

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Robert Witzig
United States Navy, World War II.

1999

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Witzig, Robert M., (1924-). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 110 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 110 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 110 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract

Witzig, a Grant County, Wis. native, discusses his service with the Navy aboard the USS Indianapolis and his experiences after the ship was sunk by a submarine attack, and his rescue after remaining in the water for five days. He talks about boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), additional training at Treasure Island (California), and role as a fire controlman in charge of sighting and ranging the ship's guns. He provides detailed information about the arms aboard the Indianapolis including the types of attack each gun was used for, storage facilities for the charges, and how various guns were fired. He touches upon his participation in the battle for the Mariannas, battle for the Philippine Sea, and the fighting at Okinawa. Witzig details his experiences after the Indianapolis was sunk. This account begins with completing the ship's final assignment which was transporting the atomic bomb to Tinaian Island and the precautions taken with this cargo. Shortly after unloading the cargo, the ship was hit by a Japanese submarine. He details walking away from his battle station on a catwalk when the ship began to list, explosion of the ordnance, jumping off and swimming away from the ship, and watching the ship's stern sink while in the water. Also discussed is the damage to his throat from the gas fumes and skin damage from the salt water. Witzig mentions the extreme cold at night, trying to keep his head above the waves, rubbing oil from oil slicks on exposed skin to keep in body heat, shark attacks, and rescue by a Navy aircraft. He comments on treatment in a hospital on Guam, the close bond between survivors, and the dedication of the monument to the USS Indianapolis.

Biographical Sketch

Witzig (1924-) joined the Navy in 1943 and served aboard the USS Indianapolis until the ship was sunk by a Japanese submarine in 1945. One of only 316 survivors from a crew of 1,199, Witzig settled in Fennimore, Wis.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1999.

Transcribed by Alis Fox, 2006.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: Well, we're talking to Bob Witzig, and it is the 17th of November of 1999.
[Setting up for interview.] Now, you were born where?

Witzig: In Grant County. You want the name or--

McIntosh: No. If you were born in this county, that's just fine.

Witzig: Yeah, I was born in Grant County, Wisconsin, 24-'24, August 24, '24.

McIntosh: Oh, just a year after me. I'm September, '23. So, and when did you enter the service?

Witzig: Later or middle of 1943.

McIntosh: '43.

Witzig: I was discharged January 8th of 1946.

McIntosh: When you joined that year, did you designate that you wanted the Navy right after that or did they assign you?

Witzig: Well, at that time you had your choice more or less. If you waited, they'd give you anything you wanted. So I didn't want the Army. I already had two brothers in the Army, or three. So I wanted to select the Navy. So I went and signed up and be done with it because you wasn't going to get out of it anyway.

McIntosh: Right. Where did they send you?

Witzig: Oh, boy. I went to Great Lakes.

McIntosh: You got your basic there and got out of boot camp there six weeks?

Witzig: Yes, sir.

McIntosh: Then what?

Witzig: Well, from there we got home for about six or eight days and went back to Great Lakes and they threw us on one of them fast-moving trains, the old style. They pulled five miles of them out of the mountains to put back in use and took four days and three nights to get to the West Coast. And then what? Went to Treasure Island, and we set around there and I was put on the crew for the USS Indianapolis CA-35, and that's the only position I had.

- McIntosh: What was your duty there?
- Witzig: I was a fire control man. A fire control man in the Navy at that time rating, they select the men of a little higher IQ because a fire control man has got nothing to do with the engines whatsoever. He is an advanced gunnery man. He handles the sighting and the firing of all guns, and gunnery crew does the maintenance and loading and what have you.
- McIntosh: Now, the fire control involved how many people?
- Witzig: I believe we had 84 in our division.
- McIntosh: And so immediately above you would be a boatswain?
- Witzig: No. Above me-- When I first joined I was a seaman, and in that division they took on three seamen, and you studied and learned. That was all self-done. There was no teaching, and if you didn't want to study and learn pretty soon they just dropped you off into some dead division and put somebody else in because they want three seamen for study and the rest of the men was all rated, rated men from there to the chief petty officer. And the men above me, well, my lieutenant was Lieutenant McKissinger. He was a man from Texas. He always looked after me nice. And now what else you want to know about that?
- McIntosh: Well, tell me what a fire control man does more specifically. We need that.
- Witzig: A fire control man maintains all the sighting, gunnery sighting equipment. He runs the computer system for the ship. That's a little different than our computer system today as you speak about. The computer system and the gyroscopic system is what also determines your longitude and latitude and whatever, all those motions. And tell me your question again.
- McIntosh: What's the purpose of your job specifically? How did you do it?
- Witzig: Well, when this is all taken care of you actually run the sighting equipment on all these guns, whatever sized gun you was on, and when it come time to pull the trigger or the firing key you was the one that done it.
- McIntosh: Who gave you the coordinates?
- Witzig: Coordinate--the orders?
- McIntosh: Yeah.
- Witzig: Well, on the big turrets, the big guns, our chief warrant officer. We had a chief warrant officer. He led each one of those. He is the one that ordered the firing. But on the five-inch we had like a third- or second-class petty officer. And we did

have some 20 millimeters. You were just on them individually. And the 40 millimeters, there was a third-class petty officer on those.

McIntosh: Well, and so you were in there organizing where the big guns were going to shoot primarily, just the big guns?

Witzig: Well, no, being I was only a second-class petty officer on the tail end. We didn't have anything-- which was left up to the chief petty officer. It comes from the computer room. It was all coordinated when the ship was in the correct balance.

McIntosh: Got it. Okay.

Witzig: And the big guns, they had to be fired broadside. You don't shoot a big gun off of a heavy ship fore or aft. You'd break them in two, tear them apart.

McIntosh: You shot that triple three?

Witzig: Yeah.

McIntosh: Straight-ahead?

Witzig: It's called a turret.

McIntosh: A turret, yeah. You couldn't shoot that ahead?

Witzig: You can't shoot straight in line, no.

McIntosh: It is automatic for the ship?

Witzig: Yeah.

McIntosh: When that thing went off from those turrets, boom, that really rocked that ship?

Witzig: You shoot what's called-- Now, we had three turrets: two up front, one in the rear. Once in a while you'd shoot the nine guns off, what's called a nine-gun salvo, and that would push your ship backwards from three to 400 feet instantly.

McIntosh: Sideways?

Witzig: Yeah, back sideways, opposite of where you was firing, yeah.

McIntosh: Yeah. And that's a big ship.

Witzig: Yeah.

- McIntosh: Straight backwards or not?
- Witzig: Oh, you bet, you bet. It'd just go straight back, just like sliding on ice, you know, same principle.
- McIntosh: I'll be darned.
- Witzig: The smaller guns you didn't have that trouble.
- McIntosh: No.
- Witzig: Now, the five-inch-- We had a lot of five-inch guns, which was used for shore base and anti-aircraft. It didn't matter how you shot them. They didn't have much recoil.
- McIntosh: The guys in the turrets here, they are self-enclosed in those turrets?
- Witzig: Oh, yeah.
- McIntosh: And then they had to have the ammunition and the powder and the wadding and all that stuff. Was that in case-- They distributed it from below, fed in the guns from below?
- Witzig: That's right. It was fed up from down in the keel of the ship.
- McIntosh: Electric lift brought them up?
- Witzig: Well, give or take we'll assume, yeah. I didn't get into that part, but first you brought--the projectiles come up, and the projectiles on the eight-inch, they weigh-- The bombardment weighed 290 pounds, and the armor piercing weighed I'm quite sure 360 pounds. Then you brought two bags of powder up and then one bag of nitroglycerin, fast-moving powder. It is a little bag, you know. Principally that's what set off the fast motion to explode the other two. And one thing is kind of interesting as you probably remember, back in them days women wore silk stockings, you know, and the military collected silk stockings. Well, that's what this powder had to be wrapped into. That's where the silk stockings went.
- McIntosh: As a protection?
- Witzig: No. That's the only way they could be bagged. Silk burnt up fast and didn't leave no deposit of residue.
- McIntosh: Oh, see, now I didn't know that. That's very good.
- Witzig: And in our day there were no pantyhose, as we know them today. We just called

them stockings. But that's what happened to the silk. The women ended up wearing cotton stockings (both laugh).

