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AN INTERVIEW WITH RODNEY QUIN NELSON

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INTERVIEWED BY
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CHARLES JOHNSON: This begins an interview with Rodney Quin Nelson Jr., from Knoxville, Tennessee. Interview conducted by doctor Dr. Charles Johnson, History Department, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Interview conducted on the 18th of August, 1987, concerning Mr. Nelson's experiences in WWII.

RODNEY QUIN NELSON: Well, I was born in Covington County, Mississippi, April 4, 1916. I was working—I went to the University of Mississippi and got my degree there, and I was working in operations, airlines operations, Nashville American Airlines, and then transferred down to New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1940. And in 1941, I was downtown, and I went into the Navy recruitment center and inquired about volunteering for service. And they said, "Well, how would you like to be an air cadet?" I says, "Well, I like that fine" and so they put me through a few physical exams there and said "Well, you're ten pounds underweight. Come back when you gain ten pounds and we'll proceed with it." So, this was in about September of '41, and in a few months, I had gained that ten pounds—I boarded with a lady that weighed 200 pounds ... this lady I boarded with, when I came home she said, "Well, did you pass your exam?" I says, "Well, no I didn't. I'm ten pounds underweight." She said, "Well I can make you gain ten pounds." Well I'd been trying to gain ten pounds all my life, but I never could. Well, she just doubled up on everything she fed me. I gained ten pounds. So I went back down to the procurement office in New Orleans—so they gave me the rest of the physical, and a week or so later they said I had astigmatism in my left eye, so therefore I wasn't qualified for air cadet training.

JOHNSON: They were real tight on that.

NELSON: So, the officer in charge of the procurement station says, "Well, how about deck officer? Would you be interested in that?" Well, he could have said how about flying to the moon or something; I had no more idea what a deck officer was than anything. But I says, "Oh, that'd be fine." So, he says, "Well, I'll put in for deck officer" and he did, and I forgot all about it. From then on, I just thought, well, that's a waste of time, but Pearl Harbor comes along, and still I haven't heard from the Navy, and I didn't give any thought to it. But, in February of '42, I got a big manila envelope about an inch thick, and I opened it up—it said on the front "Ensign Rodney Q. Nelson Jr.", so I opened it up, and I started to read it. Well, as soon as I had taken a physical, and taken an oath, I would have been declared officer in the Navy, which I did, and it ranked from March of '42. And my orders were to report for duty, Northwestern University, Chicago campus, May the 20th of 1942. So, I did that, and I went by all of my kin, most of them in South Mississippi, and came on home to West Tennessee, Weakley County, Greenfield, to see my parents and tell them goodbye, then I caught the train in Fulton, Kentucky, Illinois Central, for Chicago. So, I arrived in Chicago, and was in the officer's training school there in Abbott's Hall, of Chicago campus, of Northwestern University. For three months we studied navigation—that's celestial navigation, gunnery, seamanship, communications. And after the three months was up there, then they sent me to Norfolk, Virginia, to the—I didn't know what it was, they just send you, and you go and report. Well, it turns out to be [an] amphibious training program on the *USS Leonard Wood*, the largest passenger transport, and in this school was Annapolis graduates, West Point graduates, and the purpose of the thing was we're getting ready to make invasions,

but they didn't tell us that's what we were there for. All we were doing is learning, across the board, navy operations and handling of boats. And so, I spent a month there, and we operated everyday from daylight to dark, and some operations in the dark, on landing small craft off of transport ships, the *Leonard Wood*. And we got caught in one storm there that was so terrible, that they wouldn't let any of the boats come back to the *Leonard Wood* to be taken aboard, and so we all had to go to the shore. And it was dark, and some of the boats were capsized, and when I got my boat in, it was full of sailors, and the sailors were operating the boats. But you had to decide how to handle that boat, and by gosh, I could tell anybody, if you were handling a boat into high waves, you coordinate your boat with the speed of that wave, and try to ride over it instead of busting through it (laughter), and so you do that, you might come out without capsizing.

JOHNSON: Were the boats bad for capsizing?

NELSON: Oh, well, they weren't bad, it's how you handled. That's what—you could take the best boat in the world, and go busting into a wave, and the waves would collapse in on ya. But if you coordinated with it, you'd ride up and over 'em, and get in. And you'd have to turn it, you have to turn that thing 'cause—I went to the *Leonard Wood* when the storm broke, and they waved us off, and wouldn't take us in. Well, when I went on back to the shore—then, lo and behold, I did set up a watch all the way down that beach, sailors out in the water, 'cause some boats had been capsized. I said, "Well, there's some fellers that might be swimming in and just barely make it, and then drown right there", so we just set up—I don't know what it accomplished. But, anyway that's training. And it wasn't too far from the truth of amphibious operations, in landing, under fire. So, after this month here, they transferred me to Hoboken Shipyard, New York City, and this was for the purpose of converting a freighter to a troop transport. It was the *USS Dorothy Dix*, and we commissioned it, and then sailed back down to Norfolk, Virginia, with it. And went into the Chesapeake Bay from the Hampton Roads entrance, and we maneuvered up there with a shipload of troops. And this is in September, or maybe, yeah, September, or maybe middle of October, and uh, so we operated with the army personnel, loading and unloading, taking them to the beaches and so forth. But the only trouble was, in the Chesapeake Bay you have very calm and settled waters, but that's the best we could do. So, one night I went on duty at midnight, officer of the deck, and my last order was prepare the ship, weigh the anchor at 0400. So, I did that, and when we pulled up the anchor, we set sail out Chesapeake Bay. Nothing looked strange, until we got out through the Chesapeake, Hampton Roads mine field. And out to sea there a little piece, we began to see another ship show up. And then a little further on, another ship, and we were headed in a southeast direction, so everybody was speculatin', "Where we goin'?" Well, I thought we were goin' to Guantanamo Bay, in Cuba, for more exercises, but no one knew except the Captain, our executive officer. So we kept in that direction, and then some more transports joined us. And as the further on out, we got more. Well then, when we got out in that direction, southeast, then they changed direction more easterly, kind of say northeast, and we sailed there, and we picked up ships from that—coming out now, I know, they came out of New York down, and they met and joined with us. Well, all during this time, at nighttime in particular, we sailed under zigzag formation, 'cause the waters were full of German subs, and they were sinkin'. There's records of it, of how many sinkings the submarines, or the Germans, sunk our ships along our Atlantic coast, in the Gulf of Mexico even, on the Southern shores of the United States. But we never knew nothin' about what was out there, but

since then, a submarine commander, German submarine commander, has written a book, and I haven't been able to find it, about his operation in those wolf packs during that period of time. Well, I would have been interested in, well, where was he when we were there. (Laughter) And so, but we zigzagged all the way across that ocean. And, uh, we didn't have any trouble whatsoever from the subs, and we arrived off of the coast off Morocco, the dates you can check other places. And so ... I went in, *Dorothy L. Dix*, went in on the southern flank at Safi, Morocco, and I was in the far southern beach, and our purpose down there was to intercept troops coming in from Marrakech, which is the capitol of Morocco, and so that beach and that operation down on that end was considered kind of an important potential for trouble. So we, uh, arrived there offshore, and we got loaded into the small boats, LCVP's, landing craft personnel, with a door that drops down, they were also called Higgins Craft, manufactured in New Orleans. So, we loaded into these Higgins boats, and were lowered down to the water level, and then we'd go out there about six or eight boats, and circle in a circle, waiting, dispatched to your beach. Well, I want to digress just a minute; that operation, African invasion, was written on an eight by eleven sheet of paper, and that was it. It just was the simplest—in fact, we didn't know where we were going, and when we did, the ship's captain got out as much information as he had available, and he gave it to the different officers, and I carried in the third wave in this particular invasion. But we didn't do it on time, because our escort, the destroyer *Night*, *USS Night*, failed to appear to guide us in 'cause he had radar and so forth to our beach. Well, I'm glad he wasn't on time, because when it became daylight, that beach was narrow, all these beaches along this area were narrow. There's a big cliff there, and then there's a break in the cliff, and there'd be a small beach. Well this southern beach, on the south flank of Safi, was out to sea right in the mouth of the beach, where huge stones that were covered at night, when the high tide was in, but not enough to protect your ship, we could have very easily have just plowed into all those obstructions which nature put there. Well, it was daylight when we went in, and we met minor opposition, but by that time, the northern flank, and the harbor of Safi, had been captured. And that was the invasion of—on my beach, just very mild. The only thing I remember is I stayed—I couldn't get off the beach, the waves were so high, we couldn't retract our landing craft and get on back. But I slept on—I thought I was sleeping on something safe, and I've never seen bazooka ammunition before, and it aint but they had laid out there, and I had made a pallet on the wet sand out of the bazooka's, and I woke up the next morning sleeping on a pile of dynamite. So ...

