Transcription: Harold Risener

Today is Monday, January 28, 2013. My name is James Crabtree and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Commander Harold Risener. This interview is being conducted by telephone for the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Commander Risener is at his residence in San Antonio. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's an honor for our program.

Harold Risener: It's my pleasure, sir.

Yes sir. Well sir, I always start off with the first question of just tell us sir, if you would, a little bit about your childhood and your background in your life before you went into the military.

Harold Risener: I was born in a cotton farm up in northeast Texas, Hunt County, a big ___ which is located about 65 miles northeast of Dallas, and one interesting thing that happened to me as I was growing up was that my daddy owned a cotton farm, and since I'm only child, there was just two of us to work the farm, and we did pretty well except when it came to harvesting the cotton, picking cotton, and we had to hire outside help. One of the families that we hired to do that was the Murphy family. Their daddy had deserted the family and they were having a tough time getting things to eat. They were using rabbits and squirrels and anything else they could live on. They took every opportunity to get work. So one of the children of the Murphy family was a guy named Audie, and he and I were in fact the same age, in fact he was born in June of '24 and I was born in April of '24, and I was actually two months older. But we picked cotton several years together and got to know each other pretty well. Of course as most everyone knows now, he became the most decorated service man of World War II.

That's right.

Harold Risener: After I graduated from high school, I entered East Texas State College, and when I became a second term senior, the Navy came there with a program called V7, which enabled you the last semester to stay in your present college and graduate. If not, they got you into what they had established as midshipman school. It seems that the Navy at that time was building ships faster than the graduates of the naval academy could man them, and they needed someone that was qualified to operate those ships, and they wanted officers that had college degrees that were efficient in what it took to do so. We were required to have a certain amount of math and science. They attempted to teach us in four years what the midshipman and an ___ learned, they attempted to learn us in four months what the midshipman at the naval academy learned in four years.

That's a bit of a crash course.

Harold Risener: Yes sir, their subjects were navigation, ____, naval orientation, physical training, and – let's see, navigation, _____, seamanship, naval orientation, and physical training. And the three midshipman schools were located one at Notre Dame, one at Columbia, and one at Northwestern University. I was selected to go to the one at Chicago which was Northwestern University. At that time, and that prevailed throughout that school, they had two classes going on simultaneously, 300 in each class. There was a total of 600 and the studying was so intense

that of those 600, that either already had a BS degree or would have one upon graduation, of that 600, only 351 were able to complete it and graduate.

Now sir, did you choose to go in the Navy or was it something you were drafted into?

Harold Risener: Yes I did, I chose to go to the Navy. I got an early start in life. I did mention that, being born out on the cotton farm and being in agriculture, there's a lot of days that were rainy and bad weather and so force that we couldn't work, and my mother had taught me to read, write, add, subtract, multiply and divide before I started at school, so I graduated from high school when I was 15. I got my college degree and commissioned in the Navy when I was 19.

Wow, yeah, that's very young.

Harold Risener: Yes sir.

Where were you then when Pearl Harbor was bombed? I guess you were in college then?

Harold Risener: Yes sir, I was. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was actually at home with my laundry for mother, to do my laundry to go back to college. That was of course December the 4th, '41, and I got in the Navy in '42 when I became 18, and I knew then that I was subject to the draft and so I chose the Navy and that's when I found out about the naval officer procurement in Dallas, and so I used tractor gas that my dad had because he had a farm, to fill up the car and go to Dallas and enlist in the Navy.

Were your parents supportive of you going in?

Harold Risener: Oh, very much, very much so.

At that time, you mentioned before you'd gotten to know Audie Murphy pretty well. Did you talk to him at all about going in the service?

Harold Risener: At the time that we picked cotton together, I was still in high school and that was a little bit before. We were pretty young. Back then, they had no child labor laws, and as soon as you were able to go to school, you were able to go out and farm and work in the field.

So you kind of lost contact with him I guess.

Harold Risener: At the end, but my mother told me some interesting stories about him. Of course he kept in contact with the Murphy family, and near the end of the war, they had everyone in Hunt County that had a relative in the service to come down to the courthouse and bring a picture of their service man and tell something about it. My mother was telling me when Audie's aunt went down, she's the one that took his picture, and they asked her if he had seen any action, and where he was located, and got any awards or anything, and people were very unknowledgeable about the Medal of Honor, so she said yes, he wrote something about some kind of medal that had the word Congress in it. She didn't know exactly what that was.

That's pretty funny. So sir then, you go off to Northwestern, and you get through the program where half of the midshipmen wash out, and this is four months long, so then at that point I assume you were commissioned as an ensign?

Harold Risener: Right.

And where did they send you to then?

