Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

RALPH E. HACKER

Radioman, Navy, World War II.

2004

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Hacker, Ralph E., (1925-2010). Oral History Interview, 2004.
       User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 26 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
       Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 26 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
       Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Ralph E. Hacker, a Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses his Navy service during World War II as a radioman aboard LST-925. Hacker talks about being drafted, boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), radio school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and amphibious training at Camp Bradford (Virginia). Assigned to LST-925, he explains the capabilities of the ship and his duties as a radioman. He touches on boarding the brand-new ship in Boston, sailing through the Panama Canal, and delivering beer to Guadalcanal. Hacker touches on extra duty as mailman, living conditions, food, playing cards for fun, and listening to Tokyo Rose on the radio. He discusses being part of the invasion of Lingayen Gulf (Philippines) and being hit there by a suicide boat. Transferred to the flotilla staff aboard a different LST, he describes the invasion of Okinawa. After the war ended, Hacker touches on being based at Yokohama (Japan) for six months during the occupation. He mentions his homecoming, eventually returning to his pre-war job in Sturgeon Bay, and using the GI-Bill for a low-interest loan.

Biographical Sketch:

Hacker (1925-2010) served in the Navy during World War II. After the war he settled in his hometown, Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin).

Interview Transcript:

Terry: I'm interviewing Ralph Hacker, who served with the United States Navy during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 1:00 p.m. at the following address of 402 North 6th Avenue, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin; on the following day of December 30, 2004. The interviewer is Terry MacDonald. Well Ralph, can you tell us a little bit about your background prior to going into the service?

Hacker: Well, I was born and raised in Sturgeon Bay—what all you want to know? I worked for Ronny Jacks for a couple years before I went in the service.

Terry: Did you go to high school in Sturgeon Bay?

Hacker: Went to high school in Sturgeon Bay; went through the first three years.

Terry: And prior to you going into the service, did—were you drafted, or how did you go about getting into the Navy?

Hacker: I waited until they drafted me. [laughs]

Terry: And did you have your choice when you went down?

Hacker: Well, they give me a choice. They asked me, "What do you want to be in?" I said, "The Army." They said, "You're in the Navy." [both laugh]

Terry: This was in Milwaukee?

Hacker: In Milwaukee. Then I went to Great Lakes for the training.

Terry: What was boot camp like for you? And were you with anybody else from Sturgeon Bay?

Hacker: Nope. No. There—ah, boot camp was—normal, we had a pretty good boot camp, but didn't do anything really special that I would say.

Terry: And then what happened after you got out of boot camp? Did you get to go to some sort of training school, or where did they send you?

Hacker: After boot camp they sent me to radio school in Madison, Wisconsin, the University down there. I stayed at Bascom Hall for about two months, had a private room [laughs], and then the last month we went over and we stayed in the Union building; sort of like a dorm we had.

Terry: Now when you say you went to radio school, can you briefly describe what it was about that you learned or you were training for?

Hacker: I think mainly what they were training you is to learn Morse code. Be able to take it and type. And typing, so you could type it out as you listen to it. I got so I could take about twenty-five, thirty words a minute.

Terry: Was that pretty tough to learn that? Because I don't think everybody could do that.

Hacker: It didn't seem to be. The way they taught you, it went good. I mean, I can still remember parts of it today. [laughs]

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: I can just about go through the code, you know, thinking about it.

Terry: Then when you got out of Madison, or you left Madison, what was your plan, what was the Navy's plan for you then?

Hacker: From Madison, I was assigned to Bradford, Virginia—Camp Bradford— for training for amphibious duty. When we completed that, we were—

Terry: Can you briefly describe what you mean by "amphibious?" And was it the type of ships you were gonna be sailing on?

Hacker: No, I think it was just general training, that I can remember; never really got on any ship until after we got onto our LST, which was—when we were assigned to it, we went to Boston while they finished building it.

Terry: So it was a brand-new ship that you were going to be assigned to, then?

