

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD K. WILLIAMS

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
NOVEMBER 10, 2006

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G. KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Howard K. Williams on November 10th, 2006 at The Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

CARRIE DAVISSON: Carrie Davisson

PIEHLER: And again this is on November 10th, 2006, which in many parts of Knoxville is being celebrated as Veterans Day including a Veterans Day parade. I want to thank you for coming today to Knoxville, driving down from Cosby with your wife, particularly on her birthday. We're really glad that you could come and we're glad it worked out.

HOWARD K. WILLIAMS: Very pleased to be here.

PIEHLER: Well let me begin by first asking; could you tell me a little bit about your parents?

WILLIAMS: My parents were married in 1920 after my father returned from World War I and had been gassed and shell-shocked. For the first five years that he was back in the states [he was] in the veteran's hospital, in and out, was not expected to live. But he overcame it and lived until he was almost ninety. Mother was raised a farm girl in eastern North Carolina where he was also raised and after the war they moved to Virginia and I think it was essentially because he found some educational advantages at VTI [Virginia Technical Institute] and went there. He and mother were there when I was born in 1923. He suffered most of his life with lung damage and was unable to do manual work, so most of the time he was a salesman. But mother and dad both were born again Christians and raised five children on a little fifteen acre farm just outside of Blackstone, Virginia where we all went to school and where we, well, I guess I was the only one that graduated from that school. The property went right up to the edge of the property that the government made into what was originally called Camp Pickett; it's now called Fort Pickett. [We] moved away shortly after that because of the fact that the camp (unintelligible) off to the Richmond area where the younger children went to school and finished there in a little place called Highland Springs, where eventually I met my wife. Well I had been gone from home at that time, so I didn't make that move with 'em, I was away in school at that time. Mother lived until '87 and my daddy passed away in '84. Beyond that I don't know. I could you tell you this about my father's service. He was in the 42nd Rainbow Division, the infantry, in France and was in some of the heated battles including the Argonne Forest and St. Mihiel. But he never would talk about details of his fighting and although he was an infantry, rifle carrying soldier he never would speak of that. The only thing that he really was proud of is that he had shaken hands with Douglas MacArthur, who was his Colonel. So he was anxious to see the museum opened in Norfolk [Virginia], which honors his service and visited there and got a tremendous thrill out of that. They were good parents and they did all they could for us in a very, very hard time. We were poor and of course we didn't realize it because everybody around us was poor at that time. And that's pretty much I guess encapsulates what I remember and what I experienced there.

PIEHLER: Do you know what hospital your father was at? You mentioned he was in a veterans hospital; do you know which one it was? Was it in North Carolina or Virginia?

WILLIAMS: I don't know whether he was in one in North Carolina or not. I know that in his later years, due to his service-connected disability, which incidentally sustained us during the Depression except for the short time president Roosevelt cut out the pensions for them. He had a small pension all his life and was able to work some in the middle years as it got better. He died in the veteran's hospital at Richmond which is—the name of that hospital, McGuire Hospital. But what other hospitals he was in at the time ... McGuire didn't exist at that time. That was a product of World War II essentially.

PIEHLER: You mentioned he went to school. Did the government pay for his tuition as a disabled veteran?

WILLIAMS: Yes, due to his disability this was a rehabilitation. He was really taking animal husbandry and tried to go into the chicken business, raising eggs principally. But his health failed again and he had to get out of that before spent the major part of his adult working life as a salesman. [He] sold clothes during the Depression; that was tailored clothes. You've probably never heard of anyone that did that, but he had a lot of people working out of the tailoring houses in Baltimore with sample cases and they went out into the field and sold to individual customers, and measured them, and then they sent this to the factory and made their clothes for 'em. Someone asked him once "Were you a good salesman?" and he said, "I guess I was. I sold a man a shroud with two pairs of pants!" (Laughter) When it came the man had died since he had bought the suit.

PIEHLER: Actually ... You were just mentioning how old your parents were. Your dad lived to, you said 90?

WILLIAMS: Almost ninety.

PIEHLER: And he was born in 1899.

WILLIAMS: '95. Mother was born in '99. He was born in '95.

PIEHLER: '95. You mentioned your father wouldn't talk a lot about the war except for meeting Douglas MacArthur.

WILLIAMS: Most people that have really, that's why you know if I had seen some of the things that went on with the soldiers on Guadalcanal I wouldn't talk to anybody. And maybe some of the things I did I wouldn't want you to know.

PIEHLER: Do you think he told your mother ... anything about the war?

WILLIAMS: I don't believe so. She never mentioned if he did. But if he ever talked about it at all, he just couldn't. I mean it was just a snap and he was like—he was feisty though if you indicated you were not patriotic because he lived and died a patriot all the way. In fact in his later years, due to the fact I guess that he had so much trouble himself as a result of service, he helped a lot of veterans get veterans' benefits. Even though couldn't afford it he'd take 'em all the way to Richmond which was sixty miles; about the same distance we came this morning

from Cosby. He'd take 'em in the car and carry them down there and make all kinds of overtures to the Veterans Administration trying to get them, and got them some help.

PIEHLER: Did he belong to any veterans organizations?

WILLIAMS: American Legion.

PIEHLER: When did he join? Do you know?

WILLIAMS: No, he belonged to it as long as I can remember. I remember some things that he worked in, and sometimes he'd open up the lid and let me go. I subsequently joined the Legion too. I am no longer a member of that. I just kind of got out of it.

PIEHLER: Did he ever hold any Legion posts?

WILLIAMS: I think so. But my dad had a limited education; my momma had a good education. She graduated from what is now Campbell University in eastern North Carolina. That was ... it was really a finishing school at the time she went there and Dr. Campbell was the president when she was there in the teens. But he [daddy] didn't have much of an education. She taught him more than he learned in school. He didn't even get to go to school 'cause he had to work all the time. He was the oldest boy in the family and they had about ten children. This was in eastern North Carolina where he was raised, around Sampson County down close to Fayetteville.

PIEHLER: Did your mother ever, after she finished college, did she teach or did she have any jobs before?

WILLIAMS: I don't even know of her working anywhere after she finished. She got married when he came back from overseas and then they subsequently moved to Virginia. And when I was in the third grade she came down with ... scarlet fever to start with and then from the time I was in third grade until I was almost through high school she was an invalid. I've wondered sometimes how the five of us got grown; only one of us has passed on. My oldest brother died when he was forty-two years old, forty-one I guess, in 1962. But the rest of us have lived and stayed fairly healthy, you know.

PIEHLER: Well it's remarkable because your father was severely wounded in World War I and your mother had scarlet fever but both lived very long lives.

WILLIAMS: But he had, in recent years I guess, he had his first operation maybe in McGuire Hospital when they took one of his kidneys and I think that was cancerous although I never heard him say. He did die of colon cancer, but I don't think that killed him, I think his heart just quit on him. I don't think he ever really suffered much from that because his heart just quit on him. He was almost ninety and just worn out you know. But I don't have anything but the fondest memories and also the greatest respect for mother and daddy both. They did all for us that they could and I won't listen to any one of the relatives that would bring anything to charge against them because they don't deserve it.

DAVISSON: You said your father a great sense of humor and loved to hear stories and stuff. Did you tell your dad a lot of stories?

WILLIAMS: Well, he told a lot of stories. In fact he was very much a storyteller to people that he ran into on the street and things like that. He always had something of humor to express. I guess maybe I got some of that sense [of humor] of his. I like to think I do. They say I look more like my mother than I do my father. But I can see a lot of things about me that my daddy, and not all of them are good you know, but I can see a lot of traits and I can see a lot of habits that he had that I either have had or have a tendency toward. He chewed tobacco all his life. I left my car when I went overseas with him and he drove it the whole time I was gone when he could get some gas for it. When I came home tobacco juice was down the side of that car. (Laughter) He didn't wash it a single time I don't think while I was gone. Ann, my wife Ann, says it took the paint off of it, but I think paint was pretty well gone anyhow.

DAVISSON: Was he able to make a good living selling clothes during the Depression?

WILLIAMS: Nobody made a good living. (Laughter) It's hard for a young person to remember this or to realize it, there were people that were workin' at the, what were they called? Almost a minimum wage now, level who were making twelve, fourteen dollars a week. The first job that I had—now this is a long story and I'll try to make it real short. (Laughter) When I moved to Cosby twenty-two years ago I had a neighbor next to me and her name was Wanda Shults. She's dead now. I asked her one day, "What was your maiden name?" She said, "My maiden name was" —Dennis. No, it's not Dennis. "My maiden name was Caton." And I said, "I never knew anyone named Caton except one boy I was in school with whose name was Caton Dennis." And she said right off the top of her head, "Well his daddy was my daddy's first cousin." [And here she is] living next to me now down in the country in Tennessee. And so I got interested in finding out about him. I went to a Kiwanis Club in Newport and found out that he was the first president of the Kiwanis Club in Newport in 1920 and founded the club. And he was a doctor of dentistry in Newport. I got real interested in this because I told some of the members of the club, "I'm older than anybody here because I knew your first president." (Laughter) He was the Presbyterian minister in this little town of Blackstone [Virginia] when I knew him. He gave me my first job. My first job was tending the greens on nine holes, sand greens, in a little cow pasture golf course that just out of Blackstone. He was the treasurer and he hired me to keep these greens when I was in high school. I had to go to each of those greens six days a week. I didn't have to go on Sunday. A lot of people didn't work on Sunday then. Go to all these greens and I carried with me a rake, a rug, and a shovel. If the cows went across you had to have the shovel. (Laughter) So I had to clean these greens and they paid me. If you guessed all day you wouldn't know how little he paid me for each week I worked up there; a dollar and a quarter. Now that's how rare it was for a teenager to make any money doing anything. I had five dollars a month. I'd have to run him down though every month to get my five dollars. (Laughter) I told the people in this club I said "Now, I know what you've got a good start here. You've got a good, frugal, conservative president to start your club and hopefully you've continued that because he guarded that money that he paid that belonged to the club like it was his own." Of course they got a little charge out of that. But I thought that was just such a coincidental thing because it was so unbelievable for us these days to think that you would do that. I'd five dollars a month, [but] didn't work in the wintertime. And, uh, even though it's difficult dragging that rug

getting all the wrinkles out; I never did satisfy him; never was satisfied. (Laughter) But anyways that was my first job that anyone hired me for. So I've appreciated about everything I've gotten since then. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Well I'm just curious, what was your next job after that?

WILLIAMS: Well, in between the times, I had worked in tobacco fields when, there again, in season and I got a dollar a day and my lunch processing it. They would hire you to do that; that's when you're processing the tobacco. And that's when you have the greatest need of end temporary jobs being filled and so on. So this is the type of tobacco they don't grow in Tennessee. It was made principally for cigarettes, but it's called bright tobacco and it was cured a different way than they cure it here. I don't know whether that's still going on there or not, tobacco I mean, has become such a thing—that people are resenting the fact that those that use it don't realize what it was doing to 'em I guess at that time.

PIEHLER: You mentioned your family was poor. I'm just sort of curious did you have indoor plumbing when you were growing up?

WILLIAMS: No.

PIEHLER: You had an outhouse?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, had an outhouse. We had, let's see, we had five rooms and a path. But we didn't have electricity. The last lesson I studied in the winter of 1940, I did by lamplight. We didn't have any electricity 'til I left home.

PIEHLER: Even in 1940 you still didn't have ...

WILLIAMS: Didn't have electricity.

PIEHLER: Did other neighbors have it?

WILLIAMS: No. We got the first electricity when the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] started running these lines into the rural areas of the South under this rural electrification program that the government was sponsoring. Then I believe they'd ... wire your house if you'd buy a refrigerator or something to go along with it. All kinds of deals they had but dad and ma put it in as soon as it was available which was in, I would say '41 maybe. I left home in early '41 and didn't have it then, so it must have been around '42 when they got electricity.

PIEHLER: So you came home to have it after the war?

WILLIAMS: Yeah

PIEHLER: But not ...

WILLIAMS: Well, no, they didn't live there anymore they moved down just out of Richmond, which everybody had current there and oh, I guess six, seven miles out of the city limits in a little place called Highland Springs. They had it there.

...

PIEHLER: Did you have a telephone?

WILLIAMS: No. No telephone. We had in my high school, somewhere in my high school daddy bought an old battery powered radio. The battery was bigger than the radio. But we didn't feel like we were particularly disadvantaged 'cause everybody was in ... the rural areas pretty much and we were better off than some of the city people because you know we could grow some stuff in the garden, and that kind of thing, and it was not really completely self-sustaining, but we canned and of course you couldn't freeze anything. We do now, and I garden. I've been planting a garden ever since we been here. But we don't can; we don't can anything. That's too hard a work. If we can't freeze it, we don't save it.

PIEHLER: Could you talk a little bit about the schools you went to growing up?

WILLIAMS: Why yes, it—it's almost hard to believe that schools have changed as much as they have in the time. Not so much in content, as the way that the teachers presented something, and the way that everybody revered the Almighty, and the things that went along with teaching morals and that kind of thing, which is taboo today. It distresses me so to see some of the things that now are being demanded by organizations like the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and all those that are trying to take the spirit of God out of everything. This just torments me that we've allowed that to happen. That didn't exist then. Anybody that had said some of the things that you've heard people say about "Jesus Freaks" and all this kinda thing, and said something like that would have been ostracized out of the state for that matter. I mean it just wouldn't have been put up with. Even if they thought it, they didn't say it. Our teachers were that way. My third grade teacher, and even in that day it was unusual, my third grade teacher came to school with a long dress and long—just like you've seen in the old movies of a schoolmarm. She was a schoolmarm. Her black dresses almost went to her ankles, she had on high button shoes, and her hair was rolled up on her head on a bun back there. And Miss Emma Bland ruled with an iron fist. I mean you either did it or you were afraid not to. What she said [you] do. I remember one thing she'd tell me, and I needed this a whole lot, she said "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." I mentioned that to some of the schoolmates when we had a reunion and they got a kick out of that. But she was a, even in that day, she was a holdover from the 1890's.

PIEHLER: So even in your day she was of a different generation?

WILLIAMS: She stands out in my mind more than any teacher I ever had. I don't know that I learned anymore than I did in other places, but she stands out. But they all were people of reverence. And were truly, even in a day when you know the schoolteachers were makin' very little money, it was a job, and they were qualified so they did it with a love of a profession. They really did. I don't think I had a schoolteacher while I was in school that would join a National Education Association. They simply loved their work. We saw a few of them at the reunions;

those that had survived. In fact, the principal that I graduated under was in our first reunion and our second reunion. He was in our reunion up to 1990 I believe.