JOHNSON: Do you remember how you felt when you were circling, ready to go in ...

NELSON: Well, now I'll tell you how—I was single and I was purposely single. I was a little bit older than the others, I was 25 when I went in, and I wasn't married, and I'm glad I wasn't married, because I gave absolutely no thought—I knew what I was doing, and when I was in the seventh grade I read in the Reader's Digest many articles about Nazism and Hitler, and then, even at that early age, I says, "someday we are going to have to fight him". And how true that was. So, when I went in, I volunteered because the country needed to do something, and I did not expect to come back. But I did not harbor on it, I did not think about it, I did what had to be done as safely as you can do it, but yet effective. Now that was my whole idea, and I didn't go around preaching it to anybody, but I never lost my way under any of the operations in the whole World War II. And my men that were under me, they knew their jobs, they did their jobs, and I didn't have to keep repeating it to say, "Do this, do this, the other." So, no, I didn't expect to come

back. But, that didn't bother me. Now, as we go on, it will come out clear there's plenty opportunities to fulfill that idea that I wouldn't come back. And so, when the African invasion was over, we weighed anchor—no, we didn't anchor by gosh, we just floated. And when we set anchor again, dropped anchor again, we were back in Chesapeake Bay, crossed again, and that was the largest successful amphibious operation in the world's history.

JOHNSON: Did you bring wounded back with you when you came back, or did you come back empty?

NELSON: Not on my ship; we were empty. But now up—I imagine up at Casablanca, up in that area where the fighting was heavier, that they no doubt brought back wounded. Now, when I got back to Norfolk, on our way, the captain of the ship says, "Everyone turn to—this is your home, we are going to paint, and we going to clean this ship up" and I really liked that idea, and my division, we turned to and painted everything, and as soon as we hit Norfolk, VA, everyone of us was transferred to some other duty, (Laughter) and we were mad as (hawks?) (Laughter), but that's all right. So, I didn't see that crew anymore, of that ship. Now I will say this, right across the hall from me, very coincidentally—I finished high school and went through school at Grenada, MS. The superintendent of those city schools son was right there on that same ship, right across the hall from me. And John Rondell Jr. took in the fourth wave, and I took in the third wave at this same beach, we were on the same ship. Well, I never saw John Jr. again. The war was over with and I took my wife to meet Mr. and Mrs. Rondell, and then I found out that John Rondell, a short time after the African invasion, died of Leukemia. So, funny things happen in a war, and you say, "How can this happen?" with so many people involved, but that happened. Well, right after I got ashore, and—when they threw, put all of our luggage on the deck, up on the dock, well, my piece was missing, and so I spent—that was in the morning, so I spent a whole day, up to midnight, taking liberty boats to every ship in the harbor, at Norfolk, Virginia, and at midnight I found my luggage on the battleship that was weighing anchor the next morning going to the Pacific. (Laughter) So, I retrieved all my clothes, that's a fact.

JOHNSON: But it was a job.

NELSON: That was a job. So, I got my gear, and I checked in, and right soon I got a message saying, "You're to report to Rear Admiral So-and-So's office, and—for an interview", so I went. So he asked about the African invasion, many questions, and he interviewed everyone that was off of the—that came back and was in the harbor at that time. So, he says, "Well now, have you got any suggestions, or things that you think would help and improve things?" Well I said, "One suggestion I think I ought to make, is that if you're going to tell your men something, you do it. And if you're not going to do it, don't tell them." And he said, "What do you mean?" and I says, "Well, the Captainship said if we clean that ship up, that's our home." Well, it wasn't our home, and I says, "He didn't have to tell us anything. He said, just clean up the ship, and that's enough." And so, the Captain offered me command of a ship. And I said, "Well, what kind of a ship is it?" I says, "Is there one in the Norfolk Harbor?" He says, "No, there's none here. We haven't made it yet." So, I thought real quick, and I said, "Well, if you want command of a ship, then you got to say yes now, 'cause it's not going to come along no more." So I said yes. And very shortly, within a week, I got my orders, and I was assigned a crew. They were greener than I, and I'd been to sea once, and every member of the crew, two other officers and an executive

officer, and an engineering officer and thirty men—those had never been to sea at all. So, there was a crew, and we were ordered to go to Boston, Massachusetts, to take possession of a ship. And so, we traveled to Boston, and set up there, and I thought, well, there'd be a ship just like a taxi waiting for me. So I went to the shipyard, and asked about this ship by number, and LCIL 237, and the fellow says, "Well, we haven't built it yet" and I said, "Well, when do you think you'll have it built?" He says, "Well, we don't know right now" (Laughter) He says, "But, we've got a box—you're mail is here." I says, "My mail is?", "Yes"; I says "Well, how'd they know to send it to me?" They didn't, they said they just sent it to the commanding officer of the LCIL 237. And there was a box there, big ole box as big as a desk top, like this, and it's deep and it looked like it was a fourth full of mail address. So, I had something to do, to read through all that mail. And it really was interesting to read that because I had—in that at one time I was checking out gear for the whole crew to the Northern climes, like England, and so on. And then I make notes, keep notes, and then I come along a letter that says, "Cancel such certain orders on the Northern climes" And so, well, you just went through it. And finally I caught the orders which says, "You are to—upon excepting in commissioning of this ship, you are to go to Norfolk, Virginia, report there, and you're to take the outside route to Boston, to New York", outside means in the ocean, "and then from New York you take the inner coastal passageway into the head of the Chesapeake Bay, down to Norfolk." Well, we left—when we finally got the ship, and it's commissioned, when you receive a ship like that, you accept it. And by gosh you accept everything on it, or whatever is missing. If you accept it with what's missing, that's your responsibility. So, I really looked after that inventory to see that what they said I should have was there. We had everything except a log, which travels in behind the ship, tell you how fast you're going so's you can—helps improve your navigation. So I didn't have that, and I sent my men down, officers down to the warehouse, to see if they could get it as a last effort, and they couldn't. So I went to the Commandant of the district up there, and I told him what my problem was, and so—well, I told him I wasn't sailing without it and he says, "Well, I'll see if I can't find you one" They did, he got me one, so we set sail, and it was cold, it was in February, Boston, 1943; and it was snowing, beginning to snow, but not so much that your visibility was obstructed. So, we set sail from Boston, and went to Cape Cod Canal, and lo and behold we got to Cape Cod Canal, the temperature dropped to twenty below, froze in, and we were tied in that frozen end of that canal for a week or two, I've forgotten now exactly, but I do know this, it was cold as Hades. I never—I wore double—in Boston, the Red Cross gave us wool sweaters, and wool underwear, long handle, and I got a good supply of that, and I wore every bit of it; doubled up on my underwear, and doubled up on clothes. That's right. And I was still was cold, the ship just wouldn't heat up good.

JOHNSON: Not a lot like Mississippi, was it?

