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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Michael O'Brien
Conducted by Robert Tidwell
August 13, 2003
Transcribed by Reccia Jobe**

1 Robert Tidwell: This is Robert Tidwell conducting an oral history interview with
2 Michael Louis O'Brien on the 13th of August, 2003, at approximately ten after 8:00 in the
3 morning. How are you this morning, Mr. O'Brien?

4 Michael O'Brien: Doing very well. Thank you.

5 RT: Just to begin, what was your life like before you entered the Navy? How was
6 your childhood? Where did you grow up?

7 MO: I was born and reared in Metropolis, Illinois, which is down on almost the
8 southern tip of the state, and I had what I would describe as a rather normal childhood.
9 Looking at it retrospectively, we were very poor, however, at the time, I think our
10 lifestyle was pretty much parallel with that of many other families.

11 RT: So compared to others, you would say that it was a normal childhood, then.

12 MO: I do. Things were much different then, of course. We had no electricity. We
13 had no running water in the house and that sort of thing but then that was just generally
14 true of everybody in those days.

15 RT: So did you live outside of town?

16 MO: No, no. We lived in town.

17 RT: Oh, you lived in town. Okay. How large was that town at that time?

18 MO: About 5,000 people.

19 RT: That's fairly good size.

1 MO: We lived on 9th Street, the corner of 9th and Filmore. Both streets at our
2 corner were graveled. Across the street from my house was an absolute empty block just
3 with weeds and bushes and that sort of thing growing on it. So it was somewhat of an
4 austere existence as, again, compared with today.

5 RT: Did you have any siblings when you were growing up?

6 MO: None.

7 RT: So you were an only child.

8 MO: I was an only child.

9 RT: Did you have any relatives nearby like cousins and aunts and uncles?

10 MO: Oh, yeah. We had a multitude of them in nearby towns.

11 RT: Okay. So they weren't in the same town with you.

12 MO: No.

13 RT: So, what sort of things did you do in your youth? Did you have jobs? Did you
14 play any kind of sports?

15 MO: I did. I played a little basketball, far less than professional level. I was quite
16 interested in music. In fact, my band director was a fellow named Bob Biggs. He was
17 from Mississippi. And it was as a result of having an experience with him as a fledgling
18 musician, that I later, after I got out of the Navy, went to college and became a music
19 teacher myself, which I did for forty-two years.

20 RT: Outstanding. What sort of jobs did you have when you were younger?

21 MO: I worked for the natural gas company as a regulator control person, testing,
22 regulator tester and meter tester. I also helped at installations of floor furnaces. And the
23 reason for that was that many of the buildings in those days had very limited access to get
24 under the floor and I was small enough to do that so I spent a lot of time on the ground
25 under floors helping to install floor furnaces. I also worked at a clothing store where the
26 gentleman who owned it allowed me to have clothes at his cost so I could wear them to
27 school and perhaps entice other young men down to the store to buy some for themselves.

28 RT: Oh, it worked out for the both of you.

29 MO: It did. I had tailor-made suits. When I got into college, I needed a tuxedo.
30 My father was a professional musician and he said, "Son, when you buy a tuxedo, if you
31 could by one for \$15, buy it, because in the light where you're going to be wearing it at

1 night clubs, nobody will know whether it's a \$100 tuxedo or a \$15 tuxedo." However,
2 because of my association with that store, I did indeed have one tailor made.

3 RT: Well, that was a bargain.

4 MO: It certainly was.

5 RT: What level of education did you receive before you entered the Navy?

6 MO: I was sitting one day in a grocery store across the street from the school with
7 a group of friends. One of them said, my best friend as a matter of fact said, "When I
8 graduate," and he was a senior, I was a junior. He said, "When I graduate, I'm going to
9 enlist in the Navy." I said, "Well, if you do, I will too," thinking that he wasn't going to
10 do that. But he did and so I had to, also. I quit school at the end of my junior year and
11 enlisted in the Navy.

12 RT: And then after your time the service, you went on to college.

13 MO: I did.

14 RT: That's good. You picked up where you left off.

15 MO: I went to college, and of course, I was given credit for, I think when I left
16 school at the end of my junior year I only needed another class or two to complete my
17 senior year anyhow because I had done accelerated work. So that was granted to me as a
18 result of having served in the Navy.