PIEHLER: I'm just curious, when was the first reunion you went to?

WILLIAMS: 1970 was the thirtieth-year reunion.

PIEHLER: And when was the last one you've been to?

WILLIAMS: '95 was the last one and next year we're having the one hundredth anniversary of the school. There's probably gonna be an awful lot of people there. I made a reservation the other day and we're meeting in the—it was a girls school when I was there; a girls' college at Blackstone. Blackstone College for Girls and it subsequently was bought by the Methodists and it's a Methodist convention center now where they go and have a convention and seminars. The old building though has been renovated and I was talking to 'em the other day about the reservation. We're going to have the reunion on the twenty-third of June next year, which will be one hundred years since this high school was established in 1907. So, I'm looking forward to that if I'm living and nothing happens, and I can go. I always enjoy those. We didn't have but three other classes and we never know 'em for twenty years and they came down in '95.

PIEHLER: How big was your high school?

WILLIAMS: You know, I thought our class was larger. When we had our first reunion one of the graduates was an insurance man who knew all about mortality rates and so on. He was amazed. We had fifty-nine graduated and they found all fifty-nine of them and there had been three deaths in thirty years. He said that just destroys all the tables. (Laughter) He thought that was great. And we'd been through two wars! That was through World War II and the Korean War. I know of one classmate that I knew well was killed in World War II. Then the other one was killed; I don't know when he was killed. And we had a girl that died young later on. But other than that those were the only that they haven't been able to reach. Now some of 'em couldn't come, some of them were infirm even in the thirtieth year [reunion].

PIEHLER: What year did you graduate high school?

WILLIAMS: 1940.

PIEHLER: Growing up, what did you think you would become? What did you want to do?

WILLIAMS: Well, my brother joined the Navy in the late '30s; my older brother. And I wanted to join the Navy too when I finished high school. There weren't any jobs and I didn't really have any promise of having a job. I knew I couldn't go to college, There was no college locally like the community colleges there are now. It just wasn't possible. So I decided I wanted to join the Navy. I investigated and they said "We can't take you."

PIEHLER: Because ?

WILLIAMS: Know the reason why?

PIEHLER: Um, color blind?

WILLIAMS: I'm too tall.

PIEHLER: You were too tall?

DAVISSON: Oh my goodness.

WILLIAMS: By the time I went into the service they were taking everybody, you know?
(Laughs)

PIEHLER: But they said too tall?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I was too tall. They had a limit ... it was six feet or under I believe. My brother was 5'10" and he evidently isn't as tall as I am. But he went in and he could get in but I couldn't get in because of that. I was healthy; I was just too tall I guess, they say. And I did, when I was in the Navy, bump my head on every hatch on that ship I guess. (Laughter) I mean you gotta bend way over to get in some of those ...

PIEHLER: I'm curious, how long did your brother stay in the Navy?

WILLIAMS: Not very long.

PIEHLER: Did he get out before the war?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, mm hmm.

PIEHLER: What did he tell you about the Navy?

WILLIAMS: Not much.

PIEHLER: During the war, did he serve?

WILLIAMS: No. He had a wife and daughter at that time and just as—memories I don't want to remember. He and I were close together in age; about two years apart, closest of the five. I have another brother that's living in Kansas [and has] been out there ever since he went to college, and married a girl out there, and they raised a family out there. He's still out there. And I have two sisters in Richmond, both of whom are single now [because they] lost their husbands. I don't know why I'm here to tell you the truth. I've lived a long time and have been so close in so many things. I guess through no effort of my own the Lord just let me off or somethin', I don't know what.

PIEHLER: You had another brother who served in Korea.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's a younger brother.

PIEHLER: And he served in the Army.

WILLIAMS: Yeah he was in the Army. I volunteered like John Kerry did. John Kerry you know has ridden this business of joining up, but he didn't join until it was put in 1-A and was gonna be drafted. And then he joined the Navy so they wouldn't have to carry a gun and I did somewhat the same thing. When I was called in they gave you a choice of services that you'd like to be in. That didn't mean you'd get it, but they let you choose something. I chose the Navy and I happened to get it. I got a letter from them not too long after that, that I'd been accepted by the Navy. Then when I went to the recruiting station I thought I was in the Navy you know. They came around after all the physical examinations and said, "Alright, we've got to have" –this is a big, big contingent that is going through the process of getting examined, and they said, "We've gotta have," I forgot how many they said, "for the Marines." I said, "Uh oh, here I go." (Laughter) I looked at men around me and I didn't go in until late because, well, we'll get into that later if you're interested. But I looked around and said "I'm one of the young ones here I know they're gonna get me." Some of these guys, there was one man that was bald headed and I mean he was not only bald headed, he was old! (Laughter) He was right up at the limit. The limit then was thirty-eight. He was just thirty-eight and had a family. But they did it just like the service does, they picked it up by alphabetical down the [list] and I breathed a sigh of relief. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Let me ask you a little bit more about growing up. I guess one question is what did you do for fun?

WILLIAMS: Well not... we virtually made our own toys. And we were fortunate that we lived in a rural out in the country and had wood. I learned to swim below the dam of an old mill farm that has been there forever. So long that it's not used for grinding corn anymore, but I learned to swim in the creek below that farm. We did so many things that kids now would find maybe even boring, but they were interesting to us because we had to think about what we were doing and what we were gonna make, you know. Kids were very innovative back then. We made our own slingshots, our own rubber gun pistols, and our own popguns. You've never heard of a popgun have you?

PIEHLER: No, I've heard of them before.

WILLIAMS: You know what they consisted of?

PIEHLER: Yeah, it sounds like you got a, from the sink, one of those ... the popgun I'm thinking of, with the barrel and the little thing that popped out. But maybe I am thinking of something else.

WILLIAMS: Well we cut in the woods; we cut the elder. And if you've ever seen any elder it grows in joints like canes, only it's a dark brown bark. It's not a shrub you would use in your yard or anything like that but it's a bush that grows along the creeks and the pool areas and it's got a very soft, hefty center to it. We'd cut a length of that between the two joints and push that

out, always towards the smaller end. And then we used cedar balls off of a cedar tree, broke them up and put it in that large end of it and pushed it down to the other end. Your plunger was always about that much short of the barrel [Gestures] so that you didn't push the wad out the other end. Then you put another one in it and you pushed it through there and the pressure of the air popped it out. Harmless; I mean it's not gonna, unless you hit person right in the eye or somethin', it wouldn't even hurt. We made our own lean-tos, and playin' cowboys and indians, we used these dried weeds that were laying around as arrows, and made our bows; made us a lean-to and put pine tags all over it. Then we got old enough to where we could get—I never owned a BB gun—get a rifle; a .22 rifle, and did some hunting, fishing. I mean we were outdoors doing something nearly all the time. In fact I grew up in a house that was almost like being outdoors. There wasn't a grain of insulation in that house anywhere and I have awakened in the morning when snow came with snow on the inside of the window sill. So you wrapped up real good and you slept with your brother you know. (Laughter) Get warm.

PIEHLER: Did you ever go to the movies when you were growing up?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I loved the movies and I would go every time I could, but it wasn't all that often; usually to a matinee 'cause you could get in there for fifteen cents. The evening movie cost ya a quarter. Plus the fact you could be home at milkin' time if you went early and got home early enough. I had to milk and cut wood.

PIEHLER: How many cows did you have?

WILLIAMS: We didn't never have but one or two at a time just for the family use you know. But if I was off somewhere in the afternoon, like on a Sunday afternoon, and I had to milk I knew I had to go home.

DAVISSON: Did you have many other chores?

WILLIAMS: I'm sorry?

DAVISSON: Did you have many other chores to do?

WILLIAMS: Well I had a few, [like] cutting wood, especially in the winter time. We had some old tin heaters that we heated with that was just a cheap metal pot, you know, that you build a fire in, and they burn wood almost as fast as you put it in there. Plus, we cooked with wood. Some people had gasoline stoves; we didn't have one of those. We used a wood stove. I couldn't play sports in high school. Of course would've had to walk home, it was about three miles and I could've done that. Coach wanted me to play football but I said, "I can't play football I've got to go home and work." Instilling a work ethic is probably one of the best things that happened to me. I didn't enjoy it at the time, but I still have that work ethic, even though I'm now physically where I can't do all the things that I could.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you still keep a garden.

WILLIAMS: Yeah I've had a garden now since we moved to Cosby earlier; '84 or '85 was our first garden here. And I've had one each year since then. This last year I lost every grain of my corn. Wild hogs got it.

DAVISSON: Oh no.

WILLIAMS: They are the sharpest things I ever encountered. You just can't hardly catch 'em! If they see you they're gone. I mean they're just like—and they're long haired! They've got long black hair. I never seen any like it before. But I knew they were in the mountains there.

PIEHLER: I've read about them and I've heard they also eat everything.

WILLIAMS: They're destructive even in the Park. I live within five miles of the northern entrance to the Smoky Mountain National Park—they're real destructive. But they trap 'em.

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WILLIAMS: I think they're comin' into the yard now at night. They completely aerated my lawn one night recently ... so close together until they just like aerated the lawn.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you were asked to play football but couldn't because of all the chores you had. What about any clubs or any other activities?

WILLIAMS: I was in the [Boy] Scouts when I got to, oh, I must have been—I don't think I was a teenager yet. I may have been, [but] I don't think I was. I remember going on one camping trip and, uh, that was the only time. That was the only club I ever belonged to ...

PIEHLER: You weren't involved in any 4H? Did you have any 4H?

WILLIAMS: It was beginning, but we didn't have it in our school, I don't believe. I don't believe it was there. No, I'm sure it wasn't as I recall.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, growing before you graduated high school. Where had you traveled? What was the farthest west, north, or south that you had gotten?

WILLIAMS: Before I'd graduated I had been to—I'd never been as far north as Washington [D.C.]

PIEHLER: But you did make it to Washington?

WILLIAMS: But I had been to Pilot Mountain in Sampson County, in eastern North Carolina, in the summertime on occasion. Not every summer, but some summers we did that. But we didn't travel much because, uh, well the roads weren't very good back then either. Typically you would have to drive 200 miles to North Carolina, and also you're limited in money. I remember one time when daddy had fifteen dollars; all he had. We went down to ... 'course we didn't have any expense when we got there because these were all farmers and they had a whole world or

stuff to eat; so many choices for going into these fields with their uncles getting watermelons. (Laughter) Some of them weighed fifty pounds. They grew great big and round, and they call 'em Stone Mountain watermelons. [Large-growing watermelons named after Stone Mountain in Georgia. Popular in the 1930s and 1940s] And my favorite of all things, even though I didn't have candy very often, I liked candy, but nothin' came up to a live watermelon for me. I still love watermelon.

PIEHLER: You did make it up to Washington?

WILLIAMS: No, I was never in Washington before I left home, no.

PIEHLER: Richmond, you went to Richmond?

WILLIAMS: I'd been to Richmond, but only with my dad when he'd let go with him when he was going down to the Veterans Administration. But I ain't never been anywhere. I wasn't particularly chomping at the bit to do it. I had plenty of things that I was interested in doing when dad let up long enough for us to go swimming or whatever. He never learned to swim. Never in his life learned to swim, but loved to fish. He didn't want us boys to go down to that mill pond, where we could drown. So we'd sneak off down there and that's how I learned to swim. He was so proud of us though when he learned that we were learning to swim. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: And you taught yourselves? Is that how you learned it?

WILLIAMS: Well, no, my next door neighbors—on a neighboring farm there were two boys that were ... the youngest one was my brother's age, a couple of years older than me. And the older one was a couple of years older than that. This older boy, he was the one we followed and he was the one who taught us how to swim. But we didn't have any problem with swimming suits and things like that, we didn't have any! (Laughter) It was another day, it really was. And this race [Some water wheels are fed by water from a mill pond, which is formed when a flowing stream is dammed. A channel for the water flowing to or from a water wheel is called a mill race] that ran away from mill pond was, oh, two or three hundred yards below the mill house itself. The old house was still there but the old wheel had rotted off and somethin' was sticking out there, but the stones were still in place and the race was still there but trees were growin' in it this big around even when I was a boy. (Gestures) That since was taken over by Camp Pickett or Fort Pickett. And this old mill pond was so shallow I could wade across it as a boy, because it had filled up with mud and the dam was fifteen or sixteen feet tall behind it made out of one bolder on top of one another; been there for a long, long time. But when the camp [Pickett] came in there they put in a, uh, streambed when they built it upshore and all around it was just granite that they blew out to get these stones to make the dam. And when the camp came in there they wanted every truckload of that rock and they blasted it all that out and it's just a big ol' deep green hole now where it was. I imagine [it has] good fishing. I've never been back to it.

PIEHLER: When did the camp come in? Was that after you left?

WILLIAMS: No, I left in early '41 and never lived at home after January '41. The camp was, oh I'm sure was in the planning stage and I don't know whether they bought any of the land or not but the camp opened in '42; sometime late in '42.

PIEHLER: You mentioned both your parents were Baptists and both were born again. How active were they in church growing up?

WILLIAMS: Well, my mother was sick all the time and she couldn't go and dad didn't go a whole lot, but we went. And there's another thing that they wouldn't do today I guess ... They used the school buses to take you to Sunday school and the school buses didn't belong to the county though, they belonged to individuals. The first school bus I was on was an old T-Model Ford truck that was converted into benches along the back of it here and had a canvas top on it, so that's what we rode to school. I remember the bus driver's name. You know, I remember things that you can't really reason as to why you would even remember. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I still remember my school bus driver from second grade, and I probably will for a long time.

WILLIAMS: Well, this man's name was Mr. Tinsdale and he had a mean son called Nelson Tinsdale. (Laughter) His name was Nelson Tinsdale and he was forever in trouble. I was a milquetoast in school. I went back for that reunion and one of the guys at the reunion, the first one, said "I don't remember you. I know you've grown up since I did. I would remember you as big as you are. Most everybody that was bigger than you are whipped me." (Laughter) I said "No, I was over six feet tall when I finished high school." But he was about half, you know, drunk. (Laughter) He's since died. He was an undertaker. Then we had another reunion member who was from a very prominent family in Blackstone who was a doctor. And at the first reunion—I remember Paul Flaw the one I was speaking of ... Well, he introduced himself, he says "I'm a mortician and we bury all of doctor Irby's patients." (Laughter) Dr. Irby since then has died.

DAVISSON: Did you like school? Did you ever have any favorite subjects or anything?

