

Interview of John Whiteman

Interviewer: Okay, well John, we're so happy to have you with us here at the KUED studios, and we appreciate you coming up here. Now, you were originally -- first of all, you were born in--

John Whiteman: Payson.

Interviewer: Payson.

John Whiteman: My folks moved up to Salt Lake when I was 18 months old.

Interviewer: So you moved up to Salt Lake and you graduated from what high school?

John Whiteman: East High School.

Interviewer: All right, and then, tell us about -- you joined the Coast Guard right out of high school, or before you got out, or--

John Whiteman: No, I, I went to the University of Utah for one quarter before I joined the Coast Guard.

Interviewer: And so you joined the Coast Guard in 1939.

John Whiteman: No, actually, 1940 -- April of 1940.

Interviewer: April of 1940.

John Whiteman: Uh huh, and I was in there the entire duration of the war until it was over November in '45, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay, and take us out when you first started in the Coast Guard did, in those days, there was no war on, of course. Were there thoughts there were going to be a war? What were your duties? Give us a little run down.

John Whiteman: Well, it was during the depression. One reason -- one of the reasons I joined was for economic reasons, to help my folks out and be able to send money home to them.

Interviewer: And when you joined, where did you go after you left Salt Lake?

John Whiteman: I went to a very interesting place. I went to Ellis Island. They had a three month boot camp on Ellis Island, so I lived on Ellis Island for three months before I then went to radio school to become a Radio Communicator. I learned the Morse code and something about the equipment, and so forth.

Interviewer: Well, while you were at Ellis Island, at that time, were they still bringing in immigrants there?

John Whiteman: Oh, yes. During all the time that I was there, there was a -- kind of an open yard in the back for recreation. And the yard that the immigrants used was separated from us just by a wire fence -- kind of a flimsy wire fence -- so we had the opportunity to talk to a lot of the people who had some really rough times before they got to the United States.

Interviewer: Can you give us an idea of some of those experiences that you'd heard?

John Whiteman: Well, uh, I remember talking to one man from Holland who was, uh, treated not too well by the Nazis and was glad to get out of Holland. Felt very fortunate to be in the United States.

Interviewer: And, uh, did you get liberty and go in to New York City?

John Whiteman: Oh, yes. I, uh -- there was a ferry that went from Battery Park, the lower part of Manhattan, to Ellis Island, and it went regularly, so we had no problems getting in to Lower Manhattan from Ellis Island.

Interviewer: Have you been back to Ellis Island since they made it a national museum?

John Whiteman: No, I haven't. I've wanted to do that because it would be very interesting to see what they did to that building.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. And New York during the -- it was towards the end of the depression -- what was New York City like and--

John Whiteman: There wasn't any evidence that there was a depression when I was there. It was just to be hive of activity completely.

Interviewer: No food lines or anything like that?

John Whiteman: No.

Interviewer: All right, and then tell us when you got out of boot camp, where did you go.

John Whiteman: Well, I, uh, applied to go to radio school in Curtis Bay, Maryland, which is a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland. And so, I went there for six months before I was assigned to a ship. I was assigned to a ship called the "Sebago," and it was known as a weather ship. In other words, we went up just south of Reykjavik, Iceland and we went in a square -- a mile on each side. Now, if you can imagine this for 30 days, we completed that square while the meteorologists were sending up weather balloons and being able to forecast the weather, which information was furnished to the British convoys that were going back and forth between the United States and England. We were in the war a long time before people realized it. There was

a destroyer -- American destroyer -- that was in a British convoy that was sunk by the Germans. It was called the Reuben James, and that was, I think, almost a year before we actually got in the war.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Well, what were the thoughts of you and your fellow Coast Guard individuals? Did you anticipate that we'd be in a war with Germany?

John Whiteman: It looked like we would be eventually. My brother in law has been in the Navy for six years and had just been -- completed his hitch just before he married my sister in San Diego. He encouraged me to go into the Coast Guard. He said, "If you don't go in, you'll be drafted to some other place." And he said, "The Coast Guard is a very good organization. It's just like the Navy, but it's a little bit more elite," he said (laughter). So that's why I chose it.

