James W. Drouillard, Sr.
Narrator

Karissa White
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewer

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Grand Portage, Minnesota

Karissa White  - KW
Brian Horrigan - BH
Jim Drouillard - JD

KW: Today’s date is August 11, 2006. It is 5:03 p.m. and we’re here at the Grand Portage Veterans Room in the Old School. My name is Karissa White and Brian Horrigan is here and we’re here today with Jim Drouillard. But we’ll get your full name. What is your full name, Jim?

JD: James William Drouillard, Senior.

KW: What is your date of birth?

JD: 8-10-1926. My birthday was yesterday. I turned eighty.

KW: Oh, yes. Happy belated birthday.

BH: Happy birthday.

JD: Thank you.

KW: So where were you born?

JD: I was born in Duluth. I was raised in Hovland, Minnesota, about fifteen miles down the road here.

KW: Sure. Were you born in a hospital in Duluth?

JD: Hospital in Duluth.

KW: Which one?

JD: St. Luke’s.
KW: Okay. I was born in St. Luke’s, too.

JD: I was a little before you.

KW: Yes. So you were raised in Hovland.

JD: Raised in Hovland. Went to school there.

KW: Hovland. Okay. And were you the oldest?

JD: No. I had a sister older. Three years.

KW: And you had younger brothers?

JD: I have a brother younger. That’s Francis Nelson. Eighteen months younger than I am.

KW: Okay. So there are three children in your family.

JD: Yes.

KW: What is your mom’s name?

JD: Esther. Maiden name was Esther Arnquist.

KW: Arnquist?

JD: Yes. She was Swedish. Came over here from Sweden. She was eighteen years old and came up on the America. She had a brother here living in Hovland. And so she came from Sweden, came through Ellis Island, and came into Hovland, and that’s where she met my father.

BH: You said she came up on the America. On a boat.

JD: Yes.

BH: It was a lake boat. Took passengers.

JD: There was no road here at that time so they had to come . . . the only transportation they had was boat, steamer.

KW: Okay. How did her brother wind up in Hovland? Did she ever tell you that?

JD: They had some people from Norway that came here before. Norway and Sweden. Before he did. I guess through correspondence he decided to move here. Because they were farmers and loggers. There were so many opportunities here for them.

KW: Sure. So your mom came over here when she was eighteen.
JD: Yes.

KW: So your dad was here in Hovland?

JD: Dad was here.

KW: Okay. What was he doing?

JD: He was a mechanic. He repaired equipment. He was a natural born mechanic. In fact, after they got the road in between Duluth and the Canadian border, I have pictures of him taking care of the Greyhound buses. The old Greyhound buses used to run up here. He worked all over as a mechanic.

KW: Sure. What was his name?


KW: And he was Indian?

JD: Yes. He was fifty percent. His mother was a hundred percent and she married a French Canadian. That makes me a quarter.

KW: So your parents got married and had . . .

JD: Three children.

KW: Three children. Did your mother have relatives still in Portage here or where were her relatives at? Her Indian relatives.

JD: She had a brother in Hovland. The rest of her relatives are in Sweden. She had a relative that came later, but all my dad’s relatives are here and in Grand Marais-Chippewa City.

KW: Sure. Okay. So you would come to see your relatives up to Portage or Chippewa City frequently growing up?

JD: Oh, yes.

BH: I was telling Jim about the project a little bit but I didn’t really talk about the whole life arc thing.

KW: Sure. The reason why I’m asking you questions about your childhood is because we want to get stories about the war and information about the war, but that’s not all we’re trying to do. We’re trying to get your childhood and growing up in the 1930s, and then your war experience and then what you did after the war. So that’s why I’m asking you all kinds of questions about this.
JD: I don’t care.

KW: Okay.

BH: We’re interested in your whole life not just in those four years in the war or whatever your war service was.

KW: So your dad was Indian. He was half. Were your grandparents around? Still around when you were growing up?

JD: My grandmother . . . after my grandfather died . . . I don’t remember him. I remember my grandmother very well. She lived in Grand Marais in her later years.

KW: What was her name?

JD: Elizabeth Anaquat Drouillard. She was born up in Nipigon and they migrated from Nipigon down to Sault Saint Marie and the Bad River and then up at Red Cliff, which is north of Ashland. And then Fond Du Lac and then into here at Grand Portage. I had uncles living in Grand Marais and in Grand Portage.

KW: So do you have any stories about your grandmother that you can remember?

JD: Well, it was Depression years back in the 1930s, and my dad drowned in South Paw Lake north of here in November 1931. Every fall they packed canoes and nets into South Paw Lake right up here north of Grand Portage. They’d back-split fish. And it was November and it was cold and the canoe tipped over. The water wasn’t that deep, but the cold water I guess killed him. But they would go do that every fall in November and they would back split them and salt them. Everybody had fish all winter long. Salt fish. So in 1931, that was Depression years. It was pretty rough for any family living around here. Of course, my uncle, my mother’s brother, had a farm here north of Hovland. We got along good. We got along all right. We never went hungry.

KW: They had a garden?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Could they do canning?

JD: And my mother took care of the . . . oh, she canned constantly. She always canned. And there were a lot of good people that shared. Game warden didn’t bother local people.

