



Crit W. Killen

United States Navy

Chief Gunner's Mate

European Theater

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Interviewer:

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THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Geoff: Crit spell your name for me.

Crit: Well it's spelled C-R-I-T and I've got a middle initial W and my last name is Killen K-I-L-L-E-N. A Scottish name.

Geoff: Where were you born?

Crit: I was born in a little town called Clintwood in the Southwestern part of Virginia up in the Cumberland Mountains. We don't want to confuse that with West Virginia, we're right close to the Kentucky boarder and West Virginia. Because during the Civil War we considered West Virginia traders.

Geoff: Did you have ancestors in the Civil War?

Crit: Oh yes my great grandfather was a captain in the Union Army, he switched sides. He started out fighting for the Confederacy but the Union got a hold of him and said they'd pay him more money and make a Captain out of him if he switched sides so he switched sides and he fought a Guerilla Warfare in behind the lines. He was captured right before the war ended by the Confederacy and was executed.

Geoff: You grew up in this little town; did you go to high school there?

Crit: No I didn't grow up there. My mother died when I was four years old and my father died when I was ten and I was shipped off to Lynchburg Virginia to an orphanage and I was in that orphanage until I was 16 and I ran away and I went back to Clintwood and was going to work in the coalmines. I spent two days in the coalmines and accidentally almost blew one up and so I decided to join the Navy and so I changed my birth certificate (I was only 16) but I changed it showing I was 17 and went down and joined the Navy. I signed up in November of 1941 right before Pearl Harbor, which you know, took place in December.

Geoff: Why the Navy?

Crit: Well when I was there in the home I used to read everything I could about ships and the ocean. I wanted to travel and I wanted to see the world and I know a few movie were on at that time that we'd go visit and it was all about seeing the world and the Navy and that's why I chose the Navy.

Geoff: Where did you go to training?

Crit: I went to train in a brand new training center that had just opened up in Bainbridge Maryland and they didn't even have the barracks all completed. We lived pretty badly up there it was mostly mud and rainy weather but that's where I had my boot training.

Geoff: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Crit: At the time of Pearl Harbor I had just been in, we were just going into boot training and we got the word that Pearl Harbor had been attacked and so we were all excited about that thinking that maybe we would get the war over with in a hurry. Everyone was very patriotic. I guess more anxious to get out and get into the action, we didn't know any better, we were young kids and so we were ready to go.

Geoff: So where did you go after boot camp?

Crit: After boot camp I was sent to gunnery school in Newport Rhode Island and I finished gunnery school up there and then after that I went aboard the USS New York (the Battleship – PB34).

Geoff: How long were you on the New York?

Crit: I was on the New York (I can't remember exactly how long) but they were making up a crew for this destroyer escort and I left the New York and I know we went aboard the (this was

then getting close to 1943) I left the New York and they put a new destroyer escort, they just built it and we went aboard it.

Geoff: Tell us what the difference is between a battleship and a destroyer escort.

Crit: Well a battleship, the difference is that you could almost take the destroyer escort onboard as a boat; it's that much difference. A battleship has guns on it and with one Salvo a destroyer escort would just evaporate. But where the battleship would carry 14 to 16 inch guns, our main battery carried 3 inch 50's. We had three 3 inch 50's.

Geoff: So what was the difference in length?

Crit: Well we were only around 300 as I remember, 306 feet long and 34 feet deep and a battleship is of course much longer than that, much heavier. Whereas the battleship draws about 27 to 30 feet of water (maybe more) a destroyer escort, most it draws is 14 feet. So that is to our advantage because I know we were fired upon one time by a German submarine and we were camouflaged to look like something other than a destroyer escort and the torpedo passed right underneath us.

Geoff: What does a destroyer escort do? What is its mission?

Crit: A mission of the destroyer escort was mostly anti-submarine warfare and also for escort duty of convoys between the United States and whatever country we want to take them to. Mostly between the United States and England, even up into Russia at the Balboa Stop in Russia. But most of the convoys my ship escorted would leave out of New York and we would end up right off the coast of Africa where they'd be picked up by another escort or to the Mediterranean or off the coast of England and be picked up by other escorts and escorted in.

Geoff: So you were very busy.

Crit: We were very very busy in the midst of the coldest weather in that North Atlantic than anyone could imagine.

Geoff: Tell us about that weather.

Crit: Well, I know in the winter of 1943 we took a convoy across up through the North Atlantic and the reason we chose the North Atlantic was because the seas are extremely heavy up through there and if they're heavy that means it's hard for the German submarines to operate. If it was hard for us it was also hard for them and it was much safer going through that extremely rough seas than it would have been if we'd been going in calm seas. It was much safer. Well I know that it was so cold that if one should fall overboard...and we did lose people overboard from the convoy, not from our ship but from the convoy. I know New Years of 1944 we spent most of the night trying to find the fellows who were partying a little too much on the cargo ship and had fallen overboard but when one hits that water, if they last three to four minutes it would be a long time. The water was that cold. I know after we had dropped a convoy and on the way back we brought back some empty ships and we took a route further north and we pulled into Boston (we dropped the convoy off in New York) and we pulled into Boston and our ship had a coat of ice at least an inch and a half all over. Our guns were frozen, we couldn't have fired them if we wanted to and we spent two to three days steam cleaning the ice off the ship and so it was rather cold duty.

Geoff: Tell us the first time you really saw the enemy.