Interviewer: (Laughter) After you were--

Elizabeth: Hold on.

Interviewer: Okay, you ready?

Elizabeth: Yep.

Interviewer: You were up there at Reykjavik, Iceland, making this square thing for--

John Whiteman: Uh huh.

Interviewer: --for 30 days, reporting the weather for the British convoys.

John Whiteman: Right.

Interviewer: And then what happened after that?

John Whiteman: Well, we came back into Norfolk, Virginia, and I just realized that if I didn't take my 30 days leave, I would lose it. So I went on leave. And an interesting thing happened while I was on leave, my ship -- the Sebago -- was sold to England. It was included with 50 World War I destroyers in the first "Lend-Lease" bill to England. And, uh, I couldn't find my ship because it had been painted "battleship gray." Coast Guard ships were traditionally beautiful white, and very well maintained. And I kept walking by back and forth in front of this ship that was battle ship gray and finally somebody standing on the rail looked at me and said, "Whiteman, what's the matter with you? Are you crazy?" And I looked, and sure enough, it was the Sebago. So when it was sold to England, an interesting thing took place -- they transferred all of the American sailors, except for about 10 or 12 off, and they left 10 or 12 on to teach the English sailors how to operate the equipment. So we went on what is called a 30-day "shake-down cruise" to teach, uh, uh, the radiomen, and the signalmen, and the machinist mates, and everyone how to operate the equipment on the Sebago. That lasted 30 days. And then I was transferred again to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Interviewer: And the Sebago?

John Whiteman: And the Sebago, just about 2 months ago, an interesting thing happened--

Studio Crew: Okay, Rick, we're rolling.

Interviewer: Uh, John, let's go back to -- you went on leave, during the time you were on leave, they painted your ship that you had been on, sold it to the British, and painted it from white to gray.

John Whiteman: Right.

Interviewer: Tell us about finding that ship again.

Elizabeth: We are good to there. He's in Fort Lauderdale.

Interviewer: All right, get's go back. They gave you 30 day "shake-down cruise" and then you went to Fort Lauderdale.

John Whiteman: Yeah, yes. And there was a, a major radio station in Fort Lauderdale. There was a Coast Guard base there and a radio station known by its call letters NOL, no NLF -- Fort Lauderdale -- which communicated with all the ships in the Atlantic and the Middle Atlantic and south to the ships that would be going into ports in South America. We kept in contact with them.

Interviewer: And then what finally happened to the Sebago you were on?

John Whiteman: Well, I didn't know what happened to it until about three months ago. We turned it over to England, we -- all the Americans that were left on board, there was only 12 or 15 including the officers -- were transferred to other places. And I just happened to be transferred to Fort Lauderdale.

Interviewer: Okay.

John Whiteman: And my duties were to operate and keep in communication and be a source of help, you might say, for any ships in distress on the East Coast of the United States.

Interviewer: And what was Fort Lauderdale like in those days?

John Whiteman: Oh it was like the Garden of Eden. (Laughter) It was, you know, beautiful waves and palm trees, shrubbery and little buildings that were maintained perfectly. And, it was

-- I often said that if I in fact I could be stationed there, I could stay in the Coast Guard to retire. It was a wonderful duty.

Interviewer: That's nice. And you were telling us a story about looking up the Sebago on the internet.

John Whiteman: Yeah, that was -- my granddaughter had her desktop. There's some way -- I forget what they called it -- where you search at random for something. I am kind of a computer-illiterate, but I forget what they called it. And she found it with away. "The Sebago," she said, "it had been sold to England and changed the name. It had been sunk in the English Channel."

Interviewer: And all hands went down with it?

John Whiteman: Mm hmm, right.

Interviewer: Okay, you're in Fort Lauderdale, and then what happened after that?