NELSON: No. And, uh, so when the weather broke, and warmed up, we started out, and we had trouble because our water intake cooling system to the engine room was taking in slush ice, and was slowing us down, so we'd have to clean out the slush before we burned the engine up. So, finally we got out of there, and on down towards New York City, and we went into Brooklyn Navy yard, and took on fuel. And while I was there, which when we talk about there, you don't spend a lot of time, it's just in and out. You in one day, you probably be going out the next day; so I reported for orders to see if there's any changes, and sure enough, there was changes. They'd changed my orders from going the inside route to Chesapeake Bay, by Delaware Canal, and so

on, to the outside route in the Atlantic down to Norfolk. Well, that's a whole lot different than going inside, because then that means that we're going to have to maneuver the minefield's entrance to the Norfolk Navy Base. And, so, well, I tell you when you're an ensign that young, never had any experience, you don't even know what to complain about, (Laughter) or what to object to, so we started out. And so, there was some concern on my part, but I didn't tell the rest of the crew my concern because actually, there was a concern about hitting the proper buoy with a number on it, that marked the middle of the channel that's clear of mines to go through the mine field to the largest navy base in the world. So, I never said nothin' to them, but I did set up a twenty-four hour watch, four hours on four hours off, and there's always an officer in the chart room charting every move the ship made. So, we made it down there, and lo-and-behold, when we got down to the Norfolk entrance to the harbor, where I was looking for that buoy marking the channel through the mine field, ran into the nicest fog bank that you could hardly see your hand before your face. Then, ran into that darn thing, slowed the speed of the ship down to where it was just—got enough head way to keep from being swept into the shore. Now, we're off a mile, must have been, or two, three miles out enough that you don't run the chance of grounding. So, out that far into the ocean, and you're looking for a numbered buoy. Now, those buoys are no bigger than a desk top, I mean that size and volume, and they'd be sticking up. So, I got every member of the crew above on deck looking for anything that would be a spot in the ocean. And had binoculars, and we were scanning the ocean with the binoculars, just creeping along, creeping along. And, well, I'll tell ya, we did break out of that darn fog bank, and that was great. But, a little after that, one of the men spotted a spot, a speck, black speck, off in the, out towards the sea, further out, and we went over there, and so help me it was the right buoy, and the right number on it, (Laughter) and that's the truth. Now, you can imagine if we had got, if we had missed that darn thing. Ocean is big; you take a mile of ocean, man, that looks bigger than that. So, we reported to Little Creek, Virginia, the amphibious base that was set up; they were just cuttin' the roads in, is on that, what they call Little Creek. And when it say Little Creek, Virginia, that was a little creek there, and that's where the amphibious base was built, and that's where it is right now today. But then, it was a mud hole, and so that's how the amphibious was starting to grow. It was just growing from nothin' to—now we have a great, no doubt, a great amphibious organization to face the possibilities of having to send troops to a foreign soil, and put them ashore successfully. Well, we hit the harbor of Little Creek, Virginia, reported in with a great deal of relief; [I] can say that. So we took on supplies there, still not knowing where we were going, or when we were going or what. You just never was told. And so about March, a hundred LCI's, the LCI, that's Landing Craft Infantry large, was assembled there, and we took out in a convoy for Europe.

JOHNSON: Was that a flat bottom craft, or is that a keel?

NELSON: No, it's a real ship.

JOHNSON: It's a ship.

NELSON: It's a ship. It was commissioned. Whenever a ship is commissioned, it flies the flag, and it is ocean going. So, we set out in a convoy, and I still have those records of that particular—I don't know how, I just lost them. (Laughs) My junk, and they survived, supposed to destroy 'em. And it was complete operation of how that convoy of LCI's was to be escorted

and go across the ocean. So we set out first from Norfolk, for Bermuda, and we were loaded to the gill with food, supplies, and everything, but I do want to make this note right now, these LCI's built right here, at this particular time, were insufficient on food storage, meats, and things like that. Didn't have a freezer room, they had two, what now is a twenty cubic foot freezer, just sat on the deck, with the chest opening at the top, and so that's all the fresh stuff you could take, if you could get it. And that's one of the complaints, that I lost thirty pounds in my tour of duty on that ship, so did others, because we couldn't get fresh meats to hang up in the freezer room so's we could get a proper diet. And when we'd go into port, because we lacked the storage facilities, we couldn't get the meat. We could get hog hanks, ankles, and knee bones, and things like that...

JOHNSON: In jars ...

NELSON: The cruisers, you know destroyers, bigger craft, they'd get that stuff no trouble at all. But, the new ones they built, LCIL's, and most of them went to Europe, uh, to Pacific, they had a freezer room that was a big improvement. Well, here we are, we loaded up, we loaded into the ship all the canned goods we could get, and they was stacked as neat and everything in Norfolk, and we were really ready to go, I thought it was great. We got out on the way to Bermuda, about 500 miles, Bermuda stands southeast of Norfolk, and we got about half way and ran into a storm. Which, uh, just unstacked—there wasn't a can of anything sitting on anything but the deck of the ship, and the stuff that we had in the ship, that was loose, was on the floor and everything. And we still had to keep formation. I was in formation, and it was night, and ... the waves were so huge that it'd actually twist that darn ship, like a corkscrew; one direction it's be twisted to the left, the other direction, the rear, stern, would be twisted to the right. So, it was just—you could feel it under your feet. So, in this storm I was toppin' a big wave, and down in the trough in front of me was another LCI coming directly across, directly across, he had lost his position, and I, real quickly, gave orders to the engine room to reverse engines full speed. And by gosh, they reversed those engines full speed, and that ship just quivered, it shook, it vibrated, and it just roared, you might say; it stopped just as that ship in front of us grazed the bow of our ship, and ripped, cut a keen rip, about three feet right in the stem of our ship. So, I'm tellin' ya, war no matter how you take it—you don't have to shoot to get killed. So, ok, we escaped that, and we got to Bermuda; now you got another big problem, Bermuda, its reefs all the way around it, so you had to be very careful in your steering to stay clear of those. So, we got to Hamilton Harbor there, and the British welded on a plate of steel to cover up that hole, and we pumped out the bow of the ship, the little room there where the anchor and the hoisting machineries located, and so we pumped that out. And, we were there about a week, and we left there as a group for Gibraltar; I'll just say Gibraltar, we didn't go directly there, we zigged and we moved whatever the escort commander directed us to. So, we reached off the Gibraltar entrance to the Mediterranean, and—well we got there at night, that's a bad time to take a bunch of green—see I was, I was probably the most experienced, on my ship I was, and the rest of them hadn't been to sea at all, probably, I don't know. But, we were there, and we supposed to go into Gibraltar British Harbor, and well, I don't know how we did it without hittin' mines or somethin', because there was an awful lot of confusion. So we made it in there, and we were there a couple of days, and then the British gave us orders—we received our orders from the British because they were in charge there. So, we left there in convoy, and I was ordered off at Beni-Saf, Morocco, not Morocco, but Algiers, Beni-Saf, Algiers, the most westerly port in Algeria; you go just a few more miles, you're in Morocco. So, we set in there, a few of the LCIL's did, and then a few of

the others went on down to Oran, a few of the others went to Arzew, and so on, down the coast of Algeria there, to set into port. So, we were—Beni-Saf, oh, I guess a couple of weeks, and during this period of time, we know now, didn't know then, the British were pushing Rommel out of Egypt, and chasin' him across North Africa, and our troops from the African Invasion had proceeded on through, uh, Oran, and was pushin' the Germans on into Tunis. And, so, wasn't too long there, when I say long, it seems long, but it's a week, and off you go again. We went to Oran, and El—the old Arabian port there, I ran into a rear Admiral, and he stopped me and he says, "Ensign, how do you like your beard?" Well, on the ship across the ocean, it gets pretty borin' sometimes, and so you just fail to shave and so did the others, and I didn't object to—in fact, I don't like to shave in salt water. And so, (Laughs) we had beards when we reached Oran, and the rear Admiral saw me, mine was trimmed and all that, but it was a Fu Man Choo, and I know I didn't like it either, but he stopped and says, "Well how do you like it?" and I said, "Well, I hadn't thought about it" and really I hadn't. He says, "Well, let me ask you this", he says, "Can you keep it clean underneath?" I says, "Well, well, I don't know sir. I—that salt water is not too good to wash with", and that's it, we couldn't wash in clear water, take showers, and wash your face in salt water. So, the next day, out comes a memoranda, "All Sailors Be Clean Shaven" I was glad, I started to shave mine, and it pull like you just pullin' every hair out by its roots. So, I took scissors and trimmed it off close, but it still pulled like hell, and I haven't had a beard since. And, I—but anyway, (Laughs) we left Oran, and went on East towards Tunis, not knowing that, well, they bottled up Rommel and the Germans at Tunis. And so we pulled into Tunis, to Lake Bizerte, which was a submarine base the French had prior to World War II. So, we pulled into this harbor, and the Germans had just surrendered, and Rommel, he was flown out of there by Hitler, so we missed him. And so, we were there, ready to do what? I didn't know; but we maneuvered, so we were there at Bizerte waiting orders. And when I say we, really the whole amphibious force, and those are little ships, but they were important. You cannot invade over water, land, without puttin' those troops in there, in small enough craft you don't offer such a big target. So you have to have amphibians. And that's ...

JOHNSON: Did you have ... smaller landing craft on board your ship?