KW: Was she the one who did the hunting or your dad?

JD: No. The relatives. And my dad did when he was alive.

KW: When you were little.
JD: Little. Yes. I don’t remember too much about him. I remember him coming home. Needing some work and he’d bring Cracker Jacks or something. My brother and I would have to wrestle him for it. That’s about all I remember about him.

KW: So what did your mother do then after that?

JD: She was a cook. She cooked for a road crew when they were building the road through Hovland and had bunkhouses and had cookhouses and stuff. She did that. Then later, after that was through, she cooked in lumber camps. So that’s where we grew up. Lumber camps around Hovland. We went to school in Hovland; a one-room school up to eighth grade. There were about thirty students there and one teacher.

KW: What was your school like? How many students did you say there were?

JD: We had about thirty.

KW: Thirty.

JD: Thirty, thirty-five every year.

KW: Were there any Indians that went there or were you and your brother the only ones?

JD: We were actually the only ones.

KW: Did any other kids tease you because you were Indian?

JD: Not there. No. And then when I started high school we moved into Grand Marais so we lived there for two years. Things were rough, so I went to a trade school in Duluth. Lived with my aunt for a while. Went to a trade school in Duluth. Welding school. Then I went to work and the war broke out. I worked in the shipyards in Duluth. Then in October of 1943 I went in the Navy.

KW: Before you went into the war, you said you were at a trade school in Duluth?

JD: Yes.

KW: It was for welding?

JD: Welding.

KW: Okay. What year was that? Do you remember?

JD: 1942.

KW: 1942. Okay.
BH: So you were how old then?

JD: Sixteen.

KW: Sixteen.

BH: Left high school.

JD: Yes.

KW: So you left high school. So they allowed you to go into a trade school without a high school diploma?

JD: Yes. The National Youth Administration was put on by the government.

KW: Oh, so you went in through that.

JD: Yes.

KW: Okay. And then you moved to Duluth with your aunt.

JD: Yes.

KW: And you were there for a year?

JD: I had about six months I lived with them and then I went on my own with some other guys.

KW: Did you like Duluth?

JD: Oh, yes. Yes.

KW: You made some friends?

JD: Made friends. Made a few dollars. Learned a good trade. And then in 1943 . . . some of my friends were gone so I figured, well, time for me to sign up. So I signed up for the Navy for four years in 1943. October.

KW: Were you eighteen when you signed up?

JD: No. I was seventeen.

KW: Seventeen. So you were able to enlist when you were seventeen?

JD: Yes.

BH: Legally?
JD: Not legally, but my mother signed.

BH: Okay.

JD: She thought it would be [a good] idea. It was rough. We could have stayed home. She’d have taken good care of us. She was a fabulous person. She was a jewel. I mean I couldn’t have asked for a better mother. But three kids . . . and that’s rough during Depression years.

BH: But you yourself realized that you wanted to get out and make some of the money.

JD: Yes. It wasn’t her idea. It was my idea.

BH: You’re the first person we’ve talked to who was in the shipbuilding. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that for us.

JD: Well, they had a big shipyard there in West Duluth. Big cement plant. Big steel plant. And a shipyard. And they were building cargo ships, Victory ships. Of course, they had to take them out the Seaway. They were going twenty-four hours a day. And the people I was living with, my aunt and her husband, he was a foreman down there. They worked ten hours a day seven days a week most of the time. I went in the Navy and from there I left the country.

BH: Were you unionized?

JD: I don’t remember being in any union.

BH: In the shipbuilding.

JD: There might have been, but I don’t remember having any affiliation with any unions.

KW: How long did you work there for?

JD: About six months.

KW: While you were living with your aunt and uncle?

JD: Yes. Yes.

KW: What did you do after that before you were in the war?

JD: It was right after that when I went in the war.

KW: Oh, okay. You went voluntarily and enlisted?

JD: Yes.

KW: Did you go with anybody or was it just you? Any friends?
JD: There were some other guys around. One friend of mine that I worked with. He went in the Marines. I tried to get in the Marines but I couldn’t pass the eye test, because I’d been welding and I couldn’t pass the test, so he went in. I waited a little while and then I went and passed the test and got in the Navy.

BH: You could have stayed in the shipyard?

JD: Oh, yes.

BH: Because that was essential personnel. You weren’t going to be drafted if you were a shipbuilder, right?

JD: No. I don’t know. I didn’t question it. It’s just that I wanted to go. I always thought for a young man the Navy would be great experience.

BH: Why is that?

JD: What they had to offer. And it still is. Any service, I think, is. Of course, nowadays I wouldn’t go. If I had it to do over again. That’s my own personal feelings. But both of my sons went in when they were old enough. After they all graduated from high school. I didn’t.

KW: So that was the major reason why you went in is because you wanted—?

JD: That and the war.

KW: And the war. Had you heard a lot about what was going on over in Europe?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: And you said a lot of young men, especially in Duluth . . . I’m kind of interested. Did you notice like a lot of young men that were not around or working?

JD: Not that I can remember.

KW: You saw . . . it was just the same—?

JD: Everybody was working. There was a shortage of help in the cement plants and the steel plant and the shipbuilding trade. But you had to have some kind of a trade unless you wanted to be a laborer.