John Whiteman: Well, I was in Fort Lauderdale for quite awhile, and then I was transferred down to Cuba. And they -- people don't realize what was going on on the East Coast as far as German submarine activity. Now, you can verify this -- but I was driving from Miami to West Palm Beach one Saturday morning. There were three tankers burning off the coast in the six miles -- 60 miles -- from Miami to West Palm Beach. Now that was an extreme case, but there was continuous activity by submarines waiting outside of the International Date Line for a tanker to come out that was, that the Germans would fell would be taking oil to England.

Interviewer: This was before Pearl Harbor?

John Whiteman: Yes, this was before Pearl Harbor. And as I say, they established -- it was a known fact afterwards that -- that we were helping the English in their convoy system, whether they were picking up goods in the United States to take to England or whatever.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. So even in those days, the Germans were just waiting to sink the cargo ships.

John Whiteman: Yes, oh, yes.

Interviewer: And then, uh, take us up to Pearl Harbor day, or, December 7th. Where were you?

John Whiteman: Well, I was stationed in Miami, Florida and went to call the Captain in the Ports Office. I was a radio man, but I knew how to type. And he needed -- the Captain of the port -- needed a secretary. So they transferred me to duty with him. He was a Merchant Marine Captain, and he had been given the rank of Captain in the Coast Guard when he joined the Coast Guard. And he was, uh -- had all kinds of experience and duty with guard ships and imports and being Captain of the port and so forth -- a very knowledgeable, wonderful man. And then I was, after that happened and we got in the war, I was transferred to be the base -- part of the base radio station -- for a squadron of about 12 planes that would be stationed in Cuba at an airfield we would build, which was one out in the meadows. We went out to this place and established an air base, a very rudimentary air base.

And that's when this -- it was during this time that I had the experience with the tanker that was being attacked by a submarine. I was on duty in a radio shack. The radio shack was in a framed building, kind of a barrack-stack building. The office of the squadron was in the building and the radio station was in the building. And I was on duty -- just happened to be on duty on a Saturday afternoon late in the fall -- and, you all know that the distress signal is S. O. S. But if a

submarine is involved, it's four S's: S. S. S. S. And, it's on -- you have to have a speaker, a station tuned to that frequency 24 hours a day. And it was about 4:00 in the afternoon late in the fall, and I heard "S. S. S. S. S. S." And so, I adjusted my receiver and tuned it in as good as I could, and it says, "Being followed by submarine. Position so and so, and so and so. Hurry!" So, I was just getting off watch and I gave the message to the duty officer, and he says, "That's off the coast of where we're located. And so I ask him if I could go as a radioman. And he says, "Well, you're not an aviation radioman. You don't have any equipment." And I said, "Well, I can borrow the equipment. I have a buddy that is an aviation radio man and he can help me get the equipment." And he says, "Well, if you want to go, go ahead." So, Font, my buddy, took his equipment, helped me, and showed me how to use it. He said, "Here's your parachute. You sit on his this way, but hope you don't have to use it." And we laughed, and we went out and searched for an oil slick--

Interviewer: And what kind of plane were you in?

John Whiteman: It was a very small plane -- they're called "Kingfishers." But they had, they carried, four depth charges -- two underneath each wing. And I don't even think they had a machine gun, as I remember, but they just had the depth charges. And there had been an article in the Miami Herald of a case where a Coast Guard cutter and a plane such as the one I'm describing forced a German submarine to the surface and captured the crew. And so we all felt quite important being in his squadron in Cuba. And so anyway, going back to the actual plane going out and looking for the oil slick, we couldn't find anything at all. So we started back to the base and the pilot said he didn't know exactly where we were. See, I am in contact with the pilot. It's just a two-seater plane. And he says, "I hope we find something pretty soon because we're going to be running out of gas." And we did run out of gas, but how we got back to -- I

just happened, it was going through my mind -- I would rather go down with the plane than jump out in a parachute. I really feared jumping out in a parachute. And as I looked up at the (inaudible) to see where I had to put it back if I did have to jump, I noticed this pin point of light and I drew it to the attention of the pilot, and he says, "Oh, that's Saint Mary's light. I know where we are now." So we headed for Saint Mary's light, and we ran out of the gas after having turned on the emergency supply right over the field. So we landed without any motor, which is a bumpy landing. But everything turned out all right. But, the thing that was sad about it was that we received word -- and I was told about it by one of the officers because I had been involved in this hunt for the submarine -- the ship had been sunk. It was a tanker, a large tanker, and it had been sunk. And, it was a coincidence that the name of the ship was the "Havana." It was a tanker, but the name of it was a Havana -- commercial tanker.