NELSON: Not on my ship, no. My ship would go right into the beach and come off. And it was a ship; it had a conning tower, and anchors, and all that, and it would carry 250 fully loaded infantrymen. And, uh, they had ... two walkways down each side of the stem of the ship we let down, and the men would walk down the craft. Now when I was—when we were maneuvering, before we got to Tunis, I noticed that there were two dead spots up there on LCIL, on the right quarter, on the starboard (Laughs) quarter, and then (Laughs) on the port quarter, is dead spot, right where the troops were going over. And so, I asked a rear Admiral there for two fifty-caliber machine guns to be mounted, in a certain position, with stops on it, to fill in those two voids, because that's where you were going in, and your troops would be unprotected. So I was granted, and I was the only one that had, two additional fifty-caliber machine guns. Now right in the bow of the ship was a twenty-millimeter gun, uh, cannon, and then we had three other twenty millimeters on the ship, in different locations. But, those two spots, the fifty-caliber, did fill in. So, we never had to use it, but they would have come in handy, I know this.

JOHNSON: Uh huh, yeah.

NELSON: I was on the ship that had those two extra guns. Well, we were at Tunis, or near Bizerte, just outside of Tunis, and while I was there, I visited old Carthage, and I thought that was kind of interesting. And, but not long, just a quick—and I tell you, you have to be careful, because there were these sailors, or soldiers with their throats slit, you know, on the side of the road, they's killed. You had to be careful where you went, because everybody wasn't your friend. So, now we've captured Tunis, and now where were we going next? Well, I didn't know, but I know now; we bombed (Pantelleria?), an island of the coast of Africa, pretty close by, and it surrendered, and after that, then it began to appear, even to the lowest seaman, that our next stop would be Sicily. Well, we made a practice run, I didn't know it was for Sicily, but we made a practice invasion run, that night, and shortly after that we loaded up at Bizerte, and made the Sicilian invasion on time, by, uh, ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

NELSON: Just prior to that Sicilian invasion, the German aircraft would come every night from Sardinia, from Sicily, from Southern Italy, and bomb all those ships in Lake Bizerte. Lake Bizerte is rather small lake, considered, and then is just full of ships. On one inva—I wished I had a hundred dollar bill for every time a bomb splashed me. I was glad whenever it splashed, 'cause if you can get a splash, you all right. But, if it didn't splash, by gosh, you don't know about it. Well, one night they hit us real hard, it was LCIL One, number one, it was right over right close by, darn if they didn't hit it right in the middle, sunk it, and didn't kill a person. It was lucky, didn't kill a person, but it sure did sink it. And, so, one night it got kind of exciting. I was pulled up alongside of a refueling ship, taking on diesel oil, and darn if we didn't get into a bombing raid, and we created the biggest target in the whole lake. And, next morning—whenever they have these raids, see, we go to general quarters, and fire every gun at these planes, if you could see 'em. And, so, next morning, found a quite a bit of shrapnel, that embedded in rope, that we had on the deck, in different locations, and the shrapnel was embedded in it. So, we didn't have a single person wounded in those raids, but they were horrendous now, I tell you. And, so, we finally left there, on this invasion of Sicily, and we went to the Scoglitti Beach; that's on the right flank of the American sector. And, uh, we went in, and the one difference, now, I can point to you about how the amphibious had grown in knowledge and everything else. The operation report was only one page for African invasion, for the Sicilian it had grown to an inch thick, with all details on intelligence and so forth, and there's one thing that caught my attention particularly, was false beaches. And, so, what was a false beach? They didn't explain it, define it, but you had to draw on your imagination. So, I visualized it right, it's a beach that is shallow, just underneath the water, you can't see it, and so you get hung up on it, then you make a good target for the enemy. So, when I went in, I was on time, and at the right beach, and I made a—if you (Laughs) can say I was scared, I was scared that I wouldn't have my navigation right; you know, I was concerned about it. So, I checked my magnetic compass, I didn't have radar, its magnetic compass. So every time I'd hit a port, I'd have my compass checked out by the Navy authorities to tell me, "Your compass is operating properly" So, we hit the right beach, and when I went in, boy, I revved that darn thing up, the speed of the ship. So I said, "If there are any beaches there, then I'm going to get over 'em" And then, I'm going to have to slow the ship down, so's that I don't run ... completely out of the ocean up on the beaches. (Laughter) So I was able to do it, but there were other ships that did get hung up on those false beaches, and broadsided themselves, and the Germans, you know, did a good job on

them. So, the Sicilian Invasion sticks in my mind because it was really the finest, and the most difficult invasion, the world ever seen, as I learned after the war was over. And so, it was successful, and we returned from Sicily to Bizerte [to] await orders. But on my way over to Sicily—by the way, I was taking British troops on this particular—because we were right on the British border. British is right to the right of us, so I had a shipload of British troops. And, so, I was talking to one of those soldiers about—I was thinking about putting an emblem on the conning tower facing the front of an alligator with his mouth open spewing flames with bat wings a flyin', just a skimmin' the ocean. And lo-and-behold, he was an artist, and he says, "Well, I can draw that" I says, "You can?", I said, "Well, we don't have any paint, I know of" So, went to our paint locker, and we had enough paint in there, and so that British soldier painted that in a great big circle on the conning tower of this alligator, and I had him put at the bottom of it, "The Sea Bat" (Laughter) And, there were—here's the funny thing about it, after the war's over with, and I—just a few years ago, I'm now 71, few years ago, I said, "I sure would like to have a picture of my ship." See, wouldn't allow you to have a camera; you couldn't take pictures of nothin', fact I didn't have anything as a souvenir of World War II. So I wrote the Congressional Library, and they said yes, they have a picture of LCIL 237. And so I got it, and what do you think was on it? That there my emblem, up there ...

JOHNSON: There's sea bat up there ...

NELSON: ... and then on the back of this picture said, "Taken by Admiral Hewitt's staff" Well, you know it's against Navy regulations to put things—now I know, see, but coming out of West Tennessee, duck huntin', fishing, going bare footed, swimming in the creek, things like that, you don't think about a picture harming anything. I says, "The aircraft ... paint theirs up", I said, "I'm going to put this up", and I did. And so, the admiral let it stay, but I do know that he took a picture of it. And it was like I was posing; he got up close and took this picture. And I had lots of 'em say, "Where did you get the idea?" I says, "Why there's no idea to it." I says, "Over there to the West of Oran is a big rock cliff, and those sea bats are flying in and out of that rock cliff." So (Laughs), I says "That's where they came from" So, after the Sicilian Invasion...

JOHNSON: Did you go in at night or was it during the day in Sicily?

NELSON: We go in the morning, dawn, at dawn.

JOHNSON: Pretty stormy?

NELSON: All those invasions, just as soon as you—if you can hit it at early morning, then that's the best time. You can see well enough, but they can't see too well themselves, the enemy.

JOHNSON: Mm hmm, okay.

NELSON: So, we go in on time, and people always—I've always had a habit of being on time, and for this interview, I want to mention, Dr. Johnson was on time. (Laughter) But I was on time checkin' to see if he was on time, and we were. (Laughter) So, okay, when you make those invasions, those ships—I talked to the skippers of those ships, LCI's, who weren't on time, and they were the ones that ran into trouble. And particularly one that got shot up on the Sicilian

invasion was on the far left flank from me; I was on the right flank, and he was on the left flank. And, so he got broached on the beach and couldn't get off, and they shot him up real good. So, I learned if you stay on time, that your chances of getting out were much better, and that's the way it proved to be. So, got through that Sicilian invasion, went on back to Bizerte, and now, I'll just jump ahead to the next invasion is Salerno, Italy. But we didn't know; we just kept maneuvering, we kept training, we trained troops, we trained, uh run through training exercise for the native personnel, and make training amphibious runs at nighttime, check your navigation and things. So, when it came time to make the Salerno invasion, they didn't advertise it at all; they never do tell the regular seamen. The only time I ever learned that an invasion was be made, was when the—I'd received the operation report, and I signed for it; no one's to know [or] see it except me, and the person deliverin' it. So that is how I learned about it. Well, I was actually in the local hospital, I had a little infection in my eye, and so I was released from there with a patch over my eye, and I got my orders, so we just went on, and joined the convoy and went to Salerno. Now, this was really a bigger operation than Sicily, and the operation instructions, that was a good two inches thick. I wish I'd have kept those, but I was supposed to destroy them, and I did, 'cause the enemy got a hold of them, then of course that might, that would divulge a lot of secrets maybe. So, here we are on our way to Salerno, but we didn't know, and I'm carryin' British troops again. They divided that Salerno Beach; the north half of the beach was British, that took in the city of Salerno itself, and then the Americans were on the south half of the beach.