KW: Did you see more women working? Like your aunt?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: And young teenagers like yourself at that time?
JD: I didn’t pay too much attention to that.

KW: You were busy working.

JD: Yes.

BH: Well, it’s interesting though. If you were a teenager and you were working in the shipyard and if you choose to leave to go into the service, who does that leave to do the work behind?

JD: Oh, there seemed to be more coming. It was just my own personal choice to go. That’s what I wanted to do.

BH: See the world. Was that one of the reasons you wanted to join?

JD: Education and do your part.

KW: So patriotism was a factor?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Yes. It was [7th of December] 1941 when the attack on Pearl Harbor happened. Where were you that day when you first heard the news?

JD: I was in Grand Marais.

KW: Were you in school?

JD: Yes. Yes, I sure was.

KW: How did you hear about it?

JD: I don’t remember.

KW: No?

JD: Newspapers and radio, I guess.

KW: What was your first thought about it?

JD: At that age it was hard to understand what was going on and why. Why it happened.

KW: Right.

BH: But you knew there was a war going on in Europe already.

JD: Oh, yes. Yes.
KW: So you knew at that time, too, that you eventually were going to enlist?

JD: Eventually I would. Eventually I’d have probably been drafted, I suppose. I could have got a deferment. But I didn’t think that was right.

BH: A deferment because of your—?

JD: Well, my mother, and I could have stayed in school, I guess. And the work in the shipyard. It was pretty hard on our mother to clothe, feed and put three teenagers through school. So both my brother and I decided that she’d done so much for us, now it was time we went on our own.

KW: What did she do while you lived in Grand Marais? Was she still cooking?

JD: She worked cleaning houses and she worked in the trading post down there.

KW: Sure. Where did you live in Grand Marais?

JD: We lived in a house on the west side of town. I don’t know what it’s called now. I don’t think they’re there anymore. They were cabins, actually. Then after we went and left she moved back to Hovland.

KW: Can I just ask you about the Great Depression? What is one of the most important lessons you learned about living through the Great Depression?

JD: Not to waste resources and food and help each other out. Help your neighbors. My mother was a midwife, also. Because we did have a doctor up there but sometimes the weather was so bad the doctor couldn’t come. It was twenty miles from Grand Marais when we lived in Hovland. She was a midwife. She delivered a lot of babies. I remember they’d get her up in the middle of the night. Then the women would stay at our house. She had a bed in the living room. The women would stay ten days, usually. They don’t kick them out the next day like they do now. [Chuckles] In those days she took care of that. She made a few dollars there. She was a great lady.

KW: Did she ever go and take you kids to any town dances or anything like that or did they have town dances?

JD: They always had something going on in the schoolhouse. The kids were occupied by the teachers and the people in the . . . just one teacher was all we had. But it seemed like the churches and the communities would always have something going on. We never went without. We had plenty to do.

KW: Did you go to church?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Yes? What was the name of the church?
JD: Well, we only had Pentecostal church. It wasn’t Baptist. No, it was something else. In Hovland. We went to whatever church was available because my mother was very religious. But she didn’t press religion on anybody else. It was just her own way. She loved to read the Bible.

KW: What was her religion?

JD: She was Baptist or Lutheran or . . .

KW: Whichever.

JD: Yes. Whatever was there.

BH: Down in Chippewa City there was a Catholic church.

JD: Yes.

BH: You must have had family who went to that.

JD: We had a lot of people . . . a lot of relatives lived in Grand Marais and in Chippewa City and they went to that church there.

BH: Francis Xavier.

JD: Yes. When you don’t have transportation and you live in Hovland you go wherever your mother tells you or wherever she’s going.

KW: How did you get around then? Did you have a car?

JD: Relatives. Had a cousin.

KW: They had cars?

JD: They had cars. We really didn’t go anyplace in some years.

KW: Sure.

JD: But it was usually relatives.

KW: And they had stores where you could get supplies in Hovland?

JD: Oh, yes. They had two nice grocery stores and about two gas stations and there was plenty of stuff there.

KW: So I’m going to go forward a bit to when you were in high school in Grand Marais. Were there other Indian kids that went to high school there?
JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Yes. Did you ever notice any like fights break out between Indians and—?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Yes. Do you think Grand Marais was prejudiced?

JD: To a certain extent. Your sports in school. We had some very good Indian kids that were athletic. You didn’t see them on the basketball team. We had one that I know of. Arnold Bremer (sp?). He was an excellent basketball player.

KW: Did you play sports?

JD: Not very much. No. I loved to hunt and fish. Every Saturday I’d have a fishpole and I’d be gone.

KW: So what else did you do for fun? Because hunting and fishing was fun to you. But did you do anything else like see movies or . . . were you able to do that?

JD: We didn’t see hardly any movies until we moved into Grand Marais but we always . . . there were enough kids around. Hovland was a pretty good size village. There were a lot of people living around there. A lot of commercial fishermen, and they had kids and we always had something to do. We never got in any trouble. In summertime we’d go swimming. We’d play baseball. I don’t know. We were just busy.

KW: But when you were a teenager did you go to movies more?