McIntosh: Did they keep the nitroglycerin separate from the rest of the powder?

Witzig: The powder? Well, I was never in the actual powder room, but I'm pretty sure they were on different racks. It had to be, everything divided.

McIntosh: It's sort of treacherous that stuff.

Witzig: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's dangerous.

McIntosh: All right. So when you got on the Indianapolis you were on the maiden cruise; right?

Witzig: No. The Indianapolis was commissioned long before I went aboard.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. Okay.

Witzig: The Indianapolis was built in 1932. It ran from 1932 to 1945, the life of that ship. 1932 President Roosevelt had that ship built special, just like we got the special have planes for the presidents at that time. We had the ship. The USS Indianapolis was a President Roosevelt ship. It was built special, it was built lightweight, and built with speed. We had more speed on that ship than any of their sister ships. It was made a little lighter. The armament was cut lighter, but it had to be thrown into the war effort anyway. And one interesting thing, and I can remember reading it in the newspaper, and you did too, but when President-- A rare occasion here one of them go aboard anywhere, and President Roosevelt made one of the world's-- In fact, he really actually started it to a great extent. There was some ahead of him, presidential trips to foreign countries. He went to Brazil, and I know you must have read it in the Madison paper. So there you are.

McIntosh: On the Indianapolis he went?

Witzig: Yes, that was the ship.

McIntosh: Okay. Very good. When you got then aboard ship where did you head for? Where was your first assignment after you got aboard?

Witzig: Oh, I come into the fire control division.

McIntosh: I mean where was the ship's port? Where were they going?

Witzig: Oh, well?

- McIntosh: Mission I guess, that's what I am looking for.
- Witzig: Okay. That's fine. Oh, oh, I know. We didn't know. We just went to the Asiatic Pacific and joined up with the fleet. Now, actually the average crewman, they went up to a higher--we are accustomed to Asiatic words and names nowadays. Back in my time they said the name of some island which was Asiatic, it took as much as two or three weeks to get that through your head, what the hell the name of that island was, which is common practice. You don't pay no attention today. But, anyway, I got to put this all in perspective, you know.
- McIntosh: Sure.
- Witzig: I have a post-traumatic stress difficulty, you know, and it gets to me.
- McIntosh: Oh, all right.
- Witzig: Now switch on the subject a little bit if it's all right. Now, last night I spoke in Platteville to about a 120-130 people, and I done a pretty decent job. I didn't have anything I was going to speak about, but I can talk about--float in on five or six different angles, you know. And I was going along and, boy, I cut right off, right in the middle of a sentence.
- McIntosh: I'll be darned.
- Witzig: Yeah. I just say, well, I'm in a little trouble momentarily, I'll have to switch. I'd switch to around something similar but still on the same subject. People didn't know any different and didn't pay a bit of attention. But, you see, right now I receive my medical care from Tomah, Wisconsin, which is one of the top-rated places in the state, and I get on very fine. I go there three times a month, and I never miss. I'm on one medic--half a pill but a pretty powerful pill, you know.
- McIntosh: What disability are you on? What percent disability did they give you?
- Witzig: I'm a hundred percent.
- McIntosh: A hundred percent.
- Witzig: I've been rated not at that percentage but ever since 1951, and that's a long time. But anyway—
- McIntosh: Your first mission went to the Aleutians.
- Witzig: Okay.
- McIntosh: That's what I understand.

- Witzig: Now, I wouldn't know-- The ship had just come back from the Aleutians when I went aboard. That was pretty early in the scene.
- McIntosh: Yes.
- Witzig: Okay. We'll get on to that. Like I say, you could be thrown in the 3rd, 5th, or 7th fleet, and the crew never knew where in the hell they was. You was never told this stuff, and-- Okay. I got to switch a little bit. All right. We'll talk about cameras. Like I was in a program up here at Tomah talking about--a man was talking about cameras and this and that. I told him, I said, you know, if you had a camera that didn't work, that was 20 years; and if you had film that wasn't no good along with it, that it'd be another ten. You'd have 30 years for something that was no good. That's what it amounted to, and these young men couldn't understand that, but that's how vicious it was. Now we'll try to get back on that topic you were talking about. Now tell me, what were we talking about?
- McIntosh: It was on the first place that the ship went to after you got aboard.
- Witzig: Oh, boy, now, I don't know if I can tell you that exactly, if I can piece it together. Anyway, (inaudible) during the Mariana Campaign. That wasn't the first I was to. It seemed like I was in the battle of the Philippine Sea, but I don't know. If it wasn't that it was in the battle of another one, but I am pretty much it was in the battle of the Philippine Sea. But my ship just happened to be lucky enough we wasn't in the heat of it. The crew was not told what goes on in them deals. Now, that's all there is to it. You find them out years later. It's just like years later I found out when I was discharged I was--I had five operational stars in five major engagements. I knew that. But in 1979 nuclear submarines are named after special ships. And they built the new nuclear submarine. I went to New London, Connecticut. I was an honored guest there, and this submarine was named USS Indianapolis CA-35 697. Otherwise, the common submarine ordinarily just had numbers. And at that outfit President Carter was there and his Secretary of the Navy. Mr. Carter shook my hand. Mr. Carter talked a little bit up on the podium. The sub base is the same as a big bunch of farm buildings because this was not a newer style base and what have you. But, anyway, the main speaker, he talked and so on and so forth. When he got done speaking, he come down and-- To me there wasn't too many people there. It was in March, and it was colder than hell there and so on and so forth. And he come up to me and he says, "Hello, Bob," the Secretary of the Navy. And when I was setting down there you looked up because he was up high on the plank deck.
- McIntosh: Sure.
- Witzig: And the way we learned how to tell people--you didn't know their names all, if you did you couldn't keep count of them all--the bone structure of their face, and I

still use that as a rule today. And they ended up-- This Secretary of the Navy, he was a captain of a real high- speed transport. He was the captain, but his rating was only a lieutenant, a real high-speed transport. In other words, for example, the way I described it to the men at Tomah when I was in group, that is to the Navy--those types of ship is similar to a Ford truck is to a farmer. They are just a do-all, you know. Anyway, here I'm with the man that ended up being the Secretary of the Navy, and I remembered him by bone structure. About 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning but--in the pitch dark. I'd seen him otherwise, but I probably didn't know him. When I got picked up at that time in the morning and they took you off of a little landing craft, put you on a stretcher, they tied you with the ropes. Two or three men pulled you up over the bow, and I remember him telling us 35 feet up there. You get pulled up by the God damn (inaudible) and, oh, boy, we was on our last laps. I was getting cold, come out of the water and was set on this--laid on this little transport on a steel deck bare hide for about an hour and you was getting stiff. I remember they had to lift me on the stretcher. I couldn't get on it. Anyway, when they got up and went through the lifeline, you know, reaching and pulling you through the lifeline, boy, that rope tends to slip; and it just seemed like, oh, boy, you thought you were lost. Of course I probably didn't drop any more than a foot or two. And the thing that went through your mind, oh, boy, I made it this far, if I go down I'll hit that steel deck, that's the end of me in this shape. But this bone fascia, bone structure of the face of this man was--
[Gap on audiotape]

--that helped pull the rope up, and I was laying there, and he is the one that helped untie the ropes on me, and here 35 or 37 years later I recognized that bone structure as the Secretary of the Navy speaking to me.

McIntosh: You were sure that was him right off the bat.

Witzig: I was almost sure, but when he come down and I stood up and he spoke my name and shook my hand then I knew. And later he says, "Bob, we are up for reelection," Carter is, "I don't know if I'm going to get to stay Secretary of the Navy, but if I do you come back to Washington and you hunt me out, and if I'm not there you tell the secretaries who you are and I'll see you get treated pretty nice."

McIntosh: Oh, that's nice.

Witzig: Okay. Now I got sidetracked, but anyway--

McIntosh: That's all right.

Witzig: That's the way I do on these stories. I can't help it.

McIntosh: No problem.