WILLIAMS: I always liked history. I was never proficient in Latin, but I had Latin for two years. I don't guess it's taught anymore anywhere unless it's a medical school. Do you know whether Latin is, even though it's a dead language, whether it's being taught now for the benefit it gives us?

PIEHLER: You can still take it as an undergraduate at Tennessee.

WILLIAMS: Well it teaches you something about the derivation; about where we get some of our English words from.

DAVISSON: Is there anything specific about history you liked? Any certain time?

WILLIAMS: Well I liked American history. I was never particularly interested in ancient history. American history still fascinates me I still like to go to old Civil War grounds and of

course there's a lot of those in Virginia. My wife's grandfather, not her great-grandfather but her grandfather, was in the Civil War. He was with Lee at Appomattox. They said ... he broke a twig off a peach tree there, that he was standin' under when the surrender was performed and he kept it and somebody in the family had it. Ann said she'd seen it in somebody's family Bible. Maybe that's why I kept that little piece of aluminum. Maybe someday somebody will say "Hey, look!" And it hasn't been any interest over the years [or] in the few years right after the war it wasn't anything, but now most everybody wants to see it.

PIEHLER: What did your parents think of Franklin Roosevelt growing up?

WILLIAMS: They were Republicans and they did not appreciate Frank Roosevelt for—as I said earlier, one of the things that caused their thinkin' I guess was when Roosevelt went in and ... for a short time he cut off the pensions. And people really suffered from it. I mean it was very little money. I think my daddy got thirty dollars a month. But it was thirty dollars that we had to have, you know. He was unable to produce and survive with the chicken farm, and I guess what little he could borrow and what he had, went into that. When we got around to that it was low for him. He was still tryin' to work at somethin' all the time, but it was not easy. And I suppose that maybe he felt like he grew up easier than his parents did. Things that were included so much and sometimes we don't show any gratitude for them we just take it for granted. Economically that is.

PIEHLER: Did you get a newspaper in your house when you were growing up? You mentioned having a radio, did you get a newspaper?

WILLIAMS: ... In fact, last Thanksgiving I went back to the little paper in Blackstone which is the locally owned and run paper, in the same family that ran it when I was there. One of the sons of the man that ran it when I was a boy; he and his wife own and run it now. We saw that occasionally. We never subscribed to it, never subscribed to any magazines. I think except dad got the Legion magazine every month. [American Legion Magazine] since he was a member of the Legion. We had a little old battery fired radio when I was about a junior in high school I guess. And news just traveled word of mouth, you know, what you got. I remember one time I subscribed to—I wanted to be a paperboy. I'd do anything that was a legitimate job. I'd mow your lawn for a nickel. I had one old man, well he wasn't an old man either, not compared to what I am now; he moved in and built a house in the neighborhood down the road that had a great big yard, quarter of an acre. He gave me twenty cents to cut that lawn with a push reel mower. A reel mower is a collector's item now. But uh, we didn't have any money to subscribe to things like that. We tried to have enough money for seed for the garden, and things like that. But like I said, we didn't feel like we were any different from anybody else around us. One of the things now about people who are terribly poor, that is by the measures that we use for that, and by the fact that it costs a lot to live now, and everybody lives in a different atmosphere, a different process. They didn't have the advantage of being in the country where they could have a garden and that kind of thing. I see a lot of people out there in the Cosby area who don't plant gardens; got perfectly good land but they just don't do it. They'll go somewhere and work in Gatlinburg for minimum wage or somethin' like that and you'd think they'd be out in that garden producing something to eat next winter. It was just something we had to do. It was not a, like I said, I enjoyed it a whole lot, but dad would say, "Now get this done today, this morning, you

can go to the,” after he learned we could swim, “you can go to the creek when you get through.” But for while before he learned that we could swim we had to come home with dry hair and that meant you had to get out of the water and dried it off before you went home. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So this is the big secret when you were growing up was swimming?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I enjoyed water. Water just fascinated me. I just love it deep down even if I wasn't in the water, down along the creek, fishin' or just wandering through the woods you know. I had a friend that lived, of course, oh some two miles I guess from us.

PIEHLER: Do you remember the Bonus March? [1932, Veterans marched on Washington demanding payment of the “bonus” promised to them by the government following WWI]

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Did your dad ... ?

WILLIAMS: No, my dad wasn't in it. He didn't go. And I think one of the reasons he didn't go and would not is because Douglas MacArthur was in charge of getting rid of them personally. And he wouldn't have done it. He initially enlisted because of Douglas MacArthur and he felt like that right all the way to World War II. When I went into the service he would have joined too, if they would have taken him. He wasn't physically able and he was too old. But he worked at the Richmond air base during the war. Of course the gasoline was rationed and that little ol' stamp he'd get two or three gallons with; so they all carpooled. He told me of an incident when one of the men made the statement, I was overseas then I guess, made the statement that he was glad we were at war [because] he had a job for the first time and he said he hoped it just goes on and on. Dad made him get out of the car. He would fight you over something like that, talking something against the boys that were in the service. We didn't have politicians doing what they're doing now. It just wouldn't have flown back then. We see now that over half the people are doin' it. We'll not see the handwriting on the walls if we let this thing continue unabated. And I can't imagine the celebration, I guess we'll see it on television soon, the celebration that's going on in Baghdad and other places where there's enemies and Al-Qaeda living; disturbing. I probably won't live long enough for it to affect me much, but a lot of people will.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that you left home after you graduated high school. Where did you go?

WILLIAMS: I went to school. They had a program then, it was one of these alphabet programs [Refers to the fact that Roosevelt started a number of agencies and programs that were acronyms using many different letters, hence, alphabet program.] that Roosevelt instituted. That was good and was a good stepping stone for tradesmen. I went to an NYA school. NYA if you don't know is National Youth Administration. I went to NYA school at Manassas and I was there three months before I was called into the apprentice school in Newport News, which is a shipbuilding apprentice school. Been there for well over a hundred years and is a four-year academic as well as trade school. 'Course it's centered around shipbuilding. During the '30's, or during the Depression I was told that you could get into one of the Navy's or Army or, wasn't any air force

then, academies easier than you could get into school because they paid you. They paid you a meager amount going through school all the way through. Now mother had made applications for me down there and I guess due largely to the war itself, it was expanding tremendously. We had over a 1,000 students in that school and one of the reasons why I was late going into the service. I was eighteen years old when the war started; before the war started. But I was in school there in the spring. I left this Manassas school in April and went to Newport News to enter the apprentice school and because of that and because of our losses at Pearl Harbor we were desperately in need of ships, so they just gave a blanket exemption for the whole school. Only until we had the ships built, and they were building ships all over the East and West coasts, shipyard sprang up everywhere. They were building these Liberty ships [cargo ships built by the United States during WWII] and they were building those things about one a week, or maybe more because there was so many of them working. But they gave us an exemption and only after we got the ships built. And this is a fascinating thing when I said something about winning the war at home as much as we did in the field, was that we were able to take what was left of those 140 million people, [minus] the 14 million able-bodied people that went into the service in uniform, and build such an armada in such a short period of time. So that when I went to Okinawa, you couldn't see the end of the ships in that convoy. They were everywhere. Everywhere you looked there's more ships, more ships. But after I left Manassas and went down there they gave me this exemption, it didn't last always, it ran out as soon as we got the ships built, and then I of course went into the service.

PIEHLER: So you didn't graduate from the school?

WILLIAMS: I went back and graduated after the war.

PIEHLER: And that you did that on the GI Bill?

WILLIAMS: I went in the school in '41 and I didn't graduate until December of 1947.

PIEHLER: Now I'm just curious to go back. The NYA school in Manassas, was that connected to the apprenticeship program or what ...

WILLIAMS: No.

PIEHLER: What did you learn there?

WILLIAMS: It was a trade school. I guess what I learned is what trade I really wanted to follow. I had already applied for another trade in the yard. And then after I went to the NYA school and was introduced to sheet metal work, I wanted to be a sheet metal worker. So when I went to Newport News I was called in to be a shipfitter. A shipfitter is limited right to the shipyard, but sheet metal trade [applies] to a lot of things. I asked them to be transferred and they transferred me to sheet metal. Consequently, after that I went into drafting. I don't even know if that exists anymore, but I saw on ... a Virginia map ... where they blow up the Hampton Roads area on that map, over on the Newport News side you'll see it in red letters "apprentice school." So it's still operating. I haven't been there in years, but I'm gonna go one of these days.

PIEHLER: And that's where you graduated.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I graduated from there. I've got a annual that I've got a—I'm losin' my words. I've got an annual from that graduation in '47. And all the years that they didn't have a graduation, during the war, was in that annual; all the pictures of everybody. And I was about better looking than I am now. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: [While] you were in Newport News, where did you live?

WILLIAMS: I lived in a rooming house with other men and I ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day but Sunday in a boarding house. But I didn't live in the boarding house, I just ate there. And I paid three dollars a week for my room and the total I think I paid seven dollars a week for my meals and that was out of, uh, I think made twenty-eight dollars a week. I worked and saved my money as much as I could to get my first car. Every teenage boy wants a car. (Laughter) My daddy at that time was selling cars in Newport News for an Oldsmobile dealer. He took in this Model A Ford coupe. That 1931 coupe was absolutely pristine. It was only ten years old at the time, and I wanted that car. So he gave it to me and I paid him the fifty dollars he'd allowed the man for it. Because the boss said he'd allowed too much money for the car, he sold it within two weeks. (Laughter) My Model A was gone, I've grieved about it ever since then. (Laughter) He sold it for \$125 just to prove to the boss that he had allowed too much money for it. After I was in the school for a while they built a dormitory for the apprentice school. But because we already had facilities we were livin' in they didn't offer us the chance to move into the dormitories. It was a nice place to live, still is.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, when you were going to the apprentice school, what was the typical day like?

WILLIAMS: Well ... once a week you spent all day in class. We had everything from physics, to English, to other subjects of academic study. I can remember my old physics teacher. He was a mysterious fellow, very religious. He said, "If you want to know how long eternity is, if a little bird started on the East coast and picked up a grain of sand, and then hopped to the West coast and put it down, and came back and got another grain. If he did that until he had all the sand off the East coast moved to the West coast, it wouldn't be breakfast time in Hell." I remember his name was Professor Givens. And it was a good school, taught a lot of mechanical things like mechanical drawing and drafting and that kind of thing, you know. That was basic, everybody took that. But ... after I graduated from school and was married, I had a car accident and I don't know why I'm here today because that car fell on me and didn't kill me. It threw me out. They offered me a chance to go into the drawing room, so I went in the drawing room, looked in there so the yard—one of the first carriers that was built after the war was named after the Secretary of Defense, what was his name ?

PIEHLER: Forrestal.

WILLIAMS: Forrestal was on the way [to completion] and they canceled it. Truman canceled it. And that caused a lot of people to be laid off. I was laid off and subsequently went to work teaching drafting and sheet metal in that same school at Manassas. Stayed there three years and

then I got a job with a steel company in Richmond; went back to Richmond ... Ann and I. They transferred us ... Virginia Steel was the name of it. The main production we had was reinforcing steel for concrete. They transferred me to Florida and we stayed down there for twenty-six years and I was estimating full time; in sales and estimating. Enjoyed about all that we could stand so we retired and ... we came up to Tennessee in '84, I was sixty then. I had a chance to go out early, this was when Bethlehem [Bethlehem Steel Corporation] was cutting way back ... and trying to put everybody on the was cutting way back and reducing trying to put everybody on this very fragile retirement plan they had to get them off the budgetary items they had to report. And finally ... I guess you heard that Bethlehem Steel has been in bankruptcy and finally sold it. And the people that bought it made a profit the first quarter they operated it, and it was because Bethlehem had such a legacy cost, of course. But the new owners cut costs and we lost all our insurance, and then Guaranteed Trust Corporation took over the retirement fund. I don't know whether I'm close to retire or not.

PIEHLER: You're probably fine. I want to go back to being in the apprentice school during the war. You said you spent one day fully in class, what did you do during the other days?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I was in the various aspects of the trade. In the sheet metal shop to begin with ... sheet metal shop and on the ships.

PIEHLER: So you worked on ships?

WILLIAMS: Worked on, well they had periods, quarters that you worked at this full quarter and it was a full forty-eight month apprenticeship. It wasn't one of these things where you'd get to be a journeyman in a year or two; no you didn't become a journeyman until after you had finished the complete thing. So you had periods when you worked on a ship, and then you had others that you worked in the shop at this particular type of production; maybe it was air ducts, maybe it was something else you were making. You had pattern drafting and all that goes into taking a flat sheet metal and making something out of it, all kinds of size and shapes you know. And then you had enough machine time; you had to work the presses and so on for a while. You were under an instructor and he was your boss. The shop foreman, the man who was just an hourly worker working there, he didn't have a thing to do with it. It was all done and assigned to this instructor of yours and he did this part of it and maybe if you went to the ship he'd still have charge of ya in doing something like installation. But we were working on—one of the things I remember very clearly, some things you forget, but I remember how proud we were of being a part of the aircraft carrier [USS] *Hornet*. Newport News was the premier warship producer certainly in the early part of the war if not all the way through. I worked on the battleship [USS] *Indiana*.

PIEHLER: The one that was sunk?

WILLIAMS: *Indiana*, as far as I know, did not get sunk.

PIEHLER: Oh it was the *Indianapolis* that [was sunk].

WILLIAMS: It was a new class of ... it was ... the [South Dakota] class of ship that was later duplicated over in the Norfolk Yard across from Hampton Roads. I remember very clearly there was an investigation that Truman instituted right after the war as to why it cost thirteen million dollars, and a million dollars back then was a lot of money, more to build the [USS] *Alabama* than it did the [USS] *Indiana* when the *Indiana* had all the changes being made in it the whole time it was being done, and they followed that with a ship that cost thirteen million dollars more than the total of the private yard that did it. So it was really good to see how much difference it made if you had an independent private organization producing something as opposed to the federal government employees. I don't know what the outcome of that was, but I just remember there was a congressional investigation into it. In the interim between the day that you spent in class—and you went all summer long, you didn't have a summer off like it is usually. That was every week. You had assignments that you had to get ready for the next week, so it was a little bit like being in college when the professor comes through and tells you, "Now I want you to do so and so, and I want this back at a such and such a time." So you had to live with that and so we did too.

PIEHLER: Did you work and go to school six days a week or five days a week? What about Saturdays?