Interviewer: And roughly, what year was that?

John Whiteman: That was between -- that was in '41.

Interviewer: '41, before December 7th, 41 then?

John Whiteman: No, it was after.

Interviewer: Might have been '42.

John Whiteman: Must have been '42, because it was after Pearl Harbor.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, then, how long did you stay in Cuba?

John Whiteman: Just a year.

Interviewer: And what happened after that.

John Whiteman: Well, after that I was sent to another school. It was a very interesting school in that the crew of a ship yet to be built was assembled together, and it was in Miami right down at where the wharf is, there is some buildings built and it was called the Sub Chaser Training Center. The crew went to classes waiting for the ship to be built, and the crew became familiar and practiced with the very same equipment they were going to have on the ship when it was commissioned. So, the U.S.S. Peoria was finally commissioned and became a ship in convoy duty between Charleston and Algeria -- I am trying to think of the port in Algeria, but it was just, it was a big material base and shipping center in Oran. Oran is what it was -- Oran, Algeria. And I was on that ship until the end of the war.

Interviewer: And basically what were you doing?

John Whiteman: We were in convoy duty between Charleston and Oran, taking convoy and supplies. There would be maybe 100 ships in the convoy.

Interviewer: And looking for German submarines?

John Whiteman: And the convoy was protected by ships that had all this antisubmarine gear on to protect the convoy.

Interviewer: And did you run in to any German submarines? Any of that--

John Whiteman: No, there was only one instance where there were -- we thought we might have been in danger -- and that was when our soundman said he detected a submarine. And general quarters were called, so everybody went to their battle stations, but the blip or whatever you want to call it disappeared and nothing happened. So I was blessed that I was never in real, uh, battle situation, you might say.

Interviewer: How, tell us in detail what your actual duties were as a radio operator, and who were your contacting, and --

John Whiteman: Well, when we first went down, there was a van-type truck that was sent down, and it had the receivers and transmitters and a (inaudible) plant. A (inaudible) plant is a motor-driven generator to generate -- and so we had a radio station in the truck until the buildings were built. And the planes would go out scouting every day two or three of them would go out every day scouting for submarines. And we were in the radio station, which was in contact with Miami and also with the planes as they were in the air. But then they built a frame building where they had the administrative offices and the radio station. And we served what is called four-hour watches. We would be on duty for four hours, and then off, and back on four hours later. And there were only two radio men, and this gets pretty tiresome -- four hours on, four hours off length of time. And we were waiting for another, radio man to come down from Miami. And they had even told us that, uh, this radio man that I knew -- his name was Guy Paul -- was going to come down and be another man at the base radio. And the way they got the planes down was interesting, too. They disassembled the plane and put the fuselage parallel to the wing on a flat bed freighter type ship, and went from Key West to Havana. And we were told -- I don't know how true it was -- but we kept waiting for this radio man to come, and then we received word that this ship -- after our trip -- taking the disassembled plane was sunk. He never did come and we thought it was, so we tended to believe that it was true that the ship had been sunk because we were out one radio man and a plane.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. Do you still remember the Morse code?

John Whiteman: Yes, you never forget it. You might miss a few letters here and there, but, you know the RKO movies? RKO Radio? They are actually saying RKO Radio in Morse code when you see a movie -- an RKO movie

Interviewer: And can you think of any other interesting experiences that came your way?