- Witzig: Anyway, I'll fill it in and talk about something. Okay. Now where do you want to go from here?
- McIntosh: Okay. I want to know after you were out there in the Pacific why you came back to pick up that bomb, not knowing what it was, and taking it to Tinian. Tell me about that.
- Witzig: Rephrase that again for me Okay. Well, you said you were out in the Pacific and you had been through a of battles but then you had to return home to pick up that box that contained the atomic bomb—
- Witzig: Oh.
- McIntosh: --and take it to Tinian. So how did that go? Okay. And let me tell you how come we come back to the states. We Okinawa and, boy, they turned a lot of kamikaze planes on us. They kept 13 men 'o war. We was one of those men 'o war. We lost 27 men there.
- McIntosh: Did the kamikaze hit the ship?
- Witzig: Yeah.
- McIntosh: Do you recall where on the ship?
- Witzig: Umm, let me go through it again.
- McIntosh: Okay.
- Witzig: This kamikaze hit our ship. I was up on the flight deck, what we call a flight hand, a flight deck. We only carried four seaplanes, but-- And I was on a 20 millimeter sighting outfit, you know. Sometimes we had some 20 millimeters with sights there and the guns way over here, and sometimes you had the sight right on the gun. Anyway, I was on watch there and I was hand deck. It was about 40 to 50 feet long. The work ship was about 80, and that's where this kamikaze hit. This kamikaze had two just projectiles from the big guns, you know, the armor piercing. They tie them on. There wasn't bombs or nothing but armor piercing.
- McIntosh: Tie them right on the wings of the plane.
- Witzig: Yeah, underneath. Anyway, when this plane come down, it was foggy and they come in there fast. We only got a few rounds of ammo off.
- McIntosh: You mean off the deck, or did it come in higher?

Witzig: No, come in low, followed the fog in and then down.

McIntosh: Oh, okay.

Witzig: And they are at close range. I mean, it's close where you couldn't even pick them up, you know. You know, and that's the way it went. Like I say, there was only a few rounds off from the time until-- Got an eight-gun, 40 millimeter back there. You get some rounds off, but it didn't get stopped.

McIntosh: Did you see it coming in?

Witzig: I seen it just before it hit, but, oh, boy.

McIntosh: Scared the willies out of you.

Witzig: You don't get scared. You get scared but you do not get scared. It's a different type of a scare. It's-- Yeah, sure. It's like I say, it is just a different type of a scare, but you do what you need to do, period. But that ship hit the hangar deck. Like I say, it was only about 45-50 feet run lengthways the ship and 80 foot wide. A lot of this kamikaze plane went overboard, but two projectiles come down. Either they let loose, we don't know, but all we had left on the hangar deck was part of the wing and a little bit of the fuselage. The rest of it went overboard. It was a damn good thing. How in the hell-- How much room would there-- There was no place for me to go. I was about the only man up there on that hangar deck. I mean, you know, I never scratch.

McIntosh: Incredible.

Witzig: But from that-- When they (inaudible) that old ship went down and down and down down some more and again some more. That wasn't what hurt you. It's when it come back up. That just doubled your back and knees and legs and everything. That's what really—

McIntosh: The impact pushed the ship deep into the water.

Witzig: Oh, yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: Oh, I see.

Witzig: I don't know how far. There is no way of measuring it, but I just figured that ship went down 30-40 feet in the water.

McIntosh: Oh, my God.

Witzig: You know, they probably had two projectiles off of battle wagons. They weigh--

McIntosh: 2,000 pounds.

Witzig: They are pretty good.

McIntosh: So I expect when it was blown up you felt like you were on an elevator.

Witzig: Oh, boy. Like I say, it just buckles your back and knees. And this bothered me all my life. I've got some--part of my back-- I'm in real good physical shape, but part of it's kind of fused and grewed together, but I get along at my age. In fact, I'm in excellent health. I got real, real attention, just don't know what time, but I have this post-traumatic stress which gives me trouble. Anyway, I got sidetracked again. The question was—

[Gap in tape]

--Okinawa and we got hit, knocked our one set of engines out and our evaporator. So we had no fresh water and one set of engines still intact, and we come back to the states and they done a fast fix-up job on it. After all, this was wartime. There was no time to do it all straight. And then we got called down to Hunter's Point. That's in Frisco, right there Treasure Island, Mare Island, and all of those places in there. But Frisco had ports, docks. But at Hunter's Point that's where, you see, atomic material was loaded aboard, and nobody knew. Not even our captain knew what was taken aboard.

McIntosh: Just a big box, huh?

Witzig: Yeah, big, big boxes like-- They was just wooden crates. It just seemed like they was about 30 foot long, maybe six or eight up and across, painted green, and there was three of them. **[Side 1, Tape 1, Ends]**

Witzig: And then a smaller outfit, steel, metal container, was taken through the captain's cabin.

McIntosh: (Laughs).

Witzig: And that was welded to the floor.

McIntosh: Oh, welded to the floor.

Witzig: Right.

McIntosh: Yeah. That's the detonator.

Witzig: I don't know what it was.

McIntosh: That's what it was.

Witzig: But, anyway, that's what it was.

McIntosh: Welded to the floor.

Witzig: But the whole thing about it, I bumped into a man up here at Tomah. His dad was a lieutenant commander. He was due to go aboard ship, and he is the man that really took me under the wing and done a lot of things for me. He is a chief medical officer up at Tomah. He is retired now. But he thought a lot of me and he took me under his wing, and we took on 45 new men, and there was more to go aboard. But this lieutenant commander didn't make it for the simple fact we was all loaded and secured four days ahead of time, and most officers don't come on until about the last six or eight hours. Some of the crew comes in earlier. But the ship was ordered out of the populous area immediately. There was no admiral or nobody had the authority to do that, and afterwards-- President Truman is the only man that could order that out of the area. We was dangerous material. We was ordered to sea without no escort. In other words, if we are going to lose a ship we are only going to lose one. That's what it amounted to. But this stuff was all learned afterwards, you know.

McIntosh: Sure.

Witzig: So the ship, it had a lot of speed. We could avoid--outrun submarines, which we did. And after Pearl Harbor it took--many known--it is not made in the war records. It was two or three submarines for one to two that was on to us. But, anyway, we get to the island of Tinian, afternoon about 2:30, and we get this equipment unloaded. Didn't know what the hell it was.

McIntosh: Didn't have-- Anybody have any idea?

Witzig: No. We knew it had to be something valuable.

McIntosh: You knew it was something important though; right?

Witzig: Very valuable. But that's all I know, and then we left from there to the Philippines to join up with one of the fleets, as the fleets were getting ready to make way to the mainland invasion of Japan, and that was going to be a mean one. We avoided it. I know I was in the first three raids on the mainland of Japan back in February and March of April of 1945, and it was mean. We'd get close enough where you could see the mountains with snow on, and the water was terrible rough. You didn't really want too much part of that. But anyway, one thing thankful today, it was a hell of a thing to do but it was to the benefit of everybody, outside of a few people that want to scoff. We have quite a few of us in the last year, Japanese officials, actually come to the conclusion that it was the best thing that ever happened. It stopped it. It wasn't going to stop. After all, you had a different form

of government there; and, after all, it was estimated. And when the high staff estimates a casualty loss they are hardly ever wrong. It was estimated the Asiatic Pacific allied force to lose over a million men and the Japanese would lose upward to ten million people.

McIntosh: If they had to invade Japan.

Witzig: That was the estimates. This way it settled it. Japan got rebuilt.

McIntosh: Right.

Witzig: And both of us got a lot less trouble, and they are pretty thankful today. They ought to be because most countries that knock another one to pieces they don't go back and do them any favors, but this country always does, even at the cost of us local people.

McIntosh: They took our two major enemies and built them up, and they are the two most powerful countries in the world besides us.

Witzig: Yeah, yeah. We are pretty good at that.

McIntosh: (Laughs) Okay. So now that that job is over what were you looking forward to then forward to then, some liberty in the Philippines?

Witzig: Oh, no. Oh, no. Now which job are you talking about here?

McIntosh: Taking the atomic bomb over to Tinian, after that.

Witzig: Oh, no, no. That's when we was going to join up the fleets. The fleets were getting organized for the main invasion of Japan.

McIntosh: Right.

Witzig: Of course we never got that far.