Crit: Well the first time I saw the enemy we had come in contact with a German submarine and we depth bombed it and it surfaced and of course when it surfaced we rammed it.

Geoff: Tell us more detail about that.

Crit: Well when we first got the contact on it I was on watch at that particular time back on the 40mm. My regular gun station was mount one which was a forward gun mount (mount 350 up forward) and the general alarm went off "*everyone man you're battle stations*" and so we were

quickly relieved by the crew that manned the 40 and I went forward to my battle station mount one and we started depth charging and the ship was zigzagging and going all around and soon the German submarine surfaced and it was damaged and so our ship rammed it.

Geoff: What must have been going on onboard? You saw a submarine surface that was unusual.

Crit: Oh it was very exciting. Everybody was first kind of cheering at first, you know, when it came up. You've got to understand that we were all very young and it was like a football game almost to us in a lot of ways. It was exciting and I don't think any of us really thought about being afraid at the time or scared, it was to carry out our duty. We'd been well trained and so when it surfaced we all kind of let out a big cheer and then we turned into it and rammed it. But what the big surprise was that the German's came out of the conning tower and aboard our ship because the bow of our ship was level with the top of the conning tower and they boarded us and up on mount one the man had been drinking coffee as usual and we'd fired a number of shells from up there so we were throwing coffee cups at them and also we were trying to hit them with the empty shell casing and we were having kind of a hand to hand combat. And up on the bridge a Chief Petty Officer picked up a Thompson sub-machine gun that we kept on the bridge (they always had small arms placed at strategic places on the ship for use) and he started firing down towards the folks and we all took cover. The shells were flying all around us, bullets were everywhere and we took cover and the Germans and the sailors were all lying down together all behind a gun tub trying to keep from getting hit and as one sailor told it afterwards, I was not close to him, but he said the German next to him spoke English and he said "*he turned to me and said 'what should we do' and the German said 'why don't we all surrender'*" and so as it turned out they stopped the Chief Petty Officer from firing the machine gun and the Germans got up with their hands up in the air and they marched them aft and took them prisoner and the submarine sunk.

Geoff: What does it feel like when you ram a submarine?

Crit: Well when you ram it you fall off your feet that's for sure because it's a sudden shock, just like when you're in a car and you hit another car or something, you come to a screeching halt and this was the case and it was quite a jar. We were thrown off our feet.

Geoff: Were in on this mainly up front on the deck?

Crit: I was up on mount one; I was kind of involved somewhat, yes.

Geoff: Can you tell us a little more?

Crit: Well about all I did, I was just...I threw some coffee cups at them of course that's all we had, we didn't have small arms up there and empty shell cases. I picked up empty shell cases and throw them at them and they were ducking but I believed to this day and I've thought about it many times, if the Germans had come onboard with lots of small arms which they did not, they could've probably captured us because we did not have small arms available except a Thompson Sub on the bridge and one or two other places. The small arms were locked up but fortunately they didn't come onboard armed as we could tell.

Geoff: You captured them then what happened? What happened to the submarine?

Crit: The submarine sunk. It was sinking and it went on down, and after it went under the water some distance there was an explosion so I don't know if the Germans had planted some type of demolition to blow their sub up or if something else happened, we don't know.

Geoff: That was the first time you really saw the enemy?

Crit: That was my first visit with them, yes.

Geoff: Tell us about another time you encountered the enemy?

Crit: Another time we were involved with aircraft down in the South Atlantic and they were helping us. We operated with a small carrier and they spotted a submarine out refueling from another submarine on the surface. See the Germans had these large submarines that carried enough fuel where they could fuel their other submarines, these were rather large submarines and of course they could do all the damage that any submarine could do as far as firing torpedoes or what at another ship. Well we got the word that the planes were battling with a submarine about a couple of hours up ahead of us so we were going full steam to head for that location to participate and when we got there at this other place, the submarine was going down and it had shot down one of our planes and we never did find the pilot unfortunately. So the crew started to abandon ship and we moved in to pick up the survivors and it was getting dark and our captain took a chance by turning on our searchlights. By turning on our lights under normal circumstances at sea at night would have been an open invitation for a torpedo you know so he felt this way that even though this big submarine that was supplying this one submarine that we attacked would not fire on us because we'd be picking up their people and took that chance and it so happened that we were able to pick up around 19 of the survivors from the submarine. I think the German submarine from what I found out only lost about three or four people. One of them died onboard our ship and you know when you're fighting the enemy and you can't see them face to face it's not hard to shoot at them but when we brought them onboard and we saw them face to face, they look like us. They acted like we acted. They were just other men of the sea and there's a certain feeling that seagoing people have (friend or enemy) that's something like a comradeship and so we are '*against the sea*' in other words we love the sea but we're against it. So we picked them up and they were just fellow sailors after we had gotten them onboard, after a few hours with them and talking to them and finding that they were people like us that were fighting for their country same as we were fighting for ours. Maybe they had a choice and maybe they didn't. I don't think we had much of a choice during World War II either. I know it was a very serious thing to draft-dodge. Well this one that died onboard, I never forget how he was looking up and asking for help and he was so weak and struggling with the sea that he didn't have the strength to climb up the cargo net we had lowered over the side to help them to climb up on and he soon fell face down in the water and one of our guys jumped overboard and put a line around him and brought him onboard and we started giving him artificial respiration but he didn't come out of it and he died and I think some of guys felt just as bad as I did too if maybe