WILLIAMS: We worked Saturdays. We never got any credit for that as far as our time went. We worked six days a week, but we didn't go to school ... [except] one day, I mean all day in school one day. We put eight hours in school every week with these various subjects we had. As I said, the school was started almost immediately after—Huntington, West Virginia was named after this fella that started that shipyard. He [Collis P. Huntington] was one of the principal owners of the Chesapeake-Ohio Railroads. The Norfolk and Western Railroad was the one that served the port down there during the war. You know the big port of embarkation was at Newport News during the war. This school, on the map, you see where the port is; just ... west of that is, uh, ... the apprentice school. And I wonder, I thought to myself, well it must be really active. I've never heard anything from them; we've never had a reunion. A '47 reunion would be something else because it included about five classes, four anyhow.

PIEHLER: But no one's ever organized a reunion that you know of?

WILLIAMS: Not that I know of. It'd be almost impossible to find everybody that graduated anyhow. And this guy that I ran into, one of the fellas I knew and worked with in the yard, [was] in Jacksonville. See after the war, I mean, after the initial development of nuclear power, Tenneco owned the yard at that time. [Tenneco, Inc. bought the Newport News shipyard in 1968. Built attack subs and was the only manufacturer of nuclear powered aircraft carriers.] They joined in a merger with Westinghouse and were going to build, uh, ocean nuclear plants. Completely cooled by the ocean out from the plant and supplying energy nuclear wise. So they came to Jacksonville, bought up a fairly large portion of the island there, and built a facility to build these things you know—in a dry dock that was pulled out of the ground and they built this just like they build a ship, and that's where they were gonna build these things. Spent a barrel of money down there. Put a crane in there that was the largest one in the nation. You could see that crane twenty- five miles out of Jacksonville comin' in. They've sold it since then and hauled it

off. It was built in Germany. And this man came there from the yard, that I went to school with, and I guess he's still there I don't know, but we've never had a reunion that I know of.

PIEHLER: Because Newport News was a port of embarkation, and there was also a lot of ship building. I've read that the population of the place just exploded during the war. What do you remember of that?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was a tremendous amount of—in fact, we lived in one when we were first married. These were pre-fabricated living quarters. They built a world of these duplex apartments, just two to in a unit. They were built out of a frame with very little masonry involved; maybe a foundation. Ann and I rented one when we first got married. That was the first place we lived together. It was a bedroom, a living room, and a small kitchen and dining room. We started out there with borrowed furniture, bought some stuff at a used furniture place, some of it I still have; two or three pieces. And we paid thirty-five dollars a month rent, and that was when I was finishing school or went back to finish in the summer of '46, then graduated about eighteen months later. But these houses were everywhere. There must have been five hundred apartments in this development that we were livin' in. And it was not uncomfortable; well-insulated, hard wood floor, one shower, no bathtub. We had a, I believe it was a coal stove to start with, then we bought an oil stove. Everybody came from somewhere else back then. So they were very friendly, you know, looking for people ... they weren't in some clique or family clan somewhere that they were all tied up with ... [and] would have to pay attention to. We had some good neighbors at that time. Still have a friend that's living that was right across the street from us and when we moved down there they'd come over ... But the population was exploding just like it was around Blackstone where the camp was. Since then Blackstone has gone back to what it was; there had been two to three thousand people in Blackstone forever. (Laughter) They're solid though, they're not goin' anywhere. They're going to die right there.

PIEHLER: You grew up in the country. You were living in a little bit of a boom town from what I've read about Newport News during the war. What was that like? I don't get the sense you could go down to the creek and go fishing or swimming ...

WILLIAMS: No, no, it was—during the war, before I went into the service, we weren't limited as to what we could do from the standpoint of—I remember ... before the war started I bought a fifty-five gallon drum and put it in the back of my car, my old Chevrolet, and filled it with gasoline. I'd go and siphon it out and put it in the tank when it needed some gas you know, because you couldn't buy any gas. I mean there were black markets; you could buy black market gas. Back then you'd probably had to pay a dollar a gallon for it, if you did find somebody to sell it to you. There wasn't a whole lot you could do about it. You had a car maybe, but you couldn't drive it any distance or go far as much. I remember one time I had a car and ... wanted to go fishin' down in North Carolina down along the sound down there around Kitty Hawk and that area. So we got enough gasoline to go down there and back. But there wasn't a whole lot goin' on. We went to the movies. The movies were right around the corner from where I lived. Much closer than your restaurant is now to you after walking over. (Laughter) But movies, we went to the movies and of course we were civilians then when the place had already been taken over by military men, so we didn't have a lot of girlfriends. I especially didn't, I was too tall. Nobody wanted to go out with me, I was too tall.

PIEHLER: What was it like to be a civilian surrounded by sailors with a few soldiers thrown into the mix?

WILLIAMS: You were sort of a second class citizen. Even with the soldiers and the sailors, they sort of looked down on you too.

PIEHLER: Did people ever ask you why you weren't in uniform?

WILLIAMS: I don't recall that ever happening. They just ignored you most of the time, but I wasn't mistreated or anything like that, or abused or anything. There was a lot of people working there ya know in the yard that were not in the service. Very few military men were in the yard.

PIEHLER: Actually if you could hold on ...

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Howard Williams on November 10th, 2006 at the Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and

DAVISSON: Carrie Davisson.

PIEHLER: Now I just, we were talking about sort of Newport News and being on the home front as a civilian. You mentioned you eventually lost your deferment and ...

WILLIAMS: End of '43.

PIEHLER: At the end of '43. And you mentioned reporting for your physical and having, even though there was a draft, having some choice of the service. Although you mentioned how you alphabetically was in the right place of the alphabet so that you didn't end up in the Marines. If you had been sort of with an Abraham name or something like that you would've been in the Marines. What did you ... was the Navy your first choice?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah.

PIEHLER: Why the Navy? Because your brother hadn't had a good experience in the Navy.

WILLIAMS: I have to say although I didn't have any, I don't have any recollection of having an influence at that point in time by my brother's service, but I just had always felt like workin' around ships and so on. I'd be more at home with sea duty than I would by being in the Army or Marine Corps somewhere. And it was a good choice as far as my personal, uh, it eliminated a lot of the dangers and hardships that these boys went through. And this is one reason why I hesitated all these years after Dr. Johnson asked me to do this [interview], because I didn't suffer like they did. I was very, very fortunate, or blessed I like to say, in that I survived it. But I know so many that came back that did live to come back, that their whole lives were transformed. They just never became good citizens. I have a friend in Florida who I talk with often, whose daddy

slogged through the jungles of Guadalcanal. What a story that man can tell about the suffering. 'Course at the time I remember very well how hard it was for us to take the little ol' stinkin' swampy island of Guadalcanal, and how many men we actually lost there and all of them, all of them suffered tremendously. One of the most prominent citizens of Knoxville here a few years ago, he's dead now, but he owned this athletic equipment company here. What's it's name? I forget what it's called—anyhow he made products that were produced with a name on it—BIKE. [Southern Athletic Company manufactured protective padding and the "Bike" athletic supporter. The company was located in Knoxville, TN] Fred Isaacs, he was in the jungles down there and got jungle rot that came back on him in his old age and blinded him. Such things as that you know that you avoided by being on a ship even though, if you could avoid getting sunk somewhere; if some way or another you were fortunate enough not to get sunk or hit by a suicide plane and killed like this one man I mentioned to you earlier, then it wasn't bad duty. Terribly confining, terribly routine, terribly boring at times, but in those instances you got by with humor. There's always somebody could make you laugh about something, even though whatever he was tellin' was really a picture of this exaggerated hardship he was going through you know. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you also had the unique experience. You actually worked on ships before joining the Navy.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and maybe I didn't finish the point that I made a while ago. It's so easy for me to get sidetracked on something else. But when the [USS] *Hornet* was produced, it was the first really modern carrier that we had. It was in dry dock being outfitted when I went there in '41. When it was commissioned in '42 to go to sea, everybody was so proud of that carrier. And it was sunk in a year and when we got the news that the *Hornet* had been sunk, long tears were shed. A lot of people were so down in the dumps over the fact that we had lost the newest and best carrier we had. And what we had at the beginning of the war was fortunate they were not at Pearl Harbor or they would have been sunk too. We didn't have many. We had the old *Enterprise* and maybe one or two others. We ... in that yard, converted a lot of what they call "baby flattops," [escort carriers] ... a large portion of the came from ship fleets like Moore McCormack [American shipping company from 1913 to 1982] and others that had large ships that would suit, and we'd put a flight deck on them. They were baby carriers in the sense that they weren't really long enough for that, but we used them anyhow. Incidentally the raid on Tokyo, the first raid that President Roosevelt referred to as "Shangri-La" [The Doolittle Raid over Tokyo] was off the *Hornet* in '42. And that's another why we were so down heartened by the sinking. We went on to build some other and that's all the shipyard did was produce warships. We didn't build any Liberty ships ... they weren't done by our yards. We had another yard that we owned, that Newport News owned in North Carolina, and they went all the way around the Gulf to Pascagoula [Mississippi]. There's still a big shipyard in Pascagoula. It's just amazing how we were able to produce more stuff than they could sink or shoot down in that period of time with the people who were left at home. And the women went to work, and I mean they were in the factories ... just droves of them workin' long hours and producing. 'Course they were being paid, but it was a job that they had never had before and probably lost when the war was over, many of them.

PIEHLER: So the women you encountered during the war when you were working, did you see women at the different jobs you were at on the ships?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't remember them being on the ship itself, but they were workin' in the shops, yeah.

PIEHLER: Any women welders that you ran into?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah women welders. They were doing about everything that an unskilled journeyman could do in these shops, which was a world of stuff. And the unions weren't having any fight with the management over who was doing what, so the job got done and it's marvelous that they could do it.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you reported in March of '44 to enlist when you were drafted. You remember the physical very well and then being allotted to the Navy, you were going into the Navy. Where did you go after that, when you were told you were going into the Navy?

WILLIAMS: Well I went through the recruiting station and that's where I got the shock, you know, of maybe being a Marine, but after that we went to Bainbridge, Maryland immediately for boot camp. And went through boot camp and came out with no hair on our heads and had to go home and see our girlfriends. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: What do you remember about boot camp? And I guess, you wanted to go into the Navy, but what type of ship or assignment did you want in the Navy ideally? Did you have any hopes or did you just decide I'll go where they ...

WILLIAMS: Well, I knew that I didn't have a choice. I just had to do what they said to, you know. And everybody accepted it that way. You accepted it. If you had a chance to volunteer for somethin', that's why they say don't ever volunteer you know for anything. (Laughter) It's because they're gonna put ya where they want you. And I volunteered really ... when I filled out my papers going into the Navy. I wanted to be an aircraft metal smith.

PIEHLER: You wanted to work on ...

WILLIAMS: Wanted to work on airplanes you know.

PIEHLER: And the Navy definitely didn't give you that.

WILLIAMS: Because I'd already had what, two and a half years of, yeah two and a half years of training in sheet metal. I knew how to work all the tools. One of the things that bothers me about the service, and I think it still exists, is they put square people in round places, you know. How do you say that, square block in a round hole or ... square hole or something. They paid very little attention to what you had put down there as to what you were qualified to do. And I felt like that I was well qualified to work on sheet metal, of any kind because I knew how to handle all the tools. Well, I didn't get it. I told the officer on the ship—when I got a chance to go to Officer Training School from sea I went down to the ship's office, and the yeoman there said "Well you

know to sign the papers. You know when you get to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho you're going to have to sign. You're going to have to sign a waiver of time of two years after you finish the training an officer before you can go home." And I said "Forget it." (Laughter) This was at Okinawa.

PIEHLER: This was before VJ Day?

WILLIAMS: It was before, yeah.

PIEHLER: Even then you knew this was probably not a good idea.

WILLIAMS: So I knew it was comin'. I knew we were gonna be able to go home quicker than they all thought we were. I turned it down and there were only two of us on that ship that were chosen to go. He went on, the other fellow went on, and he was home before I got home. (Laughter) They didn't keep him long enough for him to know what an officer looked like. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You thought this two-year commitment after the war was over, you were leery of that.

WILLIAMS: Question again?

PIEHLER: You were leery about a two-year commitment, even though your friend ended up getting the better side.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I stayed. I wouldn't have been in the suicide raid if I'd gone with him, you know.

PIEHLER: You reported to Bainbridge. What did you think of being in an amphibious small craft?

WILLIAMS: Well, I wasn't at that point. And boot camp is just really a conditioning period ...

PIEHLER: So even going to Bainbridge, even though it was this sort of this amphibious school that was there you didn't know that you were going into small ...

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't know where I was going and I wasn't in amphibious training, I was simply going to ...

PIEHLER: Regular boot camp.

WILLIAMS: You go through all this boot camp thing which is really; it's an indoctrination two ways. One is to condition you physically. You're climbing walls, and you're runnin', and you're you know carryin' a load, and you're doin' all these things to build your body. At the same time you learn to take orders. You did some of the stupidest things and you knew it was stupid and they knew it was stupid also, but you did it anyhow because you had to.

PIEHLER: What were some of the stupid things they had you do that you remember? I remember one interview and the person remembers cleaning garbage cans quite a bit.

WILLIAMS: Well, I cleaned. I cleaned garbage cans, but I think the hardest job I had as far as the job went, when there was such thing as being off this routine of training you physically, was firing the furnace in the bakery. And that was a pretty hard job; hot job. That was a small, almost granulated coal that you fed the thing with, and that was pretty hard ... The main thing I think that irritated me more than anything else were these little noncoms [Non-commissioned officer] that had never been to sea, they didn't know a thing about seamanship. Yet they had all the power in the world over you to tell you all these things that you had to do, which were really humiliating; a lot of 'em were. It wasn't something that had to be done by the way, but there was so much of that goes on in the service. You're doing a lot of things that the officer says to do that amounts to nothin'. You're not really being used in a productive way. This bothered me, all the way through the service for that matter. And then there were some of the things I saw that was, well, we'll talk about that later when we talk about the war I guess.

PIEHLER: In boot camp, in the Navy, did they take you out to the rifle range at all?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we went to the rifle range but we used everything from Tommy guns to the rifles. But we were not really trained as infantry.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but they did take you out?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we used everything from a Tommy gun to, in fact, we had some automatic weapons on our boat ... We had two .50 calibers on each of our LCVPs [Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel]. We never had to fire 'em but we had 'em there.

PIEHLER: What about knots? Did you learn knots?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, you learned that. That's part of seamanship. You learned the art of tying knots you know. I can still tie a knot today. In fact one we used quite a bit is called a bowline. It's a secure knot; it's one the Navy uses constantly. The way you tie it, it's very simple knot to tie but it won't slip. When you pull it tight, that's where it's going to be.