19 RT: That was good on their part. Are you still employed or have you retired?

20 MO: I retired following the Spring Semester of 1992.

21 RT: What level did you teach? Did you teach on the high school level or at the
22 college level?

23 MO: I taught at every level. I started out with a job here in Missouri. In fact, I've
24 had a rather interesting geographical experience as a teacher. I began teaching in Elvins,
25 Missouri which is about eighty miles south of St. Louis. I left Elvins after two years and
26 traveled to New York City to enroll in Columbia University. While there, my wife
27 became pregnant with our first daughter and we left at the end of one semester, returned
28 to Missouri where I worked the rest of the year and then went to California to teach. I
29 taught at California for three years and then I came back to Crystal City, Missouri which
30 is about forty miles south of St. Louis. And from Crystal City I moved south to the little
31 college where I finished my teaching career. So, in order to get from the town of Elvins

1 which is about eight miles from where I'm sitting right now, I left Elvins, went to New
2 York, came back to Missouri, went to California and wound up here eight miles away
3 from where I started.

4 RT: That's a little bit of globetrotting.

5 MO: It's the scenic view.

6 RT: Well, you know, if you take the direct route, you don't get to see very much.

7 MO: That's true.

8 RT: So you said you had your first child when you started teaching again, or when
9 you went back to college. So, how many more children did you have?

10 MO: In the first marriage, I had one daughter. In my second marriage, which I'm
11 still enjoying, we have a son, also named Michael.

12 RT: Does your current wife, did she have any children before the two of you
13 married?

14 MO: She did. She had a daughter. We have a lovely stepdaughter who lives here
15 in town who is the mother of two grandchildren, one boy and one girl.

16 RT: Fantastic. You were living Metropolis, Illinois, when you entered the service.

17 MO: I was.

18 RT: You said it was at the end of your junior year so you were what, seventeen?

19 MO: Yes.

20 RT: And, as you said, you volunteered to enter into the Navy.

21 MO: I did.

22 RT: And that was because the friend of yours, not only did he enlist, he enlisted in
23 the Navy, so you decided to follow into the Navy, as well.

24 MO: That's exactly right. The Greyhound bus line served Metropolis, Illinois, as
25 it did many, many places in those days. And once a week there'd be a Greyhound bus
26 that would leave on which all of the departing servicemen would ride. And on the day
27 David and I left to go to Springfield, Illinois, for our induction services, we had all of our
28 friends and relatives down there to see us off as if we were leaving for mortal combat
29 right away. And we went to Springfield and we spent the night there and David and I
30 were, I guess, typical children in those days, very curious about all sorts of things. And
31 we got out the night we arrived in Springfield we were housed and allowed to do

1 whatever we wished to do and we just had a such a big time walking about and gawking
2 and staring at the huge metropolis that was Springfield, Illinois, the capital. I don't know
3 what the population was then, but it might have been maybe 15,000. To us it was New
4 York, City. We had a great time there and if you don't mind, I want to tell you about the
5 next day.

6 RT: Okay.

7 MO: We were awakened early, of course, because it was our first experience with
8 the Navy. We were given a breakfast at a commercial cafeteria and then we were taken
9 for a physical examination. I've laughed about this so many times. We were taken into a
10 room which had, as I remember it, benches around the periphery of the room and these
11 benches were marble and cold as a dickens. We were told to undress and a sailor entered
12 the room with a metal tray in his hand in which were nested small bottles. And we were
13 asked to make a donation into those bottles and having sat there on the cold marble, I was
14 wishing for, maybe one a gallon-sized. But some of my friends had difficulty in doing
15 that so I made a donation for them and the United States Navy owes me a great debt of
16 gratitude because there were four or five young men that day who got into the Navy as a
17 result of my largesse in making donations for them.

18 RT: What year was this? What was the year when you entered in the Navy?

19 MO: 1944.

20 RT: Where did you go for your boot camp?

21 MO: Great Lakes.

22 RT: That would be in Chicago.

23 MO: Yes.

24 RT: What did you think of your time in boot camp?

25 MO: Well, it was understanding that I had no reference point, I had no way of
26 knowing whether I was being well treated, well trained or not but I certainly remember
27 having no objections to it. I know this. When I went in, as we all were, we were all given
28 physical examinations and nine weeks later when we graduated, I was in a lot better
29 shape than I was when I had arrived there.

