stationed on board a ship, APA-95, the USS *Burleigh*, which was a transport ship. A Liberty ship. And on the *Burleigh* you made a number of trips to the Philippines, to Manila and back. First of all, what was the purpose of those trips to the Philippines now that the war was over?

B: We'd go to the Philippines... Here's a picture of them.

T: What was the ship doing going to the Philippines though? What was it transporting?

B: To transport the Navy, the Army, anybody in the service.

T: So this ship was transporting men for duty in the Philippines.

B: Yes.

T: And did it also bring men back from the Philippines? Other men back?

B: I think so.

T: So even though the war was over, men were being taken out and others were being returned.

B: Yes.

T: Let me ask about these journeys out and back to the Philippines. How long did that journey take to get out there?

B: We were a ten knot speeder.

T: So ten knots--it could take a long time to get out there. So it could take weeks to get to the Philippines and weeks to get back. Let's talk about your life as a chaplain on board ship. This is a new experience for you now, right? Being a chaplain on board a ship. Talk about your duties. What did you do on board the ship?

B: One of the things I did was get friendly with the officers. Try to get friendly with the captain. We had a Greek captain going to the Philippines. We had a nut going to Japan. The captain of the ship aboard the *Burleigh* was very cooperative. I also had to get acquainted personally with the executive officer, the second in command. A lot of stuff goes through him. Usually the captain's right hand man. For instance I had an arrangement with the executive officer that any man coming aboard ship or leaving the ship he had a sheet of different people he had to visit. For instance the

medical officer, executive officer and also I wanted chaplain put on there so I could visit with him before he left.

T: Each man.

B: Each man. Or when he came aboard. My son was in San Diego and got orders to go to the Pentagon, and when he was at the Pentagon they said when you go back to San Diego stop by Great Lakes and be the commencement speaker. He did and I have a video of that. In there it tells, you interview each guy when he came aboard and when he left.

**(1, B, 665)**

T: So you were doing this too. You were interviewing people, interviewing men as they came...

B: Aboard.

T: Came aboard ship.

B: And when they left the ship.

T: Did you have services on board the ship, the *Burleigh*?

B: Oh, yes. Services of course on Sunday morning and then when we were underway I had a Bible class, a Bible study class every night. And then when we were in port it would be three times a week. But I also had a thing after a while, these were Christian men, of course, who were open to this, I had an arrangement with the executive officer for the plan of the day which is posted... seven fifteen to thirty, between seven fifteen and seven thirty-five. Seven forty-five with all the men aboard ship in a certain place.

T: In the morning this is.

B: Yes. Seven fifteen to seven forty-five. A half hour. First fifteen minutes... I also got acquainted with some of the sailors and officers who had gotten involved with [The] Navigators [Christian discipleship ministry explained a little later in this interview]. They had a program. They study that program very thoroughly. In fact when we were overseas we...

T: You were the only chaplain on board the *Burleigh*. Is that correct?

B: Right.

T: So you were doing services that were for everybody.

B: Right.

T: How do you structure a service knowing that your audience could be of many different beliefs, many different Protestant beliefs?

B: Well some of them would drop out and miss. We always had a few Jewish sailors. When I would find out in the interview that they were Jewish, I said I can arrange for a Jewish service on Friday and (\*\*\*) but I'd have someone be in charge. I will be there and I will wear the little hat on my head. I'll take in the service. I'll be there. I'll arrange for the service. But you are the one who will lead the service. So he did that. And then the Catholic boys I'd find out.

T: So you did the Jewish service on Fridays then.

B: No. I didn't do it.

T: But you were present for it.

B: I was present for it. And I was present, attended service for the Catholic men. I'd find out in my interview that some of the boys were very active at home and have them lead a prayer service. So when we were overseas there would be a Catholic chaplain on this ship and a Catholic Mass at ten o'clock and a Protestant service at nine o'clock. I'd go by boat over to the service and have a Protestant service at ten o'clock and go over to my ship and have a Mass at nine o'clock.

T: So when you were in port or close to other ships you could arrange that. How about underway in the Pacific when it's for weeks that you're the only person around?