we'd lost a friend because after all the war was over for them. They were no longer any danger to us. But an interesting thing happened, the captain, we picked him up and he was very angry. He demanded to see our captain right away and so he was escorted up to our captain and he came in and of course snapped to attention, saluted and he said "*captain you sunk my ship*" and the captain said "*yes*" and he raised his voice real loud and said "*you sunk my ship, you people did*". The captain said, "*Yes, this is war*". He said, "*it doesn't matter, you sunk my ship*". He was just bursting out he was so angry and the captain said "*Captain, you're in the wrong Navy right now. This is war, we sunk your ship yes*". Well the German captain calmed down and he said, "*Well my men haven't eaten for a long time*". He said, "*I demand ham and eggs and beer*". Well the German ships, they all carried beer aboard them and they drank it, well you couldn't possibly put beer on an American ship and turn the crews to drinking, there's no telling what might happen. But the German's were so disciplined that they had beer with their meals. Our captain told him again "*captain, you're in the wrong Navy but you can have your ham and eggs*". And we served the crew ham and eggs and little bottles of brandy about so big because we did carry brandy in small bottles. That was if someone were to be physically stressed or mentally stress we used it to calm them down especially in time of action or whatever and so we gave the Germans a little bottle of brandy and their ham and eggs. They seemed to be quite pleased with that. We got to talking to them and found out that they had families, the same as we had families and one fellow we had onboard spoke good German and he asked this one German he said, "*Why are you fighting?*" He said, "*Same reason you're fighting, I don't have much choice*".

Geoff: Now there was a third submarine you encountered. Weren't there three?

Crit: Well we depth bombed quite a number. Where there was one we depth bombed and there was some debris that came to the surface but a lot of times this was a trick where you'd depth bomb one of them and they took clothes and cram them into the torpedo tube and release it to the surface and you'd think you sunk it. Well this particular one we never got a contact with that after that so there was a possibility...we were never given credit for sinking it if we actually sunk it. But we lost contact right after depth bombing it.

Geoff: You also ran into German Surface Raiders. People don't know what that is can you explain that?

Crit: Well Surface Raiders during World War II...my ship got transferred to the South Atlantic and we went down there to look for Surface Raiders. '*Blockade Runners*' we'd call them. A Blockade Runner (a German ship) would go into Argentina and pick up supplies and run them to Germany and so our job was to go down and hunt for these Blockade Runners and destroy them. Now some of these Blockade Runners, some of these ships were armed with guns the size of maybe one of our cruisers might carry, at least they'd carry one or two guns and they were of course disguised in behind metal plates so when they were attacked they'd lower these plates and give whoever was attacking them quite a surprise. Well fortunately we never ran up on one of those but we searched for Blockade Runners, we looked for them. By patrolling there we did divert a number of them that prevented them from taking their cargo from Argentina to Germany. Argentina was neutral but Argentina at that particular time sympathized a bit with Germany.

Geoff: Before we started you were telling me a story about when your ship was disguised, did I have that wrong?

Crit: It was camouflaged. A lot of destroyer escorts and destroyers camouflaged their ships; they put camouflaged paint on it so in a distance you couldn't tell what it was. Ours was well camouflaged that way that if a submarine should see it they couldn't figure out whether it was a destroyer, a heavier destroyer or some other type of ship and it was very difficult for them and that's why we camouflaged them.

Geoff: You were in camouflage when you were encountering those U-Boats?

Crit: Oh yes.

Geoff: What was the name of your ship?

Crit: Well is served on a number of them. I served aboard as a passenger the one I was telling you about that rammed the sub at that particular time my ship was "*The Strob*" and she had left New York and I had missed her. I was home on leave and they left a day early, they had orders to leave and so some of us were left behind and so I managed to get aboard a ship luckily as a passenger to catch my ship and they assigned my gun station to mount one and that's how I managed to get in on that action up there when they rammed the submarine. It wasn't my regular assigned ship and later after this was all over with we made contact with my ship and I was transferred by highline from the ship I was on as a passenger over to my ship.

Geoff: What's a highline?

Crit: Well a highline is where you take a gun that looks like a shot gun and it shoots a line from one ship to another and from this small line is attached a larger line and it's pulled across and secured and then a type of a what we called a '*boatsens*' chair – it's a chair that you sit in and they haul you across. It's interesting; you go from one ship to another and that way if the seas were a little bit choppy it's a little bit exciting you might say.

Geoff: So telling us about escorting the troop ships. Could you see the troops on board?

Crit: No we could not. What we did was run up and down (we were assigned a station) we'd run up and down the convoy. It was a constant thing of patrolling. We could not stay in just one position because we did not know whether a submarine might be in the area or not and there was a number of submarines at that time '*wolf packs*' that were operating in the Atlantic. So I never actually got to see you might say the troops themselves because we were that far a distance away from them. Possibly I could have looked through a gun sight or a telescope and could have spotted them but we weren't interested much who we were carrying or what we were escorting, it was more of just doing our job. One interesting thing did happen; one of the cargo ships broke down and see the convoy goes in columns. If I can remember correctly there was three columns and I forget how many ships were in each column but it was a number. It was probably around 50 or 60 ships and this one particular ship broke down so we immediately fell back with it to protect it and he was having trouble getting his engines going. Our captain spoke to him through

a megaphone saying, “*get your ship back and join the column*” and he yelled back over “*we’re doing the best that we can, we’re having engine trouble*”. So we couldn’t stay with him because just a few minutes longer we had to get back to our station to protect the convoy. So night was coming on and he still hadn’t gotten back with his column and when it got quite dark suddenly there was a big flash on the horizon and we went back to search and there was nothing but some debris so a submarine got him. He went down, all hands.