JOHNSON: What did you think of the British?

NELSON: British? Good soldiers, I really liked 'em. Why? Because, he we are eighteen, nineteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, like that—and say, by the way, the crew of this, my ship, came from Iowa, came from Brooklyn, came from Mississippi, came from Tennessee, came from West Virginia, came from Indiana, and it was just a morgasboard (sic) of America; that's what it was. And they were just high school—some of 'em had sixth grade education, or more, but you can teach 'em if you take time. So, well, here we are to make our landing at Salerno, at dawn, and the orders, really detailed this time, here's the order of the thing was to proceed like this, uh, shelling of the beach at a certain time, and the rocket ships to go in at a certain time, and so on. Well, on the American side, they, for some reason or another, cancelled out their shelling of the beach; the Generals told the Navy they didn't want the shelling of the beach. But, the British went ahead with the shelling of their beach, and using their rocket ship to blast through whatever was obstructing from the beach's edge on in. And so, I was on the British side of the operation. So, I didn't know that until the war was over, and I read the Navy account. And so, I do know this, when my orders showed certain things to occur, I noticed on the American side there was absolutely no firing. On the British side, they were firing in, you could the flashes on the beach. Well, the invasion took place, and with even the blasting of the beach, and so forth, even on the British side, didn't do a whole lot of good. But it did help some, 'cause on the American side, they got to the beach's edge, and the beach was just solidly laid with mines, and there was these soldiers piling up on each other, blowing themselves up with those mines, the British not too much better off. But, that's the way they went into Salerno. The first day we didn't go too far, and so, I was given my orders my ship, my orders said, "You are to remain at Salerno until further orders." And really what it ended up, I was there for the whole ten days, from beginning to the end. So, my next job was to—well, whatever they would call me to do. Well the first thing, after landing my troops, I received an order to go to Maiori Beach. They

didn't tell me where it was, where to find it, and remove wounded rangers. Well, rangers is a new word to me too, 'cause they don't tell you everything, you just gotta piece it together. So, I got the charts out and started lookin' for Maiori, and there's one thing for sure, if you don't know you are then you're not going to find where this other place is, and how to get there. So, I did know where I was, so I searched, and I found Maori over on the extreme left flank around a peninsula, and the rangers, that's American commandoes, went in on this, uh, infiltration attack on the left flank, and did well, but they ran into a whole lot—I've learned after I read about it, they ran into a lot of opposition, had a whole lot of wounded, and I was ordered to go over there and to remove those **wounded**. Well, I went to Maiori, and we removed two shiploads of rangers and, well, they were in all conditions. We weren't a hospital ship, so we bedded them down with all of our blankets and things that we had on ship, fed 'em; we came back, we thought we'd you know have a hospital ship, but it wasn't there. So, had to hold those wounded overnight, and the next day a hospital ship came into the area, so we unloaded those, and our next orders was, throughout the operation, to lay down smoke screens. And so, whenever—this beach at Salerno is quite shallow, and right behind it is a high mountain. And this mountain had tunnels in it for roads, railroads, highways, and so on; well, the Germans would put their mobile guns in those tunnels, and come out firing, and go back in. And so, whenever they start firing, then I'd start laying the smoke, and you can't lay the smoke and get in behind it too, (Laughs) so you're out in the broad daylight. So, I laid smoke screens throughout the whole ten days I was there, and I ran out of smoke pots, and then, well, what do you do? You don't manufacture 'em, you can't do down to the corner store and buy 'em, so I thought about, well, why not just go out to these Merchant Marine ships, that's just layin' way off yonder, safe distance from the firin', and get their smoke pots? Well, they were glad to give me all the smoke pots I wanted, so, we had plenty of smoke pots, and we laid smoke. At nighttime we had, from the very beginning, air raids on the—and in daytime, on the beach. And the third day, we were there, our troops had only advanced about a mile and a half, or somethin' like that, inland on the entire front from British on the left flank, to the Americans on the right, had moved in that much. Then, there was a creek, a stream of water, divided those two sectors, and the British, I meant the Germans, came down that divide, that creek, and were pushing for the sea, and on the third night, they came within a half mile of breakin' through. And so, that really was critical at that particular stage, they brought in troops, all on destroyers, anything they could get in Africa, to get those troops here quick. So, we were unloading troops all through the night, gettin' 'em on the beach to shore up this counterattack the Germans almost pulled off. This narrow beach where we were, there was German prison pens all along it, and its kindly, you know, it wasn't, in other words, it wasn't a nice place to stroll around on. But our ship and our duty was to go in there, with the troops, or whatever occasion called us to that, and so that's what we did; and that's amphibious. Now, the different amphibious craft run like this: LST is the largest, now that's a great big, really, is a great big ship that's quite plump, that carries tanks, it carries trucks, it carries the whole—maybe a regiment of men, I don't know, there's a whole lot, and they just load it up; now, that's the biggest. And then the next in size was LCI, Landing Craft Infantry, and those are ships that are commissioned to fly, fly the flag. And next is an LCM, is a big flat barge, that's really what it is, and it is brought over on the deck of those LST's, and that's the next size. And the next size is an LCT, Landing Craft Tank, which carry a truck, or a tank, or you can put soldiers in it, and ... on the LST, the bow opens up, just opens up from the water's edge right open, and then a ramp, and they run their craft out the ramp. The LCI does not open up at the bow, it has two walkways on the side that are mobile that slide out to the front and down into the water, and the men run down

it. And the LCM's, they have a drop front on the bow, which is flat, and it drops down into the water, a door, and then it's pulled back up before they get underway. An LCT, Landing Craft Tank, is similar; its front bow is blunt, and it drops a ramp down to unload its troops. And then next you have the smallest, was the Landing Craft Personnel, and that was a Higgins Boat, or just carried about thirty-five, thirty-six troops, and its bow dropped straight forward, and pulled up. Now, nowadays, if I went into the Navy, I wouldn't recognize none of it. They don't use those crafts now, because every war is fought differently, every situation can't be solved with the same type of equipment, and I will say this, by gosh, and uh, Defense Minister Forrestal, he's our first Defense Minister, he said in his letter that we won these—never lost a single invasion in World War II from the Atlantic and throughout the Pacific, and that's true. And, so they learn from one step to the other, but most of the learning was done right over here, Africa, Sicily, Salerno. Now, I will jump real quick to— after the Salerno invasion, a month later, I was on operation with five other LCI's, out of Catania, Sicily, and we were to report to Taranto, Italy, over in the heel, right in the instep, where the heel is, and that's the largest Navy base of the Italians. And we were report there, and we reported and picked up, I did, I don't know what the rest of 'em picked up, but I picked up British commandoes of the Black Watch, the British Black Watch, shipload of 'em. And we were headed back, at dark, and the sea was rough, storm clouds were hangin' in close, sea was getting pretty rough, and darn if my ship didn't hit a mine, and it blew forty-five feet of that ship just as clean away as you'd take a saw, and just saw right through one-third of your desk, and just cut it across right on a straight line.

JOHNSON: Blew the bow off...

NELSON: Yeah, the bow off clean. And we were—I was the last ship in the column, there was six ships, LCI'S, and there were two sub chasers with us, and so, the bow watch, the Navy man, was right up there in the bow to watch for things like that, but gosh, he couldn't have seen that, nobody could have. But, we hit that mine, and here's what it feels like; get a brick wall, and get back about thirty yards, somethin', and run just as hard as you can against that wall. You are not going to move the wall at all, and that's what it felt like. Now, I was there, I was in perfect position directly behind the ship in front of me, and hit that mine, and that knocked that ship up into the air completely, and when I was going up, it flashed through my mind real quick, "Well, buddy, you are going to have to swim", 'cause, you know, you go to sea, you're going to have to swim sometime, if anything bad happens. If you fly an airplane and anything bad happens, you're going to have to parachute, or crash. So, no kiddin', it went through your mind—it's funny how things, if you thought about it before, it comes back to you in a flash, quick. So, ok, up in the air, didn't know where I was, and so I landed back on my back, and the deck is not level it has steps. Your compass is right in the center, and its on a little pedestal, and then you step down a step and you on somethin' else, and so on. So when you landed, you landed like on stairs, and so I landed, and when I landed, I tried to get up, but I couldn't. The water was comin' down in such mass, couldn't stand against, I couldn't get my body up against the weight of the water. So, I says well the darn thing has flipped over on its side, and (Laughs) water's pourin' in. Well, I mean, your mind just flips that way. So, when that water quit comin' down, I got up. That ship had settled back down just as square and as flat as your foot on the ground. So, of course, that was fortunate, because now, we had a chance. So, the engineering officer and the executive officers, they were in the bunks, waitin' there—we were four on four off, that's the way I set it up. So, the engineering officer came up to the conning tower, and I told him, I says, "Check real

