

Union Church Oral History Project
John King recorded by Harry Rice 1-31-01
Tape 1 of 2

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- J.K.: 5000 men on that ship, and most of them were not seaworthy. They'd go down below and never come up topside. They'd just throw up.
- H.R.: How were you on that?
- J.K.: I was okay, but I stayed topside most of the time. We crossed the equator, and they had all the ceremonies. We had a couple of submarine scares. We only had 5" guns on the darn thing. We got into a country called New Caledonia [A multi island French Territory]. We unloaded there, our whole battalion. It was about 1200 men. We built a nice campground.
- H.R.: These were all Navy men?
- J.K.: Yeah, they were all Navy. We had trouble with the Red Cross. The Salvation Army would give you doughnuts, and the Red Cross would charge you 40 cents a piece for them. New Caledonia was French, of course. The French didn't particularly like us. I think there were a lot of rich mineral people, Frenchmen, but we didn't have too long a stay. We knew that Guadalcanal was mighty close to us, so they put us on a hospital ship, our company, two companies, and we went up to Guadalcanal [Island in Solomon Islands.]
- J.K.: They were beginning the clean up there, bloody canal. Boy, you'd take your shoes off at night, and you'd get a darn growth of mold in them and you got that fungus rot. I don't have my toenails to this day. Well, it wasn't too easy because the Japs kind of gave us a "wharping" [whipping] from the ship end there off the salvo. The marines and the Seabees who helped were able to keep Henderson Field from being captured. Then when we got to Guadalcanal corralled we went up to Bougainville, which was more worse, if I could use that term, than Guadalcanal, mud and rain and, but we made the go at Bougainville. Then they shipped us up to the equator, and we helped construct a couple of airfields on this little island, and helped build a kind of a recuperation hospital for the wounded.
- H.R.: Were you in communications work in the very beginning?
- J.K.: Yeah, I was called an electrician's mate. I made, well, I went over to second class when I hit the New Caledonia. They had these huge redwood trees, rosewood. They had a stump about that tall. They had to high-top them. I was dying to get into that high top with them, but they made me a darn company clerk. I didn't want it. I went down to the captain who had been with the Bell Telephone Company in civilian life, and said, "I want to get into ..." He said, "You just go back and tend to your darn office duties." That burnt me up.

J.K.: I kept running the company. It was six platoons, and we had a little decorum. Of course, there were a lot of laboring men in there, and some of them would even make some corn liquor. I liked that. I handled the mail and all the personnel action of the company C. I was doing pretty good. I was trying to bring in a little education. I'd get these darn tropical tree books and let the boys in the company read it. The officers were noting that. I wasn't trying to make it great. I just wanted to know a few things myself.

J.K.: The chief petty officer in charge of the company, wouldn't lift a darn finger to do anything. One morning came down to the tent, and we had this darn coral floor underneath the tent. It wasn't any dust or anything. Here this petty officer came down with a load of sand, and I said, "Chief, darn it, we don't need sand in there. You can't keep it clean. You get paper in there, and you can't get it out." He said, "We're going to have this sand in this tent." I went down to pick up the mail and I came back, and here was a big pile of sand and no chief. I said, "Well, where's the chief?" "They took him to sick bay. He developed an occupational disease from overwork." I said, "He had never worked a darn." Darn, if they didn't ship him back to the States.

H.R.: Oh, my gosh.

J.K.: About a month my lieutenant came down, he said, "John, you're in charge of this company."

H.R.: Oh, yeah?

J.K.: He said, "You've gotten a darn chief's rating. You made a chief master of arms." That's the highest rank in the Navy for enlisted men. I treated the fellows like they were my own, you might say. The boys recognized that.

H.R.: How old were you then?

J.K.: Let's see, that was 1943. I was born in '10. I was 33 years old.

H.R.: Were you? Yeah.

J.K.: Yeah.

H.R.: You were 23, no?

J.K.: No. 1910 and-

H.R.: 33, yeah.