Harold Risener: I was assigned to a ship. When you graduate, you could either volunteer for the submarine service, or UDT which is underwater demolition team that later became known as the Navy Seals, or you could take a surface ship, and I elected to take a surface ship and was assigned to a new type of ship that was designed specifically for the war in the Pacific primarily. Of course it was used in Europe also. It was a big ship. It was bigger than a football field. In fact, it was 326 feet long, 50 feet wide, and carried a crew of 120 men and 9 officers, and could carry up to 500 Army or Marine troops, and 29 Army officers along with their guns, tanks, and equipment, everything that they needed, and the ship was designed in such a manner that it had a very shallow draft, and it could be pitched so it could be down in the front and high in the back or vice versa, and have a starboard lift or a port lift, and based on that we could go right into the beach in most cases, open the bow doors and lower the ramp and discharge our cargo on dry land, and drop a bow anchor about 300 feet before we hit the beach, we could take over, and when we finished there offloading, then we could take in the anchor and back up the engines and retract from the beach.

That's pretty interesting. So you didn't have to use then the amphibious landing craft to go to shore. You could just go right onto shore.

Harold Risener: Yes sir, that's true.

What was the name of the ship?

Harold Risener: It was the USS LST 605.

What were your first thoughts or first memories of getting aboard the ship?

Harold Risener: Well my first assignment was as navigator, and I held that job for most of the war, and as the war got along pretty good and other officers had been transferred, I later became communications officer, and later I was executive officer, and by the time the war ended I had my own ship.

Being aboard that ship at such a young age, how did you feel? Did you feel pretty comfortable having been through the training you were through?

Harold Risener: I feel comfortable, but I got home sick the first year, but after I was on it a year, well, pretty soon I didn't know if I'd ever leave it or not, and when the war would be over, and it just kind of like got to be home or that's just the way the life was and I had no choice, so I might as well make the best of it.

When you joined the ship, where was it?

Harold Risener: It was a new ship. Those ships were new and they were built up in Illinois in a shipyard and came down the Mississippi without the mast because there's a number of bridges that they had to go under to get to New Orleans, and when they got to New Orleans, they raised that mast and finished fitting her out, and that's when I went aboard.

It was at New Orleans.

Harold Risener: Yes sir, it was.

So you were part of the inaugural crew then.

Harold Risener: I was, yes sir.

And the ship didn't even have a name, right, just had a number?

Harold Risener: There were so many of those. They later on began naming them counties after Texas, but I think probably not enough because I remember ours was 605 and I remember seeing the 1084 out there, so there was a lot of them. It took a lot of them to do what we had to do.

Sure. You said you transported Marines and also soldiers, where was the first place that you picked up?

Harold Risener: OK, after the ship was commissioned there in New Orleans, we went on a shakedown cruise towards Key West, Florida, and then we loaded up with provisions, supplies. And those ships were all self sustaining. I mean we sailed ourself most all of the time except when we were in an invasion force, and later on fresh water out of salt water, and everything aboard a ship just like a city without. So from New Orleans, we entered the Panama Canal after San Francisco, and it just so happened since we were sailing empty, found out that the officer's club and NCO club out at Pearl Harbor was running short of beer, so we took like 30,000 cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer from the west coast out to Pearl Harbor.

And tell us, sir, what the men of your crew were like, your ship's captain and others?

Harold Risener: Well, the ship's captain was a senior grade lieutenant, and reservists like the rest of us were at that time, and he apparently had decided that he could not cope with the rigors and responsibility, and the tension that goes with the commanding officer of a US Navy ship. When we got to the west coast, he asked to be transferred for a personal reason and health, and mental condition and so forth, and so our executive officer became the captain and the chief engineering officer took his place as executive officer. We got a new engineering officer from the States to relieve him.

Then you arrived out in Hawaii.

Harold Risener: In Hawaii, we then prepared to do the job that we were meant to do, which involved first degaussing the ship, which it was all metal, and we had to wrap cables around it and run the electricians to it to demagnetize it because there were a lot of magnetic mines there in the Pacific and if you go very close to one, well we'd attract it like a magnet attracts a nail, you know, so we had to do that and we had to paint the ship in a camouflage paint, and so forth, and then we took on some portions of the infantry, the Army division that had come from the Aleutians. Japan had occupied three Aleutian islands and we had to recapture those, and they were fresh off of that campaign and they were seasoned veterans, and so they were familiar with the equipment for invasions and we practiced loading and offloading them before we got orders for our first mission.

And where was the first mission to?

Harold Risener: The first mission, and that was the time when we first became involved in a convoy, a convoy of many ships, and it involved station keeping. Before we always operated alone, sailed alone. The ships need to be close together because submarines will pick you off if you're hung back alone, and we were screened of course with many other ships, destroyers, cruisers and so forth, and so everything, you must remember, during time of war was blacked out. The ship goes just as far and just as fast at night as it does in the day time, so keeping station and close together in complete darkness is quite a nerve wracking job for the officer of the deck because he's the one that gives the orders to the helmsman as to what course is there, and orders to the main engine room on what speed the engine should be, so we had to keep a varied watch and only thing we had was looking at the ship in front of us and ones on each side with binoculars, and the cruising radar we had at that time.