Geoff: How did it make you feel when things like that happened?

Crit: Well you felt kind of bad. You kind of built up a hatred for the enemy when this happened, naturally you know but we were so busy with so many other things that you know, doing our duties and doing what we were called to do that we didn’t just dwell on it in our minds. I thought about it a lot. It bothered me somewhat and well it’s just like you’re the enemy – this German that I was telling you about that was looking up at me and asking for help, you know he was a human being, that bothered me too later when I thought about it a lot that he was a young man and didn’t look much over 19 or 20 years old and he had a family. Even though he was the enemy the war for him was over and it did bother me to see someone so close to being rescued and then die.

Geoff: You’re going back between Europe and the United States quite a bit. What happened when you’d pull into New York Harbor and you’d see the Statue of Liberty?

Crit: Oh that was a wonderful sight! To see the Statue of Liberty it was always so exciting to see that and I would think about how my ancestors must have felt when they came to this country and they spotted the Statue of Liberty for the first time. We always watched for it, we watched for the New York skyline and then we’d see the Statue of Liberty and it was so exciting to see that and to know that here we were a part of the greatest country on the face of this earth and we felt great about it. I know every time I look back and think about it it was very very exciting.

Geoff: So when did you go to the South Pacific?

Crit: The war was just about completed, I don't remember the exact month that we went but it was the first time I had the opportunity of going through the Canal and we went through the Canal and over into the Pacific and started our usual duties of anti-submarine warfare, you know, looking for submarines. Fortunately before we really got engaged with any of the submarines with the Japanese, the war ended so I didn't get to participate too much in the Pacific as far as warfare is concerned. Most all my experience and duty was...

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Geoff: Explain to us since we've never been there; explain to us what a convoy is and a jeep carrier and the differences between ships and what your mission was in the convoy.

Crit: To start with, our mission when we escorted convoys mainly was to protect them from submarines. Now we also would make up anti-submarine combat units such as...we'd have a small jeep carrier. Now these carriers (small carriers) were in many cases converted tankers where they'd take a big oil tanker and convert it to an aircraft carrier or in some cases I believe they did where they're building a cruiser or a light cruiser or something like that and instead of finishing it out as a cruiser they made it an aircraft carrier. I understand they did this on maybe one or two of them. Most of them were converted tankers or large cargo ships and they'd put flight decks on them and these were very very useful in anti-submarine warfare for with their planes they could search out the ocean, they'd go on patrol everyday and they'd patrol and in a plane you can see down in the water if you get low enough or they could catch maybe a submarine on the surface which happened quite often and along with this we had blimps in the air at that time helping doing anti-submarine warfare and they could stand very still and they could see down into the ocean. They could see the shadow maybe of a submarine and so forth. I don't recall any blimps that we operated with ever making contact with a submarine where they were actually in combat, I don't recall this. They may have, there's a lot of things I've forgotten but I recall one time though when one of the blimps had run out of bread. He came up and floated right over the stern of our ship and we seen a few baskets of loafs of bread because we baked our own bread aboard ship and so one thing I can say in spite of it all we had enough food

even though we may not have liked it. Especially New Zealand goat meat, I never could get accustomed to it.

Geoff: Tell us about a convoy. How is it laid out?

Crit: A convoy is laid out in columns. Like I mentioned earlier there, they may be two columns, three columns, four columns depending on how many ships that are going to be going on this particular mission of taking supplies, troops or whatever across the ocean. They are in columns; they have certain distance behind each other. If you were in a plane and looked down on them you'd just see maybe three, four columns of all these ships and so it required a lot of protection from the German submarines. These submarine captains were exceptionally skillful and they would get together and lie and wait. They knew where to wait, where to watch for a convoy to come along. They already had information on it, they had their ways of finding out and so our job was to prevent these submarines from sinking these ships. Now some of the convoys that were escorted over, I recall, I know in one convoy we lost a few of the ships but most of them we were successful of escorting across without any incident but there were some that went across that they lost a lot of ships. The German submarines operate in wolf packs, they would divert the escorts that were escorting the convoy and they would sink the cargo ships. So especially the danger, most danger was sometimes when they'd take them up to the Russian Port of Valvostock – they called it the *'Mermansk Run'*; some called it *'Torpedo Junction'*. The reason they called it *'Torpedo Junction'* was because of the many ships that were torpedoed up in that area. I was I suppose in a sense quite fortunate that our convoy's pretty well got through. We lost a few but most of them all got through safely.

Geoff: Did you have a sense of how the war was going?

Crit: Well we had so much propaganda thrown at us in those days it was the proper thing to do to keep morale up. According to all news reports we were winning everywhere but we couldn't figure out why the war hadn't ended, we were doing all of this winning. But we got some pretty good reports; we had some great hero's in our minds at that time. General Patton was one of our heroes and of course regardless of what people say about Macarthur, the majority of us

considered him the greatest General we had out in the Pacific. We loved General Patton, he was a very colorful individual and we'd get news reports on him and his progress and we were just thrilled to read about it.

Geoff: Where were you when the bomb was dropped? What were you doing that day?

Crit: At the time the bomb was dropped, we were in the Pacific at that time on anti-submarine warfare duty. We were somewhere off the Hawaiian Islands, I'm not exactly sure where we were. All I know we were in the Pacific.