quick and see if we've taken on any water, and stop it." Well, he checked real quick and came back and says, "We've taken on some water in the bow section", what was left, "and we're pumpin' it out." So, ok, that settled that. So we weren't goin' sink right away. So, then, you never knew when you's gonna sink, so the radioman came around, and he was supposed to gather up all the secret material, he came around and says that he had gathered up and put into this bag all of the secret material, codebooks and so on. Okay, that, we took care of things that had to be done, and the forty-five feet section was blown off completely clean, against orders I turned on the search light, and swirled it around to see what in the devil's around the ship, and it was just a mess of destruction, and soldiers out in the water. So, we started to do the next thing, look after men, and one of my sailors, unbeknownst to me, he dove overboard and saved the life of a Black Watch English sailor. Well, I put him in for an award, and never heard from him, not at all. And so the executive officer, he looked after the removing or pulling out the wounded, and he was—oh, he pulled out, oh, five to ten, that were still alive. And the two sub chasers, they were there, and one of them reported there was a hospital ship, no kiddin'. Now, we were out at sea, I don't know how in the world that happened, but there was a hospital ship lit up, and it was—so they took those wounded troopers to the hospital ship directly, just like this old—in Knoxville you run the ambulance right over to the hospital. So, we did get these wounded, and there were about, oh, twenty-five or thirty wounded, and there were thirty dead when the last report by the British, Black Watch Captain, he gave a full report, and there were thirty British commandoes in that explosion, one American sailor, the bow watch from Georgia; he, of course, was obliterated. And so, when we removed the wounded, then we—the other LCI's came in, and two of them squeezed in on each side and towed LCI 237 to Catania, Sicily, and we set in there with the thing afloat, and then we, a week later, were towed by a seagoing tug from Catania to Palermo, which is up in the northwest corner of Sicily, to a shipyard. And we could get underway, the engine room still operated, but the only thing that saved our hide was this, and I still haven't been able to figure it out. Here you are, right now, if you've been reading, in the local papers, as of now, the mines in the Persian Gulf? Now that's flat, just as calm as the top of the table, you can see those grand rascals; now here we are in a rough sea, at night, and this mine hits right directly on the stem. Now, if it had hit ten feet to the right of the stem, or ten feet to the left of the stem, that mine would have exploded into the center sections of the ship, and the ship would have sunk completely. And so here is this mine, if it's true, hit right directly on the stem, it blew off right straight across perpendicular, from side to side, forty-five feet of the ship. Now, I thought that we were in Palermo, not Palermo, but...

JOHNSON: Taranto?

NELSON: Yeah, Taranto, and that's the biggest ship in the Navy port, that the Italians had, and the Italians were famous for frogmen, underwater demolitions, and all that; we'd been warned in our intelligence report on that. I believe that while we were there pickin' up these troops, commandoes, that a frogman, or some frogman from the Italian—and again, the Italian navy was very Fascist, they didn't—they were still fightin' the war against the Americans. I believe they went underneath that ship of mine, and just plastered the bow with plastic explosives, and put a darn timing fuse in there to go off later, because it blew off so square across, and I remember the ocean. I was having a hard time keeping my position in column directly behind the ship in front, it was a hard thing to do because the ship, the sea was so rough. Well, anyway, we—I shouldn't be here, and none of the rest should be here by, you know, by the averages. But we did, and

when we got to Catania, we had to clean the ship up, and we had to use flat nose shovels to shovel them out, you know, dead bodies, they're just regular hamburger, that's what it amounted to. And we hosed it down with all kinds of chemicals, and that smell was there for a long spell. Now, right after this, we were there a month, and nothin' happened, see, they'd tell us they were gonna do this to the ship, they didn't tell us they were gonna do nothin' to the ship or what. And, so, I got kinda itchy, and I says, "Well, I think I'll put in for P.T. duty", I had some experience now, and I says, "Hell, if I'm gonna get killed, I might as well have a shootin' chance."

JOHNSON: Shoot back.

NELSON: Yeah. So I put in for P.T. duty ..., and by gosh, instead of getting P.T. duty, they sent me to the advanced amphibious training base, and I didn't know, of course now I know, they were getting ready for Southern France invasion. So, well, I went to that duty, and first there was Arzu, Africa, and then from Arzu, we went to Salerno real quickly, soon as the Germans were run out of Salerno, then set that base up there. So, went to Salerno, and I still didn't know other than we were just training amphibious troops and training sailors. So, went to Salerno, and a little while later, I met an admiral there, one afternoon we were in the Ficiste building, on the roof, had a officer's club there, a slate roof, and you could look out to the sea out there. So, I was out there just lookin' around, and this admiral come up and started talkin' to me, asked my name, and so I asked him what his name was, and he says, "I'm Admiral Moon." And, I didn't ask him where he's from, but we had a nice conversation, and I didn't—course they don't, they don't tell anything, but I later find out, see, he was a task force commander of the Southern France Naval invasion, task force commander. So, the Southern France invasion was takin' place right there, I mean, the planning and everything right there. And then, later, I married my wife from Kokomo, Indiana, Wilma Abbott, and that's where Admiral Moon's from. Yeah, and I have his World War I history, 'cause the superintendent of the Kokomo, Indiana, city schools wrote up a complete history of all the World War I veterans, and Admiral Moon was in there, name for name. So, I mean it's just a coincidence again, and you just hardly believe it. So, I'm here in Salerno, and while I'm there, we're just training everyday, daylight to dark, six days a week, Sunday, we even worked on Sunday many times, but what of it, it's pretty boring if you don't have nothin' to do. So, I did make one trip to Rome, after they took Rome. But, before they took it, we trained this, a division of troops—I ran into an old school mate of mine from Mississippi, he was captain of our artillery company, and so—of all things runnin' into him. And, he invited me out to chow with him, at supper, so that was an experience, 'cause they don't have dining rooms and things. So, the Navy's pretty—even on that LCI as poorly as it was, facility wise, it was a far better (Laughter) than what the soldier was out in the field. So, Pelahatchie was his nickname, Pelahatchie Russell from Mississippi, and so, I got to talkin' to him, and I says, "What group is this? What division?" He says, "This is 88th Division." I says, "Where you been all this time?" He says, "Well, we've been training in the United States for three years. Mountain, desert, you name it, that's where we go." I says, confidentially, I says, "What you over here for?" He says, "We are to break through to Rome." Anzio Beach has been opened up see, and it's stalemated, so here they brought in two divisions, 88th I remember, the other one I don't remember.

JOHNSON: Probably 10th Mountain.

NELSON: So, those two divisions—by the way, we, you know, trained them a little bit on amphibious techniques of this, that, or the other, and so they went into Anzio, and they took Rome. They really did, 88th was the leading division into Rome. And, uh, so, while I was in Salerno, I made a trip up soon after that to Rome for a week. Stayed at the Arena, and the facilities built for the Olympics, that were to be held in Italy, but they never materialized. So I stayed there a week, and I saw every Cathedral in town. And I got there as they opened up this cave, huge cave, with about three hundred Italians stuffed in there, and they died, the opening—I was there, I walked in that place, this guy was driving our jeep around, there was another officer went with me, we saw the whole thing. It was sickening, but—had another coincidence, a captain, at the University of Mississippi, he—next door roommate, right next door to me, and I run into him, of all things; his name was Montgomery. So, after that trip, that's the only vacation I had, was that trip to Rome, and we went on back to Salerno, and continued to do what we were doin', not knowin' there's gonna be south—I felt like we ought to have a southern invasion of France, but it never came up, and nobody would talk. Nobody would say nothin', they kept secret, and that's good. I did notice this, end of Salerno was coming, facilities or techniques, such as underwater demolition teams, and this was a guy from Mississippi State, was captain of that, and other armed forces that we'd never used before, even at Salerno see, they were adding to it. So, I was talkin', sometime we had bull session, and I told 'em, I says, "Oh, I've never seen so much new troops, ... different types of troops, as are here now," and I says, "if they use those, then we'll go into Southern France, slick as a greased pig." And really, that's what happened. That's a fact, we didn't have any trouble, and went in there, to Southern France, and soon as Marseille was cleared up, then Salerno was closed down, moved personnel, me up there to Marseille, France. And, uh, there was a huge area, just completely demolished, right at the harbor—Germans dynamited every bit of it, to locate—they couldn't locate these, uh, radios, broadcast stations, they couldn't find 'em, they knew they were there, but they couldn't locate 'em, so just dynamited the whole thing. It looked like a mile square. So, Marseille was a mess, and they began now to move into Germany, over the Rhine, so my numbers, were I could of long go, you know, come in home on my numbers, but I just stayed. A fellow there, who was an underground fighter for the French, gave me an album of German photographs, and in it was a picture of Rommel in Africa. So ...