B: As I said before, I had a Catholic layperson lead the service. There is a Catholic lay service designed for that.

T: So you looked after and made sure that people of different faiths had services available to them even though you couldn't really officiate at those.

B: Yes. And of course there were some religions I couldn't touch. Mormons. Mormons or Christian Science.

T: So from interviewing people you knew exactly what these people...

B: Yes.

**(1, B, 716)**

T: So your Protestant service: How did you decide how to structure a Protestant service which itself would be pretty inclusive?

B: There is a Navy hymnbook which is general. When I preached they told us at chaplain school if you're a Lutheran, preach Lutheranism or preach Protestantism. If you're a Baptist, you preach... You preach whatever your convictions are. Don't water anything down. You don't want that.

T: Were you able to do that from your own memory? Even with a broad audience, to maintain a Lutheran...

B: Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. Same thing I do now. Luther mattered. Martin Luther mattered. I don't condemn Catholics and others.

T: I'm looking right now at a picture of you on board the *Burleigh*. What kind of crowds did you have and how did a typical service go?

B: Did you see that (\*\*\*)

T: I've got a picture and it looks like you've got over a hundred guys there.

B: Oh, yes. Standing room only. We had two thousand men down below.

T: So there were a lot of guys on board this ship being transported.

B: Oh, yes. These are the ones that came out and I'm sure they were sincere fellows. Because the others would ridicule them.

T: Really? So there was some sense of criticism of some of the guys who went to church on board the ship?

B: I'm sure there was.

T: How about a typical service? How do you modify a church service for on board a ship in the middle of the ocean?

B: There's a preface, the prelude or the postlude, no offering. Reading of scripture, epistle, gospel, and then you had the sermon, the gospel for the day. But I could preach anything I wanted.

T: And you had services on board ship. Did you have a service every day, or just on the weekends? Or on Sunday?

B: Regular service we only had on weekends. But when the ship was underway, I had Bible class every night.

T: How many men would turn out for that?

B: For that?

T: Yes.

B: It would vary. Anywhere from ten to forty. Thirty, forty.

T: What other jobs were you responsible for on board the ship?

B: I want to come back to this. I have some more to say about the spiritual side.

T: Let's stick with that then. The spiritual side then.

B: Getting acquainted with the fellows, which I did, and I tried to participate with them in athletics. I have a picture someplace. Softball league. But anyway, I became acquainted with them and some of the fellows called themselves [The] Navigators. It's an organization that was started on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. There were certain fellows in the Navy at Pearl Harbor who were Christians and they escaped death and they shared their experience with others who had the same faith. It was an organization called The Navigators.

T: There were some of these fellows on board the *Burleigh*?

B: I didn't have any then.

**(1, B, 762)**

T: Remember we're still on board the *Burleigh* here.

B: I introduced them to The Navigators organization.

T: But not on the *Burleigh*.

B: Yes. I introduced them to that. They had cards.

T: Like a business card.

B: Yes. It had John 3:16 on one side and the other side would be...

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

T: This is tape 2 with Reverend Opsal on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2003. We were talking about your job as chaplain on board the *Burleigh*. You mentioned having services, regular services. You mentioned having Bible classes were fairly well attended in the evenings. What other activities were you responsible for on board the *Burleigh*?

B: I was going to say something. Morning devotions that we had. We spent the first fifteen minutes in memorizing scripture. Memorizing these Bible verses on these cards.

T: Did you have morning devotions every day on the ship?

B: Yes. I had a group that met in a school room. Started out with about five guys and we ended up with about twenty. You saw the picture.

T: Yes. I did. Some of the guys of your Bible study group.

B: And the second fifteen minutes we spent in prayer. Praying out loud. To begin with I was the only one that prayed out loud. But after a few weeks some of these guys could pray out loud as well as the chaplain. They did it by practice. Then there was counseling after these classes.

T: This would be individual counseling?

B: Individual counseling.

T: So people that would come on board the *Burleigh* would come to you for personal interaction.

B: Yes. And of course what we did too, we had a lot of guys that came with questions, questions that they had at home that were never answered. About scripture and about Christ and the church.

T: And one on one perhaps they felt more comfortable asking those.

B: One on one. One on one.