Geoff: Did you make it to Pearl Harbor?

Crit: Oh many many times. My goodness making it to Pearl Harbor more times I guess than I made it to San Francisco.

Geoff: The first time you saw it was it right after the attack?

Crit: No the first time I saw it was right before the war ended, it seems like or right after I can't remember but I know everything had been pretty well cleaned up. Except the Arizona, you could still see her superstructure and air dents and part of the bar dents of where the turrets had been. They'd removed the turrets and around on the other side of the island was the old USS Utah, I'll never forget her. She was pretty well visible, she was lying kind of on her side and I remember seeing her wooden decks and we could see them when we cruised past and then about a year later we cruised passed it again and noticed that a lot of the wooden decks of wood had fallen off of it. But the old Utah was used as a target ship and they did lose some people aboard it, they were on there when it was attacked.

Geoff: What did you think when you saw Pearl Harbor?

Crit: Well it was kind of exciting. What made me think about it is how vulnerable our fleet was by being in there at that time. There was only one entrance; a very small entrance going into

Pearl Harbor and it's a death trap really. There's been many stories about our ships being in there, we've heard a lot of things and I don't want to elaborate on it because I may be wrong but a good many of the Commanders on those ships that I have talked to felt that it was very foolish thing to have had those ships in there. Especially at the time when we were trying to negotiate some sort of a settlement of peace with Japan and when there was a Japanese Fleet out in the Pacific ocean along there and they were showing hostility toward us. That was a very foolish thing to have those ships in that harbor.

Geoff: What did you think when you saw the Arizona?

Crit: Well I thought about that, my heart went out of course to see one of our ships in such a position. It was sitting there sunk and knowing that a lot of our sailors were still onboard and to us that ship is still alive to us sailors. I know that it's still on the commissioning list the last time that I heard that it has never been de-commissioned. I may be wrong but this is what I understand and so it's a monument, a memorial that should remain in our minds for a long time. There was a song that came out back then called "*Remember Pearl Harbor*" – well let's remember Pearl Harbor as we did the Alamo and so on and that was a type of battle cry, a battle song that was going on at that particular time.

Geoff: Tell us about coming home after the war.

Crit: Well that was rather exciting. To come home we went back down through the Canal and on up the coast to New York City and we couldn't wait to get into New York. It was a great liberty town; people treated us so nice there. I gotta say that the New Yorkers just made us service people, all the service people feel so important and so welcome and they seemed to be so grateful. I still look back on it today that New York City was one of the most patriotic of the cities I know – on the coast, speaking of up and down the coast, and there were some cities, there was one city in particular that we didn't even want to go in. I won't mention it's name but the sailors had a name for it, which is not very complimentary, and we found out that a lot of foreign sailors called it the same thing. I would say this particular port is southbound, well let me just leave it at that. Boston was nice but New York was special and coming home it was just like

you'd been away on a trip and you come home and suddenly you see the New York skyline and there's the Statue of Liberty again and so it was a wonderful feeling.

Geoff: You stayed in the Navy.

Crit: Well I wanted to get out but the thing of it was, I grew up in the Navy. My teenage years were in the Navy and I did get out, I took a discharge. I just couldn't adjust, I was institutionalized, there's no doubt about it, I was. So I was out a short while and I just could not handle it. Anyway I'd lost my girlfriend and that didn't help and you know it was interesting to come home and find the girlfriend you'd been writing to had married somebody else, that was always interesting. I didn't get a *'Dear John'*, I got to meet a Dear John you might say but anyway I missed the Navy, I missed being at sea. I loved the sea and I seem like I must have been something like a natural born sailor and so I just went down to the recruiting station, I walked in and I said this to the recruiter, "*take me home, I want to go home*" and he started laughing and so I re-enlisted. I went and caught the Old Isabel as a passenger on the USS Isabel and road her through the canal back out on the west coast to catch the USS Rowan – DD782 and I had a very exciting time on there. I was on there for seven years and went through the Korean War on there.

Geoff: You actually saw some real heavy action in Korea didn't you?

Crit: Well we did quite a bit in Korea. The Rowan was involved in the invasion of Itchan. We did a lot of shore bombarding up in the Wanson Harbor and we took five hits one day up there and a lot of our people were injured. We didn't have anyone that I know of that were killed but we did have a lot of injured and we were hit a few other times other than at Wanson. But in Wanson we did receive some pretty heavy hits.

Geoff: Were they shore batteries?

Crit: They were shore batteries, we were firing on the shore batteries and I recall I was back up at my favorite mount which is mount one on the bow and that's where I was always the Mount

Captain and I was firing at everything up there, boy we were pouring the ammunition out at them, same as mount two and mount three. And I didn't know we were hit until the Mount Captain at mount three called me and he said "*we've been hit back here*" and he said "*I can't get ammunition to my gun*". The shell came in right below where the gun mount is, it came in through the compartment and the handling room where the ammunition is sent up to the gun it exploded in there and it kind of scattered everybody and he couldn't get ammunition up to his gun. It didn't knock the gun out itself but they couldn't get ammunition up to it. A lot of men were wounded real bad but as far as I know they all survived.

Geoff: I don't know if this was World War II or not but didn't you have a black sailor on board?

