

HANK KNISKERN
October 11, 1989
Sacramento, California

Captain, Retired (38)

SG: Today is the 11th day of October, 1989, and I am visiting with Hank Kniskern at his home in Sacramento, California. It is a beautiful day, and Hank has made a few notes and he is ready to talk. It's all yours.

HK: I was assigned to the former liner ~~USS~~ *Manhattan*, which was named the *Wakefield* during the war. On our first mission, we sailed to England to pick up a load of English troops which we then took around, arriving in Capetown, South Africa, on December 6th just the day before the war was declared. Then we took the same shipload up around Africa into Singapore where we offloaded the troops. At the time, the Japanese were first starting their offensive in that area. We landed in Singapore just before—well they actually ran over the country, captured Singapore soon after we left there, and 5,000 of his troops with a General Sir Roger Backhouse served four years in a prison camp in World War I, and I believe was _____ to serve four more in a Japanese place, as far as I know. I never heard of it. Then we returned to Capetown, had some minor repairs fixed up, then made our way.

SG: The *Wakefield* was damaged in Singapore?

HK: Yah. We received a bomb. The main hatch on the forward deck, the main hatch was wide open unloading supplies. Then there was about 20 feet I guess from there, in the open hatch to the side of this, and the bomb hit right in between the two so that the hull really absorbed the full force and effect of the bomb. If we'd gone ten feet further towards the middle of the ship it would blown out the bottom, or in the other direction it

would have blown in the bottom, and we would have probably left the ship right there. But we were able, as it was, to make our way back to India where they made some minor repairs--we were able to ride back to the States.

SG: In our chit chat reminiscing, you spoke about the workmen that the Indians who were sent down to make the repairs. Would you describe that?

HK: Yes. The ship was actually blown out a little bit around the upboard, and it was necessary to clear that up, and to do that they filled the—they used must have been 50 or 60 men each with a little hammer, they would get up and knock the side of the ship out that way. And in lieu of the power hammers that we would use, just one or two of them. It was quite a sight.

SG: How long did that take?

HK: That took them about two days. And when we were in shape, we came back, able to come back home here and go into dry dock and had full repairs.

SG: So the bomb had not ruptured the hull, then?

HK: No. It did not open the hull. We were able to come home, but we were just a hair's breath from letting us get out of Singapore. If they had of hit just about where it was, 10 feet one side or the other, we'd still be there. The ship would still be there.

Then we continued on the *Wakefield* for several other trips around ferrying troops. Took a load of the American troops over to England, and they were probably the toughest troops on the—compared with British troops, they were the most disciplined. And then we took a load of Marines to New Zealand and landed them there in preparation for the Pacific campaigns, and there you had the really tough, well-disciplined forces. Very,

very visible. Very noticeable. They were as tough as the—our doughboys—and as disciplined as the British.

SG: What were your duties on the *Wakefield*?

HK: I was an Engineering Officer at that time, was Electrical Officer on the ship. Electrical engineer and responsible for that part of it.

SG: It seems to me I heard something from Jimmy ^{Hyslop (38)} Hyslip about you being the electrical engineer.

HK: I was the electrical engineer, then Damage Control Officer, and Jim Hyslip was my very good friend and classmate—also responsible for helping me starting the fire and also for failure to put it out. Now he did this after I spent two years with him in Greenland, and that was his explanation of why I was on there, but I never did get the story why he had to spend two years up there. That's about it, I guess.

SG: You were in Greenland then in 1943, 1944?

HK: Just about, yah.

SG: Weren't you partly responsible for building the ^{tank} tent farm up at Rondo?

DESSES (sounds like "Dissay.")

HK: Yah. Dissay.

SG: Remember, I was there.

HK: You were there? I didn't know that. ^{CDR} Admiral Dissay was very nice about it, too, because he wrote a wonderful story about construction of the place. He recommended me for a commendation--obviously in order to get a medal for himself, but I never checked into it. Well, you were there? In—?

SG: Well, I went from the North Star to Admiral Smith's staff as ⁽¹³⁾ ^{FLAG} Flight Secretary, and seldom, well—it was idle time most of the time. Just nothing to do, really. A couple of Boards, miscellaneous stuff like that, but I was just spinning my wheels.