JD: When we moved to Grand Marais we got to go to a movie once in a while. They had a movie theater there.

KW: How much was it to get in?

JD: Oh, I don’t know. Thirty-five cents or something. It wasn’t much.

KW: Not much. Do you remember any movies that you saw?

JD: The first movie I saw was *The Last of the Mohicans*.

KW: Did you like it?

JD: Oh, yes. It was a movie. We’d never been to one.

BH: That’s kind of interesting, I would think, for an Indian kid to see *The Last of the Mohicans*.

JD: That was the first movie I’d ever seen. I’ll never forget it. [Chuckles]
BH: It was at the . . . wasn’t it called the Wigwam Theater?

JD: Yes.

BH: In Grand Marais.

JD: I don’t know if that was the Wigwam or not.

BH: Is there more than one? There probably was.

JD: No. There was just one. It seemed to me there was one before that. The Wigwam was before this one. 1940-41. It was right downtown. In fact, one of my best friends was a projectionist. He’d run the movie.

KW: That must have been fun.

BH: Get you in for nothing.

KW: So I have a question about when you worked for the shipyards. Did you see a lot of people from other countries?

JD: No.

KW: No? No Russian . . . would there be Russians back—?

JD: No.

KW: Because you see a lot of Russian ships now. I was just wondering . . .

JD: Yes. Yes.

KW: It’s all American ships.

JD: If there was, I didn’t pay any attention to it.

KW: Sure. All right. So. And you enlisted in the war in 1943.

JD: 1943.

KW: What month was that?

JD: October.

BH: You brought some papers with you.

JD: October 13, 1943.
**KW:** Okay. That’s your paperwork. This is an honorable discharge certificate. It says your date of entry. And where did you go for basic training then?

**JD:** I went to Farragut, Idaho. Eight weeks.

**BH:** For Navy?

**JD:** Yes.

**BH:** In a land-locked state.

**JD:** Yes. On Lake Penderelli. Beautiful. Right in the forest. Eleanor Roosevelt picked it out. I guess she flew over or something and had seen it and that’s where it was. In Farragut, Idaho.

**BH:** And they had boats on the lake that you could train on?

**JD:** Yes.

**KW:** What is it you have there?

**JD:** Well, it’s the different places I went. Stuff I did.

**KW:** Does it say basic training? Oh, it starts there. Okay. Farragut, Idaho. Had you ever been out of state before?

**JD:** No.

**KW:** Not before that. So what was your first impression of Farragut, Idaho?

**JD:** There isn’t much difference than Minnesota. It looked . . . it actually looked like Minnesota. There was logging and it was all forest.

**KW:** Sure. Did you take a train there?

**JD:** Took a train. Out of St. Paul-Minneapolis.

**KW:** So what did you do when you stepped off the train into Farragut? What was the first thing you had to do?

**JD:** Right into boot camp. Get fede[d] out. Bend over and spread your cheeks and get your uniforms and get your bunk and medical examination and then go into basic training for eight weeks.

**KW:** So what did you do specifically there in basic training? Did you have to qualify for any—?
JD: Physical fitness and a lot of different things. Basic things you learn in the Navy and swimming. You couldn’t get out of there unless you learned how to swim. There were just so many things they taught you that it’s hard to . . .

KW: Did you have a specific job that you had to do while you were on a ship?

JD: No.

KW: No? Just general . . .

JD: Oh, yes. On the ship, yes. But then from there I went to Great Lakes machinist mate school. For eight weeks.

KW: So you were in Farragut for eight weeks and then went to Great Lakes for another eight weeks.

JD: Eight weeks.

KW: And what did you do there?

JD: Learned to be a machinist. Lathes and shafers and different . . . you know what that is?

BH: Yes.

JD: I was there eight weeks and then I went to Richmond, Virginia. I went to diesel school for five weeks. Diesel propulsion. Engineer. I was there five weeks and then they shipped me to Camp Bradford in Virginia. Put me in the amphibious forces. That was fitness, which was very interesting.

KW: So you had to become extremely fit.

JD: Yes. Not like I am now.

KW: So how long were you at Camp Bradford?

JD: I don’t know. About a month. Doesn’t it say there?

KW: No. It doesn’t say. So you were in amphibious forces for a little while and then where did you go from there?

JD: I went to Great Lakes. Laid over there for . . . I think it was approximately three weeks or a month waiting for our ship to build. They sent us to Evansville, Indiana. I think it’s right across the river. It’s right on the Ohio River. Then we picked up a ship, an LST. You know what it is? Here’s a picture of one of them.

BH: LST is a light . . .
JD: It’s a landing ship.

BH: Landing ship.

JD: Bow doors open when they hit the beach.

BH: Right.

JD: 327 feet long. It’s got about 115 crewmen.

BH: Those are amphibious ships that landed on . . .

JD: Beaches.


JD: Picked it up there. Put a skeleton crew on it and we went down the Ohio River, the Mississippi. Came out in New Orleans.

[Tape interruption]

BH: You were saying that you took this LST down from Indiana down the Mississippi to New Orleans. And then what happened?