Crit: No that was after and you know we have tried to locate him every year at every reunion that we have of the Rowan 782 we ask "*has anyone seen Charles J. Higgins*". Charlie Higgins was one of the first black sailors to be able to get into a rating outside of cooks and bakers or laundry men or something like that and Charlie was a great Gunner's Mate and he and I were very close friends. Everyone on the ship liked Charlie and to this day we don't know where he is but every reunion we have that's almost the first question or universal question – Does anyone know where Charles J. Higgins is. Charlie was from Boston, a really neat guy and he was a very dear friend of mine.

Sally: When you had idle time and you were hanging around with your buddies, what did you do?

Crit: Well I was not a gambler. I tried gambling one time, we would be at sea and those of us who were not on watch would gather down on the mess deck, that's where we'd eat we'd call it a "*mess deck*" and there would be card games and so I recall one night I went down and thought I would play cards. I didn't know much about cards and low and behold I just won like everything and I thought '*boy I'm a gambler*' so the next night I went down and I won again and I thought '*man alive I'm gonna get rich*' then I went down the next night and lost everything I had won plus my next paycheck and so I quit. I walked out on deck and I swore that I'd never gamble again and I haven't.

Sally: But what were your conversations?

Crit: Oh our conversations would usually consist a lot of times of the last liberty port that we had been in, where we'd gone ashore or our conversations a lot of time would be how we reacted during any particular crisis on the ship or at the battle stations or something and about our families. Everybody had a girl back home; a wife or a girl and we would talk about that and a good many of us received '*Dear Johns*'. I received mine in person, a young lady out of New York City and I'd like to mention her name – Stella Demario. She married the biggest ugliest looking guy I've ever seen. He was a big Pollock and his name was Polkowski and I'll never forget that when I knocked on her door; I hadn't heard from her for about a couple of months and I was going to be in for two days and knocked on her door and this big ugly guy came to the door and I thought at first he must have been some sort of a janitor and it turned out to be her brand new husband. So I went away just fallen and broken hearted and said, "*That's it, no more girls*". Of course later that all changed.

Sally: You grew up in Lynchburg Virginia? How do you spell that?

Crit: L-Y-N-C-H-B-U-R-G, I was in an orphanage there from the time I was ten years old until I was 16.

Sally: So you were in Clintwood from birth to ten?

Crit: Yes until I was ten years old and then when I came back when I was 16 I was going to go in the coalmines and that one experience in the coalmines decided that (I knew a war was coming on) and I knew then I'd rather be someplace where it was safe and not in a coalmine and that ended that.

Geoff: When you got into action did it seemed like what you imagined it would be?

Crit: No, we were so trained as anyone's who's been in the military who has been trained for that particular job is when that job actually takes place it seems like second nature, you just go and do it. You do it automatically and I don't recall every having any fear. I was excited like I was playing a ball game and I recall one time (during the Korean War) and we were off the coast of Korea and we were being fired on and I remember a shell whistling right over the ship and it went "*whew, whew, whew*" right over and I was Mount Captain and I was out looking through my Mount Captain's hatch at mount one and it went right over it and hit on the other side of the ship and exploded, but all I did was yell, you know "*whoopee*" you know like that. I don't think any of us had what you'd say "*fear*" I think we were just trained for our job and to just go do it and let the chips fall where they may.

Geoff: Did anything particularly funny happen when you were on the ship that you would recall?

Crit: Well I don't know if you'd call this funny, back in those days I did have a tendency to take a nip now and then and I'd had a little too much one time, came back and missed the gangway and fell down between the dock and the ship and they got the grappling hooks on the chain and hooked in my uniform to pull me out. I remember that happening.

Geoff: Weren't you also a boxer?

Crit: I tried it. I tried boxing and at first we had what we called "*smokers*" and that's Charles J. Higgins incidentally who trained me and we were working real hard to make a heavyweight fighter out of me so we had a smoker and I was teamed up to fight this one particular fighter and he was from another ship. We started talking and he said, "*how many fights have you ever had?*" And I said "*none, how many have you had*" and he had around 23 or 24 and about six or seven of those he had KO'd and he had won all of his fights. And he said to me "*you've never fought before*", I says "*no*", he said "*I would advise you not to get into the ring with me*" and I took his advise and that ended my boxing career. I didn't get in the ring with him.

Geoff: That was good advice.

Elizabeth: I want to know how the European Theater was different from the Pacific.

Crit: Well that's pretty hard to answer in a way; I'll have to give it some thought being that I spent all of my time at sea in the European Theater. We did have one particular 'code' you might say and that was if we sunk a ship (a German ship) we would definitely pick up the survivors, but if it was Japanese at that time we would not pick them up. That was a rule that (I never knew if it was a *rule*) but I know it was the policy of the Skipper on the ship I was on and I was Captain on the ship and he said when we went in to pick up survivors he said "*if they are Japanese we're going to leave them*". Because the Japanese, if you know the philosophy of the Japanese military man, surrender is unthinkable. They thought if you surrender you are the worst individual that could be living – you shouldn't even be alive. So they would be wounded and I know on the islands and I've read about it many times and I've talked to some of the Marines that were there and they said they would pull the pin of a hand grenade and put it under their arm or put it under their body and so when our medics would come to help them that grenade would go off and kill our people. So our feelings were that if we picked them up, they had not surrendered. They just did not surrender and we admired them as a fighting force, if ever I went to war two countries I'd want on my side (including England of course would be three) would be the Japanese and the Germans because they fight to the end. Now the Germans would surrender but very very few Japanese surrendered. It was a disgrace. They'd be disgracing their ancestry if they surrendered. That was unthinkable and so if you start to pick one of them up out of the water to try to help them you may get yourself killed and that's why. Not because we were being inhumane or anything like that, they were human beings too but you were afraid you were going to get yourself killed. Why take the chance?