J.K.: '43 was when I was in the Navy. I enlisted in '41. I'd get some books, maybe a botany book or something. I'd leave the fellows in the company read it, see? Because this is primitive living. They were all tents, and the only building probably was a mess hall. It rained eternally. That was a real experience handling that group of men because a lot of

them were labor men, and they didn't like the way the Navy ran things, but you had to keep harmony.

J.K.: Then we left the equator and went over to New Guinea. MacArthur was trying to set up the headquarters there. It was a very primitive setup. We went over to one of the islands. They established what they call a beer garden. They'd give the boys free cans of beer. I was assigned on this one ship, and I went aboard, and I was put on watch, midnight watch. On deck there, and here comes this big, I don't know whether he was a commander or not. I looked at him, and then I found an order down below there, a fire. Here was a senior lieutenant name. Stoddard was his name, I said, "I should know that guy."

J.K.: I asked my company commander, I said, "Do you have mess with the crew of the Pinckney?" He said, "Yes, what do you need?" I said, "Well, ask if he ever was in West Virginia." My commander came back down that evening and he said, "Yes, he knows you." He was a forester, a landscape architect I worked with in West Virginia in the CC camp. He came right on down, he said, "You come on up to my state room." I said, "No, I can't do that. I'm on duty." He said, "I'm giving you orders to come up." I went up there in his state room. He had oranges and all the fruit in the world. I couldn't even find a coconut. It seemed like a small world.

J.K.: Then I was feeling there was something big coming up. This was off of New Guinea. We got up early that morning, went up on the deck. As far as I could see were battle ships, boats, everything that would move. I talked to my commander, I said, "What's happening, Lieutenant?" He said, "Something big is about." Here was the whole darn fleet getting ready to go to the Philippines. Well, the next day we got started with that pile of darn ships go aboard to that darn beer garden. We headed for Tacloban [City in the Philippines]. We got right in the middle of that second battle of the Philippines. We were on this ship that it only had two 5" guns on it. We had to park it at Tacloban. MacArthur would not leave any of the Navy or Marine go ashore till he had put the four Army units up there at Tacloban.

J.K.: Meantime, we were right in this straights here, and the darn Japs would come underneath our radar and leave us have the darn bombing. I was up topside there, it was about noontime. I heard the darn general alarm, and here comes this Jap plane right over our mast. He let the three fellas in the forward gun basket have it, killed them. I was underneath one of those wooden life rafts, and I pulled that darn thing down over me. It wouldn't have stopped a flea. That darn Jap plane went over our ship and went into one of these Liberty ships. They were unloading stuff, and it exploded. That whole darn crew had to go overboard, flames. We had to go out there and pick them out of the water. We made a mistake at first of putting them on a blanket, and when we got them back to our ship we tried to pull the blanket off, and the skin... Oh, boy, that was gruesome. But, MacArthur finally got them landed, and away we went.

J.K.: The Philippine country, well, it wasn't really uncivilized. They had a lot of niceties. Of course, they had some habits. They made a liquor called tuba made from coconut juice. The natives would get paid-off in sugar. They'd get some sugar, and they'd go ahead and

make this darn liquor. Some of these old Navy guys had to have some. One of the chief petty officers we had, we had to carry him ashore one time on a landing. That's the way of life. That's what you had to deal with.

H.R.: Did you stay in the Pacific all the time you were in Navy?

J.K.: Yep. Except the States stops. Coming back I was one of 17 men of our outfit, that was in July of '45. Somehow they picked them, and darn if I wasn't picked as one. 17 of us got on this Army freighter, and they had loaded a bunch of army artillery men, had been on this one island, they said 45 months. When they got aboard our ship I knew there was something wrong. They were sullen, they wouldn't talk. The next morning when we got general quarters sounded we had to walk around the deck three times. They had lost nine of those fellas. They jumped overboard in the middle of the darn Pacific. They were beat. That's something I'll never forget.

J.K.: The tropics have a nice sounding name, but in the primitive areas it's not the nicest thing, I don't think. The diseases, boy, elephantiasis and all that. Of course, the darn fungus gets on the Yankee's foot and he gets this jungle rot. I think they have made progress in developing medicines to cure jungle rot, but when we were on Guadalcanal they didn't have anything.