JD: Well, you had to take it out on a shakedown cruise. Make sure everything was working right. Then get a crew together. I think we had 116 or 117 men. Then got it all together and got it demagnetized. Got everything on it we needed. Supplies. Loaded 65,000 cases of beer in the tank deck. A lot of people call me a liar but it’s the honest-to-God truth. 65,000 cases of Greasy Dick beer out of St. Louis.

BH: Greasy Dick beer. Yes.

JD: Remember the name?

BH: Yes. I’ve had it in St. Louis.

JD: You don’t have to take a laxative. And we loaded it. There’s a picture of that. It’s in a carton. I don’t know where Bob got it.

BH: Yes. So they were relatively small ships.

JD: 327 feet long.

BH: But they were ocean going?

JD: They were ocean going. Flat bottom.
BH: So they weren’t . . . did they land on beaches?

JD: It hit the beach. It would land right on beaches.

BH: So it’s not what I was saying earlier. Those amphibious ships with the ramps that come down?

JD: Always open the door and the ramp comes down. The ones you’re talking about is like that LCT. They hold a tank or a couple tanks or a truck. Higgins boat. Where they put troops. I’ve been on them, too.

BH: So the LST’s job was to what? Transport troops?

JD: Transport troops and transport material.

BH: Beer.

JD: Well, beer. When we left, went through the Panama Canal and left there and we didn’t see . . . well, we stopped in Hawaii and got some supplies and some fuel. I guess it was at least a couple weeks later. We never saw land until we hit New Guinea. Landed in New Guinea. We pulled up on the beach there and opened the door, dropped the bows and a bunch of quartermaster army came in with the trucks and unloaded a couple thousand cases of beer for the troops there. Then we made about three other stops at different islands. Finished unloading at different places. Supplies for the army. We got her unloaded. Then we started . . . all over the Philippines.

BH: You weren’t supposed to be a combat ship though.

JD: Oh, yes.

BH: You were?

JD: Oh, yes. Well, we’re not . . . not for fighting other ships or anything like that.

BH: But defending yourself.

JD: No. We had forty-millimeter guns for aircraft and twenty-millimeter guns. And we had a gunner mate on there. Of course, everybody had to learn to shoot. And we just went all over the Pacific.

KW: You said there were 115 men . . .

JD: 117, I think it was.

KW: Oh, 117. Okay.
JD: I belong to the LST association. I don’t know if you . . . here’s a picture of one. I don’t know if you remember that ship they went over in Greece and got? Do you remember reading anything about it?

BH: No.

JD: Here’s what an LST looks like. And this is at Utah Beach over in Europe.

KW: Jim is showing us a newspaper called *LST Scuttlebutt*, the May-June 2006 issue.

JD: Yes. This is the name of the paper. They got a Minnesota chapter down in Forest Lake. They have meetings every so often. When I came back I went to one in Mobile, Alabama when the ship came in. One they restored and brought it back. A bunch of old LST sailors and they had a big reunion.

KW: So was this the particular one that they restored?

JD: No.

KW: No. Different one.

BH: It’s just a picture.

JD: The one they restored now is in Evansville, Indiana. Anybody can go down and see it. We’re going down this fall to see it.

KW: So they just finished restoring it?

JD: Yes.

KW: I wonder . . . would you be able to walk through it then?

JD: Oh, yes. They might have tours on it. I brought this down for Bob. They have a Minnesota chapter in Forest Lake.

KW: Yes. Okay. So you’re a member of this chapter then?

JD: Yes.

KW: So if they have a chapter, then there are quite a few people in Minnesota that were on LSTs. Trained.

JD: Yes.

KW: Okay. And there were 117 men on the LSTs and you said you were in the Pacific then for a while. How long?
JD: Thirteen months.

KW: Thirteen months. Did you experience combat then during that time?

JD: Lots of it.

KW: Were there any specific battles that you were in or do you want to talk more about that?

JD: Well, we were in some pretty bad . . . I guess the worst one was when we went in to Borneo. We did go to Australia and we went there two weeks. Then we went down to Cairns, Australia and had R and R down there.

KW: For two weeks?

JD: Yes. They give us R and R after we’d been all over the Pacific. Went into Panay and Negros. A couple islands. We were sitting on the beach when MacArthur . . . after we went in and cleaned the beach out. A load of Marines. MacArthur came walking ashore. Son of a bitch. But we made . . . this was the three major invasions we made.

KW: Jim handed me a card. It says USS LST721. That was the name of your ship. Participated in the following initial landings aboard this vessel: Panay, that was March 18, 1945; Negros, March 30, 1945.

JD: That’s where MacArthur walked ashore.

KW: Okay. And then Borneo, Balikpapan . . .

JD: Balikpapan, Borneo.

KW: Balikpapan, Borneo. July 1, 1945. Balikpapan is spelled Balikpapan. So those were some pretty heavy battles.

JD: The worst one was at Borneo.

KW: Borneo?

BH: Were there a lot of American ships involved?

JD: Oh, there were a lot of American ships. There were battleships. There were aircraft carriers. There were cruisers, destroyers. We went down to Cairns, Australia for two weeks R and R. We loaded up quite a few ships of Australians and Marines, infantrymen. They were seven feet tall. They were . . . They had no fear. We went in to Borneo. They were great.