T: We're talking about the spiritual side of life, and you had mentioned services, you had mentioned Bible study groups, morning devotions, and also personal consultations with people on board the ship, and that's where you mentioned you had a chance really to answer people's questions and they could be pretty open and honest with you.

B: Yes.

T: What kind of questions, when you had one on one meetings with men, what kind of things did you hear from them? What did they ask you?

B: See, there are a lot of people who go to church who don't have assurance of their faith. They're not sure. You ask them, are you going to heaven? I don't know. They say, are you a Christian? I hope so. Martin Luther is very positive. That's why

Lutheran pastors speak positive. I preach (\*\*\*) gospel. Show man that he is a sinner and in need of forgiveness and then the gospel which is the savior you need.

T: Did you feel on board ship that you were able to reach men individually and to make a difference?

B: Oh, yes. We had those who became converted, you might say. That's not a popular word today.

T: But I understand what you mean by that.

B: The Lutheran Church has so much emphasis on baptism that... Although with communion is repentance. When you come to communion, you're supposed to repent of your sin. And then we'd get them to go out and recruit other fellows to come to the services. And we emphasized prayer and so on.

T: So the spiritual side of life on board ship was satisfying and busy.

B: Yes. For me it was.

T: As the only chaplain on board ship, you mentioned you had other duties as well. Let's talk about those.

**(2, A, 98)**

B: You were also athletic officer. That meant that you arranged softball games and basketball games. Basketball league.

T: On board the ship?

B: No. But we did that on the beach and in the armory.

T: When your ship was docked or something.

B: Yes.

T: How about all those weeks on the Pacific. What kind of recreation can you arrange for men there?

B: In the Pacific, when we go over there on the base they have...

T: On board the ship.

B: On board ship.

T: So while the ship was sailing. Talk about the activities you could arrange.



B: There wasn't a great deal that we did in the recreation port except... We also had a library. And we would encourage men to attend that.

T: Were you in charge of the library?

B: I was in charge of the library. I had to get books that were first class books.

T: This is a lending library on board the ship where men could come in and borrow books, or did you get magazines too?

B: Mostly books. Mostly hardcover. In fact, this one officer that gave me a bad time, when he was a first lieutenant and he was in charge of space. Before that famous Christmas when he got presents, we were going to go over to Manila and we had to go... her birthday the 20<sup>th</sup> and the captain wanted to go. He said there was a storm brewing on the West Coast. So he wanted to go around the storm and so we did and we had a wonderful service there.

T: This is one of the trips over to Manila?

B: Yes. What happened was that I came across a Jewish lady...

T: On board the ship?

B: No. I came across a Jewish lady...

T: So the ship was scheduled to leave the 20<sup>th</sup> of December on one of the trips to Manila.

B: There was also a ship store on board ship and the profits of that, a certain percentage of that, could be used by the chaplain to buy presents for the fellows. So I honed in on that and then I wanted to have a Christmas tree. A big one for the place where they eat.

T: On board the ship.

B: On board ship. And then a smaller one for the officers, and a smaller one for the chiefs, and then one for the hospital.

T: So you were going to get several Christmas trees for on board the ship here.

B: Right. We had an awful time with the big trees. We almost lost them. We had them out on the hatch and that infuriated the first lieutenant. He said, "I've been in the Navy for thirty years and never had a Christmas tree to take care of."

T: You got these Christmas trees on board the ship.

B: And he never had that before. And then I arranged for everybody to be down in the hull of the ship... what is it?

T: The galley?

B: It's where the galley is but it's a big compartment where the fellows eat.

T: Like a mess hall?

B: Mess hall. So we all sang Christmas carols. I saved my sermon for Christmas Day. This was Christmas Eve now. The 24<sup>th</sup>. Then gave out presents to everybody including the guys who were on duty stations in several places on the ship. I got to dress up like Santa Claus. That one picture there. He went around and gave a present to each one. So then when it was over we had some presents left over. There were more presents than there were men, so I said take them down to the first lieutenant and give them all to him.