Hacker: Yeah.

Terry: And what were the letters or numbers of that particular—

Hacker: It was LST-925.

Terry: And what did the "LST" stand for?

Hacker: "Landing Ship Tank."

Terry: So that carried heavy equipment?

Hacker: Carried heavy equipment and we'd carry, um—oh, when we went overseas we had an LCT on the top deck, which is a smaller landing craft. When you get overseas you shift your ballast, then you slide it off, and—watch it.

Terry: Now how big a ship was this, your LST-925?

Hacker: I think it's approximately—about three hundred-seventy feet.

Terry: And how big a crew?

Hacker: Hmm—

Terry: Roughly.

Hacker: Maybe ninety? I could tell you. [laughs] I'll look it up here.

Terry: And was the LST designed to unload—I'm not too familiar—off the bow of the ship, or how would they unload the vessel?

Hacker: They would go into the beach, open up their bow doors, drop a ramp.

Terry: And they drove off. I suppose you carried tanks and whatever, heavy equipment?

Hacker: Every kind of equipment, yeah. Tanks, motor vehicles that they needed—

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: —along with the Army for on an invasion.

Terry: So what was your job aboard the ship as a—you were classified as a Radioman. What was your rank? Second? First? Third?

Hacker: Ah, when I first was on the ship I was already in my Third, and after I got into a—after we got hit in an invasion, then I got transferred into LST Flotilla Staff, and then I got to be Radioman Second Class.

Terry: Okay. Then when you were up—when the ship was commissioned— brand new ship—where'd you sail it to? From the east coast to—where'd you go?

Hacker: Well, we picked it up in Boston. We went down to the Chesapeake Bay for a couple training cruises, went from Chesapeake Bay, went up to New York City, then we left from there and went down to Cuba, stopped at Guantanamo Bay; through the Panama Canal, went into San Diego.

Terry: When you went through the canal, were you able to see—that was a pretty important piece of land for the United States during World War II. Did

you observe any special type of guarding stuff that they did down there or anything? Could you see anything?

Hacker: Oh, I was too young to care [laughs], put it that way.

Terry: Okay. Well, what age were you when you went in?

Hacker: Eighteen.

Terry: Eighteen years old. Okay. So then once you went through the canal, where did you end up in the Pacific area?

Hacker: Then we went up to San Diego, and our last stop from the States. From there, went to Hawaii and picked up our LCT, which we'd loaded on the top deck, loaded up our tank deck—full of beer. [both laugh] Which we took from—there we went to, I believe it was Guadalcanal—to drop off the beer. [laughs]

Terry: What was it like sailing on a Navy ship during the wartime? Can you briefly describe what it was like? A typical day? Or a week?

Hacker: How should we say? Well, you're out there, completely—there's nothing around except other ships; probably—generally in a convoy.

Terry: Okay. You didn't sail alone.

Hacker: No. You're always in a convoy. You'd have some—well you had GQ practices.

Terry: General quarters?

Hacker: General quarters.

Terry: What were your watches like? Are they four on and eight off or something?

Hacker: Generally four on and eight off.

Terry: Continuously, huh? Did it kind of get boring after a while? Or you just adapted to it?

Hacker: You adapted to it, you just stick with your own—generally, your own bunch.

Terry: When you were out at sea, then, did you ever run into any problems when you were going from one island to another island or anything, with the Japanese?

Hacker: Not 'til we went on our invasion.

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: I remember when we went up to—when we were going up to Luzon, Lingayen Gulf, we'd have the radio on and listen to Tokyo Rose; she'd tell us where we were. We listened to her because she played good music. [laughs]

Terry: Yeah. Well, your first stop, then, was Guadalcanal and you were dropping off the beer. This was after the invasion; is that correct?

Hacker: That was after the invasion.

Terry: And you're supplying the Marines I guess, huh? [laughs]

Hacker: Marines, Army [both laugh].

Terry: Then they would've run the ship right up on the beach at that time? Is that what they did, unloaded it?