KW: So was there fighting already? Did that already begin before you got there?
JD: No. We made the initial invasion. Because we never went into Manila until two weeks after they took Manila back. But we were all over the Philippines. After we made those three invasions we did a lot of supply, hauled a lot of supplies to different...we picked up wounded. We had a load of supplies on one night. We were headed for northern Luzon, where Jim Wipson was, and I was in the engine room. I was in the “black gang” they call it. Down in the engine room.

KW: Why did they call it that?

JD: Well, that’s where you were. You all were dirty and greasy and running engines and repairing.

KW: So you were literally black from grease and...

JD: Hot.

KW: Yes.

JD: Yes. We were in a convoy one night heading for northern Luzon, but we were surprised down in the engine room. The engine quit. We had two engines down there. Both about the size of those engines you see in railroads. One of them quit. And we dropped back. Found out a little later a Jap sub had sent a torpedo for us. We were in the coffin corner, which is this corner here when you’re in a convoy. Went and got the next LST next to it. We never...I don’t know. The worst part about being in the war and being over there, we really didn’t give a damn. That’s the attitude. You know you’re not coming out alive anyway. And all the time I went through there and after I got back I think...and still to this day...I’ll swear it was my mother’s prayers that brought me home.

BH: If you were in an engine room you know you would have died.

JD: Oh, yes. I’ve seen a lot of them get hit.

BH: So if that ship got hit that would have been it. You couldn’t have gotten out.

JD: No. Look at all they sank with torpedoes.

BH: What was that?

JD: I said look at all the damage torpedoes had done during the war.

BH: Right. So you dodged a bullet that time, as they say.

JD: Yes.

BH: But the other LST got it.
JD: Yes.

BH: Sad.

JD: We were over there all over the Pacific.

KW: Oh, your pictures here. Is this you?

JD: No. It’s a buddy of mine. I’ve looked all over for him. I’ve searched all over the United States for him.

KW: You didn’t find him?

JD: Can’t find him. That’s just a couple of us on the ship. A couple of guys in that picture. That’s me and two of my buddies.

KW: Okay. Oh, I was going to ask . . . so you were on the ship. You were pretty close with the crew during that time?

JD: Oh, yes.

KW: Did people ever ask you anything about being Indian?

JD: No.

KW: Did they know? They knew you were Indian?

JD: Yes. Yes.

KW: Did they ever think that you were a good . . . brave . . . had special abilities because you were Indian or anything like that?

JD: No, no.

KW: Nothing.

JD: We all looked out for each other.

KW: Sure. Because I know sometimes a lot of people have talked about how some non-Indian people that they were with thought that they were extra brave because they were Indian or this warrior kind of tradition. I was just wondering if you experienced that.

JD: No. I didn’t. I never experienced any discrimination in the service when I was in due to nationality.

KW: Yes. Okay.
BH: What about Alaska? Were you there, too?

JD: When I went in the Navy I signed up for four years. I was in the regular Navy. I wasn’t in a reserve. I got hurt hauling some machinery and I broke my arm, and bones won’t heal over there very good in the humidity. We had gone into Okinawa. Took a load of supplies in there and we went into an island north of Japan with some supplies. Hokkaido. We went into Tokyo Bay. Yokohama. The Missouri was sitting there two weeks after the war was over. We sailed in there. We made a trip with a load of supplies to Inchon, which is twenty miles from Seoul, Korea. Coming back out we stopped in Saipan. There were still Japs on that island yet. They put me in a hospital there. I had a wound on my leg and I had a broken arm. They stuck me in a hospital there and the ship left and I never did get back on it. But that typhoon, hurricane they had in October of 1945 in Okinawa wrecked a lot of ships, too.

BH: But you were reported to . . . you were ordered to report to Kodiak, Alaska?

JD: No, no. I got on a destroyer out of Saipan heading for Honolulu, for Hawaii. We stopped there for a couple days and then they went into San Diego and I got off the ship there. Because [my arm] wouldn’t heal over there. I got off the ship in San Diego and they stuck me in a hospital. To see if I was nuts.

KW: What year was this?

JD: 1946.


JD: 1946. After the war was over. And then from there I had thirty days leave. After I got out of there I took the train and went home to Duluth, Minnesota. I met a buddy of mine down there in Duluth. Had to stay overnight at the old Spalding Hotel. I met him down in the lobby. He said, “Where are you going?” I said, “I’m going to Grand Marais in the morning.” He said, “Well, you can ride up with me.” I said, “Okay.” I met him down in the lobby in the morning and I had a seabag and my clothes. Somebody picked us up and I said, “Where the hell you going?” He said, “Going out to the airport. I got a plane up there. I’ve got to take it to Grand Marais.” Little Piper Cub. Got in that thing. I think we looked at every beaver pond all the way up the north shore and up over the lake. “What in the hell am I doing up here?”

BH: Praying.

JD: Praying. Been gone two years and I’m going die in this plane. Bobby Blackwell was his name. Well, I finally got home. Got off the bus in Hovland and my mother was there to meet me. She almost squeezed me to death. It was an experience. I’ll never forget.

KW: Did you write letters back and forth while you were in the war to your mother?

JD: Not often enough.
KW: Did you get letters from her?