What about the worry of submarines?

Harold Risener: We had the DE's and the destroyers and the cruisers, and they had not only sonar and very sophisticated radar, and the equipment that it took to detect a submarine, and it was their job to protect us.

Where was the first place - ?

Harold Risener: The first mission from Hawaii, we got underway and went to Landin, New Guinea, and we dropped anchor and stayed there would you believe for six weeks. We had 500 Army troops on there that we had to feed and take care of all that time, and we got pretty impatient. It was very hot down there and the ships weren't air conditioned. In the main engine room, the crew, the motor ____ couldn't even wear a shirt and they had to stand when they weren't over there controlling some of the mechanical equipment, the generators or whatever, they had to stand under a blower. We did have forced air, like a big giant fan. Evaporation is a cooling process, so the sweat on their bodies would keep them cool, but the temperature would get up to 120 degrees in there, so we had to combat that then, in a land which was below the equator. After the six weeks, we finally found out what we was waiting for. We were to invade the Philippine Island, specifically the island of Leyte. You remember that Pearl Harbor, the Japanese also simultaneously pretty much took over the entire Philippine Islands, and General MacArthur was in charge, relieving General Stilwell in his place, and the Navy took him, through the darkness of night down to Australia, and he was to start building up a force to counter attack and he promised the people of the Philippines I shall return, and that was the job that we were confronted with first, to take MacArthur so he could say I shall return. That was our first invasion.

When did you know that's where you were going?

Harold Risener: We never knew where we were going on any operation until we were at least three miles outside of land, and then the officers, they would break out the top secret operation orders that had been brought aboard, and then we knew what it was.

And then at that point what's done? Did things begin to change once you know exactly where you're going in terms of getting ready?

Harold Risener: We did. Of course, being navigator, I was furnished the charts of the area, and of course as navigator I had to establish position of the ship anyway, and always had, three times

a day – early morning twilight, noon, and evening twilight. So that kept me busy, along with keeping up with the fuel consumption on the ship and the men we had on board. I remember that because I always thought growing up when automobiles came in, to know if you got 20 miles per gallon, you were doing pretty good, but our ship used 20 gallons for the mile. So that was important, and that was also the navigator's job, which I did and kept pretty busy on the way out there.

What are your memories, sir, then of that first landing that you made?

Harold Risener: H hour was at 10 o'clock. We approached Leyte beach about 8 o'clock. At that time, the ships that had the big guns, the battleships, and I might mention to you, on the way there, from the bridge of our ship, you could see the horizon 8 miles, so 8 miles in any direction which meant a circle of 16 miles, and the ships 200 yards apart. That's the entire area was covered with ships. That's how big that invasion force was. It's the biggest thing you can imagine. But at 0800 when we approached the beach and slowed down, had all the big guns, battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers, destroy escorts, the LCI gun boats cut loose, and it was a continuous roar. The only way I can describe it was if you can imagine a big building about a block long and a block wide with a tin roof on it, and have thousands of men on top of it with barrels of ball bearings pouring down on it, that's as close as I could get to the sound that was made during that two hours. That sound went on continuously from 0800 until 1000, which was H hour when we were supposed to hit the beach. At that time, the ships stopped. The silence was like you could hear a pin drop. I had looked through my binoculars over to the beach at that time, and I could see the foliage and the palm trees and so forth, and it looked like it came out to the water's edge. At the end of that two-hour period, looked over there, and it was as clean as a gymnasium floor, just nothing there. You couldn't see how any living creature could survive it. So at 10 o'clock, then the AKA's, the ATA's, the big cargo ship that carried thousands of soldiers, threw nets over the side. They came down and got in a small boat. We had two small boats and the infantrymen that we had aboard, they came aboard, and the officers that we had been living with, gosh for a couple of months or so, maybe more, we got real familiar with them because they ate in the ward room, they ate the same food and everything as we officers did, so we got to know them real well, but when they showed up with a battle ___ gone, their helmets with nets on 'em and twigs in them and everything, their faces painted up, we could hardly recognize them. They went aboard our small boat, we lowered them, and they went in with the early invasion force at 10 o'clock.

Could you tell from where you were what was happening with the battle?

Harold Risener: Yes, pretty much, especially when the force that hit the beach, and a few hours later, I think that was 10 o'clock, in the early afternoon, then we were able to go on the beach, and each one of us had an assigned position. We would go hit the beach, lower our ramp, open the bow doors, lower the ramp, then off went the tanks and the big trucks and all the supplies that the infantrymen couldn't carry with them. So we were right there at the beach, and that offloading went on the rest of the day, and that night, the Japs counter attacked, and they pushed us back, and they got so close to us that every once in a while you would hear bullets ricochet off the ship. In fact our commissary officer was standing half out of the door to the galley, and one ricocheted right where he was standing, and just a second or two after he had walked in the door. So but then we found out later, then another wave hit about that time of Marines. Those Marines really cut loose and they pushed 'em back, and went forward, securing the miles of the island, and used the Army for mopping up operations. So when daylight came the next day and we were seeing what was going on real close up, in fact there was a foxhole just, oh I guess about 15