30 RT: After your time at boot camp, did you go to any kind of advanced training?

31 MO: No. We were sent to Virginia. What's the naval base there?

1 RT: I believe Norfolk.

2 MO: Norfolk, right. We were sent to Norfolk to do three months mess hall duty.
3 That was done in order to allow our ship, which was then building, to be completed, the
4 one we were assigned to, the *Frank E. Evans*. The first day we arrived there, we settled
5 into the barracks where we were going to be housed and then we went to the mess hall to
6 meet the officer in charge of the thing. And he said to us that, "You're going to be here
7 three months. During the three months, or during this first month, one of you is going to
8 work harder than all the rest and the second month, that individual will be made
9 Assistant Master at Arms, and the third month he will become Master at Arms." And that
10 sounded like a pretty good deal to me, so I decided to make an effort to get that done and
11 I succeeded. The second month, I was Assistant Master at Arms. Concurrent with that,
12 there was a new crew that arrived, most of whom were from Brooklyn and they had a
13 sense of humor that was unmatched in my young life up to that point. And they were a
14 rather difficult group to deal with because they were so playful. They much preferred
15 playing with each other, jokes and that sort of thing, to doing the work they were
16 supposed to do. So I had a rather raucous second month there. But I got through that and
17 the third month as Master of Arms, it was my responsibility to tell the assistant what it
18 was I wished to have done and let him worry about all the work that took place on the
19 line with dishing food and the washing of trays and utensils and that sort of thing. It was
20 an interesting experience.

21 RT: I would think so. How professional, or at least in your opinion, how
22 professional would you say that the instructors were?

23 MO: Well, again, with no reference point other than the exposure that I had, I
24 have no reason to complain about anything to which I was exposed. I thought they all did
25 a good job. It was, of course, a different experience between civilian life as it existed then
26 and military life. However, I had the advantage of having been reared by a very stern
27 mother. So I already had an understanding of discipline. Furthermore, I began to
28 understand immediately that the military is going to function much better if its not run on
29 the basis of a union, that when somebody tells you to jump, you better jump and you
30 better do it because there's a good reason for doing it. I still have some adherence to that
31 notion.

1 RT: So what was your daily routine during boot camp?

2 MO: That's going to be difficult to remember, but we got up early before sunrise.
3 One of them in our company had been appointed to lead the exercise. We would go out
4 onto what was called the grinder and get in some kind of formation and the instructor was
5 on an elevated platform and he would yell out what we were going to do and then we
6 would do it. We would exercise like that for, gosh, I don't remember how long, maybe
7 thirty minutes. Then we'd go back into the barracks, get cleaned up, and leave for
8 breakfast. After breakfast and straightening the barracks, we would go to various classes.
9 No, I'm sorry. We would go out then and stand for inspection. And there somebody
10 would look over all the companies that were lined up and probably give us some general
11 announcements for the day. For example, I can remember the day when I heard
12 somebody say, "Today is the day you're going to get your uniforms." Because we were
13 issued a uniform when we first came in and some of them had to be tailored and so we
14 were without a change of clothes for some days. Then after the assembly and inspection,
15 then we would go to various classes and learn to tie knots or work on airplane or ship
16 recognition or any of the various items of that sort that they wished us to know about.
17 Then we'd have lunch. And the afternoons, I think I remember we had probably more
18 classes in the afternoon, but I'm not clear about that at all. I know there was a time during
19 the day when we were permitted to have some time. That may have been in the early
20 evening to do things like our laundry and personal hygiene and et cetera.

21 RT: At that time, did the Navy begin training you for a particular job aboard ship?

22 MO: You know, I'm unclear in my mind about when that took place but I think it
23 was in conjunction with Norfolk. We were given a generalized test and my musical
24 abilities were great enough. Oh, by the way, another thing I should tell you. When I first
25 got into a company at Great Lakes, the question was asked, "Does anybody here play a
26 drum?" And I said, "I do." So they said, "You're going to be the company drummer." So
27 I had a pretty good sense of rhythm. I played in the band, was the company drummer and
28 I also sang in the Great Lakes Naval Choir while I was in boot camp. So when I took the
29 generalized test at Norfolk sometime later, for some reason they could determine that I
30 had a good sense of rhythm and they decided that I needed to be a radioman, which
31 worked out really well because to learn that you have to learn the Morse Code and the

1 Morse Code was sent by a machine which came across very rhythmically and it was
2 rather simple for me to pick up. So I did that and I became one of the radio operators
3 aboard the ship.