The next day I heard the men say the first lieutenant says that's the best Christmas he ever had in his life. I said I'll believe that when I hear it from him. The next day was Christmas Day and it was kind of rocky. I was standing there with the portable pulpit. The ship was going back and forth. I looked down the aisle, down the passageway and there was the first lieutenant standing directly under the PA system listening to the sermon. Later on that morning, he told me, he said, "Chaplain, I want you to know that's the first Christmas I ever had. That's the first time in my life I ever had a Christmas present."

T: Is that what he said?

B: Yes. First time in his life.

T: So you made a difference even when you thought you weren't going to make one. So here's a guy who gave you a hard time for space allocation and didn't want to give you space for the library, and here, through Christmas, you touched him in a way that he really felt that too.

B: Yes.

T: Very good story.

B: So then when we came back we were going to go through the Panama Canal. He said, "Chaplain, I'm going to take you out to dinner". We went out and he said, "What will you have?" I said, I don't drink. "That's okay. You take your Cokes, whatever you want." He drank at least sixteen beers and still had conversation. And I had my Cokes. Not sixteen but... Then he wanted to take me bowling.

T: This is in the Panama Canal Zone.

B: Yes. He said I want to take you bowling. So we went bowling. Little did he know that I was in San Bruno...

T: You learned to bowl there.

B: And I beat him. And he couldn't get over it. Couldn't get over that.

T: Beaten by the chaplain at bowling. The last thing I want to ask you about today, Bernt, is you made the trip to the Philippines and you actually got ashore in the Philippines both times I think, right?

B: Yes.

T: I'd like to talk about the conditions that you encountered in the Philippines. That is, your impressions of Manila, of the countryside and of the people you met there. Let's start with Manila, which was where the ship docked.

B: I looked and I saw this horrendous, terrible scene of buildings being bombed out.

T: So you saw bombed out buildings.

**(2, A, 225)**

B: It looked awful and I couldn't believe what I saw. Because I had seen Manila, pictures of Manila, a beautiful city. See pictures I think in National Geographic and other places, and it was awful. But that was it. I also poked my head in the courtyard and saw General Homa [Masaharu Homa, Japanese Military Commander of the Philippines, 1942] on trial. He was later executed [hanged, 1946].

T: Japanese war crimes trials.

B: Yes. So then...

T: How about the people? Did you encounter Filipinos when you were there? Have any interactions with them?

B: Very little. I stuck pretty much to my crew.

T: So Manila looked pretty much ravaged by the destruction, the fighting in 1945. What about the countryside? When you got outside Manila. What was that like?

B: I really didn't get out much. I had some pictures...

T: There's a couple pictures of you. Yes. Out in the...

B: It was the way people lived. They had...they looked very primitive. The hut that was there. I really didn't have much to do with the Filipinos.

T: When your ship was docked, how long did you typically stay in the Philippines before the ship turned around and went back?

B: I don't know, but I could figure it out with my orders.

T: You had time to get ashore in any case, but you weren't stationed there for any length of time.

B: No. No.

T: Did your job or your duties change at all when the ship was docked in the Philippines? Did you have new things to do or different things you had to take care of?

B: I think we arranged for some sightseeing, but I wasn't really involved in it.

T: So you were still doing the library, athletics; you mentioned softball, things like this.

B: Yes.

T: Basketball. And you still held services and had the other things you did regularly.

B: Yes. Also had softball league and I think there was a swimming pool. I'm not sure. I was very interested in basketball, so we had a basketball tournament. Because I played basketball in high school and college.

T: So this was keeping men occupied, giving them something to do.

B: Yes.

T: Those trips that you made over and back--you made two trips to the Philippines and back on board the *Burleigh*, what was the most interesting part of that particular duty for you? What was most rewarding?

B: Working with men in Bible study and leading men to Christ. That was a privilege--to help men who weren't certain of their faith and wanted to know for sure. (*off subject discussion*)

T: You got back, and from the *Burleigh* you were posted to Brooklyn Navy Yard for a short time. You were discharged from active duty in September of 1946. That's the last question I had. That concludes the part of your career as chaplain that meets our time limits. Let me thank you for helping me understand a lot more about how

the chaplain service works and what that meant to you. So on the record, thanks very much.

**END OF INTERVIEW**