But, anyway, after we got hit and sunk that was a pretty vicious thing. After all, this ship--Now, probably what I say is on the naval war records as the worst single disaster in the history of the United States Navy and it still is. We had a hundred percent casualty, period. And that's the way it's classified. Anyway, when I got picked up they took my group to the Philippines to an Army field hospital. Oh, boy. They pulled us inward there, and there was the God damn barbwire about 20 foot high and had one nurse and one Red Cross worker, piece of canvass over their head maybe 20 feet square. That was their living quarters. They had Army cots there. This was on gravel. You was outside. Their roof was the sky. And, oh, boy, every night machine gun fire going on.

McIntosh: In the City of Manila?

Witzig: No, no. We was out in—

McIntosh: You were out in—

Witzig: Out in the timber somewhere. How in the hell did we know where we was at? They took us back to another war zone. Actually at that time we was actually treated like convicts. We didn't even know such thing as the war was over with until way afterwards, never even knew where in the hell we was or what the hell we was doing. We were just heading, period. But, anyway, I remember we had a pair of shorts, you know, that's my clothing. I got this Red Cross outfit, Field Hospital 110 or 114 is what it was called. Red Cross nurse come around--and the Red Cross never got a penny out of me all these years--give you a little bag of something about like a bag of tobacco. In that bag was a little tube of toothpaste so strong you couldn't put it in your mouth, like what used to be the smallest one you can buy the size of a pencil, and a toothbrush I never seen in my born life, one row of bristles. Here is a man who hasn't shaved and we got an old--it wasn't plastic, it was celluloid in them days--a celluloid razor with one blade. And I believe there was one or two other little things in there. And that was the big favor the Red Cross was going to do us. Here was a bunch of men who didn't have nothing but one pair of undershorts to a hide. And we was there in that hospital for 14 days on the same sheet, shit, blood, and corruption. Finally they brought us another sheet. I don't forget those things.

McIntosh: Did anyone from the Navy sit with you or talk to you or say anything?

Witzig: No. There was no such thing as that. All we had out there was that nurse and a Red Cross worker.

McIntosh: They gave you some food.

Witzig: Huh?

McIntosh: Food.

Witzig: Oh, we got a little something to eat, yeah.

McIntosh: Back to-- Now tell me about sinking that fish. You were sailing along and what happened?

Witzig: Oh, well, that's easy enough. She just got hit. Actually it was midnight, and I happened to have old maid in as you call it, you know. And nobody slept below

deck because this is the hot weather. This ship didn't have air conditioning and fans and what have you, you know. And my workstation was the main battery director, which was 97 feet from the water. It is about so big around, maybe ten foot in diameter, and then we have a catwalk around it the hatch off the pie tin. Anyway, you got a little track where you walk around all the working stuff.

McIntosh: This is 97 feet above the water?

Witzig: The water line, yeah.

McIntosh: 97.

Witzig: That's ordinary. This track around where you walk to do these things in the director, like with me I couldn't even lay straight on. You had to lay on the curve. So, you know, it wasn't too big. You'd take a blanket and a pillow and that's your sleeping equipment, and you leave your shoes and your clothes on. You don't take them off. But anyway, all I know, I never heard this explosion. All I know, I was on my feet going out the hatch to the rear. I walked around on the catwalk to the front, and, I'm telling you, she was blew off clear to the number two turret I could look right down there and see the big engines rolling over. There was a gush of water there you could bury a pretty good-sized building in, and it stayed a long time. And this ship was really opened up. I mean, you knock that much off it's going to go down fast. Now, in my group meetings and programs at Tomah that talk, the first thing the instructors is, "Now, what did you think? What did you do?" I said we didn't think or didn't do. They couldn't understand it. This was so fast, so mean, so fierce. I said two things controls your body. You don't even control your body. You don't even control your moves. It is reflex actions and self-- Say that word.

McIntosh: Preservation.

Witzig: Right. --self-preservation that controls your body. You didn't move a hand out here with your--just like I'm moving here. That was done so fast it went from your--
[Gap in tape]
--thinking about whatever you might say, and that's the way I place it, and I'm pretty sure I'm right. But, anyway, a lot of men done a lot of things. After all, we did have a lot of men sleeping up forward on the decks. I never really knew how many, but I imagine 4600, maybe -700, and lost all of them. This impact was so--so vicious, so fast, so sharp that principally anybody sitting up or standing up didn't make it. They just about had every bone in their body broke, and I'm pretty sure I'm pretty much right.

McIntosh: You mean from knocking them down.

Witzig: From the impact.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Witzig: This is an impact much more than anybody can contemplate. It is so fast, but I do know here I was up there quite a few feet above the main deck forward, and the only men I heard was the men on the deck on each side up by the cabin, oh, up underneath the second turret. We have the captain's cabin and a few things. Those men, they couldn't get off-- couldn't get off the deck. I could hear their voices up there--it would be 60-70 feet up there--plus all of this noise and commotion from these engines and the hush of the water. The only life they had was the air in their lungs, the last life mother nature give them, hollering for help, screams of mercy you never heard of. It wasn't just one. It was everywhere I looked. I could look on this side and look on that side, and I'm the only man that really actually had--

McIntosh: A good view of the thing.

Witzig: Yes. Yes. That's right. And the captain, he was asleep. He got up-- Evidently he either had clothes on or threw them on. He got in the water and he made it. Just how, he must have moved to the rear of the ship somehow or another. But I looked around and I seen all the men, and the ship was listing and listing fast and going down, got pushed down in front.

McIntosh: It went down—

Witzig: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: --forward into the water?

Witzig: See, that heavy explosion naturally pushed the ship down.

McIntosh: Yes.

Witzig: After all, we had a full load of everything, like 10,000 gallons of aviation gas, 5,000 of paint, 3,000 of thinner, which is very explosive, and 26 carloads of ammunition, not counting the torpedoes. How much went up we don't know. But, anyway, I had to take inventory. I didn't do it intentional, not even thinking about it. Like I say, it is a reflex action, puts you right there, and you'd be surprised. I think about it many times how mother nature guarded you. She done things just perfect for me. I decided I would stay there, right there, and that'd land me way out in the water as far as any man, and I did. That didn't bother much. Probably did but, you know, you don't get excited. But I do remember as I kept on moving your heart beat beyond any speed you ever heard of and-- Your heart beat, and what the hell was the other thing?

McIntosh: It was a reflex action.

Witzig: Yeah, but the heart--these two things, your heart would just pound and--

McIntosh: Breathing.

Witzig: Breathing. And as you start to take on more listing and you was picking up speed and-- man. But I knew that the thing to do was to stay right there and it would set me out in the water, and it did. It set me out just perfect.

McIntosh: On the port side or the starboard side?

Witzig: Yeah, it went down on the--

McIntosh: On the port side?

Witzig: No, starboard side.

McIntosh: Oh.

Witzig: And I was set way out. And you swim like hell, you know.

McIntosh: I was going to say, by the time it turned on its side you were quite a ways away from the rest of the boys.

Witzig: No, it didn't turn on its side. It went down forward to a great extent. I'll tell you about that. Anyway, you swam like a son of a gun, try to get away, and you turn back. And when I turned back that could only be just a matter of a few seconds. There was the stern. It wasn't too many feet. She was sticking up, straight perpendicular. And the hole in the water, they claim it goes down eight feet. I don't know, but maybe it's more, give or take. I don't have-- But the walls in the water was perfectly round, around that stern just like it was--a hunk of earth was carved out. And just that quick that stern went down and the water went in and there was really commotion. That's a terrible noise, and just that quick you got no place to put your feet, period.
[Gap on audiotape]
Here an ordinary crew you have a Mae West belt that goes around, you now, it's folded, and they wear a little belt, and you can't keep much air in them. How in the hell in that commotion you take that off and blow it up and put it back on? That's almost impossible. But I had what I call an act of mother nature. In this rough water just as soon as that stern went down and kind of partway settled for some reason or other I had my arm out like that. I don't know how come I had it out, and I know there wasn't very many life rafts or life—

McIntosh: Preservers?