PIEHLER: What about firefighting? Did you have any training in firefighting in boot camp?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't believe we did as far as handling hoses and actually putting out fires. We had need of that on the ship when we got hit on the side that the plane actually—first plane hit us, we were on fire; blazing fire on the ship. And we didn't have any water, you know, because the power was out, until we got our emergency generators going. Which you'll ask me about that later I guess.

PIEHLER: You mentioned—I mean, one of the memories I think that sticks in your mind is KP [Kitchen Patrol] particularly when you had to fire the ovens for the bakery. How often did you do KP while you were at boot camp?

WILLIAMS: I did KP only for punishment, you know.

PIEHLER: What did you get in trouble for?

WILLIAMS: Oh, little things, like you were in the chow line and you saw something you could sit down on and you sat down on it, something like that. But you'd have to go ... for a couple of days and wash pots and pans, that kind of thing. I never served on the ship ... as a seaman. I served as an engineer. There's two different divisions. One's called a flight gang; that's the engineers, the one's who do all the mechanical things and things that actually operate the ship, except for steering and operations that are done by officers and the deck hands. But we were attached to the ship as a landing craft division.

PIEHLER: Was there anything that was very useful that you learned at boot camp that you later used when you were actually out to sea?

WILLIAMS: It's been so long ago. I think boot camp is mostly taking a raw civilian and making a military person out of you; making ya to where you realize that you don't question an order, you do it. And this is why I said what I did today about bringing these boys home and tryin' them in a court somewhere for killing people that you have some question about whether or not they should have killed or not when you trained them just to do that. So there's a lot of things about the Army and the Marines that I would not fit into from the standpoint of some of the hard things they have to do, like killing people. I think that's what tore my daddy up to where he wouldn't even talk about it. But he didn't bring home any guns or any bayonets, and the only thing I can remember using as a boy that he used in the service was his old war leggings in the snow in the wintertime. I didn't have any proper boots; I never owned a proper pair of boots. I wanted boots so bad when I was a kid.

PIEHLER: It also sounds like, going back to growing up, you had a lot of hand-me-downs in the family.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I wore my brother's shoes. I just expected every year to get a pair of shoes. He'd get the new pair of shoes ...

PIEHLER: You got the older shoes.

WILLIAMS: And I got his shoes. And we don't wear those in the summertime, you'd wear them out.

PIEHLER: So you went without shoes in the summer?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely, absolutely, and I couldn't wait to get barefooted. I'd take those shoes off. I remember begging my mother let me just get barefooted in the Spring, but it was too early. She said, "No, not yet."

DAVISSON: I have a question about that too. You said you loved water and just being in the water swimming, do you think that had anything to do with you wanting to be in the Navy?

WILLIAMS: I think so. I never feared water like my daddy did. Well, he fished in a boat and he'd stand on the bank. He was horrible at swimmin' in the water.

PIEHLER: After boot camp, where did you go to next?

WILLIAMS: Well I'd hoped I could go to engineering school in Richmond. They had just opened up a new one just like they did with the boot camp at ...

PIEHLER: At Bainbridge.

WILLIAMS: At Williamsburg where Camp Peary was. But they sent me to Gulfport, Mississippi. Hottest place I've ever seen! (Laughter) And it was because I had to be outside a lot and mosquitoes—I remember old Bob Burns [American radio and film comedian of the 1930s and 1940s from Arkansas] telling a story one time about the mosquitoes being so big in Arkansas. And he said he saw one of 'em talking to another one, and the mosquito says, "Will we eat this man here or take him down in the words? We better eat him here because if we take him down in the woods, one of those big ones will take him away from us." (Laughter) Those mosquitoes at night—working those fences where you're on guard duty, that's a very vivid memory of them basically eating you up. I never saw any deterrent, any mosquito deterrent at that time.

PIEHLER: What did you do at Gulfport?

WILLIAMS: There again as probably as little as you could say, that you could have an organized school, as far as engineering went to. We got a little training in diesel. And some of the things that we would be doing to these engines onboard. We knew then we were going into small craft. What they were teaching; they were teaching me how to use a file and a hammer. You know, it's humiliating when you think about it. It just turns my stomach to think of some of the things they trained you to spend time doing that even a guy off the farm would be able to do, you know; baby stuff. But we did learn that the makeup of a diesel engine was much, much different from the old gasoline engines that we might have been familiar with, and that these gray Marine diesel engines that were in everyone one of these LCVPs, [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel] and the tank landers too, what did we call them—LCMs [Mechanized Landing Craft] made out of steel. The P-Boat [LCVP] made out of wood, except for it had two sheets of armor plate on each side of it down to the water line. The rest was wood and the ramp was steel. But these engines have injectors, fuel injectors in them that probably was the most precise instrument I've ever seen. And they demonstrated by taking one of those injectors apart and cleaning it off or whatever. And ... the barrel that goes in it, that produces the pressure for the diesel fluid being injected into the engine; you hold it between your fingers for a few seconds or maybe a minute or so and it won't go back in the hole. That's how close the tolerance was, it had to be, you know; it was steel against steel, no packing or anything like that in it to produce the pressure, it was steel against steel. That was a revelation. I'd never seen that before. And then the tremendous power that those six-cylinder engines had was impressive. So much so that there was a coxswain I had, he was supposed to operate the boat, but if I were on there he wouldn't do it. He'd want me to do it 'cause he was afraid of it. He never drove a car until he went into the Navy. That was another

thing, take somebody like that and turn them loose with a piece of equipment like that's gonna haul forty soldiers and a crew of four and have someone that's afraid of it. He was actually afraid of that thing. We were in training one night off of Oceanside, California and the preface for going out that night was there were small craft warnings out, there was a storm. We had to put those boats in the water in that storm, and the waves were high, and hit the beach and fall off, just one time. That's all we had to do. Go in, make a proper landing, drop the ramp and go through the whole show, and then back it down until you got back into the water again when the boat was lifted by the next wave. Well, the waves were high enough that they bounding over the back of boat when we hit the beach, and he was afraid to back into the waves. And I got frightened. I'll admit I was frightened. I thought we were gonna broach. You know if you hit those things a little bit sideways those waves will flip you right over, and we'd been warned about that, cautioned about it. And he'd let the thing get a little bit sideways and I kept hollerin' at him, the waves kept makin' a lot of noise, but I kept hollerin' "Back it down! Back it down!" It lifted free and he wouldn't do anything. Finally, I took him by the arm, I pulled him (Laughter) back and I got behind the thing, and when the next wave lifted it free I must've backed it a quarter of a mile (Laughter) and into that water as wide open as it would go. And the officer aboard, there is always an ensign aboard, I knew I was going to be put on report and have to go to captain's mast [non judicial naval punishment] ...

PIEHLER: But you were put on captain's mast?

WILLIAMS: No, he didn't even report me.

PIEHLER: He didn't even report you, he knew ...

WILLIAMS: No, he was scared too. In fact, I was in some other incident with that same officer where we spent the night on a coral reef because of the fact that the coxswain got out of the channel and got on the coral in the Admiralty Islands. That was the first group of islands we went to after we left the States; went down to the Admiralty Islands across the equator. Another thing that disgusted me was the process of crossing that equator. You ever been across the equator?

PIEHLER: I haven't, but I assume you got initiated.

WILLIAMS: See, in the Navy you're a captive, you have to go through it. And there's no such thing as being treated like you would on a cruise ship. They saved the garbage for three days, and they built a canvas trench around the cargo hold, all the way around, and the filled it up with water and garbage. And then you had nothing on but your shorts and you were crawling through like a pig on all fours, and all the while they were hittin' you with a water hose, and hittin' you with a paddle.

DAVISSON: Oh my goodness ...

WILLIAMS: Then along toward the end of that they slapped black grease, the old grease we used for the gun tubs and so on, heavy black grease in your hair, and just rubbed it in; disgusting. We were within three hundred miles of Truk Island where they [the Japanese] had an airbase and

we were by ourselves; not another ship. We didn't have anybody with us until we got in that convoy going to—that's the only time we ever travelled with a convoy was when we went to Okinawa and got in the campaign.

PIEHLER: Well I want to just finish Gulfport. How long were you at Gulfport? How many weeks or months roughly?

WILLIAMS: We spent a year there one summer. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So it was a summer that ... (Laughs)

WILLIAMS: Summer of '44. We were there and I clearly remember the announcement of ... D-Day in Europe which happened in ... June of '44. We were there then. We left there and went to California, I guess in September.

PIEHLER: Of '44. You mentioned the coxswain in Gulfport when did ...

WILLIAMS: No, this didn't happen at Gulfport, this was after we got to California. We were really in training then as far as landing craft.

PIEHLER: Yeah, the coxswain was scared of driving, he'd never driven.

WILLIAMS: Never driven a car. He came from Pennsylvania.

PIEHLER: And they made him a coxswain.

WILLIAMS: His name was Tony Mancuso. And Tony was the most likeable guy you ever saw, but he did not have any dexterity at all when it came to that boat. He'd tear the side out of it alongside the gangway coming in on ... (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You liked him even, I mean, it's not like you had animosity.

WILLIAMS: I liked him yeah. The night we got hung on the coral in the Admiralty Islands was again our boat; it looked like my boat had to do everything. When a single boat was needed they called up my boat, and put this thing in the water, and said we had to go to shore to the officer's club and pick up some officers. Well, it was the same ensign that was in the trial runs off Oceanside, California in the boat with Tony and myself and a deckhand who handled the ramp. Started out to go to this thing and they kept watching that compass and I was already mad because I'd missed the movie, you know. (Laughter) Two things I looked forward to [were] movie and mail time. Mail time was first of course, before everything. But I was sittin' back there and I was sort of mad [and thought] let them do it. And before we got there I heard this "crunch, crunch, crunch." We'd gotten on this coral; they'd gotten out of the channel. And they kept trying to get off it, but couldn't get off it. We saw this garbage scow, and this was nighttime so it was dark. Saw this light on this garbage scow, this was one of these big ol' barges they use for hauling garbage from ships to wherever. And had a crew on there, just a flat barge with outboard motors on it, and they had a big floodlight on it. We hollered at them to shine the light

out there. They couldn't come in either, even though they were a barge they got to keep the motors in the water that wouldn't damage them. They couldn't come in. So we come in as far as we can. And well, this coxswain, he says "I'll just wrap my line around my waist and I'll swim out there and walk, if I can, and get to the deeper water and swim and turn around." I said "That line won't reach out there Tony!" He said, "Well I know it won't, but I'll pick up another line and come back and tie 'em together." I said "Tony, in the dark?" He says "Oh yeah." So ... I let him go over the side. (Laughter) He went over the side and didn't have a lifejacket, just tied that rope around him and he started walking on the coral and when he got to where he had to swim he started swimming. He got, oh, a hundred yards from us and was in deeper water and he went down about three times. They had the light on him, I could see his head bobbin' up. And all a sudden his head went out of sight and he came back up and he said "Help! Help!" They didn't hear him, and all the time I said "Pull in the line!" By that time they had thrown the line out there. Somehow or another he got a hold of that line and they pulled him in and I saw them drag him up on the barge in the light and worked on getting the water out of him. Said "We're gonna take him to sick bay!" They turned around and went to the island and we were sittin' on the coral. I said "I'm gonna get this thing off this bar." I kept monkeyin' with that thing and backing it up and fooling around and finally I got it into water that was deep enough and the screw was so messed up it wouldn't go forward. So we just lost— ... the ensign officer had gotten out of the boat and walked on through the coral ... and he didn't come back. (Laughter) So we sat there all night and next morning the tide had gone out and we were high and dry, just leaning over like that when the rescue boat came out to pull us away, and got us out of there. Old Tony came back from sick bay the next day, he was alright. But he said "Man, it sure is nice over there. Oh, it's beautiful over there." (Laughter) I said "Tony! Do you know how close you came to drowning?" He said, "Oh no, I'm alright." But normally he wouldn't drive that boat if I was in it. And the boat went out there, we used it for everything. They put a smoke generator on at Okinawa, to cover the ship with smoke. So many little things happened. I don't know if we have time to tell all the stuff.

PIEHLER: How long were you in California and where did you meet the sort of crew ... the division crew that you would work with? Because you mentioned you were in engineering.

WILLIAMS: Well we were assigned to, well I don't know that we were assigned a boat because when we went on a ship we had new boats. These boats that we were using were training boats out of San Diego. We went first of all to just north of Oakland, California to a camp there. That was really just a holding, dispersing station where the Navy went everywhere from there you know, to different things. And only then did we find out that we were going to be in landing craft. From this place they sent us to San Diego and into the training, which all they did was train.

PIEHLER: So when you were a student in engineering, you still thought you might ...

WILLIAMS: Didn't know what I was going to be doing in diesels, no I didn't know ...

PIEHLER: So it could have been a larger ship then?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it could have been anything. It could have been—I'm not sure whether those, what are their names, the torpedo boats that ...

PIEHLER: The PT [Patrol Torpedo] Boats?

WILLIAMS: The PT Boats that Kennedy was commander on. I don't know whether it was diesel or gasoline. I believe they were gasoline. But anyhow you didn't know what you'd be doing with that.

PIEHLER: So not until you got to California did you ...

WILLIAMS: After we went to San Diego then we knew what we were going to do, we were going to be in a landing craft because that's what was there. Although we had, I don't know whether we had any indication before we went down there from, I can't think of the name of the camp there just north of Oakland. Oh, east of Oakland. Shoemaker I believe. [Camp] Shoemaker. I don't think we knew at that time we were going to be in landing craft. But then of course when they said we were going to San Diego to this school, we knew what was going on. But we—Coronado was where we trained.

PIEHLER: And that's the incident ...

WILLIAMS: It's really an island—you go across on a ferry over to San Diego.

PIEHLER: And that's the incident where you were in the storm with the boat ...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, from there we went to Oceanside which is just north of there and made landing on the beach there. At night too, I mean it wasn't just day time. Which is really the only—we did this at Coronado. We learned to use the boat and land it and all that, but it was in the day time. We didn't have any night training or any storm training. Really you just did the best you could with the training you had. It was a little scary because the early landings that we made on the islands, they had such poor maps of what the topography looked like and where the coral was and all that, until I can remember clearly ... When we hit Tarawa, and Tarawa, it was a disaster. These boats got hung up on the coral going in there and they were sitting ducks full of soldiers, on the reef or whatever.