JOHNSON: Take you back?

NELSON: ... I really appreciate that, which I still have.

JOHNSON: You said you were scheduled to go to the Pacific?

NELSON: And then when the Mount Vernon, big troop transport came in there, and took me back to Boston, of all things. And I never will forget my first meal in Boston, after this tour of duty overseas. The waiter at the café brought in sweet milk; I drank, I guess two quarts of that before he ever got the meal onto the table. That was really the best tastin' stuff. So, yeah, I came into Boston, I called my family, and of course they were happy, I was happy—and then they sent me from Boston to Olathe, Kansas. Now, Olathe, Kansas, right outside of—it's a Naval air station, is right outside of Kansas City, and it was the command—Naval transport command was located there, headquarters, so that's where they flew officers and enlisted men to the Pacific. So, I didn't know that, see, they just don't tell you those things.

JOHNSON: You just are part of the machine.

NELSON: That's right, and when it's all over, and the reports come in—so what you all are doin' here, if it's properly done, will be a great value to the future generations. For this reason only, if nothin' else, they'll know, "Well, daddy was here," and so forth, and he was there for a reason. So, well, I was there at Olathe, not knowing what, really, I was there for; but I do know that my duties they assigned me was concerning the dispatching, or planning, the outgoing, and reporting in are the pilots of the incoming troop transports, see. And, so I begin to, you know, kind of piece things together, and I finally caught on to the idea that that's—they give 'em a little restin' period after a couple of years over in Europe, they say, "Well, give him a little more time," or something like that. I know that's what they were playin' on now, but then I didn't know, and eventually the atomic bomb was dropped, and as soon as that was dropped, then that shut down the war in the Pacific. And then I was sent to Bunker Hill Naval Air Station, right north of Kokomo, Indiana, about ten miles somethin' like that, and so, I was pretty happy you know, I came back ...

JOHNSON: Mm hmm, oh yeah.

NELSON: ... all in one piece; I thought I was in one piece, but I wasn't all together.

JOHNSON: I was going to say, did you get beat up from...

NELSON: Yeah, yeah, I did, and I didn't know about that just a little later. I came back to Kokomo, and the first Sunday, I'd already said—you know when you're in a...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

NELSON: ...the sun is just so warm, and I was—I'll never forget on my LCI, I wasn't on duty then, I just went out on the deck, and layed down and watched the dolphins race along side, just jumpin' out of the water, right along with the ship, like carryin' a conversation, and, you know, that was a nice time, I thought, yeah.

JOHNSON: I've talked with enough people to know that there's good, and bad, and boring, and scary, and all of that, you've got a piece of everything there.

NELSON: Well, I want to tell you about the scary part, if you, you know, if you lookin' after your safety... (Break in tape) where their wearin' hats now, again. So, oh about two weeks, I was introduced to Wilma, who's to be my wife later, and it was the girl up there arrangin' those flowers. So, I'm still married to Wilma, raised four children, three of 'em girls, and my youngest is a boy. Two of 'em went to the University of Tennessee, no, three of 'em, three girls went to the University of Tennessee, and the son, Maryville College on a basketball scholarship. So, I'm in Bunker Hill Naval Air Station, and uh, this is nineteen and forty, or May of about '45. And so, I marry September 31st of '45, and I no sooner married and they sent me to Glenview Naval Air Station, in north of Chicago, and, uh, my wife and I, we set up housekeepin' at Kokomo, and she's teachin' school, and then we learned that we were goin' to expect our first baby, and I'm

up in Chicago, so I come back on weekends to be in Kokomo with her. So, she finally moves up there to Glenview, had a one little old one room apartment, with a sway back bed, with a shared bathroom with two other couples, and we cooked, ate, and slept in one little room, and on the wall there's a water closet from an ancient commode (Laughter), but we were happy. And so, on July the 10th my wife has this baby, and I get my orders for demobilization for July the 15th. So, I go to the hospital, Naval Air Station, or Great Lakes it is, Great Lakes Naval Hospital, and told 'em what my problem was, I says, "I'm being demobilized the 15th of July, but my wife's in—she's just had a baby, and I'm just wonderin' if they can stick around here long enough for her to get back on her feet." As it so happened, they were keepin' her anyway, two weeks. So, when we left there, I had everything packed, and I picked up my wife and baby at the hospital, got on the train, and went to Kokomo, about a hundred miles away, and we set up housekeepin' there. And about seven months later, well, let's see, my final active duty was October the 10th, 1946, that was demobilization date, 'cause I had no leave here in the state for my whole duration, so I had ninety days coming. So, after that demobilization, I went on back to work for the airline in Indianapolis, they had it, so I went back there and I was with 'em for seven months. My left eye went blind all of a sudden, just wham bam—and so I was drivin' fifty miles from Kokomo to Indianapolis and then back everyday. So, my eye went blind, and so I checked into VA hospital at Indianapolis, and so they said "Well, you got a detached retina," and so they operated on it, and over a period of two years, it began to function, but they thought they was going to lose my right eye in the same period of time, and so after two years, I was allowed to take off these little black glasses that would just let light come in through a little hole; back then they didn't know how to operate, so it was really an experiment, and it worked, fairly well. So, over that two period of time, I ... had plenty of time to think, and I wondered, "Well, what would cause this?" And so, I thought it was the explosion blast in face which I caught, my head facin' this explosion, caught all that, and then throwin' me in the air and droppin' back on the deck. And so, I wrote a letter to the Navy Department, just explaining to 'em what the situation was, so they ordered me, called me back to duty, to report to Bethesda Naval Hospital—that was around December of '48 I believe. So, I reported to 'em, and I didn't know what they were gonna do, but they examined me and all that, but they put me—had to appear before a retirement board, I didn't know that, and so they talked to me about what happened and everything. So, in about two weeks time they told me they were retirin' me, full pay, from you know, at that time was three-quarters pay. So, I was retired to be effective February 1, 1949. That's really just the beginning. You know, the problem really is, the sad problem is—service connected disabilities of troops, sailors or servicemen, you can't go out in the private industry and get jobs, they won't hire you; now, they don't tell you that, but they won't hire you, 'cause of insurance reasons and so forth. So that, actually, is not quite fair. I mean, so you have to do a lot of adjusting on your own, to find a place where you can still function with your disability. I've been lucky in that—now this eye here, it's no good, it's just glass. Now this right eye—and when it's finally, you know, just gone, and so this right eye, depth perception, is not as accurate as it would be if I had the left. So, well, I've got no complaints, but I do have the two things in my mind they ought to correct. I think they have corrected some, now that it keeps coming back to my mind—now here is this sailor, volunteered, jumped overboard, saved this man's life, and it's nothing out of the ordinary, justifying some award. Now, I reflect on that in this respect, to put it in proper context, at Salerno, a sailor on my ship—I had a twenty-four hour watch, we were on what you call, we were on battle station all the time, skeleton, so if anything happened we could be right in the action right away. This aircraft spotter says, "There's something comin' in, oh, a airplane,

spotted an airplane, way off in the distance.” He called it in, looked, yeah, it’s there, and in just a minute or so, he says, “Say, there’s somethin’ coming in, certain direction, bearing”—and sure enough it was there. It was the first radio controlled bomb the German’s had, and it comes in, and I was sitting right close to this cruiser, USS Savannah, and it comes right down into that Savannah ship—it never fired one shot, it could’ve thrown up, and had the ability, to throw up a canopy of fire that probably could’ve shot that slow moving glider, it was a kind of a glider thing, you know. So, okay, I’ve still to go to Washington and check the ship’s log on what their report was during that happening, and I’ll bet you they’ve got oodles of officers that got awards for damage control, inside that big ship—that’s regular Navy, see. And there’s a difference between the Reserves and the regular Navy, and that kind of sticks in my craw a little bit, and I haven’t been able to do a thing about it. Well, it won’t be done about it, nothin’ will happen; they say the legislation prohibits reviewing those now. But, in my report, when that bomb, uh, mining happened, I put this sailor in for an award, and they never honored it, never even responded to it. And, so, I almost (Laughs) come to the conclusion that the regular Navy has one set of values and the Reserves is another.