yards from the bow of our ship and we could walk around out there, and I saw a trench with seven dead Japs in it, and they looked just like you saw in the movie with their uniforms on and everything, and I saw what looked like a brand new gas mask down there, and I said boy, that would sure make a good souvenir. Young kids like us, we were souvenir happy, you know, and I said well, wait a minute, I read about those booby traps. I better leave that alone. But I did reach down and get a bottle of Japanese saki, but later on when enlisted men came ashore, some of the __ machinists, they carry just like a mechanic does a wrench, gear with pliers, a wrench and stuff on their belt, and they were taking pliers and cutting the gold teeth out of those Jap's mouths down in that foxhole. And another thing that I'll mention that I never will forget, oh I guess the early part of the afternoon of the next day, we started bringing our dead soldiers back to the beach, and I guess about very close to 30 feet or so on the starboard side, they started sacking, handling them like sacks of flour, just pitch 'em up on the sack, and then raised on the farm, I saw a lot of haystacks, and they kept piling those dead soldiers up there higher than the ceiling of a normal house, quite a bit, like a big haystack. I mentioned, and we were walking around on the beach out there, and I asked one of the Army officers, I said well that seems kind of inhumane handling our own men in that fashion. He said well, fellow, this is war and we have a special detail that will come along later and take the dog tags, process their personal belongings and take care of them in a proper manner.

Was there every any point during that first invasion that you felt worried for your own safety or worried about what might happen, or was it just something you didn't even think about?

Harold Risener: You know, you're so busy and things happening all the time, it really didn't soak in much. Of course when the bullets ricocheted off the ship, it kind of takes you by surprise, but I guess it's a good thing that you really don't realize how much danger you are in.

So your ship stayed ashore for six weeks?

Harold Risener: No, we stayed beached only long enough to discharge our cargo, which was the remainder of that day. A lot of that stuff was small stuff that a truck would back in to our tank deck and offload and come on. Of course we had some tanks and some jeeps and armored cars, LDT's, a landing vehicle track that could operate on land as well as the beach, so it took quite a while, but the next day, the next morning, we retracted and went out and anchored in Leyte Gulf, along with the other ships to wait for our orders.

Sure. And then what happened at that point? Did you later get called back in?

Harold Risener: Yeah, we were only there about a day or two, and followed another convoy on our way back to Mannis Island down near Australia, down near New Guinea, and on the way down there, just that night, we saw over the horizon, a lot of flashes, not knowing at all what it was. We later found out that Admiral Hall's main battleship and carrier fleet had been kind of taken by surprise by the Japanese, and acted like they were going to attack us from the north, so he pulled out of there. But the main force that wanted to trap all our supply ships in Leyte Gulf, that was where the real battle was, and there was a book written on that later about the tin can sailor.

Oh, I've read that, by Jim Hornfisher.

Harold Risener: And they were the people that actually saved us from getting trapped in Leyte Gulf. They sunk a couple of carriers and a battleship and so forth, and did so much that the

Japanese taskforce turn-tailed and went back to Japan, even though we'd lost a number of ships of our own in the battle.

Yeah, that's an excellent book. He's an Austin author and I've had a chance to meet him on a couple of occasions, so that's definitely a good story. Did you have a chance to read that book?

Harold Risener: Yes, got a copy of it in my library right now.

That's great. Then tell us, sir, a little bit about were you able to get letters from home during this time while you were out?

Harold Risener: About every three weeks. I met my girlfriend when I was a sophomore in college, and she was 14 years old in 8th grade in high school. And we got serious about each other and later on, I figured when I graduated from college, well then we could get married. But things happened so fast and couldn't get married when you're an officer in training school, and as soon as I got my commission I was aboard ship and gone, so we were over there two years in the Pacific. All during this time, she waited for me and we got married when I got home.

That's great. How was it you met, just in school?

Harold Risener: Yes sir. I didn't stay in the dormitory when I was in college. I was in a boarding house run by a family, and one of their daughters was a girlfriend of the girl that came to visit her and that's how we met.

That's great. So you were able to write to each other during the war.

Harold Risener: Yeah, of course by the end of the war I had my own ship and came back to New Orleans, and as a matter of fact, I called her from a phone booth and called her on a cell phone and she took the next train from Commerce down to New Orleans and we were married five days later and we celebrated our 66th wedding anniversary this year.

Oh, congratulations. That's a great story.

Harold Risener: Thank you.

Do you still have any of those letters, save any of those letters?

Harold Risener: A few. But the letters, we wrote each other almost every day, but I could only mail them when we got in to a port where they had a post office and mail ship, and I could only receive mail at that time. So after years though, we found out that we were getting letters all jammed up, and in fact I got one letter from my other aunt, she was finally out of the hospital and I didn't even know she was sick. So Lindy and I, my wife, we started numbering our letters in the lower left hand corner, so when I'd get a bunch of them, I could put them in chronological order.