H.R.: When did you finally then get out of the Navy?

J.K.: Well, they sent me back for a 30-day furlough, and I hit the Treasure Island there out of Frisco. I finally got a hold of a Pullman train that there weren't any bunks on it. There were a lot of public people too on it. That was the awfulest darn train ride I had from San Francisco to Elkins, West Virginia.

H.R.: Oh, my gosh. That was '45?

J.K.: That was '45. Well, I got ashore at Frisco about the end of July. My wife's father and mother were down to Leonardtown, Maryland. We went down to see them and VJ Day. See how lucky I was. Well, it changes. They sent me to Philadelphia, and they put me transferring prisoners from Philadelphia down to Washington or Florida, train ride. We had a bunch of German prisoners. I thought, "Boy, we're going to have trouble." Those German prisoners, boy, they'd do anything you wanted. They had good food and good treatment.

J.K.: Well, then I left Philadelphia, and they sent me down to Newport News. I stayed there, and they made me one of the officers of the day in the barracks and all that stuff. Then they sent me down to what they called A Prime submarine base about eight miles from Newport News. They put me on office duty, and I was, "What's the devil wrong? I've got enough points to get out of this outfit." They said, "When you come down to this A Prime, you're a lost soul." Well, I kept working there. I ran out of a little change. I needed to get some pop or something. Well, I said, "I need to get an advance." "Well, you'll have to go up there to Newport News and go to the paymaster."

J.K.: Well, I went up there, and I talked to a lot of these girl officers, and they just gave me a lot of guff, "What are you doing up here bothering me?" I said, "I just want to get a few dollars." I went up to one of the Navy paymasters and gave him my name. He said, "Where the hell have you been, King? We've been hunting all over the darn country for you." Well, I said, "I've been out at that A Prime, and I wasn't happy." Well, he said, "You owe the Navy \$900." I said, "Darn it, I've spent four years in this outfit, and I haven't spent a darn bit of it." I said, "I have MAQ sent to my wife." "Well, there's where the trouble is. We don't have a record of you sending that." Well, I said, "You just telegraph Elkins, West Virginia. It's registered in the darn county court that I have let Hazel have \$32 a month," something like that. Well, when that officer heard that he said, "Okay, buddy, you've got her made."

J.K.: The next morning I was sent up to Maryland to a Navy hospital, and I was discharged. I got on a train there at Cumberland, Maryland, went up to Elkins on a one-stack engine and met Hazel. The next day I went up to my ranger, forest ranger at Parsons. I said, "I want to go back to work." Well, he said, "Gee wiz, you can't do that, John." You're upsetting us." I said, "Darn it, I want to go to work. I have the right." They wired Philadelphia, and I went to work for the Forest Service under this ranger.

H.R.: Oh, yeah? You stayed there for a long time, then, didn't you?

J.K.: Well, yeah. I stayed there. That was '45, and I worked on the Parsons district, and then they worked me out of the supervisor's office. I was fortunate enough to be living in Elkins, and my wife was a graduate of Davis and Elkins College. In '48 I decide I'm going to get my degree. I went back to Davis and Elkins College and took all my mathematics and physics. Hazel, of course, was a graduate of it too. I went there two years, and then I went up to West Virginia University for the other two, received my bachelor's of science in forestry. That was one good thing the Navy did for me.

H.R.: All right.

J.K.: I went back to West Virginia [University] after, and I kept Hazel down in Elkins. She had one youngster. I went up there, and I was kind of renting in a room there. I just studied too darn hard trying to make good because I thought, "Boy, I've got to meet the challenge of all these young boys." In six months I went down to the registrar, and I said, "I've had enough of this. I can't take anymore of it." He said, "Well, why don't you drop a few [courses]?" I said, "I'm passing all the studies, making A's and B's." Well, one of the class advisors, he was a Vermonter, I think, he said, "John, why don't you go back to Elkins and go home and get drunk?" I said, "I don't want to do that."