Hacker: Probably.

Terry: What was your job during that period of time when they were—either you're standing watch or—what other jobs were you assigned to do?

Hacker: Well, I was a mailman. [laughs] I'd have to go ashore every day to pick up the mail and bring it back to the ship.

Terry: So that was a big morale booster because everybody was looking for mail during that time. As you were isle hopping across the Pacific, what were some of the other spots that you hit, or were at?

Hacker: Well, Guadalcanal, down to New Guinea, up to—well, there's a couple islands; can't really name them all.

Terry: On any of the ones, were you actually on the invasion force?

Hacker: We went on the invasion up to Luzayah [phonetic]—up to, um, Luzon, Lingayen Gulf.

Terry: In the Philippine Islands.

Hacker: That was the actual invasion. That was in, approximately, right after the first of the year in 1945, I believe it was.

Terry: Did you ever carry any troops onboard your ship, too?

Hacker: Yeah, we brought troops and equipment up to Lingayen Gulf. And in fact, when we couldn't go into the beach the first day of invasion, that night we got hit by a suicide boat.

Terry: Can you briefly describe what happened?

Hacker: What happened, all of a sudden you heard a loud bang and—then what they did, they planted a—some sort of a charge on the side of the ship. We found out afterwards that it was a—oh, approximately—I think about thirty-five by forty feet and about three-quarters of it below the water line. And ah, lucky we had our self-sealing doors all closed and locked, 'cause it did bulge out, part of that, into the tank deck, one of the doors.

Terry: Anybody injured on that, or do you recall?

Hacker: There was some minor injuries. There was one fellow that was sleeping down in where the boiler rooms were and that, and that flooded; he drowned.

Terry: Was the ship armed at all? Or what kinds of arms did the ship have?

Hacker: We had 20 millimeters, 40 millimeters; a couple .50 caliber machine guns.

Terry: More or less small, smaller arms. You weren't prepared to do any battle with other ships.

Hacker: No.

Terry: And during general quarters, what was your specific job as a radio—if you were not on watch, what was your specific job then, in general quarters?

Hacker: To stand by the radio room.

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: Yep, that was mainly it. Of course when we got hit that time, then one of the fellows—I don't know, whoever it was—manned one of the .20 caliber and capped that small boat.

Terry: You sank it, huh?

Hacker: We notified another ship. Another LST came up alongside of us, then they backed off, and they were put on general quarters. They seen a couple small boats comin' in towards 'em; they asked to load their guns; their captain wouldn't let 'em. [laughs]

Terry: Wow.

Hacker: And they got right down off the back of it, the stern. We yelled, "Fire!" Well, they didn't have all the guns loaded. So they got clipped[?] or they got a hole into their ship, too.

Terry: When you were onboard the ship you said you had a pretty close knit with the other radiomen and stuff. Did you make some pretty good friendships during that period? Because the crew pretty much dated back the whole time from the commissioning on throughout the war?

Hacker: Pretty much.

Terry: Did you make some friendships with other sailors?

Hacker: Well, mainly, like I say, just the radio crew guys. We went out if we went on shore leave or something like that, more or less stuck together.

Terry: What was it like onboard the ship? What were your living quarters like? Were they comfortable or crowded or how would you describe that?

Hacker: Well they were—it was fairly comfortable. I think what—I was trying to remember how many we had in it. It wasn't one big room, it was, you know, sort of divided into separate rooms, maybe ten, twelve each. And then we had what you could call an "open galley" on the ship.

Terry: Yeah? And how was the food?

Hacker: Good. [laughs] *I* thought. [laughs]

Terry: "Open galley," that meant that you could go in there any time and grab snacks?

Hacker: Well, say after evening chow, you could go in if you wanted to make yourself a sandwich or something like that, or fry a couple eggs or make a hamburger you could.

Terry: So what did you do with your time that was—what would we call it—your free time? What did you do? You're out in the middle of the ocean; what did the sailors do?