Witzig: Well, a life jacket just come and floated right up on my shoulder, the correct side out. All I had to do was run my other arm through it and tied it up and that pulled me through. After all, this life jacket thing was made of milkweed, guaranteed for 48 hours, good for 72, but it pulled me through. And it was considered four days and 19 hours up to the first part of the evening, but I didn't get picked up until something like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. So I had five days in there. Plus when I was up all this here--in the main battery director and all this here the oil fumes and smoke and the fumes off of these powder bags, the ones with the nitroglycerin in them, come up and mix with the oil until a good many years later. I remember when I hit the water I vomited so hard you'd just drop right in the water, and I thought, well, I'll count them. Something come over my mind count them. You'd drop forward, and I vomited 17 times just orange and green, you know, a lot of smoke or something. But what I did do, I took on the fumes from this nitroglycerin powder plus the oil and the other powder fumes, and here some 55 years my lungs are all scarred about eight--or three-sixteenths of an inch completely, not a bunch but completely, and they are all black, and I get along pretty good. But I don't live in town, not even this little town, and pick up them fumes. I live out here.

McIntosh: And this oil has--fumes still bother you, you mean?

Witzig: Well, much of anything, yeah, but fumes from cars and trucks. That's the no one. Smoking, that's a no.

McIntosh: Makes you cough?

Witzig: No, you don't get cough, you just--you just-- I don't smoke, so I don't cough. Well, I can't really give you a definition, but it just--

McIntosh: Sure.

Witzig: It just pops you.

McIntosh: Okay.

Witzig: Okay. Then I got to tell you a couple of interesting things. This one special-- I talked with the medical staff. In fact, maybe 20-25 years ago I was doing so good I was up there in Madison VA and pretty soon they put a ten-year study on me. I'm kind of proud of it. And of course it only lasted about three or four years and then the programs changed and the budget

changed so it was cut out. But there was university doctors. I had five or seven doctors coming with pads and pencils every time they come, about once a month. And they were all women doctors, so it made it kind of interesting. They never did send a man doctor. Hell, I don't need a man doctor. But they were studying me, and that was fine. So the program was just dropped, you know, because of insufficient funds. So they scratched it and that was it.

McIntosh: What were they studying specifically?

Witzig: Just my general health, that a man could go through a commotion like this and come out--See, my health is almost flawless right today. Sure, I got post-traumatic stress, my lungs are burned, but none of the scars are giving any trouble. But, anyway, the time I got started a little later there and tell them about the salt water, how the salt water--and when we come out, you know, they took that God damn life jackets off. They was heavy as bucket of water. You know, they was just about on their last lap. They more than done their last lap but they--they done it. You are just lucky. But this stuff, the salt water, is a wonderful thing we learned, and I've talked to some of the doctors up there--I don't know who they were anymore, I don't need to know--about something that-- See, I don't have no skin grafts. I was telling them about that. They thought I was foolish, impossible. But I do know that all the war casualties, no matter how bad you are banged up, and you will disagree with me because you don't know, if they was taken out in the ocean and submerged in the ocean salt water for about two days before they ever went to get medical care, and that's been thought about quite a bit, they'd have so much less trouble it isn't funny. Okay. That's beside the point. But, okay, now talk about meat. You take from jaw to jaw, my bare jaw was sticking out. After all, salt water is fine for two and a half days and after that it starts to eating and then your life jacket comes up, you know, you are just like you are hung. And up to about eight to ten years ago I got one little scar under my chin. Now I got a hell of a time to find it and I can't hardly find it today; and all my scars on my body, they are pretty well gone. After all, my ankles and leg bones around the knees, they were bare bone.

McIntosh: From what?

Witzig: Salt water eats you after two and a half days. And like your hands, even mine are scarred quite a bit through the years, but wherever you had a little mark, and there was more marks on your hands you ever dream of, that would swell a little bit and it would be just like you took a drill bit over here and drilled a little bit in a hunk of iron, just perfectly round, just like it was done intentional. And it would be quite a few over your arms and what have you, wherever. But, anyway, the flesh grew back. It took

about 30 years to get the scars out of my legs and stuff, and my face perfect.

McIntosh: Now when you first went in the water and you started looking around to find your shipmates, were they all there, and how did you get together?

Witzig: Oh, well, a good many of them never did. After all, we didn't know it until afterwards, there was predominantly four groups of men got off, and when they got picked up there was about just like a square about 40 miles square, and then we had a few stragglers. Some men never did get to join up. I was in a bunch we had-- I was in the best bunch of the whole works. We never-- Excuse me. We never had no food or water whatsoever. I'll tell you what happened to the first, best bunch. They had one raft the only raft that I ever heard of anybody got on. They had a little water and they had a little food. So the second day they thought, well, we'll surely get picked up pretty soon, we'll get a little something to drink and eat. And they did, and they didn't. The man that sat on the edge of the raft--this is the story I was told, and I'm pretty sure it's a true one--he opened that can of Spam. Spam today isn't so bad, but in them days it was just nothing but--at sea it smelled like dead horse ground up, and it wasn't much better. That man didn't hardly get the lid off the Spam, and they wasn't even thinking about a shark, a shark come and took him, the man with the Spam in his hand, and that was the size of it, took that man. And there was 132 men in that group, and a cup of blood at sea draws sharks in for an eight-mile radius, and--

You need that fixed?

McIntosh: No.

Witzig: All right. Did you get it all?

Draws sharks in for an eight-mile radius. But afterwards, we was all gathered together, we found out these 132 men, there was 34 left. And the people that didn't have enough to eat or drink, and we didn't have nothing-- We had a carton that happened to be there, a carton that's got floaters on outside of the outfit to put boxes on. And that got off, and that's what we stuck our legs through to kind of stick together, and that's what helped rub your legs. That carton pushed down to, hell, between your knee and the bottom of your feet. There were so many men try--

McIntosh: Keep you vertical, keep you together.

- Witzig: Well, it kind of held you together. After all, this water was getting rough for the last three or four nights. It was going over your head. You more than get shipped out and it would be coming again, and at nights it got cold. And I know I had my shoes on and clothes and a shirt, and I had a shirt. It's the funniest thing I can never understand. Pretty soon a shoe come off, never realized. Have to think, you know, this is a different situation out here. Where in the hell did that shoe go? Wasn't long and the other one come off, a little soft swipe. And I had a shirt on underneath that life jacket, but when I got picked up I had my pants on. The billfold goes out of your pocket and everything. What in the hell ever happened to my shirt? That's something I don't understand. After all, it was underneath my life jacket and I know I had it on. Well, that's the way that went. But, anyway, my bunch done pretty good.
- McIntosh: No sharks?
- Witzig: Yes, there was sharks, but we didn't lose no men. We didn't have nothing for them to eat. **[Side 2, Tape 1, Ends]**
The only trouble is if you happen to get blood in the water.
- McIntosh: Then there is a problem.
- Witzig: But I in them days didn't know much about sharks like kids do nowadays. I took them as a piece of enjoyment, a piece of pleasure. Them sharks, the big ones swim underneath and make figure eights under us, and the water was just like a mirror down underneath. It was something to watch, a miracle, something to do.
- McInto You didn't necessarily see the threat.
- Witzig: They were as friendly as hell. They'd swim underneath and they'd come up and grab on your legs. You think, well, sure, they are going to rub on your legs they must be all right, and they were.
- McIntosh: Wouldn't let them get a taste of you.
- Witzig: No, they didn't bother us. But when you get sharks come up and rub on your legs, don't bother you, you don't worry. After all, you must understand, this is some--close to six decades ago. People didn't understand what they do nowadays. To me it didn't have a safety gauge on all this stuff. But we did have shark trouble. Our shark trouble come like most the time at midnight and after in the dark. That lone fin would come. Enough people you kept watch. When you seen a lone tail fin come you knew that was trouble, and the only things we had to beat sharks off with was you could beat the water and you can yell, and you can hold sharks off. You could hold them off about so long, but about the last night

we had two, maybe three, maybe four come after us. We beat them away, but they was getting vicious. About one more night and you wasn't going to pound them away. That's about the size of it. And, of course, they knew--might as well say they were studied enough they knew more about us than we did ourselves. They knew we was getting rubbed down. We wasn't going to be bait that was jumping around too much. But actually the men didn't look at it in that fashion. I looked at them as my friends, and that kept you mentally alert besides. And, after all, that big boy come up and rub on my legs, God damn it, he got to be all right. (laughs) Well, so now where?

McIntosh: Ignorance was bliss.

Witzig: Pardon?

McIntosh: Ignorance was bliss.