That makes sense.

Harold Risener: Yeah, I guessed a lot.

That's great. Then sir, tell us about finally being assigned your own ship, being a ship's captain. I'm sure that was quite an honor.

Harold Risener: Well, it was. Of course, after that Leyte invasion, I went to three others before the war was ended. But when the war was ended and people were starting to go home on points and everything, I got orders from Washington, detaching me from the 605 and put aboard as a commanding officer of the 459 as a commanding officer. When I got those orders, I said oh boy. See I was young and not very old. In fact I was 21 years old as a matter of fact. They will probably keep me out here on this LST. Of course there was a big push then to return prisoners of war back to their regional homeland – the Chinese back to China, the Japanese back to Japan, and things like that. When I got to Pearl Harbor, which is where my ship was located, it just so happened that she was destined to come back to the States for decommissioning. So I brought her from Pearl Harbor back to San Pedro, California, through the Panama Canal and up to New Orleans.

That's great. And sir, during your time in the Navy in the Pacific Theater, and different places you went –

Harold Risener: Well, after the Leyte invasion, our ship and a smaller convoy of other LST's and ships were assigned to go about halfway through the Philippine Islands and invade the Island of Mendora. That was where we almost met our Waterloo at Mendora. We carried a load of torpedoes. We were establishing a PT boat base there on Mendora, and it was a three-day trip up there. Of course we were in sight of land, and we held land the whole way, and the captain wanted to fix our position every 30 minutes, so I had no sleep for three days and two nights when we got there. When we got there, the first thing that happened, we were attacked by a swarm of kamikaze's. Prior to that, we'd only seen one kamikaze, and that was at Leyte when we were alongside a supply ship taking on supplies, and we just assumed that since we made such a big target, that's why that kamikaze came after us. We peppered her all the way down with our 40 mm and 20 mm guns and knocked her off course, enough to where she didn't hit the ship, but right alongside, and splashed up and shrapnel and everything and water covered the ship, but when that action was over, and secured in general quarters and the officers in the ward having a cup of coffee trying to settle their nerves, the gunnery officer said gentlemen, remember what you just saw. That Japanese pilot intentionally tried to dive and ram us and sink us. He said you'll never see that again. That's something you can tell your kids and grandkids about. Well, nothing could have been further from the truth because when we hit Mendora, boy, they came after us. They sunk the ship in front of us, the ship behind us, and they were just devastating. In fact, they thought that they pretty well had our invasion stopped, and they had planes diving on the little small boats with a three-man crew in it, and what happened to us, there was a big twin engine Betty at a higher altitude, and we assumed then that his job was to see that those Zeroes and ____ carried out their mission by diving on and sinking the other ships. Well, we took her under fire, and our 40 mm, we had real good gunners on our ship, our 40 mm's hit her, and saw that she was going to crash anyway, so she banked and headed right to us. And we peppered her all the way down with those 40 mm and couldn't stop her, but we knocked her off course enough to where she didn't hit the middle of the ship. She hit near the bow, and we were unloading high octane gas for those PT boats and that made the darnedest explosion you can imagine. Planes and smoke and everything covered our entire ship, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise because they thought they finished us off, and they didn't bother us anymore. So we survived that even though we did lose 18 men.

Wow, that's gotta be pretty traumatic going through that.

Harold Risener: Unfortunately we didn't get unloaded that day, and so I, adjutant told me to hit the sack. I was pretty well dead on my feet. It was the only time in my life I'd ever gone to bed and didn't know if I'd ever wake up or not, but when I woke up the next morning, we were still there. I looked around and we were the only ship there. All the other fleet, everybody, supply ships, troop ships, destroyers, cruisers, everything else had gone, and the captain said that they had told him that, we knew why because MacArthur had always said it's better to sacrifice 200 men in order to save 2,000. So they told the captain that they had to take the fleet out of there because they had no air cover and they were picking us off at such an extent that he had to save the fleet, send them back under to cover of darkness, back to Leyte, and they left us there to do the best that we could. Fortunately, like I say, being covered with smoke and everything, they thought we were done for, and so they used the rest of the kamikaze's on other targets. We heard over Tokyo Rose later that our ship was so big that Tokyo Rose had announced that the Japanese had sunk an aircraft carrier there, which was probably us. We were on our own, and we couldn't even contact anyone by radio. So we said we'll get underway and go back the radius, we'd make it. Would you believe, once we got out into the sea, here come seven destroyers from out of nowhere and they surfed with us all the way back to Leyte. We had to bury our dead at sea on the way back. We had the best protection that you could imagine, and had no further difficulty until we got back to Leyte where the rest of the fleet was.

What goes through your mind during a thing like that, during a time like that, or do you not even think about it?