4 RT: Okay. During your time in basic training or in boot camp, do you remember
5 any particular incident involving any individuals, in particular? Any unusual individuals
6 or any unusual occurrences?

7 MO: I do. We had a fellow from Illinois who, I don't know what his background
8 had been but it was not oriented towards cleanliness. We could never figure out for sure
9 exactly what his plan was, whether it was a determined thing on his part or just and if
10 you'll excuse this expression, some kind of abject ignorance. But he would have some of
11 the bodily functions take place while he was clad and rather than clean those clothes, he
12 would just wad them up and put them in his sea bag. And of course, the aroma began to
13 be rather telling. The first experience he had was what was called a GI bath. Some of the
14 guys grabbed him and took in the shower and scrubbed him with one of those hard bristle
15 brushes. That didn't get the job done. To just cut this short, eventually, he was discharged
16 before he ever got out of boot camp as being unfit.

17 RT: I would think so. Aside from the, as your story would indicate, self-discipline
18 on the part of the men in the unit itself, at least enforcing discipline, how would you or
19 what were your impressions of the discipline on the part of your instructors?

20 MO: Retrospectively, my impression is that they made every effort to make us
21 understand when they wanted something done, when they gave an order, they wanted it
22 done right now. We don't stop to talk about this. You have been given an order, do it. I
23 think it was an effort to bring everybody into the same behavioral canoe, so to speak, so
24 that we all understood that when an order was given, it was given for a good reason and
25 we didn't need to spend any time trying to determine whether it was reasonable or any
26 other considerations, but to carry out the order. So I think their discipline was a little bit,
27 certainly by today's standards, harsh. By harsh, I mean, it was clearly understood that if
28 you don't do this, there's going to be some kind of punishment. We didn't always know
29 what the punishment was going to be but they were rather creative. So it was determined
30 rather early that these things we need to do without question, just go do them.

31 RT: During your time in training, was anyone ever injured or wounded?

1 MO: No. Not to my memory. We were scared to death several times.

2 RT: Did you volunteer for duty in the Pacific or did you simply receive orders to

3 go?

4 MO: We received orders.

5 RT: When you told your friends and your family, what did they think of it?

6 MO: I didn't tell my friends and my family for a couple of reasons, the primary

7 one being that we had been indoctrinated to believe that you tell your parents about this

8 and then they will tell "Lunch-Bucket Harry" at the grocery store who happened to have

9 a cousin who lives in Germany and so we don't want to tell about troop movements of

10 any sort.

11 RT: Absolutely. So, whenever you would write home during your time in

12 training, you would just tell them, I'm in training.

13 MO: Yes. Well, they knew when I was at boot camp, where I was and what I was

14 doing. Nothing there, but with specificity in referring to going to the Pacific, no, I never

15 said anything to them about that. In fact, my mother got angry at me at one time because I

16 hadn't written enough. She got in touch with the Red Cross because she didn't know how

17 else to get a message to me or to my superior to see that my letter writing became a little

18 more disciplined.

19 RT: During your time in the Pacific, you were assigned to what fleet?

20 MO: The 7th Fleet.

21 RT: Okay. During that time, your mission was related to combat or combat

22 support?

23 MO: I would say combat support.

24 RT: During your time aboard *Evans*, what campaigns or battles were you

25 involved in?

26 MO: The only one of any consequence that I can remember was at Okinawa and

27 we arrived at Okinawa pretty well after the island had been secured. I think there may

28 have been a few Japanese left about there. But the battle of Okinawa, which was

29 hellacious as I understand it, was essentially over by the time we got there. Our job then

30 was just to be sure, was to leave Okinawa and sail towards Japan across the horizon so

31 that the radar aboard our ship would have an advantage over the land-based radar in

1 terms of intercepting approaching hostile aircraft. So we patrolled back and forth out
2 there and I cannot remember how long, but maybe a couple of weeks and then we would
3 go back in and three more ships would come out to patrol. And we would come in for
4 stores, food and ammunition if we needed any.

5 RT: Speaking of ammunition, what was your impression of *Evans* and its
6 equipment and weapons?

7 MO: Well, my impression at the time was that we were told that the *Evans* would
8 be misperceived by the Japanese as a cruiser. It was a modernized version of a destroyer
9 at that time. There were two five-inch turrets forward and one aft. There were several 40-
10 mm antiaircraft guns. There was a whole array of depth charges on the aft section of the
11 ship. I think the captain had a rifle. I remember that because he used to shoot at sharks.