PIEHLER: And you were aware of that before, I mean, you were aware at the time?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. But, uh, in fact we knew of the tremendous suffering. I was tellin' you about this friend of mine that lives in Newport that was at Pearl Harbor running a garbage scow when Pearl Harbor occurred. He was picking up garbage that morning on Battleship Row when the first planes came in. He said "When I first saw them I thought they were our planes, but then I heard the machineguns and saw 'em drop those torpedoes." And one of them went right under his barge, and I guess hit a battleship beyond it. He was with us in a meeting about a year ago at the Kiwanis Club in Newport. We had an honorary day for this Veterans Day thing ... A friend of mine who was head of the program wanted me to be there I said, "I don't belong with these guys. They saw the whole war. I was just in the end of it." He said, "Well that's what we need.

We need to have you there for that and tell us about the last ship hit by suicides.” And I passed that aluminum thing around, everybody saw that.

PIEHLER: For people reading the transcript, you have actually saved a bit of the plane that attacked you.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: When did you actually leave California?

WILLIAMS: We commissioned this new ship, APA 124, USS *La Grange* and we went to sea the first day of '45.

PIEHLER: January 1 ...

WILLIAMS: January 1st, 1945. We didn't get to go home for Christmas or anything else, and I remember that very clearly. I wanted to go home and see Ann. But we were by ourselves and that was frightening to me. I remember directly the impression I had watching the wake behind that ship at night in that Pacific, and I suppose it's the same thing in any ocean; the phosphorous you could see for a mile trailing this ship. Phosphorous that's in the water flowin' that you stirred up. I guess it was phosphorous, some kind of urchin or sea being or something that looks like a lightning bug in the water. And I remember I said "Well, now that's a flag for any submarine the Japanese have around here." And I thought [about] this a few days later when we crossed the equator ... [and were] cavorting on the deck within three hundred miles of Jap held air force. And I said what a stupid thing that was to do.

PIEHLER: So you thought crossing the Neptune, you didn't think this was a wise thing to do.

WILLIAMS: No I thought ...

PIEHLER: Besides it didn't seem very pleasant. (Laughter)

WILLIAMS: Well, you know you were irritated by the fact you're so humiliated by this business of stripping down to your shorts and crawling through that garbage that smelled terrible and having somebody hit you with a paddle with wet shorts on. I don't see how they operate like that now with women being on the ship too. (Laughter) Maybe they do it a different way, I don't know. Make ya wear a full uniform or somethin'.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, among the crew you had, were there any old navy on it?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah! Our skipper was a full captain and of course now, you know, that a captain in the Army and a captain in the Navy is a far cry.

PIEHLER: Oh no, it's a very different ... you had a full captain?

WILLIAMS: He was a full captain. If he was a captain, he's next to a rear admiral. He's beyond the commanders. We had a lieutenant commander [and] we had a full commander that was over our landing craft division.

PIEHLER: The captain, had he gone to Annapolis or ...

WILLIAMS: I don't know about that, but he was a regular Navy man.

WILLIAMS: He was retired, yeah, and they called him back.

PIEHLER: Do you remember his name?

WILLIAMS: No I don't. But he was the man that interviewed me when I was going to Officer's Training School, but I still can't remember his name.

PIEHLER: What did he ask you when he was interviewing; do you remember what he asked you?

WILLIAMS: No I don't. The only discouragement I had was from the first, what we call the first lieutenant, who was really he was the damage control officer for the entire ship and when we got hit it, his voice is what you heard on the bullhorn calling you to go get your fire extinguishers, and organizing everything to put out this fire. He was a regular Navy man. He said, "You mean to say you don't want," when he found out I turned this thing down you know, going to Officer's Training School— ... the process then was to take men who had sea duty and had a what did they call it a GCT test or something of that nature of a certain level which you took when you were in boot camp, as I recall. And then he selected two. He was asked to provide two from a ship; of about five hundred crew. I had already accepted the thing to the skipper, and then he called me down to sign the papers in the yeoman's office, and I went in there and this yeoman gave me a snow job. He said "You're gonna have to give two years of waiver when you hit the beach to say that when you finish school you'll spend two years in the Navy." And I was fat, dumb and happy, and I said "I don't want to do that. I'm goin' home to see Ann." So I turned it down. This lieutenant, he saw me later and said "I went to bat for you. I recommended you highly for this and now you do that! What are you going to do when you go home?" I said, "I'm gonna finish my trade." He says, "A trade ...

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

WILLIAMS: ... ward room above, which was above the engine room.

PIEHLER: I think this got cut off. This lieutenant had chastised you for—he'd gone to bat for you and he really dismissed the idea of trade school.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he said, "That's beneath you. You don't want to do that."

PIEHLER: But he got killed in the ward room.

WILLIAMS: He was in the ward room when the plane hit and the hatch that went from the ward room down ... opened to a ladder that went down to the engine room was, they told me this, I don't know, was blown off, had one dog [external handles called "dog handles"] holding it there. You know, the watertight hatch has several of those latches that ... seals it against water; only one holding it. And that concussion from that bomb blew that latch off there and also the door itself and the door cut his head off. He was sitting at the table playing cards in the ward room. Regular dedicated, regular Navy man.

PIEHLER: You had a lot of regulars, I mean you had some real old Navy, not reservists but ...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we had some of those.

PIEHLER: What about the enlisted, the sailors? Any old chiefs who had been pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

WILLIAMS: I don't know about pre-Pearl Harbor. I doubt that. This was a new ship and these people, of course, had been on other ships.

PIEHLER: They'd been on other ships that they ...

WILLIAMS: In fact one of them told me—maybe I shouldn't tell that—told me that he'd been down in the islands early hours, I don't know whether it was Tarawa or one of these other islands where the early landings were made; he was in the landing crew then. And he said the officer he had in the boat with him, the ensign, was the actor Eddie Albert. He told me the story and I don't remember the details now, but about how scared and cowardly he was, and how he acted. I'm just ... every time I seen Eddie on screen, I've thought about that.

PIEHLER: But he told you a less than complimentary story.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it was very damaging ... and I don't know what his motivation was for telling it. Maybe he shouldn't even have repeated it. But you know, you talk about everything in the Navy, especially if you've been at sea a while. You gotta talk to someone and somebody has to talk to you.

PIEHLER: What was a typical day when you were out to sea, for you?

WILLIAMS: Well, in the landing craft division we didn't have much to do except after we'd got hit by the suicide planes. We'd lost some of the key people who were in the black gang [Nickname for crew members assigned to the engine room, from the old days when they had to shovel coal into the engine] that ran the ship down below, and had to stay the watch on that. Up until that, we didn't have any responsibility. In fact, they didn't want us in their way, as they knew we did mostly when we were employed doing anything of consequence. ... Runnin' these boats we did a lot of cargo work. We hauled everything in those LCVP boats. The last time, we came in after Okinawa was secured and in June we came back to the States to re-outfit for the invasion. We got all new boats and I don't know what else. But I do remember we carried

twenty-five thousand cases of beer back. (Laughter) And we had to carry this beer when we got back to Buckner Bay [Nakagusuku Bay, named Buckner Bay by American soldiers after General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr.] where there were no ports, no docking facilities, so the ships all anchored in the harbor. If there were any docks anywhere, or piers, I never went to one of 'em. Well they'd have a place alongside the slip where you could go in where you could side throw stuff off the boats. We hauled that beer to Okinawa and landed ... where they had stacks of it there on the side of the bank where they were hauling it off and where it was gonna be used for some good purpose. We had a drunken crew. (Laughter) I never drank a can of it, I've never liked beer. I couldn't drink a beer today if I had to.

PIEHLER: But others in the crew didn't feel that way?

WILLIAMS: No, our drunks—the boats had a deck on top of the shell of the boat itself where the ribs and all and the keel was. Over top the keel was a plywood deck, and it had ports in it where you could pull up these sections of it, and put stuff in the keel, and it was full of beer. You couldn't get on any of the boats that were handling that beer without looking down below and you'd see case after case of that beer in there. And the people who were operating the boat sometimes were drunk, pretty well so.

PIEHLER: I'm curious about Okinawa. Sort of being aboard ship, but in some sense, [with] two sets of crew, as you described it. The ... [crew] that ran the ship and then you're in the landing craft. Did you have to stand watches?

WILLIAMS: We stood gun watches, yeah.

PIEHLER: But otherwise you're not involved in the maintenance or running of this ship, you're really off ...

WILLIAMS: We only had responsibility for the landing craft, and operations of the landing craft and the maintenance of the landing craft, and that kind of thing. But when they were brought aboard you had twenty-four LCVPs and two LCMs. The LCM was the larger boat capable of hauling a tank or something else. That's what the "M" stands for, mechanical equipment, and the LCVP was personnel, and handled maybe a jeep, but nothing bigger than that maybe that you could put in one of them, and then have many men in it at all. But as far as I know I never hauled a jeep. But we had forty life jackets stored in the perimeter racks that ran along inside of the boat for all forty soldiers, and that was during the landing of course and if you didn't have soldiers—we still spent a lot more cargo time in the boat than we did hauling soldiers or marines.

PIEHLER: Now did you take part in the landing on the first day of the invasion? Did you haul soldiers in?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we took this little island, did I say that? I guess I didn't.

PIEHLER: Well, I think we haven't gotten to Ie Shima [Small island off the western end of Okinawa.] But did you do the landing on the main island?

WILLIAMS: Not first, we went to Ie Shima first.

PIEHLER: You went first to Ie Shima.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and the landing on Ie Shima was more dangerous than it was on Okinawa. Okinawa didn't ... well it was a cakewalk. When those guys went ashore, they couldn't believe it.

PIEHLER: Well that was one of the great surprises about Okinawa, was in fact, there wasn't the resistance people expected.

WILLIAMS: But as they got on inland and these people had positioned themselves, and of course knowing the island, and knowing where the troops would come ... It was like walking into—and they used this tactics even on these islands, these volcanic islands ... had caves that formed over there. They were in those caves. You've seen pictures I know of the soldiers and marines using the napalm guns to hit these, and just blowing those things full of flames. They were in there, but we don't see any terrorists in Iraq today, I'm satisfied, that were anymore dedicated to what they were doing than these people were. They simply looked at the emperor as God himself, and they were there because of the emperor, and they would die there because of the emperor.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about the landing at Ie Shima?

WILLIAMS: I remember that we didn't take any chance on coral. We got in close to the beach and I think we put most of our soldiers into Buffalo Tanks [LVTs, Landing Vehicle Tracked; amphibious assault vehicles with tracks like tanks] near the shore and they went ashore with the buffalos. I don't think we even dropped the ramp, as far as our ship was concerned, on that island to let them out. They got out of our ship into a buffalo when they got in close to the island. So therefore we were fortunate, we didn't have the risk of getting caught in the coral and that might have been the reason why they did it that way. But we had pulverized that beach with rockets ... for quite a long while before we went in. They thought this was going to be a cakewalk. They planned it to be three days then go back in and pick them up, but it was over a week before they secured it. And it's a small island ... in fact it wasn't far off the end of those islands out there. This little island was where Ernie Pyle [famous American war correspondent] was killed. He was with us, I think it was [part of] the 66th Infantry Division ... that we had aboard on our ship. And he was with the 66th and I believe that he went ashore in the initial group, but it was off of another ship; a lot of ships there.

DAVISSON: How soon after he was killed did you hear about it?

WILLIAMS: Very soon, very soon. He was so beloved by the service people. He was dedicated to them. He went out there and volunteered. 'Course he went everywhere And I've heard stories about him since then. I've heard people telling that he was an alcoholic and all these kinds of things, that he had a drinking problem. But I've read some of his writings in this book I have called *Home Country* and he's a good writer, along with being a dedicated American who

was there to do the job he needed to do and he wasn't looking for any glory. He wasn't back at headquarters writin' these things up and e-mailing them to the paper somewhere or something.

PIEHLER: On your way to Okinawa, did you know about kamikazes?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we had not been hit, but they were first. The desperation they had started in the Philippines. The first, might have been one or two instances before that, but they used them; not extensively like they did at Okinawa.

PIEHLER: So you were aware of them?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we were aware of them. In fact we were already prepared to—in fact, we went to sea in the daytime and sometimes, I've forgotten how many times we went out while we were waiting to make the dang landing ... we still had troops aboard, so we hadn't landed those people yet. ... after we got to Okinawa, [before we landed], we ran into this storm of suicides, and we started going to sea in the late afternoon when they were likely to be there. We'd be gone by two or three o' clock in the afternoon; we'd be out at sea in convoy. I mean this was not one ship, it was an armada. And I know one afternoon they found us. I don't think we were knew they were there, but we just kept moving. We got a general quarters alarm, and we went to general quarters, but it was really too late. When I went above deck these planes were coming in. And one of them hit the ship in front of us, and these were not Zeroes, this was advanced far enough to where they were throwing in the bombers too. They had these Betty bombers, twin engines, all over everywhere. All of 'em I could see had twin engines. The flak was just [so thick] like you could walk on it up there, but they still kept coming, kept coming, kept coming. And we got a few of them. One of them hit the ship in front of us and I remember very distinctly seeing a man in a life raft that had come off of that ship; had been blown out of the water I guess ... he's just sittin' there in the life raft. So we picked him up. But they were in desperation. They'd been told ... they'd been trained and told that if they went into the hands of the enemies they were going to die anyhow. So why not honor the God and the Emperor by doing that? But anyhow—so I told 'em at church one morning right after we had this September 11th attacks that it wasn't the first time we'd seen fanaticism. Fanaticism has existed a long time and compared it to World War II. Just as fanatical as these people are now, the only difference is they were in uniform. You could tell one from something else you know.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you're in part of a division with your own amphibious ships; what about your ship's defenses against the kamikazes? Who manned the deck guns?

WILLIAMS: We were not officially, or not specifically designed to do a lot of that, but we had 40mm antiaircraft guns, we had a quad up front maybe up near the bow, and that's the one I worked on when we were under attack and would feed ammunition for it. I wasn't doin' the operating of it myself. But then we had some 20mms, and one instance there—this is another thing I thought was very unfair. We had troops aboard and we were in the convoy. And one of these lone enemy, I don't know whether it was a Zero, I think it was, got under the radar and got in. We first picked up what they call a bogey flash on the radar, which is an enemy approaching and then immediately after that they got an IFF [Identification Friend or Foe] which is friendly. So the radar operator said, "Oh, that's just a mistake, it was just a friendly." But what it was; it

was one of our hot dog pilots chasing this single Zero who was intent on a suicide raid, and was chasing it right into the convoy which he might've known he'd be under fire. We were not prepared; we didn't have anybody at battle stations.