JOHNSON: There are people who feel that way about the Army, too; that ...

NELSON: Yeah. Here’s the thing that’s so dangerous about that, if it’s really not true that, but the perception is there, it might as well be true. Because the regular Army, the regular Navy, under our system of government, and that’s what I like, will never have full defense without the Reserves. The Reserves do the work, these other guys do the planning, but they should smooth—and I think they have some, because here’s what brought it to mind, I was talking to some Colonels, and they says, this Colonel said that he was decorated because he saved a man’s life. And I said, (Laughs) here’s this boy from Georgia, “He saved that man’s life and wasn’t even ordered to do it, did it on his own.” So, I kind of like, I’d like to see our, you know, armed services, which—they have a better opportunity now, because they got the National Guard, works more closely, and I think they’ve corrected some of that. But, they ought to go back and pick up this guy, because he has no record—now I’ve got the letters, see, but I don’t know where he is, I can’t locate him; he’s from Georgia. The fellow that got killed was from Georgia, and I sure would like to, you know, get that straightened out. Congressman Duncan, he wasn’t able to get any help; the Navy Department says, “We aren’t able to do it because...”—they put a deadline on reviews, but they never advised me there was a deadline, so how in the heck would I know to act. (Phone rings, break in tape)

JOHNSON: One more thing. I’d like to end up by asking, is there, looking back on it, is there anything special that you want to highlight, that you’d be sure that I know, and anybody else who hears this tape knows? About World War II, and I can pretty well guess, but uh...

NELSON: Gosh, I don’t know. Well, I—my advice to any man going into the service is this, if you go into the service, afraid to die, then don’t go in, ‘cause you’re not going to be effective at all, period. And if you do go in, hell, learn safely how to do what you’re supposed to do, ‘cause if you dead, you can’t help, but if you’re alive, you can help. Now, so many of ‘em say, “Well, I ..., well, I don’t want to die.” Well, then they better, better not get in the service, because you can die in just merely maneuvers. I’ve seen—didn’t see it, but I was on these maneuvers because of the carelessness of somebody. The ramp on these personnel, LCVP’s, dropped prematurely,

and just shuttled a whole boatload of troops, weighted down a hundred pounds, on their backs, see, drowned like dogs. Well, I mean—so, there's a safe way to do things and be very effective. And fightin' a war is like anything else, if you do it right, your chances of success are greater. And it's just simple as that. And go to bed at nighttime sayin' "Have I done my best?", "Have I done what I supposed to have done?" And if you do, you're gonna have a clear conscience, and you're gonna be able to be more effective. You can't, you can't run scared. And those that run scared, they lose their equilibrium, and I can give you an illustration real quick.

JOHNSON: Sure.

NELSON: Alright, when the ship was mined, I had two rafts; one on the starboard side, and one on the port side. And so, there was a white guy there, smart twelfth grader, and so, I asked him to take that raft and go get those guys out there in the water. And so, we had maneuvers on how to do that, you get the retaining line, and hold it and cut your raft loose, or untie it. Alright, he released the raft and didn't have the retaining line, so there goes my raft. Ok, I turned to port side and here's this sixth grade black, from Indiana, and this other sixth grader, (Laughs) I don't know how they both came together right there, but they were. And I told him take that raft and go out there and get those fellers. They did it, sixth graders. So, I don't know how you explain that.

JOHNSON: Education isn't all of it.

NELSON: No, it isn't; I don't know how to explain it, but I came out of it this way, I says well, by gosh you just got to give a fella a chance, to prove himself. And I can say this, there was several who, uh, we didn't have but one black on the ship—I'm from Mississippi, and so Mississippi's supposed to be the bigot of the Nation, by people—but it's not so. Just the same, they'd come to me with tales about the black boy. They couldn't substantuate nothin', and I told 'em, I says, "Listen I don't want to hear anymore about this unless you got the goods. I don't want to hear no more about it." I says, "He's doin' his job, are you doin' your job?" So, we have lots of blacks in the service, and you can't put a label on them beforehand, you're goin' say let the actions speak louder than the words.

JOHNSON: And this guy worked out alright...

NELSON: Oh, he worked out fine. You darn right he did. Actually, he was my "valet" if you want to call it. I never used him that way at all. I just, that wasn't me. I could eat my own food, I could serve my own plate, and I wanted him to do like the rest, he was a sailor like the rest. Now he got his promotion just like the rest, I didn't cur a favors with none of 'em. They did their work, by gosh, they got their rewards, except on that mining. Now, the executive officer and this sailor that saved the other folks, no decorations whatsoever.

JOHNSON: Have you ever had a reunion of those guys getting' together...

NELSON: Well, there weren't, but, you know, thirty-three of us, and you can't find 'em. See, the service won't give out addresses on 'em. Now, you can put in a letter addressed to the service, and they will—and then you write in the letter what you want forwarded on, on a self-

addressed envelope, and they will put his address on it, and if he's interested, he'll answer back, if he's alive. These are scattered, ... they were all over Brooklyn, had 'em right off the streets of Brooklyn. But I will say this, I had good officers, I had good men, and I account for their functions, it was successful. When I hit that mine, they functioned. Remember when that ship was in front of me, and we were goin' to have a head-on collision out in the middle of the ocean? They could have hesitated on givin' me that full steam a stern, they could've hesitated, they could've froze up, they could've delayed, if they had, we would've had the collision. As it was, got it immediately. And, shoot, they were good. They were good. We never damaged that ship one iota, and many, many times, higher, you know, ranking officers, would come and volunteer and say, "Your ship came in real pretty. It's real smooth." You see, you don't do it by yourself. Uh, at Salerno, I forgot to mention this, Commander (Phone rings, break in tape)... There was a Commodore Zimmerly, American representative in the British Task Force at Salerno, and he's the one that was in command of the convoy that we—the LCI's came over in; he was the commanding officer. He was Captain Zimmerly, and they promoted him to Commodore to match up with the British at Salerno invasion—and on the tenth day, I got my orders to join a convoy and go back to Africa. Two Focke-Wulf's came in, and by gosh, one of 'em dropped a bomb right off the stern, and knocked out my port propeller, strut, that supports the propeller, that propeller was just unsupported and floppin' in every direction. Well, that's how close it was all the time, that was the tenth day. On the ninth day, Commodore Zimmerly pulled up along, in his flag ship, pulled up along side this little old ship of mine, it two hundred feet long, and he says, "I like to speak to the commanding officer, the skipper." So, I happened to be in the conning tower, and I acknowledged him, he says, "I want to extend my commendations to your ship," and so forth and so on. Now, I wasn't trained, in Northwestern, how to get those things in writing, see, or how to get a declaration, point blank, they never mentioned that. So, I should have said to him—I thanked him, then, but I should have said after I thanked him, I says, "Now, Commodore, will you put that in writing so all my men will have for their descendants, a record of this commendation." Never occurred to me that you'd have to do a thing like that.

JOHNSON: Yeah, you'd think that they would take care of that.

NELSON: Yeah, yeah, they didn't, they didn't. So, the only thing we can live with, he said it.

JOHNSON: He said it, and you know, and you told the crew, I'm sure.

NELSON: Oh, the crew heard it, they heard it; 'cause see, when a ship pulls up by another—you know its kind of like, well, visitors have come. So, I, that's the way it went. And I again think that it's the difference, you know, regular Navy, Reserve, it's just hangin' in there. Oh, that's alright, they'll be out of the Navy in a few years, they will be out and all that stuff. But, that's...

JOHNSON: It would have been nice to have...

NELSON: That shipped deserved commendations.

JOHNSON: Yeah, it sounds like it.

NELSON: I gave a full report. I've got my report, but the men don't have it. The radioman, I hope he made a copy for the ship, he did all my typin.' So, well that's the complete story.

JOHNSON: I thank you very much.

NELSON: That was it.

JOHNSON: I thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----