HK: Well, in contrast to that story, up to that point in time, I never knew how to drive a car. Never drove a car in my life, and the Admiral came out and said, "Drive me over to Army Headquarters." I was a little afraid to tell him that his Engineer Officer did not know how to drive a car. So I got in and started up and drove him over to Headquarters. Everything went along pretty smoothly, except when he got out he said, "Kniskern, you forgot to take the emergency brake off." Thank God, that's all that happened. It's a wonderful life.

SG: Well, after the war you had a number of interesting assignments.

HK: After the war, I was assigned to the, went to the Headquarters, assigned to Headquarters for awhile as Assistant to the Comptroller. I set up the program for the Coast Guard supply depots and their supply functions. That was after having attended the Navy Supply Course School. So we set up that program which has worked out very successfully, I think. Where did I go after that? (Wife in background—inaudible) Oh yes, Coast Guard sent me to the Harvard Business School which was a good two-year tour of duty. The education—business education--has been very useful since then. From there, went to Headquarters and then helped establish the supply forces.

SG: When did you retire?

HK: I retired in 1968 from the Coast Guard Training Center in Alameda, which was an outstanding organization in my mind. We took in raw recruits there, and we had a band, a marching band of all recruits that was able to compete with all the other bands on the

West Coast for military discipline and performance. It was a top notch outfit. The system I inherited at the base would turn a recruit into a very disciplined and physically fit and mentally fit enlisted man for the service. And our reviews were—you could see the performance, feel the performance and *esprit de corps* in the whole outfit. It was a wonderful experience for me.

SG: How long did the recruits spend at the training station?

HK: Three months. Come and go for three months.

SG: So you took a new class each month?

HK: There was enough for six classes, so it must have been more than that. I forget the details, but—because I had enough to have parades with two, three four, five, six--six companies I guess it was. Two battalions. It was quite an experience.

SG: And it was after your time that Petaluma came on line, is that correct?

HK: Is it back on? Is that red light on?

SG: Yup.

HK: They had the band there, the marching band at Alameda used to compete with all the bands up and down the West Coast, they even took a trip to Alaska.

SG: How did they get to Alaska? By cutter? Didn't fly them up, did you?

HK: Uh,

SG: Summer cruise?

HK: I don't think I had anything to do with it, actually. No, I guess, I don't know how they got up. Bus or cruise or something. Somehow got them up there. Maybe not Alaska, either. Might have just been Seattle. I think it was probably Seattle because they had the big Sea Fair in Seattle. They go up, and they caught top prize for the band.

SG: Well, after you retired, you settled here in Sacramento. What were you doing that brought you here?

HK: Well, I went first to Yuba City which is about 50 miles north of here when I retired. And had a retirement position as the Business Manager for the Freemont Medical Center there, which I stayed for several years. But finally I decided to retire from that, and we moved down. My wife wanted a little larger city to live in, so we moved down to Sacramento, and we've been here ever since. It's a nice climate. It's big enough to have all the services and good shopping areas that she likes, and we've enjoyed it here a long time. Go off the record, I'm a little sorry we didn't go down a little bit further and join the Coast Guard Group.

SG: Well, I note that there are two further east from you, two of our retired personnel that's Thompson⁽³⁹⁾ and Hammond⁽⁴⁰⁾. Hammond is in Reno.

HK: Is that right? I didn't realize he was here. I'll look him up next time we go. I regret not having been there, but we just lost touch at that time, and getting the job at the hospital didn't help me.

SG: That would isolate you—.

HK: Yah. Got me out of the habit of things.

SG: Well, Hank, you've had an interesting career. Some highlights of the years. I want to thank you.

HK: Thank you. I would like to say that if I had my life to live over again, I would do exactly the same as I have. And I don't think there's an awful lot of men that can say that. I've been very happy with the whole lifetime.

SG: That is so true of so many of our Coast Guard people. They wouldn't change for anything. We have one or two people who are soured, but most of them were just pleased to have been in the Coast Guard, a part of it during a very dynamic period of time.

HK: The experience at the Coast Guard Academy to start with, and all the way through. It was one enjoyable career, and they take very good care of you in retirement.

SG: You would recommend it to others, then?

HK: I certainly do.