PIEHLER: General quarters hadn't been called.

WILLIAMS: No general quarters had been sounded. There was a soldier on deck [because] they went up on deck to get air, smoke, and so on. He was standing there near this one-man 20mm gun, and he jumped over and uncovered that thing, and started firing at that plane. And the plane veered off, the enemy plane veered off, and hit the ship there again in front of us. And he got court-martialed.

PIEHLER: He did get court-martialed?

WILLIAMS: That's what they said; that's what we were told. He was court-martialed. Of course our ship's officers were in the defense, but that's your job, you're supposed to stand right there and get killed.

PIEHLER: Where did you pick up the troops that you took?

WILLIAMS: In the Philippines.

PIEHLER: Now how long were these troops onboard your ship? Because you mentioned you didn't immediately land them, that they were onboard for a while.

WILLIAMS: I don't recall how long it took us to go from the Philippines up there. It's quite a distance. I don't know how many days we were at sea there. But we probably were—of course ... landing troops being replenished all the time after the campaign started. But we were there until they secured the island or said the island was secured before we came back to the states to get re-outfitted and prepared for the invasion. That's when we picked up the beer. I would say that the whole campaign was—maybe they had the island secure in early June.

PIEHLER: And then you went back to get the beer.

WILLIAMS: But the troops weren't on our ship all that time.

PIEHLER: No, no, but you described how they were onboard the ship for several days in Okinawan waters, as you were sort of moving around ...

WILLIAMS: Their quarters were near the bow and they had the whole section double decked to where they had pretty much the same accommodations we had. All bunks ... nobody was in hammocks. I don't guess they'd been any hammocks for many years. But they weren't there, I didn't see any hammock. We had a hammock, but we never used it. They were on there, and they were pretty much idle; they wrote letters and they came up on deck and talked to each other. I suspect they did like we did, played poker, and some of those poker games could go on, you know, for twenty-four hours or more. That was something we had a lot of going on in the Navy.

Nobody tried to break up a poker game if he was off duty. And some of the guys that were good at it sent a lot of money home that they stole from somebody else. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You mentioned movies, how often did you get to see movies?

WILLIAMS: When we were in a secured place. We went to a lot of islands. We moved to a lot of islands before we ever went to Okinawa.

PIEHLER: And so when you go to these islands, is that when you'd get a movie?

WILLIAMS: Well when we were in a safe place where there was no danger they'd show it on deck. And the night we got hit by suicide [planes] we were looking for a movie on deck because we thought the war was over, we were home free we thought. And they'd been showing it when the weather was good they'd pull up a great big ol' canvas screen on these stanchions that stood up alongside the cargo hold and project the movie from the bridge over to the [screen]. And then you'd see people all over the deck, and we had landing craft sitting in these—six landing craft on port and starboard side of the bridge that were handled by davits. Two on the deck, one here and one over top of it (Gestures), and then the last one was lashed down to the side of the ship hanging on the cables. Well, [where] this particular boat was sittin' on the deck on the port side was where I was sitting; on the end of the boat, the back stern of the boat facing forward and the movie was going to be shown out there. They announced that movie and we thought we were home free, we didn't think we were in any danger any more. ... And they announced over the PA system they were going to show the movie down in the mess hall. So I jumped down off the boat and went down to the mess hall to see the movie. The movie was a fairly new movie at that time. John Wayne was fighting the Japs in *The Flying Tigers*. Got about a third of the way into the movie, and he was in a dog fight, and all of a sudden the camera, and the benches were blown off their legs, and everybody was on their backsides; the movie and the camera went everywhere. We'd been hit in that same boat I was sittin' on. That's where this guy Martin was asleep, one of our crewmen. We found his arm in the bay a couple of days later. And that side of the ship was on fire and all the power was off temporarily. So until they got the forward generators going—we didn't have any troops aboard incidentally. We didn't have any power so we couldn't fight the fire. So the First Officer, who, let me think, he was the damage control officer. He had a bullhorn and was telling us to get our fire extinguishers out of our boats; everyone, all the engineers, the coxswains were running to the boats to get fire extinguishers. So I ran to the other side, our boat was hanging in the sling over the side. I went and got in this boat and got over on, put my foot on this side of the gunnel of my boat, and I head this motor. I looked up and here comes another plane. So I jumped back in the boat and wrapped my head in a life jacket 'Course he was aiming for that bridge ... and basically he missed it, and it hit the forward stanchion; one of the ones that we put the screen on to show the movie, and spun it over the side and the bomb went off in the water, didn't do any damage that I know of. So I'm not sure where this piece of shrapnel came from that plane or the other one. I think it was the other one because it shows tremendous blast to make it crinkle like it is. So I don't think it was that wing ...

PIEHLER: And this was August 13th?

WILLIAMS: This was August 13th and we thought the war was over.

DAVISSON: So where were you in contrast to where the bomb hit? I'm trying to get a visual of ...

WILLIAMS: Well, if you picture the ship this way (Gestures) with the movie screen being this forward on the boat sittin' on the deck here, I was on this side of the boat. I was sitting on the back of the boat facing the stern going to watch the movie. It was an ideal place to sit. And you've got five hundred personnel on the ship so that was a choice place to be. So I was there before the bomb—this was adjacent to the yeoman's office and then you had the bridge [ship's control area] on top of that. Just below that though; below the main deck, which was what the boat was resting on, on the second deck down was the brig. And we had a bunch of people in there that were in the brig, all of them got killed. So it hit right in there where that boat was and took the outside boat out completely, just the end of it was hanging on one of the cables. This boat here was gone too. In this yeoman's office, which is right there, the yeoman was flattened against the bulkhead. He was in there doing some work. I don't know whether that was the man that gave me the story about having to serve two years, I've forgotten if that could have been the same one or not. He was a chief though ...

PIEHLER: So you lost a lot of crew in this attack?

WILLIAMS: We ... I don't know how many of our boat crew were killed. I think most of 'em were ship's crew. There were twenty-two. This letter we got from the Navy department said twenty-one killed, but I think they missed old Martin or somebody because it was generally known afterwards that we'd lost twenty-two. But one of the things I want to mention, and this is not very favorable. Doesn't put a good light on Purple Hearts, and to be honest has colored my judgment and my sympathy for mothers and wives that lost their loved ones and got a Purple Heart for that person's loss. The way those Purple Hearts were handled on our ship, and it may have been an isolated incident, I don't know, but it has affected the way I question Purple Hearts in general. We had, I don't know how many we had injured. I don't know that. But anyhow, when they counted them—the doctors usually have control of this on the ship—they sent a prescribed number of Purple Hearts from the admiral's ship which was in the bay, and sent the boat over with a request for this number of Purple Hearts. And the next day, after the attack, we heard over the PA system an announcement from sick bay saying. "If you have been injured in the attack, please come down to sick bay," well, they don't say please for that matter, (Laughter) "come to sick bay." We had the ceremony for those later and it was surprising for who you saw there receiving these Purple Hearts for having been injured. They had to send back for some more after they got the first order; after they got everybody down to sick bay and vouched for the fact they were hurt. I guess they had to vouch, you gotta have a doctor's approval. They sent back over to this admiral's ship for some more and the officer who was onboard and the crew that was in the boat told me this. He said that admiral came out on deck and said "What are they doing over there? Givin' these things out in chow line?" And the day we had the ceremony on deck, the whole crew and everybody was standing at attention, and we had the ceremony with all the pomp and everything that the officers could devise I guess. And we had people who didn't have a thing wrong with them going up there to get these Purple Hearts; they'd call their names out. One man I know was in our boat division, whom I talked to regularly, and this was some, I don't know how long it was maybe a week or two weeks after the thing had happened; we had to

clean the mess and all that before we had the ceremony. But his name was Young, and he was an older man. 'Course he was very young to me now. He said, he'd been talkin' about this, he said, "There's some of those people who went down there to get a Purple Heart that," he says, "it's just ridiculous That is a travesty to think that these people down there who lost their lives; their mothers and wives will get a Purple Heart, and these guys went down there without a thing in the world wrong [with them] can get a Purple Heart. Then low and behold, when they had this ceremony, they called his name out. He had to step out of line and go up there and receive that Purple Heart. He didn't know what to do, but to do it.

PIEHLER: He hadn't put in for this?

WILLIAMS: No! He swore he says, "I didn't go down there! You heard me talk about this thing!" But now the significance to that is greater especially as we grow older in that the VA honors those things when you go to get treatment. And rightly so if you deserve one and you got it in good faith. Now I'm sure that a regular Navy doctor somewhere will dispute what I am saying, but it's true, it's true! We had people on deck that there wasn't a thing in the world wrong with them getting Purple Hearts. I can see how John Kerry might have gotten three and got to go home in five months after being in the service, or in the field; if that's true. I don't know if he didn't deserve them, but I believe that a number of Purple Hearts have been given out that weren't deserved. Now I understand that they've got some kind of criteria on it, but these doctors sometimes get overruled on some of their decisions. They're still subject to regulations.

PIEHLER: I want to ask just a few more questions about the ship. How was the food? Do you remember?

WILLIAMS: I remember the best meal that we had, as far as breakfast went, was Wednesdays. And we had navy beans for breakfast. Have you ever eaten navy beans for breakfast?

PIEHLER: I've not eaten them, but I've read about people eating them. (Laughter)

WILLIAMS: I like navy beans still today. But, you know, it's not one of those things—when you go to sea, and I guess this is probably not as bad as it used to be, especially since there's not so many sailors and not so many ships, but we had cereal products aboard that shouldn't have been eaten by anybody; loaded, dry cereal loaded with weevils. I mean you could see 'em floating when you put the milk on. But the worst meal, and this is a personal thing with me, have never eaten it since; is New Zealand mutton. We had New Zealand mutton on occasion, and you could smell that stuff all over the ship when it was cookin'. I couldn't eat that stuff. But many times I'd gone up to my boat where I had K-Rations, we hauled a lot of K-Rations for the troops, and ... C-Rations were really the best. They had such stuff as canned bacon, uh, what's it called—anyhow canned bacon has practically no fat at all in the cans and we put that and some other things out of the C-Ration ... on the manifold of our engine and heat them, you know, and eat that a lot of times. The food wasn't unsanitary ... it didn't seem nearly as unacceptable. As I said, the breakfast cereal was terrible because of the—you'd go into these holds where they kept the cereal and the place would be lousy with weevils. They must not be poisonous or we'd all died I guess, we ate them anyhow.

PIEHLER: What about showers? Did you have enough fresh water to take regular showers or did you take saltwater showers?

WILLIAMS: When the troops were aboard no, we didn't have. We had a system, the kind of [desalination] system that used saltwater. In fact, we used salt water a lot of times; they'd give you a certain hour to take a shower, and that changes exactly how you had to do it. You get in, you turn the water on, you get wet, then you turn it off; then you soap up real good, and then you rinse off and get out. You don't stay in there and soak in it or anything like that. If it went too long you got in saltwater. (Laughter) You didn't wash your hair in that.

PIEHLER: Did you have a chaplain aboard?

WILLIAMS: I don't think we ever had services aboard.

PIEHLER: Never had—even informally did anyone ever organize?

WILLIAMS: No, not that I know of.

PIEHLER: What about when you were on bases, did you go?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they had it on bases, all bases.

PIEHLER: Did you go on Sundays?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What about, did you have a doctor aboard?

WILLIAMS: Oh, there were several doctors, yeah. And I assumed, I was told this, I don't know whether this is true or not, that they were rated. And the reason they were giving out so many of these Purple Hearts, or recommending so many Purple Hearts, was that the more people they handled, they served, the better chances they had of promotion. I don't know whether that's true.

PIEHLER: It sounds like there were a lot of rumors and scuttlebutt when you were in the Navy, is that ...

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. Somebody was always coming up with a story of where we were going next and nobody knew where we were going. (Laughter) Or when we were going to come back or whether, well your enlistment told you that when you went in. You signed up for—you were obligated for the duration and six months. If you were drafted you were obligated for the duration of the war, until they said it was over and you would go home, or six months thereafter. Now when the war was over, or just before the war was over, they set up a points system and it was really fair. Those people who had been in the longest acquired the greatest number of points. Those people who had large families, they were in there too, involved in getting out early. But I didn't get out of the service until well over, something like seven or eight months.

PIEHLER: So not until 1946 did you ...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Now, did you take your ship all the way back to the United States?

WILLIAMS: No. Oh yes we did, after we got hit! We took it back to the States but we decommissioned it. We had to take the ship into repair at Okinawa.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but then once it was repaired ...

WILLIAMS: They patched it up. In fact we went through a storm coming home and there were some tremendous waves and the ship would dive into 'em, you know, and it was just shuddering and shuddering ... I wouldn't go down the side where they got hit on 'cause it made so much noise, popping and cracking; sounded like it was going to come [break] in two. But we made it back, and when we got back we decommissioned it, and they took it off in the flats around San Jose somewhere, and mothballed I guess. Or maybe they didn't even save it, took it and scrapped it. I don't know what happened to it after we decommissioned it.

PIEHLER: How much of the crew left as a result of points early on after the war ended?

WILLIAMS: It was substantial, but I don't know how many it was during that, but there were a lot of guys that had been in the Navy quite a while, maybe the whole war. And I know that I counted my points when they first came out, it looked like I was going to be in there another three years to get out. (Laughter) But I wasn't. They sent me back, after we decommissioned the ship, I went back to the East Coast; Richmond. Ann and I were married, what, six days after that Ann?

PIEHLER: While you were still in the Navy?

WILLIAMS: No, no after I got out of the Navy.

PIEHLER: So after the decommissioning you weren't in the Navy very long except the East Coast.

WILLIAMS: After the decommissioning I was in the Navy until the latter part of May of the next year.

PIEHLER: What did they have you do after the decommissioning?

WILLIAMS: I was on a tug off the coast of Virginia, and we were towing, and that was the sickest I've ever been, seasick, on that tug out there in the spring of '46.

PIEHLER: More seasick than in the Pacific?

WILLIAMS: Towing targets for the ships coming in to shoot at, shooting up all the ammunition they had.

PIEHLER: So they were really using it to use up the ammunition? (Laughs)

WILLIAMS: Yeah and I got so sick I hoped they hit us. (Laughter)

DAVISSON: Did a lot of guys get sick like you said going through the storm? Was there a lot of seasickness going on then?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but that was a big ship. Now this was a tug. A tug doesn't draw a lot of water to start with and it bobs around in a storm like that. The thing that always made me, I'm motion sickness prone. I can't ride in a car and read a newspaper.