12 RT: He used to shoot at sharks?

13 MO: Yeah. When we were on shake-down cruise, the captain would heave the
14 ship to and the captain, if we were in shark infested water, the captain would get out his
15 rifle and shoot at them.

16 RT: Was this to distract the sharks by getting their attention focused on one that
17 was wounded or did he do this for sport?

18 MO: No. I think it was a matter of sport and the crew got a kick out of it. So it had
19 no militaristic implications at all. It was just a way of spending a little bit of time and
20 letting everybody relax some on that shake-down cruise. By the way, one other thing I
21 need to tell you that shocked me at the time. Either before we went aboard the ship or
22 soon after we got aboard it, we were advised that a 30/30 rifle could probably shoot
23 through the hull of that vessel from 100 yards. That was not a very comforting piece of
24 information.

25 RT: I would think not.

26 MO: It looked and felt so sturdy. And I'm sure it was as sturdy as they could
27 economically build them in those days.

28 RT: So, during your time aboard *Evans*, do you remember seeing any actions
29 either on the part of Allies or on the part of the Japanese that were particularly brave?

30 MO: Particularly what?

31 RT: Brave.

1 MO: Break?

2 RT: Brave.

3 MO: Brave. No, I don't.

4 RT: Did you, or the *Evans* for that matter, have any kind of contact with coastal

5 surveillance.

6 MO: You know, I was interested in that question because I'm not exactly sure

7 what that is.

8 RT: Okay, anything such as coast watchers or anyone.

9 MO: No, not to my knowledge. You've got to understand that I was a radioman

10 and I never spent any time, I was never told that I needed to be curious about what was

11 going on in the radar room or what the officers were planning or what the messages were

12 or orders were that came to the ship. I was a radioman and that was my focus. I'm sure if

13 I were in the Navy today, I would have a lot more general information than we were

14 given in those days.

15 RT: You focused on your job and that was it.

16 MO: That's about it, yeah.

17 RT: So then what was your daily routine like aboard ship?

18 MO: I'm hazy on that. I think if I can remember, we often "fell to" in the morning

19 for some kind of inspection or announcements. I arose and had breakfast and we had

20 watch duties to stand. I think in the normal day would have been where we would sit for

21 four hours and copy code and then we would be off for eight hours and then we'd do

22 another four hours. When we were in what was then interpreted as combat situations, we

23 would be on four, off four, on four, off four. I wish I could be a little more explicit about

24 leisure time activity but I just have no memory of that at all.

25 RT: So when you were sitting on your watch and you were copying code, this

26 could have been for incoming or outgoing messages?

27 MO: Essentially incoming and the reason for that is that, I don't remember except

28 in and around the United States, the *Evans* ever sending messages. And of course, the

29 reason for that is when you bring your transmitters up and begin to send messages, those

30 messages can be heard by everybody. And when those signals are sent out, the site of the

31 sending can be essentially located and had we, for example, sent out happy birthday

1 messages to all our mothers while we were floating around out in the Pacific, the
2 Japanese could have found us because of the transmission. So we sent very few
3 transmissions. Most of the communication took place in the sense of sending, took place,
4 surface to surface with either a light or flag signals.

5 RT: After your shift was over on watch, what sort of things would you do
6 whenever you had what little free time that you did have?

7 MO: I think I mentioned a while ago I wish I had a greater memory of leisure
8 time but I do remember that I read, played cards. Other than that and taking care of things
9 like laundry, I just don't have any memory of leisure time.

10 RT: Okay. So, in general, what were your living conditions on *Evans*?

11 MO: The bunks were, well first of all, at the deck or floor level, each bunk had a
12 locker. There were three lockers under a bunk, under the bottom bunk. The fellow on the
13 bottom had one of those lockers, the fellow in the middle bunk had a locker, and the
14 fellow in the top bunk had a locker. You know, other than that and the fact that we had
15 the ample shower and personal hygiene conditions, I found it very comfortable. I just had
16 no problems with anything that we were given.

17 RT: Well, especially, since, as you had mentioned earlier that in your childhood
18 you didn't have running water or electricity, so this must have been quite a different
19 experience.