JD: Yes. Yes. But you don’t . . . maybe I wrote every three or four months or something like that. That’s one thing I made a big mistake. I didn’t write often enough.

KW: But you made it home and I’m sure she was really glad.

JD: Yes. And after my leave was over and I still had ten months to do, so I went to Seattle. I was told to report to Seattle. I went to Seattle and they shipped me to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Onalaska. Alaska out in the Aleutian Islands. For ten months I ran a water treatment plant out there.

BH: That’s why Alaska shows up on his papers.

JD: That’s Kodiak, Alaska. When I was out there I ended up with pneumonia. So they sent me to Kodiak to the hospital for a couple weeks. Then I went back to Dutch Harbor. When my time was up I caught a ship out of Dutch Harbor and caught a transport that was coming by and went into Seattle.

BH: And then back home.

JD: Then back home.

BH: For good?

JD: Well, no. I’d gotten married up in Alaska.

BH: Oh.

KW: So you met a girl there.

JD: Yes. In Dutch Harbor . . . Onalaska. The fish really jump there. She had a daughter and then she was pregnant with my son, my oldest son. So we went into Seattle and she had an aunt and uncle in Berkeley, California. They wanted us to come down there. So I went down there. He was a big shot in the shipyard. He got me a job painting ships. For ten months I lived there. Then they closed the shipyard down.

BH: The shipyard in Richmond?

JD: No. It was in Alameda.

BH: Alameda. Yes.

JD: They were converting Liberty ships into . . . to haul sugar from I guess Hawaii or someplace. Put stainless steel inside and then paint them and they were hauling sugar. I worked on that and then I moved back to Minnesota.
BH: With two kids by then?

JD: With two kids and a wife. Worked in the woods for a couple years and then went to work in Grand Marais. Construction outfit. Then I went to work logging. Hauling lumber and pulpwood. In 1951 I went to work for North Shore Freight Lines. Go up and down the shore here for . . . until 1957. I got crippled up with arthritis so bad the doctor said, “Get out of here.” So I had a brother in Phoenix. So I moved to Phoenix. Down about a month. I got feeling real good so I applied to Greyhound in April, I guess. I started. Went to school with Greyhound. I got to go to a course for five weeks.

KW: What year was this?

JD: 1957.


JD: So I drove for Greyhound all over the southwest. I worked there down in New Mexico, Texas, California. Strictly a seniority job. You just go in and you’ve got no seniority. You’ve got to bid your position where you want to go like the railroad did. So I worked for them for twenty-seven years driving all over the United States and Alaska, Canada. There are only two cities in the United States I haven’t been in, I haven’t stayed in. One is Cleveland and one is Chicago.

BH: So your family was back in Minnesota and you were driving?

JD: No, no. They came with me. No.

BH: Where were you based?

JD: I started out in Phoenix.

BH: Phoenix. Okay.

JD: And then we ended up in Flagstaff for a while. Then we had a merger so I ended up in Indio, California and then I moved to San Luis Obispo, California. I was over there twelve years. Then I got divorced. And I moved back to Arizona for a little while. I moved to Flagstaff. I was working out of Flagstaff, Arizona, running between Flag and Albuquerque. In the meantime, I had hooked up with a tour company out of Redlands, California, so I pulled senior citizen tours all over the United States for seven years.

KW: When did you start that? What year?

JD: That was 1973 or 1974. I got burned out of that so I had enough seniority I could hold a run out of Flagstaff and then I stayed there until I retired.

KW: What year did you retire?
JD: I retired in February of 1984. I had twenty-seven years in. I was fifty-seven years old. The company was going downhill and they were getting ready to sell out. So I got out of it. I took my pension and went to work construction for two years with my brother. He was a general superintendent of a construction outfit.

BH: Whereabouts?

JD: In Phoenix. Tempe.

KW: How did he wind up in Phoenix?

JD: In 1957 when I got crippled arthritis that’s where I went and started out with Greyhound because I had a brother down there.

KW: He was living down there already?

JD: He was down there all the time.

KW: Did he have a job there?

JD: Oh, yes. He had a good job right away. He’d been there for years. Construction. But I didn’t want to stay in that construction. I wanted to get in the transportation business. So I applied to Greyhound and got on. And I worked for Yellow Freight. I drove for them out of Flagstaff after I retired from Greyhound and I worked construction a little while.

KW: In the 1980s?

JD: Yes. Then in 1991 I came back up here to family reunion and found this place down here on the lake. Because of my wife we were getting the hell out of there. Moving back here. So I moved back here.

BH: You were remarried.

JD: Yes. Been married twenty-eight years now. I just turned eighty yesterday.

BH: And your children were mostly raised in the southwest?

JD: Yes. I have two sons in Phoenix, Arizona, a girl in Hawaii and a son in Portland, Oregon.

KW: Did they also come for the family reunion or do they come back to Portage at all?

JD: No. They’ve been up here and visited. And I’ve been there. Been in Hawaii a couple times. Up to Alaska and to Phoenix. Then I came back up here and I was off maybe a month and they said, “We need somebody to haul lumber.” Had a mill going up here. Stupid me, I said, “Okay.” So I hauled lumber and wood chips and worked construction up until I turned seventy-five and then I said, “That’s it.”
KW: I have a question about the war. You were in the Pacific when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

JD: Yes.