PIEHLER: I have the same thing.

DAVISSON: Me too!

WILLIAMS: Well you would be subject to seasickness. And this is what does it you know. And the landing craft did that quite a bit, when you were just wallerin' around waiting for orders from the deck above, a lot of times you got nauseous. I got sick on that tug. I would get up and stand my watch, and go back, and as long as I was lying down I was fine. I'd get over it quick. But standing up, mmm! I got sick. Tug duty would not be for me.

PIEHLER: Had you thought of staying in the Navy?

WILLIAMS: I didn't.

PIEHLER: You hadn't thought, or no?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

PIEHLER: Did you think of staying in the reserves?

WILLIAMS: No, I got out and I was discharged and I got the card somewhere where they placed me in a category where they could call me back if they had to for a while, but I was never officially in the reserves. No, I didn't want to go back. I'd had enough. It just wasn't the kind of life I wanted to be in.

PIEHLER: I want to make sure I ask. Your father was very active in the [American] Legion, did you join the Legion right away after you got out?

WILLIAMS: Well let's see, I joined probably in the early '50's.

PIEHLER: Early '50's is when you joined. And how long did you stay? You mentioned you are no longer in the Legion, how long did you stay in the Legion?

WILLIAMS: After I left we were living just in the suburbs of Richmond in the early '50's—was there from summer of '53 to the end of '57 I guess. I never joined again anywhere else after that. Just got busy with other things; learned a new trade, working with drafting and estimating steel, and raising a family. We got transferred to Florida in '58, and from then on we were pretty much involved in things around northern Florida.

PIEHLER: You used the G.I. Bill to finish apprentice school?

WILLIAMS: No.

PIEHLER: So apprentice school, you continued the same arrangement. But you did use it for the house ... to buy your first house?

WILLIAMS: Not mine, I never used mine. In Florida I bought a G.I.'s home that he had about a year, it was about a year old when we bought it. It was under G.I. loan and I assumed his loan, it wasn't mine.

PIEHLER: Have you used any veterans' hospitals at all or veterans medical care?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I was in the hospital when I was twenty-five years old I guess. I was in a car wreck and that was one of those times I should have gotten killed. [The car hit a pothole, and skidded, and then flipped several times on the road.] I was thrown out of the car and it landed on top of me in the road, still in the road. And broke my pelvis ...

-----END TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: I had a few questions sort of out of order. I usually try to ask questions in order, but you, and I should've asked this way back ...

WILLIAMS: Well, I have been jumping all over the place ...

PIEHLER: No, no, you've actually been very disciplined. But do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor occurred?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, I was actually on an Army base that Sunday, visiting some friends that had been drafted or were in the service at Fort Story, Virginia. Fort Story, I don't know if it even exists anymore. It was a camp across [from] Camp Hampton Roads on the Norfolk side from Newport News where I was in school. But I was there when I found out it. That was a Sunday afternoon ... which was pretty—I guess that's what, ten, twelve hour difference in time from Hawaii to the East coast? It's at least eight hours. It's thirteen hours between the east coast of America and Japan, I know that. ... So it was pretty quick after it happened. They shut the base down; we couldn't even get out of the base. We were civilians in there.

PIEHLER: They wouldn't let you out as civilians?

WILLIAMS: We were there for hours before they'd let us leave.

PIEHLER: What did you think about in 1940 and 1941? You weren't drafted. Did you think you might get drafted in the 1940 draft?

WILLIAMS: During the 1940 draft I was still in school of course and I don't know when the draft started. The draft started sometime in 1940. But I was still not old enough at that point. I was eighteen in March of '41.

PIEHLER: So these were older friends? It sounds like these were older friends you were visiting on the base.

WILLIAMS: I don't even remember who it was. I think it was some boys that I ... who I knew in this NYA [National Youth Administration] School earlier in '41 when we were together in Manassas. Incidentally, after I left there did I say that I went back to Manassas to teach?

PIEHLER: Yes, you did mention.

WILLIAMS: I had a NYA trade class there.

DAVISSON: What was your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WILLIAMS: Well it was like anyone else. 'Course it had been on the news and we had known the threat was there, we were preparing as much we could. We didn't have anything to fight with, we really didn't. Sometime in the spring of '41 I went to visit—Roosevelt had called up the National Guard in January of '41, and they called a unit from the Blackstone area, which, one of my boyhood friends was involved in that. He was older than me. And I went there and he told me—I went up there just to visit at Fort Meade, Maryland—and he told me they were practicing, drilling with wooden rifles. They didn't even have enough of the old World War I pieces to get the new recruits or the new people coming in there to do their drilling with the old World War I Springfields that my daddy used and so on. So we just didn't have anything to fight with. Going through this depression—and there was, uh, I think a friend of mine in Newport told me there was eighty thousand, total, in the Navy; the whole Navy, eighty thousand was all we had at the beginning of this. And he had joined the [Navy] in 1934, this man who lives in Newport. He retired from the Navy. But we knew that we didn't have [much]. We lost all those ships that had the big heavy guns ... sittin' on the bottom of Pearl Harbor, and ironically, the one that I mentioned earlier about being hit the night before by a suicide [plane] in Buckner Bay ...

PIEHLER: [USS] *Pennsylvania*.

WILLIAMS: *Pennsylvania*, I believe that was sunk at Pearl Harbor. A lot of these—the water is shallow there.

PIEHLER: Yeah, most of the battleships were ...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and they raised ‘em see. And so this is true of a number of ‘em; I don’t know how many.

PIEHLER: Your son served in the Air Force. You mentioned he served for nine years.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: January ’84 to spring of ’93. Do you know why he joined the Air Force and did you encourage him?

WILLIAMS: No, he didn’t, he came to me asking questions. He was in North Florida Junior College and he’d been in there, how long mother? [Mrs. Williams] He graduated high school in 1980? About a year and a half he’d been in there ... and he came to me one day out of the blue sky and he said, “Daddy, I wanna join the service. What do you think about that?” And I said, “I don’t think you should.” And he said, “Why?” I said, “You don’t want anybody to tell you what to do and you’re gonna do it whether you want to or not when you go in there.” He said, “Well Daddy, I need some discipline.” Now can you imagine; how old was Wayne then? Twenty? Coming in and telling your daddy that you need some discipline? I said, “There is such a thing as self-discipline. No other kind of discipline is ever gonna get you anywhere. You need some self discipline. You need to decide that if you’re gonna get an education, you better work at it and that it’s worthwhile.” Well he said, “I know, but I’d like to join.” So knowing that he wanted to, I went down to the recruiting office where they were recruiting for the Air Force and got some literature and brought it home to him, trying to guide him into something like that a little bit. He grew up with flat feet. I don’t think the Army would have taken him. I don’t believe they would have. If they did, they didn’t examine him properly. And he grabbed onto this Air Force thing, went down there and passed everything just flying, and they told him at this time that they were getting the cream of the crop. Here he was on paper, at least he had a year and a half of college, and he was applying for the lowest rank there was in the Air Force, and gonna go off to training camp for that, and they accepted him right away. But they said it’d be a while before call we ya. It was about a year before they called him. They called him, he went in. He was twenty-one years old when he went in the service. But he spent the major part of the time after he got out of the basic training he took, they sent him to Ohio and worked at Wright Patterson [Air Force Base] as a nurse’s aide. He worked in the hospital the whole time he was in there, even when he went to Japan. He worked everything from pediatricians all the way to retirees that were there that needed help. So he had a real good basis for coming out and going back to school to be a nurse—a degreed nurse, practical nurse. Came back, went to school here, and was in Carson-Newman. What he wanted to do was to be a civilian nurse, just like a civilian teacher today, overseas, and made it back to Japan. At that time he was married to a Japanese girl. Then he discovered from somebody who was already in this occupation that the Department of Defense had stopped hiring nurses. I don’t know how they could do that, they need nurses like everybody else. And so, they said, but we need teachers. So he changed his major and went into teaching, and that’s what he wound up doing.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned over lunch that he still teaches at the Department of Defense school.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he teaches middle school? (Speaking to Mrs. Williams)

MRS. WILLIAMS: Middle and high school in Sasebo, Japan.

WILLIAMS: Middle and High School at Sasebo Naval Station. It's on this little island on the southern tip of Japan. It's almost adjacent to North Korea. You know that's where most of the suicide planes came from; North Korea, Japan had taken it.

PIEHLER: Have you ever visited him in Japan?

WILLIAMS: No, he just went to Japan this past fall. He's only been over there since August.

PIEHLER: I wanted to ask you—you've had a long day answering our questions—but since your wife is here, this seems like a very appropriate time, how did you meet your wife?

WILLIAMS: I will always remember our first date because it was my sister's birthday. I first saw her the 26th day of February, 1944. I mean that's the first time I saw her, but not the first time I had a date with her. She was in the high school class with my sister and I think about it real often. She says she saw me too, but I don't know whether she did. My memory's wrong or something. But the first time I saw her she was coming out of the drug store, she was ... a senior in high school, and she was with a gang of girls, they'd been in there for sodas or something. I was sitting in the car on the street when she came out and I saw her. And I asked my sister about her, I said, "Who is this girl, she's got beautiful black hair." I described her for her and she said, "Well that's Ann Howle." And I said, "Well get me a date with her if you can." So she was tellin' Carrie a while ago and I didn't know this; that she held out a long time before she told Xenia, that's my sister, that she would date me. But that wasn't the end of it. I had to fight for her. I came home from boot camp and she was about to marry somebody else! Do you remember that? (Laughter) One of these officers down at the air base.

DAVISSON: Did you guys correspond?

WILLIAMS: So there again I was blessed again—and again and again. Sixty years I've been blessed now.

DAVISSON: I was just saying, did ya'll correspond while you were ...

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, we had some ...

MRS. WILLIAMS: I said prayers and ...

WILLIAMS: She says she was praying for me, you know burning candles at church for me, and all that stuff and I'm sure it helps.

[Mrs. Williams is speaking, but too far in the background to hear.]

WILLIAMS: Well maybe that's where it's been all this time 'cause I've had some other close calls too. But she's ... pretty well trained. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I meant to ask this earlier, too. Your father worked on an airbase during the war, what did he do?

WILLIAMS: I don't know what he did. He was sort of a backyard carpenter. He could do things ... well finish work he couldn't do. But he could do regular rough carpentry you know, so it might have been in that.

PIEHLER: But you're not sure?

WILLIAMS: I'm not sure. I don't know that I ever knew.

PIEHLER: Now I guess one thing I meant to ask over lunch is how you grew up in Virginia and worked in Virginia and then you went to Florida. Why Tennessee? How did you arrive at Cosby in East Tennessee?

WILLIAMS: People ask me that real often. A friend of ours asked, "How in the world did you wind up here?" Well, I think mainly it was because I've always loved the mountains, and always been employed on the seashore somewhere when I was in civilian employment, around Newport News and the uh ...

PIEHLER: Jacksonville.

WILLIAMS: Jacksonville, in Florida. But when I retired I took an early retirement ... when Bethlehem [Bethlehem Steel] was downsizing. I didn't want to stay in Florida in the summertime and stay in the house all the time; if I gotta stay in and do that I'd just stay in the office and work you know. (Laughter) Because I just didn't have, well ... we were not in the country, we were in a suburban area with a small lot. I wanted to go somewhere we could have a garden and we loved the mountains. She and I had vacationed in the North Carolina mountains so we started to look for a place. We looked for a place in Virginia, around Abingdon and that area, on a snowy day. Then we came on to Newport, came on down to [Interstate] 40; got on 40 going back toward Asheville. It had been snowing that morning so we said we'd give up this property huntin' and go home. So we came down and I saw the sign Newport. I'd talked to a lady here about some land on the phone, and I said, "Let's get off here." The sun had come out and quit snowin' so we met her and met this realtor. She took us out and showed us the property and the second house we looked at was the one we bought. We just walked through it one time, but it was where it was. It was in the Valentine Nursery, right behind the Carver's Orchard. Farming enterprises all around us, and all the bunch of houses or trailers, and we still don't have any trailers there. And the homes there now make ours look like a cracker box they're so big. But I asked her that night; we went back to the Cracker Barrel and were sittin' there eatin' and I asked her, "What do you think about that place we saw down in Cosby?" She said, "I liked it." So I said, "Well let's make 'em an offer." So I went to the phone right there and called the office. The lady who ran the agency was in the office, and I told her, I said, "I want to make an offer on that place down there," and I identified it, "that Marie showed us today." I said, "Tell Marie

that”—and I gave her a figure that I would pay, something less than what she was askin’ for, but about ninety percent of what they were asking for it. And the owner took it and they notified us when we were back in Florida. And I just turned to Ann and said, “What in the world did we buy?” If we’d heard all the stories about Cocke County that we’ve heard since then, and you heard a lot, read a lot of them I guess in the paper; can’t pass up an opportunity to condemn Cocke County. It has a long standing bad reputation way back to the ’30’s with crooks, chop shops, and cock fights, and other things that are illegal going on. But we’ve met some of the finest people we’ve ever known here; nice people. We’re in a good neighborhood. We’ve got good neighbors; best we ever had I believe. We’ve had some bad neighbors in the past in places we’ve lived. Had one woman come out and start fightin’ one night because Ann was picking up the street in front of her house, in Florida. We’ve enjoyed being here; enjoy meetin’ the people and all that, and it’s a very quiet, relaxing—been the fastest twenty-two years of my life. The first twenty-two are always the longest though. You’d say that too wouldn’t you Carrie? The first twenty-two are the longest.

DAVISSON: Yeah. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Is there anything we’ve forgotten to ask you, particularly about your Navy experiences?

WILLIAMS: No, as you can see I did very little and so I had very little to tell you about that. It’s just the fact that I’ve lived longer than a lot of veterans and been blessed in so many ways. So I really can’t say that I contributed as much as maybe I got from it.

MRS. WILLIAMS: You didn’t tell them about that ... (Unintelligible)

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I got snookered on that. I’d been home and we’d been married months before we were. ‘Cause this guy apparently he didn’t have any more points than I had that went, but he was home before I got back to the States I think.

PIEHLER: I want to thank you for spending a good part of the afternoon, in fact almost an entire afternoon with us.

WILLIAMS: Oh you’re welcome. We appreciate the lunch, we enjoyed it so much.

PIEHLER: This concludes an interview with Howard K. Williams on November 10th, 2006 at the Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with Kurt Piehler and ...

DAVISSON: Carrie Davisson.