20 MO: I remember being, I can still, there are two scents that I remember from the
21 Navy. One was the general odor that surrounded all the places where we trained that had
22 any electronic equipment in it at all. There was just a kind of a laboratory aroma that
23 surrounded all that stuff. And the other once is not a sense of smell, it's a sense of taste. I
24 learned to taste what fear was like and I can remember it to this day.

25 RT: Did you have a particularly frightening or memorable experience aboard
26 ship?

27 MO: I did and we all did. On one of those returns to Okinawa and let me preface
28 this by saying, I have seen *Saving Private Ryan*. I have talked with some of the men who
29 went through those experiences. And the experience that I had is child's play compared
30 to what they experienced so I don't mean to elevate this in any sense at all. On one of our
31 returns to port from doing a radar patrol between Okinawa and Japan, we had just gotten

1 in and docked. We were called to general quarters and sent back out to the same spot
2 because a destroyer that had replaced us had been sunk, as I remember it. We sailed back
3 out, three of us, one ship in the lead that I don't remember. The *Evans* was in the middle
4 and there was a third ship behind us. By this time, my general quarters station was the
5 emergency radio shack, which was on the main deck of the ship. We were all, of course,
6 advised to put on life vests and life belts and life vests, one or the other or maybe both.
7 An old salt by this time, I didn't deem it necessary so I went into the emergency radio
8 room and I cranked up the transmitter and the receiver and when I had those on frequency
9 and operating, I went back out on the deck and I was standing there with my foot up on a
10 rail looking ahead and watching explosions in the air where ships were firing at an
11 airplane or at airplanes. Unbeknownst to me, the radar had picked up a plane, a Japanese
12 kamikaze that was coming in on the ship behind us. Our forward five-inch mounts turned
13 around and began to trail this [plane] and they fired at it and the flame from that fire
14 shocked me so and it blasted me back against the bulkhead of the ship. My next memory
15 is being inside the emergency radio room and I had on a life belt and a life vest. The
16 doors, the two hatches that I'd entered to get into there were snugly fastened and I have
17 no memory of having done any of that. But I do remember how frightened I was.

18 RT: Amazing.

19 MO: I became aware of, its like I was conked out or something, and I'm sure I
20 wasn't, but I think I was just scared to death. But I remember I have no memory of
21 opening either one of those hatches to get in there and no memory of putting on either
22 one of those life preservers. But I had the belt on, it was inflated, and I had the vest on
23 and it was fastened up tight. I had this terrible taste in my mouth. That's the only time
24 that I had anything like fear.

25 RT: And as you said, you can still taste that.

26 MO: I can, yes. Its interesting that that's the part that I remember most vividly is
27 the taste. I also have other tastes in my mouth now like a good filet and things of that
28 sort.

29 RT: Much more pleasant things.

30 MO: Yes.

1 RT: During your time aboard *Evans*, did you ever make use of rest and recreation
2 facilities?

3 MO: No. Excuse me for a second. I'm presuming that you're talking about a
4 facility that was there for rest and recreation where service people would go for a period
5 of time to rest and relax, right?

6 RT: It could be either a proper facility or it could be any place where you pulled
7 into port for the purposes of rest and recreation.

8 MO: No, I don't remember any of those but I remember a few times where we'd
9 pull into port and—well, let me see. Do I? The rest and recreation that I can remember is
10 one occasion. I don't even remember where we were, but somewhere in the Pacific where
11 we were allowed to swim off the ship in some little—I don't remember anything else being
12 around, but it was a place that the captain deemed to be safe for swimming. We were
13 allowed to swim, and I think they had Coca Cola aboard ship and they gave us all Cokes.
14 But just to go into a port for that purpose, no I don't remember ever having done that.

15 RT: Okay. Since you were aboard *Evans* from the beginning, as it were, on your
16 trip to the Pacific, did you stop off in Cuba?

17 MO: No, I think when we left the Brooklyn Navy yards, headed for the Pacific, I
18 think that was a direct trip. I believe we were in Guantanamo on shake-down cruise. But
19 I'm unclear about that. I remember we were in Bermuda and I don't know whether that
20 was the shake-down cruise. I have no memory of that. We were at Guantanamo at one
21 point and we were in Bermuda at one point but I can't remember the particulars.

22 RT: So, when you were aboard ship, you did say that you wrote, especially after
23 your mother made efforts to remind you to write more often.