Elizabeth: How would you characterize the German soldier?

Crit: Well from my experience during the war, of course I never actually was ashore to fight them, but from what I've read and from what I've seen and some German soldiers that I got to know after the war, they were excellent fighters. They were excellent soldiers. A German will fight to the death too but he will surrender. I met just recently a German soldier that had entered

the army in 1939 and he fought all the way through and was captured right at the end of the war and he was wounded a few times and we'd get together and we would talk and his thought was that it was to do his duty regardless and to fight to the end if necessary. But they would surrender if the time comes for that, whereas their Japanese counterpart was a different story, they didn't want to surrender, it was disgraceful. I think the German fighting man was an excellent soldier and if we go to war I'd love to have them on our side. I help train, incidentally at the end of the war we gave the German Navy three destroyers and I was fortunate enough to (I was in Norfolk Virginia at the time as an instructor for my first shore duty incidentally – with all these years at sea and I never pulled shore duty, I didn't want to come ashore) but anyway I was an instructor at the Naval Schools Command and I was sent out on a German destroyer, one of the destroyers we had given to them to help train them in our operation and also help train them with our equipment and I was amazed at their morale and how thorough they were and how quick they were to learn and a desire to learn. As I talked with some of them they didn't feel they lost the war, they just lost the battle.

Geoff: Wasn't there a funny incident where there were some Germans under your command and there were some American sailors heckling you?

Crit: Oh, yes. We had tied up along side on a pier across the pier from an American ship (the German ship did) and we were told to stay away from our American sailors while we were training them. We didn't know what their feelings were, you know, some of them had some pretty hard feelings and so I was told if we went out on the pier not to talk to them and anyone because we were as far as everyone else was concerned that was on that German ship were Germans and I went out with a young German (he spoke English very well) we went out to dump some trash and these American sailors started heckling us. They yelled "*what do you think of old Hitler now*" and on and on and on and I made kind of a remark (I don't know whether I should repeat it here or not – I made it about Roosevelt) and boy talk about yelling! The Officer on the deck of the American ship had to order them away from the quarter deck or they would have come out on the dock there and probably beat the tar out of me and so when I got back aboard the German ship our American Officer that was on there with us called me aside and said "*you ought to be Court Marshaled*". He said, "*You should not have let them know anything*".

And one thing when I was yelling back at the American sailors, one of them said “*hey that one speaks English with a southern accent*” and so I did it out of just jesting. But anyway we trained these and did what we could by training them and they had these three destroyers.

Geoff: How did they feel about America? You must have gotten to know them pretty well.

Crit: They got no bad feelings. The sailors had no bad feelings about us at all as I could tell. I was accepted, I was treated exceptionally well on there while I was training. All the other men that were American sailors that were with me on there we were all treated exceptionally well. We were just, I’d say treated royal by them. One thing to understand was that men of the sea are different than warriors you might say on land. Their different, there’s a certain comradeship between men of the sea – regardless. And so they treated us....

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Geoff: Okay we were talking about wolf packs.

Crit: Okay, the Germans developed a system to utilize their U-Boats as efficient as possible and so they would put a group together and we would call them “*wolf packs*” and with this they could attack convoys or any type of enemy ship they may come across and it was very effective. We lost a lot of our cargo ships to these wolf packs and it required a tremendous effort on our part with our Jeep Carriers, our Destroyers, Destroyer Escorts, our anti-submarine ships that we had to actually defeat these wolf packs. Now we were having, of course, help from England too but it was quite a job and we did defeat them but they were very very efficient in what they were doing especially at the start of the war.

Geoff: How many boats in a convoy and how many submarines in a wolf pack?

Crit: Well a wolf pack can consist of, I don’t know, three four five our more it depended. In a convoy there could be any number of ships, it could be from 20 ships up to maybe close to 100. It could be any number and what they decided were how many ships were to go to a particular

war zone and they'd get as many of them together as possible to go into that war zone so a convoy could be almost any number of ships.

Geoff: What's a U-Boat?

Crit: A U-boat, that's a submarine. A U-Boat is a submarine, the Germans called it an "*undersea boat*" but a U-boat is a submarine.

Geoff: How fast could a U-Boat go underwater?

Crit: During World War II our U-boats, I'm not exactly sure it's not exact, it wasn't very fast – three, four, maybe five knots (a knot is a mile and an eighth) all together different today. Our submarines today or U-boats can go as fast or sometimes faster than some of our World War II surface ships but those submarines that were in action during World War II were not very fast underwater, you could not...you were running on batteries and so three, four, if they could do five knots they were doing real well.

Geoff: How fast could a Destroyer Escort go?

Crit: The destroyer escort varied, some only did 19 knots and others were built to where they would do 20 to 23 knots. It depended on the diesel type like the strub it would only do about 19.8 or 19.5 knots whereas the steam type could do more.

Elizabeth: Was there any doubt in any of your minds that you could defeat Germany?

Crit: We never had any doubt whatsoever. We believed we were going to win and victory was always up most in our mind. Being defeated just was not part of our vocabulary. We were there for the end of the war, to stay until it was finished and that song "*over there, over there, the Yanks are coming and we wont come back 'till it's over over there*", that was our philosophy then was to fight until we had one and victory had been accomplished and then come home. That was our philosophy, we didn't think otherwise.