Harold Risener: The only thing that I can remember is I wish and hope that somehow when this thing is over, I can be able to look up in the records and see that the men that we'd lost there, sweethearts, their wives and their parents, and tell them what happened and where their men were buried. I thought about that.

Did you share many of those stories with your future wife when you would write letters to her, or did you try to -

Harold Risener: No, we weren't allowed. Our mail was censored. We weren't allowed to say anything about anything we'd be in, but now that you mention that, she wrote me a letter saying what the date was that she had a dream that our ship was hit. And I'll be doggoned if it wasn't exactly when it happened.

And you got that letter weeks later?

Harold Risener: Oh yeah, and one of the officer's jobs was to censor mail whenever the crew would write a letter home or anywhere, they would drop it in a mailbox unsealed, and so at night when we weren't on watch, the officer's job was to censor the mail. We weren't allowed to say where we'd been, what we were doing, what happened or anything else.

When you'd censor it, would you have to cut out anything?

Harold Risener: Yes sir.

How would you cut it out? Would you use a little knife?

Harold Risener: Well, we had razor blades. Back in those days you didn't have electric razors and most of us had a single edge razor, and you'd just lay 'em out there on a piece of felt and cut it out because if you scratched it out or took the page out or anything, but then when the loved one got the letter, they wouldn't know how much they had read or how long the letter was or anything, so we did it that way.

That makes sense. Tell us sir, about your ship, when you became a ship's captain, and how old were you at that time?

Harold Risener: 21. My first assignment was to take back to the States a load of brig cases and POW's, prisoners of war. And the poor director that has to do with that assignment asked me. He said now you're the captain of this ship, and we can't make you do it, but said the admiral would really appreciate if you could take these people back. They are murderers and they are rapists and like every society, we have a lot of bad people, and they are hardened criminals, but he said we will furnish you a detachment of Marines, bring them aboard, and guard them the whole time they are there, and make sure that they don't cause any harm to you. He said in the Marine Corps there is an unwritten rule they enforce, if any Marine lets a prisoner escape for any reason, and whatever term he has, he finishes serving out his term. He says they are gonna make sure that they stay and they converted a couple of compartments, several compartments down below to keep them locked up on the way back to the States. I said well, I haven't been skipper of this ship too long, but if I do something that doesn't please the admiral, that's not gonna set well. So I said yes sir, we'll sure take 'em back.

How many did you have?

Harold Risener: I think there was 24 ___ cases and about 12 PAL's which is prisoners at large. They had PAL written on the back of their dungarees, jumpsuit. We put them to painting ship and deck, swabbing decks and doing the work on the ship on the way back. Of course, the others we had to keep confined. The thing that bothered me, of course you have to inspect the crew's compartment and make sure it's clean and sanitary. I found out one of the worst things that can happen to a captain is let anybody die aboard ship which almost happened to me between San Francisco and the Panama Canal. But anyway, what concerned me on, see, an LST is about three weeks it takes us to get from Pearl Harbor back to the States, and so my concern was when I made the weekly inspection of the compartment that one of those guys would hit me in the head when my back was turned. But I made sure I had these master at arms right behind me, and I tried to be well protected when I'd go through there.

Sure, makes sense.

Harold Risener: But I felt relieved when they left the ship and we got to San Pedro.

I imagine, absolutely. You said you almost had a sailor die?

Harold Risener: A man, we were sailing along from San Pedro, California, down to the Panama Canal and we got about halfway there, and the pharmacist came off the bridge where I was, said captain, says we got a very sick man down below. I said what do you mean? He says, well, he's delirious and he doesn't know what he's doing. We're having to keep him tied to his bunk. I said why is that? He said I just don't know. He says I don't know that much about medicine. See, we didn't have a doctor aboard, but we had a crew of pharmacists, and they could treat injuries and sickness and all and wounds, but nothing like that. And so I got on the

radio and got a hold of a COM 14, I think COM 14 was at that time down in Panama, and told them my situation, and he got a doctor on the force radio, and I got the pharmacist in charge up there, and the doctor would keep asking him questions and he would answer, and when he got through, the doctor said the man has spinal meningitis. That's often fatal and very contagious disease. So then I got back to the commanding officer of the naval district and asked him what he suggested action I take. He says, you make the best possible speed and take the man off at the first set of locks. We were already going about 10 knots which is less than 15 mph, so I told them to put on every RPM the engines could stand, and we got up to maybe 11.5 knots, and did the best we could. Boy, when we got to the first set of locks and the guy went over the side with pack and baggage, I felt like a big weight had been lifted off of my shoulders, because boy, if a man dies on board your ship no matter why or when or what reason, you start getting letters from their sweethearts, their wives, their parents, there's lawyers and maybe some of the senators and stuff, and it's really hell to pay.

What ended up happening to that sailor, do you know?