Witzig: Well, it wasn't either. After all, we had to live with it, so we was-- Instead of being scared you were far better off to treat them as a friend. That way you get your body under control more. You were going to stand there and shiver and shake, you ain't going to help yourself too much.

McIntosh: Right. Did you tend to lose hope?

Witzig: We didn't pay much attention. Actually, one thing I will tell you, we learned how to kind of tell time, not necessarily using the sun up and down, but every time approximately midnight the big oil slick-- When you are at sea the men went around in a circle. Every 24 hours about midnight you were through that oil slick. Catch what I mean?

McIntosh: Yes.

Witzig: And that was a good thing. You get in that oil and you got a coating on your body and it helped keep you warm. Now we were talking about that. Used to be in medical journals and this and that they'd tell you about oil. The human body won't absorb water. I got to say this. I'm saying it in the medical--and I have told this to doctors in Madison and they can't understand. The human being--the body (inaudible) the human being if you are setting for any amount of time. I told them, I said, I know better. Well how come? I said I know better. They are talking about people setting in water had something put in their belly and a drink. Catch what I mean?

McIntosh: Uh-huh.

Witzig: Now, I learned a trick, one thing. It was cold, and of course you had to urinate real often, especially at night when you get colder. How did you urinate if you

didn't have a drink of water? Tell me. That's impossible.

McIntosh: Your body metabolizes to produce the urine.

Witzig: Well, that part's to a certain extent. But what do you do when your body is about drained out? Are you still going to urinate? Not really, not when you urinate just heavy. What really helped us stay alive, and I still say it, our body was absorbing this salt water, and actually the salt didn't get in, fresh water. We urinated real heavy, just like you might as well say somebody drinking beer constant, especially in the cold of the night. And I learned a trick to help me pull me through. You take your toe and you spread your urination around your main body where your main blood vessels are, all of your big arteries, and that helped warm you. And that was just like a little cookstove you could call it. Take it any way you want, but I'm pretty sure you are taking it from somebody that understands it. But when you urinated you would urinate, oh, my God, more than you ever would any old time. And it was awful, especially from midnight on until daybreak. And I got to tell you something else about daybreak. The men was really excited, you know. I don't get excited. I come out with one statement, and this statement I got to tell it to you because I originated it, not to brag or complain. We had men towards morning was so God damn scared they was shaking. You ain't going to have any self-survival in you when you are scared to beat the life out of you, especially when there ain't nothing--no food or water to replace your energy. So it was getting about--a little bit light, still a little dark yet, but the men was quiet. And I said the one thing you got to remember, why I said we wouldn't make it, wouldn't make it, and I said, you know, we will make it with one little exception. There is daybreak and sunrise. Daybreak would start and get a little light, and if we can live between then and sunlight we got it made. Tell me how come. Tell me. That period of time is when the enemy submarine would come back and machine gun you, and they didn't do it, and my statement still stands.

McIntosh: You nver saw any submarines though when you were in the water?

Witzig: Pardon?

McIntosh: You didn't see any submarines when you were in the water.

Witzig: Oh, no, no. No. When you are out in the ocean you ain't no more than a speck in a washtub.

McIntosh: I understand. So let me just-- Did you ever decide that you weren't going to be picked up?

Witzig: No, I never really--I never really did.

- McIntosh: You knew it sooner or later, something?
- Witzig: Yeah. It's just like I say, you get excited, tear your body to pieces worrying about you ain't going to get back or worrying about getting something to eat or worrying about this. You got to remain stable. I watched them big sharks down there twisting around and rub on my legs, and the other men was getting excited and I pulled through. After all, I had five days. I lost my food and water. Under that circumstances and what you got in your belly-- In your belly for self-survival you had three days in it right now. So primarily I was eight days out in the sea or drink, and I made it. I will tell you one thing, too bad. We had a lot of big men. We had a lot of men in the marine corps, which they had a chance to get calisthenics or whatever; whereas the crewman, he didn't get a chance to do that. And some of these big Marines--we had a detachment of 58 Marines, six or eight, ten or a dozen--in two and a half days they was beat. Here I was just a common sailor But it all goes back to when you was young. You have to--and we did. There wasn't no choice. you live like an animal in the sense or way you was growing up, six, eight, ten years old or whatever. Nowadays, oh, boy, you got to be fat and in good shape. You got to be able to suck your backbone--belly to your backbone and pull your ribs in, have your ribs stick out a little bit. That's the process of nature's way of growing up. When you growed up too fleshy and had it too nice and didn't I've got work when you was little you wouldn't have--you ain't going to have the endurance to withstand a go like that, period.
- McIntosh: Similar experience in (inaudible). The skinny boys survived much better than the guys who were big and husky.
- Witzig: Yeah. Well, yeah. That's just what I'm telling you. I didn't know nothing about-- It's the endurance.
- McIntosh: As a lot of kids--
- Witzig: Well, yeah. But you take some little animal, wild animal, where it don't fight--the young ones, they got their belly stretched out pret'near their ribs sticking out.
- McIntosh: (inaudible) happened, how did that go when you saw that PBY?
- Witzig: Well, kind of like seeing a human being up there, clean and uniform on, and he was down pretty low. He was leaning out, you know. And I was clear out of reach from our group at that time out in the open. And he waved at me and I waved back.
That man has been a lifetime friend. He just died about a year ago, but he's

there, and he's-- Our outfit for the second war is the most organized group of men in the whole country. We built the 26th National Monument. This man we are talking about, Adin Marks and Wilbur Quinn—

McIntosh: This is the PBY pilot?

Witzig: Yeah. And Quinn was the other-- I can't tell you now. He was the pilot that spotted us, a reconnaissance plane. They are engraved, engraved on the stone. Our national monument is 38 feet wide, 16 feet high, got all our names on the back.

There's one thing about it I would like to say about this country, is place the national monuments--and we were smart enough to do it-- throughout the country where the average people going to see them can get to them. That's something that needs to be done. I was going to place, number two up there, where not one of us can take our car and families and drive to it.

McIntosh: Where?

Witzig: In Washington, D.C.

McIntosh: Where's the monument that you are building?

Witzig: Indianapolis. And the thing about this monument, we got a nice one. The City gave us four acres of ground. It is about four blocks from the Hoosier dome, and you get in-- And you are allowed to get that close to the center of Indianapolis you got to have something pretty good. They give us four acres of ground at \$450,000 an acre. Now this number two monument, the taxpayers are furnishing that ground. The taxpayers are going to furnish the upkeep on it and everything else. Here some 200 men spent about 30 years, they built the monument, not counting the real estate, of approximately 11 million they accumulated. Now, the number two monument is going to be 123 million they are talking about. We built one for ten percent of that, 200 men; but here they got to have the whole country and every organization, so on and so forth.

But the one thing about our monument, in 1995 it was dedicated. In 1995 when we spent--paid off the last \$110,000 on it, all paid for, then the Ninth Naval District and the Bureau of National Monuments took it over, and we was glad of it because this one here costs they figure at least 200,000 a year to maintain it and here we are a bunch of matured men. We haven't got much way of raising money anymore.

McIntosh: How did you raise the money for that monument?

Witzig: We spent 30 years.

McIntosh: I mean from what sources?

Witzig: Well, people of Indianapolis and the city just never quit giving to us. They are the most--well, I don't know how to say it--most grateful people that we've got something to represent their town and we represent them. And I'll go--Up to this day we got an insurance company down there that just does everything for us. We got this fall, the first part of August--we had a man step up on the podium, he told us his name, he says I'm the chief executive officer of the Indianapolis Colts. He give each man a Jersey--

McIntosh: Oh, neat.

Witzig: --with their name on it. I just got it over at the house. And I sit up front, and I'm pretty active, and I get the people on their feet. It was late at night, and they was getting a little tired. After all, we got matured people. And I give him a standing ovation. He turned around and said another word or two and he says--

[Gap on audiotape]

--us people, and I do. He told about his family. He said he didn't have a father. And he said, "I've been paying attention. You people are like a fatherhood to me." The next sentence he says, "You've got 80 men here. I'm going to write a check out for 80,000 bucks, 1,000 bucks apiece."