Hacker: Played cards [laughs]; read. That's about it.

Terry: And bring movies, different movies, onboard the ship at different times?

Hacker: I don't remember if we had movies or not. I don't think so, [unintelligible]. We could listen to the radio, of course.

Terry: Tokyo Rose played some pretty good music, huh? [both laugh]

Hacker: She always did, yep.

Terry: So when you were on the Philippine Islands, were you there at the end of the war, when the war ended?

Hacker: No. After our ship got hit that time, then we went down to Leyte and we were there waiting to find out what they were going to do with it. When actually none of the fleets wanted us, so we'd get transferred back and forth between the fifth and seventh fleet. [laughs] And I took a message one day, said they wanted two radiomen from our ship and two from the other LST to go to a Flotilla Staff. Well I figured I was safe, so I went on shore to pick up the mail.

Terry: What was a "Flotilla Staff?" What did that mean?

Hacker: That means—

Terry: Is that land-based?

Hacker: No, you were on a—we got transferred. When I got back from picking up the mail, one of the fellows come up and says, "You're transferred."   "Ah, I don't believe you." [laughs] "Mailman, I won't—" He said, "You are. You're going to have to talk to communications." I did. "You got a half an hour." [laughs] I got transferred to the Flotilla Staff.

Terry: Where did you actually go then? To another ship?

Hacker: Went to another LST.

Terry: Oh, okay.

Hacker: And the staff consists of—I don't know, I think it was a—well, it was a small group that was in charge of—then they would be in charge of the whole group of LSTs. And we took off from there, we went up to Okinawa for that invasion.

Terry: On that particular invasion, after the Marines landed and the Army landed, were you out in the ocean? And how long before you went ashore?

Hacker: We didn't go ashore in Okinawa; we were never ashore. We led another small group over to another small island that they wanted to secure, secure the lighthouse on that island, so we led another small group over there.

Terry: In the area at Okinawa at the time, how would you describe the battle? Was there an awful lot of firing from the Navy bombardment?

Hacker: Not by—that bombardment went on before we—

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: Couple times, we had—I'd hear planes flying overhead. I remember one time one of the Piper Cubs of our *own* went overhead.

Terry: And what happened to that? [laughs]

Hacker: Naturally he gets some of the ships starting to open fire on it. He's going and he's opening up his door and waving his flag [laughing], and he's saying, "Hey! Cut it out fellas, I'm friendly!" [both laughing]

Terry: Wow.

Hacker: There was one that—oh, they did shoot down one Japanese plane, I remember, and he came and tried to hit one of the ships in harbor, but he missed.

Terry: Then after Okinawa, where did you end up going then?

Hacker: After Okinawa, then we went up to Japan—Yokohama. We were based right there at Yokohama; well, in the harbor.

Terry: Were you there for the VJ Day? [Victory over Japan] For the surrender?

Hacker: This was after the surrender.

Terry: Afterwards. Okay.

Hacker: About a month afterwards it was.

Terry: What was the feeling aboard ship when they heard that the Japanese surrendered?

Hacker: I don't even remember. I imagine they were happy, but—

Terry: Well, because the war, they didn't have to do any more fighting.

Hacker: Yeah, we didn't have to do any more fighting and then—

Terry: Okay. So when the war ended you were in Japan for a period of time in the occupation then?

Hacker: About six months.

Terry: What did you do over in Japan?

Hacker: While we were there we took over communication duties for a communication ship, but they had to bring in a destroyer alongside of us to have enough radiomen and radios to take care of it.

Terry: While you were doing work in the radio room, did you run across any unusual messages or anything that you might have heard or anything?

Hacker: No, most of your messages—well, when you took your—most of your messages were in code. They would come through in what they call—it'd be a five-letter code you were typing it with, or Morse code. All you got was a bunch of five-letter—

Terry: Did you have to decode the messages?

Hacker: No, you didn't have—

Terry: —authority to do that.

Hacker: The only authority—yeah—the only authority was the Communication Officer.