Harold Risener: No, we never heard from him again, but then when we got through the canal and over on the other side, I told the pilot, they gave you a horrible time to take you through the canal, through those locks and everything, so on the way over there I said, are we gonna be starboard side to the dock or port side to? He said you'll be starboard side to. I figured I better let him know because one of our small boats that we were gonna use for liberty parties and mail was the only one we had operating. None of the others would operate. So I told him to let me know in plenty of time before we get there so I can lower this boat. He said OK. So we get through the canal and we start heading up towards the dockside and I said I think the space on there looks like where we are heading. I say hey, wait a minute, is that our space there, ahead of us space? He said yes it is. I said well you were supposed to let me know about that boat. He said well start loading it, hurry up. By the time I called the boat crew, well he'd lowered the boat, they got clear, but the ship had so much weight on it, in other words it was going so fast that even though he stopped the engines and put them back all a-pull, we could not stop and we hit the end of that dock. There happened to be a house there on the end of that dock, and man, we smashed into that thing, broke the plumbing loose and water squirting 50 feet in the air, people are running around hollering and thought an earthquake had hit or something, you know. Then I thought I was in for it then. So we backed off and it put a dent in the ship, and there's a lot of difference between metal and wood, so we were not worried about the safety of the ship, but sure enough by the time we got secured, here comes this ensign down here and said the captain of the port wants to see you in his office. I said oh, I knew it. So I get up there and he says are you the captain of the ship that ran into the dock down there and wrecked this house? I said yes sir, and I'd like to tell you how it happened. He said that's what I want you to do. So I gave him all the reasons for it, why we did it, what I told the pilot, what the pilot did and everything. He looked at me and said son, how old are you? I said I'm 21, sir. He said I tell you what you do. You get back to your ship, look up in naval regulations what reports you make when a collision like this happens and send it in, and that'll be the end of it. I said thank you, sir, and I headed for the door and he said wait a minute, weren't you the ship that had that case of spinal meningitis on the way down here? I said yes sir. He said look, you weren't even supposed to be in here. You're supposed to be 3 miles offshore in quarantine for six weeks, was it six weeks, or three months or something. He said you're supposed to be out there in quarantine before you even came in here. I said, sir, I was only obeying orders. My orders were to make full speed and take the man off at the first set of locks. He said well, if we all come down with it, we'll know why. Go on back to your business. So I had another close call there.

Sounds like it. How long, sir, did you end up serving as the skipper of that ship?

Harold Risener: It was decommissioned shortly after that. We got it ready for decommissioning, which I guess took a couple of months or so. There was only certain items that could be left on board. We had a list of it, and so I asked the officer in charge of decommissioning, so those ships became surplus after the war was over, and so they were decommissioned and what they were going to do with it at that time, we had no idea. But anyway, there was only certain items that could be on there, and I said gosh, we got a whole bunch of stuff on here. What am I supposed to do with that? He says captain, everybody has their problems, and that's one of yours. Well I got a hold of some nursing homes and hospitals. From New Orleans we went to Galveston and supposed to be decommissioned in Houston. When we got to Galveston, that's when we took about three weeks after that to get ready and so forth, so I contacted some nursing homes and hospitals and I got rid of the sides of beef and food that they could use and just asked them to send transportation over and take them free of charge. But I had a refrigerator in my cabin I just threw over the side, and we were throwing library books that we put in weighted bags that we had for burial at sea and for jettisoning secret material in case we got captured, and we used those for library books and we threw typewriters and handguns and I even had a jeep on there, and boy my dad on the farm would've given anything for that jeep.

That's a shame.

Harold Risener: So I just told the driver of that jeep, just drive it over on the dock and leave it and walk away from it and come on back. So we threw so much stuff over the side to get ready for decommissioning, that I was concerned when we started the main engine and started the propellers going, we might run afoul and have a hard time getting away from the dock, but we didn't.

That's too bad. I've heard a lot of those stories about all the gear and stuff they got rid of.

Harold Risener: Before we left the Pacific, I even saw them take brand new fighter planes out at sea on barges and just push 'em over the side.

That's sad to hear that, but I know that's kind of what had to be done I guess. So then at that point, did you get out of active Navy?

Harold Risener: Well, what happened there, when we decommissioned, they asked somebody that would like to stay and keep watch on those ships, and I said that sounds like pretty good duty to me, I'll just take that. I'd just gotten married, and said boy, New Orleans is a great place to have a honeymoon. So for a month or two, I stayed out there as kind of a security officer in charge of some shore patrolmen who were assigned under me to patrol the area and make sure those ships were secure. Then the doggone mosquitoes got so bad because we had to shut off the power. We had no blowers and everything, and I told the officer in charge of that operation, I said you know, I'd like to be relieved of this duty. I've taken about all of these mosquitoes I think I can take. He said well, that's good because other people would like to have that. So he said you go on and report to the 8th Naval District and they'll give you a new set of orders. So I went back and reported in, and I had something happen to me that I wasn't accustomed to. I was accustomed to people giving me an assignment and I'd carry it out, and they asked me, said I was a lieutenant then, of course no matter what your rank is, if you are a skipper of a ship, they call you captain. He said lieutenant, what do you want to do now? I said you're asking me what

I want to do? He said yeah, what do you want to do? I said I want 30 days leave. And he said, you got it. So this was where I was for New Orleans.