This insurance company, when they checked in down the line one of the people setting there was a stack of a hundred dollar bill, \$40,000 deep in cash. Each man got five. That's the way we get treated. One thing that did help us out in all the monument building, towards the tail end, not at the very last but second to the last, a couple from the eastern states, their boy graduated as an ensign and he come aboard and he was lost. He didn't make it. Pretty soon they all wanted the monument. And his dad died, and he was the only one--the only kid they had, you know, and their mother was left alive. She finally died about two years--in '93. She didn't get to see the monument. But she was always cared for, you know. And she kept helping and helping and helping. She give us three and a half million herself, just herself.

McIntosh: That's neat.

Witzig: So that was a big, big start. After all, there was still close to seven or eight million yet to make, but we made it. But here you compare the mammoth deal. This number two deal, it kind of gets to me a little bit. I've got it over the years, last couple years, buy a plane, buy this and that. They expect the disabled veterans to pitch in when we are limited on income, and they hound you to death. I took the God damn stuff, threw it in the fire over here. They ain't never going to get a dollar out of me. They want to put that monument out somewhere in the middle of the United States where the average people that need to see it or long to see it and their young ones can drive to it, that's fine. Now the time I went to New London, Connecticut, I had to go up the eastern seaboard, and that was 1979, and I know it's worse now. How in the hell does an average fellow like me get to our nation's capital unless you go on a bus tour? And then on top of that I've been reading articles around the God damn capital there is a whole bunch of queers and commotion and this and that. So how are you supposed to take--a young couple supposed to take your little kids there?
I'm not going to give to it.

McIntosh: No, don't do it. Let me just take you back here before we get off the track here.

Witzig: Yeah, we get sidetracked a little.

McIntosh: Tell me about picking you up, when the plane saw you and so you knew something was going to happen.

Witzig: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: So how long before the ship's there?

Witzig: Well, the ships come at the fastest speed.

[Gap on audiotape]

Several of them, three or four done hit there first. And I don't know how long my bunch, but the quickest any of them got there, one bunch, whichever one it was, it was 26 hours to get there. So that's a little better than another day.

McIntosh: Another day.

Witzig: And they all pretty much fell in place after that. And then, like I say I--just four days and 19 hours officially. My group didn't get picked

up until 2:00, 3:00, or whatever in the morning in the pitch dark. And here I got to say it again. The mandiedjust a couple years ago. I didn't get to Washington, D.C., to meet him or nothing afterwards, but the captain of this little high speed transport that helped pull me aboard, untied my ropes, and he was Carter's Secretary of the Navy 37 years ago. He come down off the podium, and I stood up. He says, "Hello, Bob."

- McIntosh: Right. He remembered you.
- Witzig: Yeah.
- McIntosh: So where did you go? They took you to the Phillipines. You had to (inaudible) five days or so.
- Witzig: Five days? I was there about three weeks from there.
- McIntosh: Three weeks?
- Witzig: Yeah. And then they flew us into Guam. We was there until up in November before we got out of the hospital.
- McIntosh: Where did you get a medical checkup, in Guam or in the Phillipines?
- Witzig: Medical checkup?
- McIntosh: Yeah. Somebody must have looked at you.
- Witzig: Well, when I was in the Phillipines we had one nurse and one Red Cross girl. There wasn't too much they could do.
- McIntosh: Right. That's why I thought perhaps in Guam--
- Witzig: In Guam they done a little better.
- McIntosh: Right. Okay.
- Witzig: But it just took so much time for you to kind of—
- McIntosh: Did they put any salve or any ointment on those skin bruises that you had?
- Witzig: Well, yes. I'll tell you what we had to doctor with at that time, was two things, and you do wonders with them, but people poke fun at

those two things nowadays. Here was a bunch of men that come through in pretty bad shape. Vaseline and boric acid, that was the main thing we had.

McIntosh: It doesn't seem to be logical.

Witzig: You tell that to a doctor nowadays—

McIntosh: He probably wouldn't know about it.

Witzig: Oh, no, he'd poke fun at you. He would know enough to do that. But, anyway, I was going to add something else in there, oh, about this here ship's captain, which was actually a lieutenant. This is the story I got to tell. This ship had 126 men, crew, had one second class corpsman, which probably at that time in this era wasn't any more knowledgeable about medics than a nurse graduating first-round schooling, you know. But, anyway, anybody in that position was considered highly of medical ability. He took the crew before they arrived and he'd tell them how many men they are going to pick up didn't know. He took the crew a third at a time, a third of the crew three times. He instructed them how to give blood plasma, which had to be dry, which had to be mixed with water, how to give intravenous feeding. Number one, the first thing, these men are going to be all oil covered. You'd just scrape a patch off, the ones that got to have right away. Don't waste no time, scrape a patch off, rinse it down with alcohol. And he showed men how to put needles in and this and that. After all, our needles was like an eight-penny nail. In them days they ain't the fancy little ones you got today. You understand what I mean?

McIntosh: Yeah. I used them.

Witzig: And here was 122 men--

McIntosh: And they rescued you.

Witzig: --on their last lap you might as well say, and here was 126-man crew was supposed to medic and take care of us. And I think if you put that into our modern-day hospital we'd have some death rate. They never lost a man.

McIntosh: They were well-trained.

Witzig: No, they wasn't well-trained. They were just talked to once.

- McIntosh: Well, that's training. How long did it take you once you were on the ship to get back to the Philippine area, Guam? Which way did they go?
- Witzig: Well, we went to the Philippines to the field hospital. I don't know. We was on it three or four days near as I know. But here is what--how this crew was--their captain talked to the crew and he said we take on--each man of the crew he takes care of a man, you give him his bunk and you take care of him. It ended up, I didn't know it, but I got the captain's bunk. I was pretty lucky.
- McIntosh: Yeah.
- Witzig: Never knew it. Never got to thank him because I didn't actually know. Now that's quite a thing--
- McIntosh: Incredible.
- Witzig: --when you come around and I get the captain' bunk, 37 years later he gets to be the Secretary of the Navy. And here we are honored guests launching one of the second or third nuclear submarines and the man comes down off the podium and--
- McIntosh: Recognizes you.
- Witzig: --calls my name and shakes my hand.
- All right. Now, what else do you want to know?
- McIntosh: Okay. And after you got back to Guam how long before they got you back to the states?
- Witzig: Well, when we went to Guam, see, all this stuff-- We was picked up the first few days of August, but we never got back to the states until way after November.
- McIntosh: Most of the time was spent (inaudible)?
- Witzig: Yeah. I was in the hospital there. After all, remember I was telling you, one thing about the Philippines, and we didn't have much, it was hot and dry and you could see yourself grow together every day like a sewing machine. And that actually was the best blessing actually we had. You go in where it's hot and dry and any little scratch or stuff will just hem right together about a hundred

times faster than it will right here in this climate. That's one thing I learned.

But anyway, like I say, all this flesh was eaten off from jaw bone to jaw bone, just perfect today. I never had a transplant.

McIntosh: You didn't need it.

Witzig: But I learned one thing, and I spoke to medical doctors how that comes about.

McIntosh: Well, I know how it comes about.

Witzig: You don't. Any other source you got to have transplants but--

McIntosh: It didn't go completely through. That's why. You still had some basic skin there underneath.

Witzig: Well, that might be. I don't know.

McIntosh: Otherwise it never would have grown back.

Witzig: But when the bone is sticking out you know there ain't a hell of a lot there. That's all I know.

McIntosh: Right. And, let's see, I lost my train of thought. Oh, tell me about eating. That pair of stipes that picked you up, they have good food for you?

Witzig: Oh, I don't remember ever eating there.

McIntosh: Okay. Was it tough to get back--when you got back to Guam to get back on a regular diet? Was that a problem for you?

Witzig: Well, I got to tell you that--about in the Philippines first. Actually, when I was on this transport, unless I can't put it together, I don't ever remember eating on it. After all, we were some tired men. And, you know, in all them days you never slept, you never shut your eyes, you never done nothing. But I do know that when we got in this little field hospital in the Philippines they did have a lot for us to drink and we was allowed to drink, and that's what we needed worst. I remember they had chocolate milk, which was mixed up out of powder, and fruit juices mixed up and what have you. I do know one afternoon they said now you can have

all you want to drink, and that started at 1:00, and they had-- these women couldn't put it out there fast enough. I remember I drank, a regular glass--I counted them--41 or 42 or 43 glasses of fluid and never felt full.