Terry: After your occupation of Japan, did the ships all stay together, your crew? Or what happened to determine who came back to the States then? Or were you still running—what happened after the war ended?

Hacker: After the war ended? There would be—everybody had so much time in, I forgot just how much time it was, they could—they'd be transferred back. Most of us did not have enough time, we stayed on the ship. When we finally came back, when we left from Japan then we went to Guam, Hawaii, and back to the States.

Terry: Did you bring troops back with you?

Hacker: No.

Terry: In that big ship? [both laugh]

Hacker: Big ship—

Terry: Pretty empty when you came back then?

Hacker: Pretty empty.

Terry: I understand some of the ships ran into typhoons and things like that. Did you run into any severe weather coming back or any time you were onboard the ship?

Hacker: Well we had—one time we went through a typhoon. And I remember our typewriter even, from the radio room, bounced on the floor. And you sorta—[laughs]

Terry: Rocked pretty good, huh? [laughs]

Hacker: —rocked back and forth. I think this must have been right after the war, because I remember we seen one Japanese fishing boat and we asked him if he wanted help. He didn't want any help. [laughs]

Terry: So where did you come back into the States? Where did you come into port at?

Hacker: San Francisco; Treasure Island.

Terry: Did they decommission the ship at that point, or what happened? Is that where you end up getting discharged from?

Hacker: We got discharged from, well, Treasure Island then they'd be there for two days waiting for transfer back to your discharge. I got discharged back in Great Lakes, again.

Terry: Okay. Now at what timeframe was this? What month in '45 did you get out?

Hacker: It was '46.

Terry: '46, I'm sorry.

Hacker: March; April; May? About, ah—I think it was May.

Terry: Okay. Then they discharged you at Great Lakes, Illinois, and you come back to Sturgeon Bay then?

Hacker: Then I came back.

Terry: Did they give you any money when you got out? [laughs] For you, when you got discharged, to help you get on your way a little bit?

Hacker: Yeah, I think it was a hundred and some dollars. "Total payment of discharge: $183.25."

Terry: And what was your final rank when you got out there?

Hacker: Radioman, Second Class.

Terry: Radioman, Second Class, okay. When you came back to Sturgeon Bay then, did you have a job waiting for you when you got home?

Hacker: Not right away. I didn't really rush. But about a month later I got back working for the fellow I worked for when I went in, Ronny Jacks. He had a wholesale grocery. I went to work for him.

Terry: Now, were you going to take advantage of any of the GI benefits that they offered at that time?

Hacker: Ah, the only benefit I took was after we got married, they had where you could get a loan from the State for—a low-interest loan. I took advantage of that one.

Terry: Okay. Did you join any veterans' organizations or anything when you got out?

Hacker: No.

Terry: Recently you joined one though, didn't you?

Hacker: Yes.

Terry: Okay.

Hacker: Yours. [both laughing]

Terry: Go ahead, then.

Hacker: No, I said finally I joined the American—what was it? AMVETS?

Terry: Ralph's got some items on the table in front of us here. Were there any reunions of your ships? Did they have any reunions at all, that you're aware of?

Hacker: No, nothing that I was aware of.

Terry: Looking back on your time in the military, what kind of impact did that have on you? Because, you know, you're a fairly young man, and everybody was pretty much a young person in the military at that time. Did it have an impact on your life?

Hacker: I don't think so.

Terry: Because most people were doing that—it was just—I guess that's what—

Hacker: Just a job you had to do—

Terry: You had to do it.

Hacker: —so you did it.

Terry: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up about your service in World War II?

Hacker: [pause] Nothing that I really know of, I don't think. I just had a—sort of a—[laughs] easy life. Might as well say it that way, being a Radioman.

Terry: Well, you know, everybody had a role to play in the war and it didn't make any difference what it was. You were serving your country and it was a time that everybody needed it. You needed to go and do that to save what was taking place in the world at that time.

[End of Interview]