John Whiteman: Well, there was one bad experience that happened in Cuba, too, that could have been disastrous because of the base being built there, there was a little town about three or four miles from the base called San Julian, and there was a little grocery store there. And they had a couple of tables you could buy a sandwich or something like that. And when they built the base, they kind of expanded their operation a little bit and they, we could go in and play cards. They had a window that they could hand sandwiches through and some tables there. And one night we were there and there was quite a few Cubans in there. And there was one of our men -- his name was Benny Kowski, I'll never forget him -- he was only about five-foot-seven, something like that, and he got into an argument with a six-foot-four Cuban. And they actually had a fist-fight because Benny Kowski -- he understood Spanish -- and he could hear that the guy, the Cuban was running down Americans. And he went over and he confronted him, and they had a fist fight and Benny Kowski cleaned up. And so anyway, about a half hour later, it was time to go, there was always a pickup truck that came in and gave anybody a ride back to the base that happened to be at the little store. When we walked out of the door of that place, there were about 50 Cubans on the other side of this dirt road with huge rocks in their hands. And they -- when we came out, they let fly. And, and, one of our men had a broken collar bone, another was hit in the forehead and knocked unconscious, and, we just dispersed and ran in all directions to get out of the way. And it just happened that when they went to pick up their second rock to throw at us, the sheriff patrol -- he had a loaded 45 and he pointed it up above the heads of the Cubans and

fired about three times and they disappeared completely and we went back to the base. And it could have been a serious situation had the Sheriff Patrol not come in at that time.

Interviewer: Were there any, uh -- what was the general feeling of the Cuban population to Americans?

John Whiteman: A lot of the adults did not like Americans. Remember that Spain was kind of a belligerent nation. Even though they weren't actually at war, their sympathies were with Hitler, and so a lot of Cuban older people were with -- sympathized with Hitler and the Germans. But the kids just loved the Americans. And they wanted to talk baseball and sports and cowboy shows and all of that. They'd just sit and talk all day with the Americans. They loved 'em.

Interviewer: Could the young Cubans in those days speak English?

John Whiteman: Most of them could speak English, yes.

Interviewer: Where were you when you heard that the war was ending in Europe?

John Whiteman: In the middle of the ocean between Charleston and Oran, North Africa.

Interviewer: You were running one of your routine missions there--

John Whiteman: Yeah, right, uh huh.

Interviewer: And what happened aboard ship when they heard that news?

John Whiteman: Well, it was -- the habits were changed completely. We couldn't throw garbage over in the day time. We had to go without running lights at night, you know, and observe radio silence and all the precautions that were available to protect ourselves from the submarines. And as soon as the war was over, why, we ran with lights on, threw garbage over when we wanted.

We fished for shark when we through the garbage over and we put hooks on the end of chains and threw them in with a hunk of pork, bacon or something on, and one day we got eight sharks (laughter). We pulled them up on the pulley that the life boats were connected to. And so we had a happy time from the middle of the Atlantic to Charleston on the last convoy.

Interviewer: Um, it's my understanding that, uh, a lot of Germany submarine activity was through most of 1943, and -- did it end abruptly, or was there still submarine activity?

John Whiteman: There was some.

Interviewer: In 1943?

John Whiteman: But it wasn't anything to the extent that there was before. There was some activity, but not a great deal as the war was winding down.

Elizabeth: How scared were people of that submarine -- people in the Coast Guard and such -- of that sub activity before '43?

Interviewer: Were you guys scared of getting hit with a torpedo or anything in those early years when the Germans were sinking those ships?

John Whiteman: No, they didn't seem to be worried about it. I mean the, uh, the officers and the command felt that the Germans were not going to unnecessarily involve us in the war. In other words, if the tanker -- if they came across a tanker that was a belligerent nation, as far as Germany was concerned, they would sink it. But they didn't -- the only case I know of was the Ruben James where they actually did sink an American destroyer six months to a year before we were in the war.

Interviewer: And they kept that pretty quiet, didn't they?

John Whiteman: Yes they did, uh huh.

Interviewer: What were your accommodations like on board ship?