24 MO: Well, I wrote a lot of letters. I just hadn't written very many home.

25 RT: Did you get many responses to your letters?

26 MO: Oh, yes. I should tell you that when we left Brooklyn, we copied messages
27 in code. The messages came across in five-character segments. For example, S-R-K-Y-P.
28 That would be one group. The next one might be whatever, five letters. Everything came
29 across in five-letter groups. And when we first started to learn code, we listened to that
30 and we were asked to copy down the first letter of each group. Then to speed it up, the
31 first two letters of each group until we could copy all the message. The East Coast, by the

1 time we were involved, the war in Europe had essentially ended and we were focused on
2 Japan. And on the East Coast, messages were sent at the rate of eight groups a minute.
3 Now, that's rather slow. But as we went down and went through the Panama Canal, the
4 closer we got to the Pacific Ocean, the faster this thing speeded up. And the fastest
5 messages we took were, of course, out towards Guam and Okinawa. By the time I
6 reached that area, I could copy code as fast as I could type. And I could read a book or
7 carry on a conversation while I was doing that and never miss a character.

8 RT: Amazing.

9 MO: The messages all came with, well, again, there were guys that could do it
10 faster than I could, I'm sure. But the fastest messages we listened to would be messages
11 that came from maybe a directive from the admiral about something to do within the
12 fleet, some movement or something he wished to have done. Those were sent by an
13 operator by hand on what was called a bug. And a bug is a device that you moved
14 laterally back and forth from one side to the other. One side will give you dots and the
15 other side will give you dashes. And of course, dots and dashes made up the Morse Code,
16 which we were using then. Everything sent in code and each message had an address on
17 it. The Navy used a lot of abbreviations, two that I remember. One was NERK. And that
18 meant: this is a message addressed to any and all ships in the Pacific Ocean. That was to
19 address all of us. And that may have to do with something like the location of buoys or
20 some explosives had been discovered in the water but unexploded. The Navy also made
21 use of signals for radioing. One I remember was QBK. QBK was rather an insulting
22 order. If you were in communication with another ship and you had trouble
23 understanding their transmission, you would send QBK and that meant put a competent
24 operator on the radio. That's the one we liked the best but we didn't get a chance to use it
25 very often. So these messages would come in and we copied everything whether it was
26 addressed to us or not. And when one came across that was addressed to us, and I can't
27 remember our call, but when one came across like that, we copied it and immediately
28 took it out of the typewriter and carried it to the communications officer who took it into
29 a room where he had a decoder. He would decode it and then take it on to the captain. We
30 never saw the results of the decoding. Anything we needed to know we would then be
31 told. So that's the way that operation took place.

1 RT: Amazing. It's impressive that you were able to do more than one thing while
2 you were working on the code.

3 MO: Not when you think about it. A good carburetor man can take a carburetor
4 apart and carry on a conversation at the same time and do both successfully. One became
5 such an ingrained process that it was almost habit. The other, carrying on a conversation,
6 you'd have to think about what you were doing, but your subconscious would still hear
7 and this was not unique to me. Almost all the operators could do that.

8 RT: So it became second nature.

9 MO: Sure.

10 RT: Okay. As most people know, the Germans, for example, used a naval code to
11 encipher their messages. Did you have to encipher or decipher any messages?

12 MO: As an operator, no, we didn't. That was always done by a communications
13 officer.

14 RT: So, did you receive messages that were enciphered, then you handed them to
15 him to decipher?

16 MO: Yes. If a message came in addressed to us specifically, we would take it to
17 the communications officer, either the assistant or the ensign or the lieutenant,
18 communications officer and one of them would take it into a decoding room, decode it
19 and then take it forward to the captain. They never gave it back to us. By the way, do you
20 happen to have contact with Jerry Fine, F-I-N-E?

21 RT: I did but unfortunately, he passed away within the past couple of weeks.

22 MO: He did?

23 RT: Yes.

24 MO: Well, I'll be darned. Well, I'm glad I asked you. I've been in touch with him
25 a couple of times and he was one of our communications officers. I hate to hear that.

26 RT: Well, fortunately from what I understand from his family, it was fairly
27 peaceful.

28 MO: Well, good. When I got in touch with him—we can back up on my teaching
29 experience a little bit. My first teaching job was in Elvins, Missouri, and then I came
30 back to Desloge, Missouri, and then I moved out to California, and then I came back to
31 Missouri to a town called Crystal City. There I had as a student, a young man by the

1 name of Bill Bradley. Bill Bradley was an exceptional basketball player and student.
2 When he graduated from high school, he went to Princeton where he was an All-
3 American basketball player. When he left Princeton, he was a Rhodes Scholar and he
4 went to England and took a law degree. When he came back he played professional
5 basketball with the New York Knickerbockers for, I don't know, several years. When he
6 left the Knicks, he ran for Congress and was elected a senator for the state of New Jersey
7 and during this last presidential campaign, you will remember he was one of the
8 candidates, Democratic candidates for president.