And then you stayed I guess in the Navy Reserves?

Harold Risener: I stayed in the Reserves, Active Reserve, if there's another war you're gonna be called to active duty anyway, so you might as well stay in, and you get paid a day's pay for every day you attend a drill, and then you go on two weeks' active duty every year and you get paid for that, and if there's another war, you're going back in anyway. Well it just so happened, let's see, that was in '46, it just so happened that not long after that, the Korean War came along, and it wasn't everybody going back. It was you, me, and another guy, and I happened to be the other guy, so I got recalled to active duty in the Korean War, and was on an electronic supply ship and operated out of Satsabo, Japan, going over to Korea about once a month to handle the ships of the line over there, and they passed the radar, sonar, whatever.

That had to have been a lot less nerve wracking I guess.

Harold Risener: Oh yeah, that was quite different, and I was over there for over two years.

Two years straight.

Harold Risener: Mm-hmm.

Were you able to bring your wife with you?

Harold Risener: Well, I was able to then, but it just so happened that we had a baby then, and the only quarters I could get was with a Japanese family. The Army had a village for their dependents, but the Navy didn't, and the only way she could would be to live with a Japanese family, and with the conditions they way they were then, it was better to stay home. So she stayed at home.

During those two years, were you able to get back to the United States at all?

Harold Risener: No, I had a son that was six weeks old when I left home, and he was over two years old the last time I saw him.

What was that like, you finally got back home?

Harold Risener: That was pretty strange. Of course my mother was reading my letters to him and when he got old enough to understand English and so forth, and she could show him my pictures, said that's your daddy and everything. It was quite an experience to meet him at the airport when I got back, but then it took me a while to get used to him, and of course I was accustomed to pretty strong discipline all my life, and so he'd get out of line, why I'd correct him and he would say I want to go see mommy.

So did it take him a while?

Harold Risener: Yes, it did, but he came around.

Oh, I'm sure. And then at that point, did you continue, I know you retired as a commander, so I assume you stayed in the Reserves.

Harold Risener: I did, and wound up as commanding officer of a Navy Reserve Surface Division 899 in San Antonio.

And when was it that you retired from the Navy?

Harold Risener: Well, I think it was about '68, something like that.

Retired in the late 60s.

Harold Risener: Yes sir.

And how was it that you came to San Antonio?

Harold Risener: Well, I had a friend in college that had the same education that I did, and he had told me after the Korean War was over, he said you know, our company, the name of the company was Texas Automatic Sprinkler Company, and he said our company is doing pretty well and we are enlarging, and said, see, I majored in industrial engineering, and he said if you are interested in going to work for the sprinkler company designing fire protection systems, I'll say something to the boss about it, and tell him you have the same education and qualifications I do, so he did and so I got this job and started out as a draftsman learning to design a sprinkler system on the drawing board, and then I got to be an estimator, and then a salesman and branch manager and wound up as district manager.

That's great. Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time today to share some of your stories and memories with us.

Harold Risener: Well, I wished we had time to go into the Okinawa operations, the Luzon operation which were quite interesting, about the kamikaze's and going into Japan at the end of the war, and what the Japanese fought with us when only officers could go aboard the first couple of days we were side armed. I would like to tell you about this thing if we have time. When the two atom bombs were dropped, and sort of after the fleet got a message from Admiral Halsey, and I'll never forget the wording on it, it said "It is our understanding the Japanese have surrendered. However, should you see any of the enemy in the air, shoot 'em down in a friendly manner."

In a friendly manner, that's great. Yes sir, I really would like to talk to you about some more of those stories and perhaps we can schedule another interview some time to do that, but for the interview we've done today, I want to thank you on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everybody here at the Land Office. We want to thank you, sir, for your service to our nation and just as a small token of our gratitude, we're going to send you like I mentioned before, copies of this interview on CD's that you can give to friends and family and whomever, as well as a nice letter and certificate signed by Commissioner Patterson and we put that in a commemorative binder. So in about a couple of weeks, be looking for that in the mail.

Harold Risener: Well thank you very much, Mr. Crabtree, and I tell you what, you seem like a very nice gentleman and I want you to know it's been a real pleasure.

Yes sir, it's been my honor and you've got my number as well, and when I send that package to you, I'll be sure to I'll be sure to put one of my cards in there, too.

Harold Risener: Thank you, sir.

But feel free to get in touch with me, and like I said, the gentleman that normally makes the CD's for us, he's on vacation this week, but when he gets back next week he'll get 'em made for us and then shortly after that we'll get that package in the mail to you.

Harold Risener: Very good, sir.

Yes sir, all right, well thank you very much, sir, and take care.

Harold Risener: Thank you, sir, have a good day.

[End of recording]