McIntosh: How about sleeping? Now, you said you didn't sleep in the water. Is that right?

Witzig: Oh, no. You never shut an eye.

McIntosh: But you weren't fatigued?

Witzig: Fatigue--

McIntosh: That didn't seem to happen?

Witzig: Strength and reflex action was guiding you. There was no such sleep in nobody. How was you going to bend your head over? (laughs)

McIntosh: Yeah, I know. I mean sometimes (inaudible).

Witzig: Under these circumstances you don't sleep. There is none in you.

McIntosh: So when you got back to the Philippines I bet you slept well then.

Witzig: Well, I don't know, but you felt safe. After all, the safety in us was-- Like I say, we heard the machine guns fire constant and not too far away. It made you kind of wonder. But the safeness was putting your foot on a piece of ground. That was the safeness. Now, let me tell you a little something. I tell it in the group meetings. You take your foot, where you got them two feet setting right now, and I said all the rest of this floor is gone. **[Side 1, Tape 2, Ends]** --water there, but you had two places to put your feet on. Catch what I mean?

McIntosh: Uh-huh.

Witzig: Take those two places away and you got a feeling that you never heard of or felt in your life. Nobody can-- We can't tell you and you can't

understand it. When you take away what little bit of ground that that foot sets on, you go into a different--I won't say a different world, but it's a different--there ain't no explanations for it. That's all I know.

McIntosh: How often does the Indianapolis group meet?

Witzig: We are meeting every two years now. It was five, but now we are two. We met last summer, and we are apt to have another meeting this summer because we are losing our men.

McIntosh: How many are left?

Witzig: Pardon?

McIntosh: How many are left?

Witzig: We got about 106, -eight, or -ten left, but there isn't hardly a dozen and a half of the men in good shape. In fact, I'm not bragging or complaining but I'm really the only man that's in physical condition.

McIntosh: Did you ever use your GI bill when you got out?

Witzig: I used it but, you know, them days it just seemed like-- I thought I used it. I don't know. It didn't do us so much benefit.

McIntosh: You came back here?

Witzig: Yeah.

McIntosh: You were home right after you got out of the service?

Witzig: Yeah. I was a little around the country, but I couldn't work for somebody else because you was in trouble constant. A lot of men couldn't work for nobody else. Now, with me I haven't bothered much today, but this stuff work at you. Tears come right out of your eyes and roll down over your face. How are you going to work in public when you got that? People poke fun of you and this and that. So you worked for yourself, you made what you could, and--

McIntosh: Well, it looks like you've done very well. This is a nice job.

- Witzig: Yeah, and I've done pretty good, and I could--If I could have borrowed money 30 years ago, I could have been so rich it wasn't funny. I'm thankful that I couldn't borrow the money. You know how come?
- McIntosh: No, not yet.
- Witzig: I probably would have made so much money. I had it figured out, and I tell the boys I could have had buildings both sides of the road from here to town, people working to hell and back, and I was doing everybody a favor but myself. You know what favor you wouldn't do yourself? Pretty soon the big belly and big jowls and you'd have been in the box ten years ago.
- McIntosh: (laughs)
- Witzig: And here, I'll say it as plain as the day, my physical health is good and I golf and I run.
- McIntosh: You run?
- Witzig: And I go with women. Most of my women run from 35 to 55 years old. The older ones, they are crocheters. And I don't have to take all the magic stuff, and I'm living it up. And what better?
- McIntosh: It sounds like you are doing great.
- Witzig: You can have the thickest pocketbook when you get my age or your age, but if you haven't got a body to go with it you don't have much.
- McIntosh: No. That's true.
- Witzig: So, anyway—
- McIntosh: It looks like you are in good shape, Bob.
- Witzig: Yeah. And you know what I tell people? They say, "Oh, I'm cold" and "I'm hot" and I'm this and that, always something wrong. I tell them, well-- The hottest day last summer I said, you know, I know it's been at least-- I bought a new refrigerator couple years ago; and I said, you know, I put the ice cube trays up there and never put no water in them. In fact, I haven't put water in them for 30-40 years, and I don't own a fan and I don't own an air conditioner

and what have you.

And here just the other day is a young woman down to the restaurant, she had a long, heavy winter coat on with a hood, clear to her ankles, all buttoned up, and a young man about 30 years old sitting there with three heavy sweatshirts on and a heavy winter coat, and I sat there with a shirt with my sleeves pulled up, and that's all I had on from the time I got up in the morning.

I do know one thing, and I strive on it. I'm not a health maniac or whatever. It ain't what-- A lot of people, oh, boy, they come up the last five or ten years and I'm a health--do this and do that. Pretty soon they don't know it but they get their knees and hip joints wore out and then they can get some new ones. And another thing--and I lost it now. Oh, boy, I lost it, what I was going to tell you.

- McIntosh: They've got all the joints and all the replacements for the joints now.
- Witzig: Yeah. I don't have none though.
- McIntosh: Right. Neither do I.
- Witzig: Good. But, anyway, all I got to say is—
- McIntosh: Do you keep in contact with anybody personally in your group?
- Witzig: Oh, yeah.
- McIntosh: Anyone in this area that you keep in contact with?
- Witzig: No, there is nobody outside of three or four in Madison.
- McIntosh: Melvin Jacob.
- Witzig: I know him when I see him.
- McIntosh: Because he was one of those Marines that was guarding the box.
- Witzig: I know them when I see them, but I don't know their names.
- McIntosh: Sure. And did you join a veterans' organization or just your

own Indianapolis association?

Witzig: Oh, I belong to DAV, but I don't go. You know, they got a chapter down there. I got a lifetime membership for it, but I'll tell you what they do. We got a few of them in there and they pry on the men like me even before I had a good rating, we got to do for the kids, we got to do for all the organizations, do this and do that, and they send the nastiest God damn letter to men that actually they've got all they can do for themselves. And I take the stuff and throw it away. And I told the feller the other day about it and I says if that's the way you want to run your God damn outfit you run it but you ain't going to get me there, and I lay the law down. I belong to the American Legion, but I don't hardly ever go.

McIntosh: I never joined any of it.

Witzig: Well, you see, in our family there was four of us in. There is only two left. Only two come out. So--

McIntosh: Oh, you had brothers in the service?

Witzig: Oh, yeah, two of us, two of us come out.

McIntosh: What were the other brothers doing?

Witzig: One was in the Navy in the Asiatic Pacific and one lost out in Germany.

McIntosh: With the Army?

Witzig: Yeah. And then my other brother, older one, he is living, he got sent to Puerto Rico. Now I was talking about medics a while ago.

McIntosh: He had a cushy job.

Witzig: Not necessarily, but it wasn't the shoot-up job. But let me tell you what he got. You talk about medics, and we were talking about Vaseline and boric acid and this and that. He got thrown into the medical team, didn't know--didn't even see a God damn needle. Where do you think he went? He went into the main surgery room for a helper. And, of course, the reason why, the people in Puerto Rico, the hospital-- See I didn't know it, but there was quite of divisions of Puerto Ricans who was in Europe in the European theater and they took--the wounded

didn't come back to the United States, they went to Puerto Rico.

McIntosh: Oh.

Witzig: And the main trouble they had--they didn't have a fan or an ice cube or hardly a refrigerator--was gangrene. When they got gangrene cases too bad they had to ship to the states to get taken care of. But he said he was there 19 months, and they worked pret'near night and day to take care of these men. There was surgery going on all the time. Here is the man that never knew what a God damn needle was and never had no education but yet he was a—

McIntosh: Sure.

Witzig: --he was the helper in the main operating room.

McIntosh: Right.

Witzig: And are you allowed to have some greenhorn go in one of these hospitals and be a helper in a main operating room, especially when you didn't know what a needle was? And the thing about it on top of that, now these men-- War casualties can be beat up any direction, but here is what they had. In the 19 months there he said, "We never lost a man." You can't even put that amount of men in Madison or Dubuque Hospital nowadays without losing some. I'll betcha on that. And they got everything, ice cubes to go along with it.

McIntosh: Okay. Well, we'll have to take a couple of photographs. That's the only thing we haven't done here.

Witzig: Well, let's go.

[End of Interview, Side 2, Tape 2]