9 RT: Yes. Yes.

10 MO: When I spoke with Lieutenant Fine, he was in New Jersey and told me he'd
11 had an office in the same building with Bradley, so we had kind of a connection there.

12 RT: So, what did you think about your experiences aboard the *Evans* at the time
13 that you left the ship?

14 MO: At the time I left the ship I was so glad to get out of the Navy. I'll stick in
15 here right now, there have been many times when I wish I had stayed in the Navy
16 because the expectations I had for civilian life led me eventually to the conclusion that
17 the military was right. Now, what I mean by that is this: when I get out of the Navy,
18 nobody's going to tell me when to get up. Nobody's going to tell me what to wear. But I
19 found when I became a civilian, that if the Navy was not imposing those things, I had to
20 impose them on myself. I could not, for example, go forth nude. I had to dress. If it was
21 raining, it was sensible to wear something to protect myself from the rain. If I had a class
22 at eight o'clock in the morning, it was wise to get up and get there on time. So, there
23 really is not all that much difference, and I always had a feeling for the military. I have no
24 idea now, thinking back on it, why I was so eager to get out. But I was so eager that I
25 refused to keep the insurance, which is one of the great mistakes of my life. I can't
26 remember what the premium was, but it was less than a dollar a month for ten-thousand
27 dollars of life insurance. I dropped it. The guy said, "Well, what do you want to drop this
28 for?" I said, "Because I don't want you to have any way to get me back in here." So I
29 can't square those two things up; my strong feeling for the military and the fact that I
30 wanted to get out of there. I charge it up to youth and a certain degree of ignorance or the
31 inability to recognize what I thought was good and virtuous at the time.

1 RT: So when did you leave the Navy? Did you leave in '44 or 1946?

2 MO: Forty-six. I believe I got out in June and I started to college in the fall and I
3 cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am for having had the opportunity to go to college.
4 Because had it not been for the GI Bill, it would have never have happened.

5 RT: So, were you recalled when the Korean War, or at least when the United
6 States became involved in the Korean War?

7 MO: No.

8 RT: How have your attitudes about your time in the service, have they changed in
9 any way?

10 MO: I spend very little time thinking about it unless I'm talking to somebody like
11 Harold Higginbotham that I'm sure you have on your list or one of the other guys. But I
12 have nothing but positive remembrances. I'm sure there were things at the time that were
13 misunderstood or misperceived as being virtuous in my life. But retrospectively, I have
14 no arguments at all with anything that took place in my life during my time in the Navy.

15 RT: When you were in the Navy, did you collect any kind of souvenirs during
16 your time in service?

17 MO: I think I had one picture. Did I send that to you?

18 RT: Yes.

19 MO: I have that one picture of me and my friend Charles Townsend and the
20 fellow Snedden. I don't remember what his first name was. No. When I got discharged,
21 again, I was so anxious to get discharged that I allowed the larceny that entered into my
22 soul at that time to be set aside because I really wanted to bring home one of those
23 automatic .45 pistols. A lot of guys were taking them with them but I just knew in spite of
24 the fact that I'm Irish and I was born on St. Patrick's day, I didn't think my luck would
25 hold. Somebody would surely feel that in my sea bag and put me in prison for forty years.
26 So I didn't dare take the chance.

27 RT: Do you have anything else which you'd like to comment or discuss?

28 MO: Nothing that I can remember except to say that I have admitted to certain
29 lapses of memory here and I will freely admit that anything I may have told you might
30 have been clouded by the lapse of time between now and when those things took place.
31 But I've tried to be as honest as I could be and I'm appreciative to the university for

1 housing the archives relating to this in connection with the Vietnam War. Other than that,
2 nothing that I can think of to say further.

3 RT: I thank you very much for your time this morning and I hope you have an
4 excellent day.

5 MO: Best to you, too. I appreciate what you're doing. Thank you so much.

6 RT: Thank you very much.

7 MO: Bye.

8 RT: Bye.