Geoff: Looking back on World War II, is there something you want to tell people today who have no idea what it was like that you would really want them to remember?

Crit: Well what I'd like to tell the people today that this is the greatest nation, greatest land on the face of this earth. I'm not saying that just to be talking, I actually believe that and people today should support our country. In time of war especially. I know everybody loves peace, I love peace but peace without victory is to being defeated and if we want to get defeated then pull out, pull back, don't fight. Bully nations are like bullies in school, they pick on the weak; they pick on those who won't fight who will back away. But they will not pick on people or school kids that will defend themselves and it's the same with countries. A strong nation, strong military force and a strong desire to win – no nation is going to just jump on them and attack them. I think the reason that this attack we had on September the 11th was because these people had gotten the impression that we would not fight, that we would not go for victory, that we would back away and shrink from our duties. And today my thought is this, we are in a war right now, we are at war and we should do everything we can to win it! And those people out there who are yelling "*get out of Iraq, pull away*" is meaning that we would be letting the enemy dictate our future and our future is to win and not be defeated.

Geoff: On D-Day your ship was chasing a submarine?

Crit: No, on D-Day we were somewhere out in the Pacific, we weren't chasing a submarine on D-Day itself. I remember we all threw our helmets over the side as soon as it came over that Japan had surrendered – oh wait a minute, excuse me – you said "*D-Day*", oh I'm sorry I thought you were talking about the end of the war. No D-Day we were operating somewhere in the Atlantic on anti-submarine warfare and we were following it, our radio operators were picking up the information and printing it out and were handing them out to their crew as to what was taking place. We were out there after submarines watching them, trying to you know sink any if we could find some. That's what happened on D-Day.

Sally: Did you sink some subs that day?

Crit: Not on D-Day, we did not but what I mentioned to you before was of the submarines we were involved in. Like I said we depth bombed dropping depth charges and so forth on submarines that we had contacts on and we lost contact after dropping these depth charges but we don't really know for sure if they were sunk or not. It's possible, possible not. We never did take credit for it and I imagined that happened with a lot of ships but the U-boat ships were cleared out – they were gone. But we couldn't say "*we sunk a ship yesterday or sunk a submarine*".

Geoff: Tell us what a depth charge is and tell us what a hedgehog is.

Crit: Okay, a depth charge was – usually there was different kinds. There was a fast dropping one that was shaped almost like a tear bomb. We had those that would sink very fast and I forget what the weight was on those but then we had what we called the old "*ash can*" it looked like just a drum and it weighed 300 pounds and they had a setting on them where you could set the different depths that you wanted and you'd set the depth before you dropped it. So the people on those sonar stations through sonar would let us know (or the people that were manning the depth charges) approximately what the depth of their contact was. So they'd set it for that depth and then they had racks for the big ash cans and they'd roll those off the stern of the ship, which we called "*fantail*" and then we had these "*K-guns*" that also fired them and also a teardrop. I forget what mark it was now but it was a very fast sinking depth charge, the old ash cans didn't sink fast. You see them in the movies you know where they're coming down well the other type depth charge that came out about the middle of the war or not too far from the close of it, those depth charges went down fast and you asked me about the hedgehog – well that was a range of pickets, 24 pickets. A 30 pound explosive was placed on those pickets and inside the tail of the explosive it looked like a pipe was a charge. Now the pickets had firing pins in them and we'd place those hedgehogs, those explosives on this hedgehog rack and we'd get a contact on a submarine. You could only fire it forward, they could be tilted right or left as the ship rolled but when you fired them they went out in a shape of something like a cone and when they hit the water after they had sunk so far they had a propeller on them and after it had turned I think about seven revolutions the charge was armed and all it would take was a 15 pound jar for it to go off.

So if one hedgehog should hit a submarine it would explode and the concussion would explode all the others that were in the water so they were very effect. Very fine weapons. I know we fired ours at submarines but we never did hit one.

Elizabeth: What did a depth charge do to a submarine?

Crit: What the depth charge does, it explodes right next to the submarine hopefully and what it does is forces the water pressure away from the submarine and that will cause (in once sense) will cause damage to the submarine, it causes water to come in or it may be so close that the explosion itself will damage the submarine and cause it to sink.

Geoff: Could you hear them click? Could you hear the sonar?

Crit: The sonar could pick them up, you could hear it very clearly – a ping ping and then an echo back and you could chart their course. I’ve got to say this about the German submarine captains, they were very good. They maneuvered, the were exceptionally good at evading a ship but see we had so many plus our blimps in the air, our Jeep carriers with their aircraft out, our destroyers, destroyer escorts and we had another ship it was called a “*pickets*” which the Coast Guards manned in the Picket Ships and all of those type of anti-submarine warfare ships out there – we eventually put them all out of action. But they were very very good captains, the were very good at out-maneuvering our ships. They knew what they were doing. I would say they were a very able enemy.

Elizabeth: Did you see the convoy on D-Day? Did you see all those ships?

Crit: No on D-Day all of that was taking place and we were right south of the Mediterranean or actually down in the Atlantic there we were on anti-submarine warfare. We were more I’d say...then we moved further on down to the South Atlantic but we were more out in the Atlantic, I didn’t get to see them at all.

Geoff: But the convoys were building up for D-Day.

Crit: Oh yeah well we escorted...during that particular time we were building up there for D-Day, we had escorted a lot of convoys over there but we were spending a lot of our time in the South Atlantic at that particular time.