J.K.: Well, I called Hazel, and I bummed a ride down to Elkins. When I got there she said, "You're going down to Meyers Clinic tomorrow." I said, "No." She said, "You are," so I went down. She made a special appointment, went down there and saw the doctor. They reamed and rowed all over me. I was in good shape. He said, "You're in this thing. You wish you weren't, but you don't want to get out of it." I said, "Yeah, that's about right." Well, he said, "I'm going to give you a little green tonic." I went back to Elkins, and I moved Hazel and the youngster up to Morgantown. We got kind of an attic room,

everything went fine. I was on the honor roll two years. How nature works on you. A lot of the boys said, "I just can't make it back to college. I can't make it back."

H.R.: Oh, really?

J.K.: Well, I said, "You're talking to one that has," and I said, "You're making a mistake if you don't do it." Then I passed what they called the junior forester exam. I received a notice in '53 they needed an assistant ranger at Stearns, Kentucky.

H.R.: Uh-huh, now you get to Kentucky, finally.

J.K.: That's how I got in 1953. Well, we had the one youngster, and I had a house in Elkins. Let her brother take it, and we moved to Stearns. We got a company house. We paid \$25 a month rent for a three-story house. It had the stoker furnace, sterilized water, and a garage for \$25 a month.

H.R.: It was a coal company house.

J.K.: That's right. That's right. My wife, she liked to play bridge, and she had taught school down there at Stearns. She played bridge, and the daughter, she went to the Stearns school. Are you a Baptist by faith?

H.R.: No.

J.K.: I'll tell you one of the Baptist [inaudible 00:26:18]. There was a Baptists church there right next door to where we lived. Well, I was a United Presbyterian, but I was liberal, I think. I went to one of my buddies and said, "Well, I'd like to go to the Baptist church and see what you got." "No sirree Mister King. You wouldn't be welcome."

H.R.: Oh.

J.K.: Yeah. "What the dickens is going on? I thought a church was kind of a privilege in a way." "Well, you have never been immersed." That's how ancient they were. Right across the street was a community church, and I joined it.

H.R.: In Stearns?

J.K.: In Sterns, that's right. They had an active bunch. There were about 60 people, and they made me a deacon in a month, and president of the men's club. Then we renovated the whole front of it. It was a beautiful friendship, but that was one of the oddities. I don't hold it against them, the Baptists, but that was their thinking, just the old time religion down there.

H.R.: Oh, sure. I'm a bit surprised that there was a community church. It's a nondenominational church in Sterns?

J.K.: That's right. Yeah. I don't think it's there now, but we lived, well, about a hundred yards from the main office of the Sterns Coal and Coke and the president's house. We had a lot of social life. Hazel, she loved it. The educational set up was good. Of course, the ranger station was only half a mile up the road. The ranger I had was very liberal. He had been in the Army Air Corps, and he just let me have, really, my own way.

J.K.: Then in '55 there was an opening at Berea here. Spud Howell, the ranger here, he was promoted up to Morehead. My boss, Bob Collins, said, "Would you like to come to Berea as ranger?" I said, "You bet," so I came up to ranger to Berea as a GS9, that was my grade. We had a house down on Center Street. We lived there, and then they bought a house down on Cherry Road. That's where we really had a beautiful life there. It was a nice house, and had air conditioning, and Hazel was teaching in the school, and my daughter was in the college. What did they call it?

H.R.: The Foundation School?

J.K.: Foundation. Then, she decided she'd go to college here.

H.R.: She went to Berea?

J.K.: She went to Berea.

H.R.: Your daughter's name is Annette.

J.K.: Annette, that's right. She finally took her master's in UK. They put her taking worms out for some dog food company on her master's. This guy that was heading it up was keeping those kids five years in his program. He was getting the salary, and he's keeping these kids doing the work. He was a Spaniard. She couldn't take it, so she asked to be removed, and he wouldn't release her credits. She finally had to go to the president, and she got into education. This instructor in the subject, he was greedy. He was making all that. Of course, I think they've fired him since. My daughter, well, she went down into Maryland and Washington, D.C. and taught two years. Boy, conditions were awful there.