John Whiteman: They were very close. I mean, there was four bunks stacked up and side by side, but the food was great. One time I hitchhiked from Norfolk, Virginia to Salt Lake City on leave -- this was later on in the war -- and I stopped at an air base. I can't remember exactly where it was. It might have been around Richmond, Virginia. And, to see, if there was a flight going -- if a military flight as going, they would take somebody on leave. And I went see about that, there wasn't anything going, but I had dinner there. And it was good, but not anything to compare with the way -- we ordered steaks like we wanted and eggs over easy as we were in line on-board ship. It was great. And it was such a sad comparison -- we had to eat the English food for 30 days. And I hope no Englishman take offense, but, the food all looked the same color. It was all gray (laughter).

Interviewer: And I guess you're wishing -- you're glad you were in the Coast Guard.

John Whiteman: Yeah, the Navy was the same. The Navy was the same. And we ate better than the Army did.

Interviewer: When you heard that the war was over, tell us about that. Did you, uh--

John Whiteman: Well, by that time, I had a wife and two kids Hollywood, Florida, and they were in my mind all the time and naturally I was looking forward to the end of the war so I could go back and be with my family and take up civilian life. I had been in the service for almost six years. And I loved Florida, but it was interesting that my wife, who had come out and visited

with my folks during the war, who loved Salt Lake, and she didn't want to stay in Florida. And she's practically a native Utahan, although she was grown before she ever came here, you know.

Interviewer: You met her in Florida?

John Whiteman: Yeah, I met her in Florida. And I wanted to stay there after the war, and she didn't want to. She wanted to come to Salt Lake, so we came to Salt Lake.

Interviewer: And you were in the -- on one of the runs when you all heard that the war was over, did you all cheer on the ship or, was there a big celebration?

John Whiteman: Oh yeah, there was, uh huh.

Interviewer: And, uh, you consider yourself -- the most dangerous part of your missions was when you were ready to about bail out of that plane when you were stationed in Cuba.

John Whiteman: Yeah, that's right. But you know, a man -- an enlisted man -- doesn't have any control over where he goes. I was fortunate that I never avoided going anywhere I went where they told me, but, you go where you're told. You're stationed where they want you to be. And if you're as lucky as I am, as I was, you're stationed to places where your life is not in danger. But when you're on a ship in the North Atlantic, or when you're on a ship in a convoy, you're exposed to danger.

Interviewer: Yeah, there's always that chance you will be hit with a torpedo.

John Whiteman: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. Elizabeth do you have any, uh--

Elizabeth: What were his emotions when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

John Whiteman: Well, uh--

Interviewer: And talk to me when you answer that.

John Whiteman: We despised them, and we were anxious to get busy and eliminate the threat of Japan and Germany and Italy -- the Axis Powers.

Interviewer: If you were to give future generations that might be listening or watching this interview, what kind of advice would you give them and what would you tell them about World War II?

John Whiteman: You know, I don't know. It was just a necessary evil, I guess.

Interviewer: A necessary war.

John Whiteman: Yes.

Elizabeth: One more. I'd like him to demonstrate Morse code. Does he remember enough to demonstrate?

John Whiteman: Demonstrate what?

Interviewer: She says, can you demonstrate by just your voice a few words of Morse code?

John Whiteman: Well, uh, RK -- let's see. Miami would be dash-dash-dot, dash-dash dot.

Interviewer: But it would be di-da-dit, or whatever?

John Whiteman: Morse code, the "da" is a. "Da-di-dit" is b. "Da-de-da-dit," that's a dash-dot-dash, is a c. Uh, RKO Radio is "De-da-dit da-de-da da-da-da de-da-dit de-da da-dit dit-dit da-da-

da.” And if I had one of my buddies from the U.S.S. Peoria radio gang, they would still know the Morse code. You don't ever forget it.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting.

Elizabeth: You got anything, Natalie?

Natalie: I am good.

Interviewer: Well, John, thanks again for coming in. We interviewed over 100 veterans.

John Whiteman: Radio man first class.

Elizabeth: I'm going to give this back to you.

End of recording.