KW: Where were you when you first heard about that? The first bomb.

JD: We were in the Philippines somewhere. I don’t remember exactly where.

KW: What do you remember thinking about that?

JD: It’s about time. I hate to see people get killed but it had to end somehow. We were losing way too many men over there. The reason I don’t like MacArthur is we went into northern Luzon with a boat of supplies and picked up a bunch of wounded infantrymen to take them to the hospital. Put them on cots on our tank deck and took them back to the Philippines. Leyte and a hospital ship. The hospital was down there. I talked to a few of them and they said that . . . I said, “What’s your problem?” They were cussing MacArthur. They said we had this hell where we were getting slaughtered in the valley in there and we wanted those tanks and MacArthur made the statement, “It’s cheaper to replace men than it is equipment.” He could have saved a lot of lives. That’s the stories I got.

BH: It sounds like MacArthur though. I mean it’s believable.

JD: Yes.

KW: I think we’re going wrap up here but I have a couple of questions for you. We were just talking about the war. What do you think is the most important way the war changed your life?

JD: I think it made me a better person. After seeing all the suffering it made me more compassionate for other people. Elders and children. Of course, those seven years I worked in Greyhound I took senior citizens all over the United States. I really enjoyed it. The only trouble I had with that was all these senior citizens were up in their eighties, seventies . . . late seventies and eighties and nineties. I’d be in Los Angeles with thirty-eight people or thirty-six people on the bus and I’d have thirty women and six men. “My husband always wanted to come here. He always wanted to see this. He wouldn’t quit work.” They never traveled together. So I don’t know. It made me more compassionate for elders because I worked with elders for many years. And children. Children, especially.

BH: How did the war do that?

JD: Well, all the suffering you see.

KW: Sure. Did you have any questions? I’m going to ask you one question. The name of this project, I think Brian told you, is called Minnesota’s Greatest Generation. How do you feel about your generation being called the greatest generation? Do you agree with that?
JD: Yes, I do, because RTC called me one day and asked me if I wanted to go to Washington, D.C. for the World War II Memorial and I said, “Sure, I’d love to.” I’d read a lot about it. Seen pictures of it. They said, “We want to send somebody from here back there. We’ll pay all your expenses. Fly you back. Pay all your expenses. Furnish your rooms, your meals.” And I was all for it. He said, “Fine.” They said, “Find somebody to take with you. Another World War II veteran.” So I shopped around and shopped around and finally I found Bill Amyotte. Have you talked to him?

BH: Yes. We saw your pictures together at the memorial.

JD: Yes.

BH: What did you think of the memorial?

JD: Oh, just beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. And it’s mostly private funding. That was beautiful. We walked across the Mall there, across part of it there one day, and I saw Bob Dole over there. I think we got a picture of him, too, with us. And I spotted him and I walked towards him and I had a cap like this and it said LST721. He walked over to me and shook my hand and he said, “You were on an LST?” And I said, “Yes.” He said, “You boys had it rough.” You remember at Normandy and all those places. How bad they were. You’ve seen pictures of it. I thought that was nice. He shakes hands with his left hand. So I hollered at Bill and he came over and we had our picture taken with him and talked to him for a few minutes. But we can’t thank the RC enough for what they did for us. That was great. Sending us back there.

BH: What is it about your generation that you . . . is there something that you think is special about your generation that’s the reason that it’s called the greatest?

JD: Well, I never thought about it before until after I listened to Tom Brokaw and what I’d seen back there, and it seemed like every place we’d go there were school kids, college kids, guys in their twenties and thirties. They’ve never been in the service. They’d walk over and say thanks and shake your hand and keep on going. It really made you feel good. I think that the . . . my personal opinion. I think that the greatest generation are more used to hardships growing up than they are nowadays. We never had all that stuff they’ve got now. I think that makes a big difference. We worked harder. We studied harder. Now everything is handed to them. They can’t walk from here over to the store. We did it all the time. I’m not talking about you two.

KW: We walk.

BH: This is kind of going backwards a few decades, but what did you think about . . . you were out of the service, long out of the service by the time the Vietnam War came around, and I wondered what you and people of your generation . . . you don’t have to speak for your whole generation, but what do you think of America during the Vietnam era and also today’s war? Is there some perspective that you have from World War II that you brought to those two conflicts, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War?
**JD:** My oldest son was in the Vietnam War. He was on an aircraft carrier. He put the detonators in bombs before they put them on the planes, which is actually . . . and he helped load them on the planes, which is a pretty scary job. But after listening to him talk about the pilots, what the pilots would come back on just madder than hell. They’d have to drop their bombs out in the ocean before they could land back on the carrier because they weren’t allowed to bomb. Bomb this and bomb that. It was pretty much a political . . . I don’t think we should have been over there from what I know about it. I know damn well this one here is a big mistake. That’s my feelings. And that’s my wife’s feelings and that’s my family’s feelings.

**BH:** But during the Vietnam War, especially if your son was involved in the conflict you probably . . . you weren’t opposed to the war at that point, were you? Or you believed we shouldn’t be there?

**JD:** At first I didn’t know what it was all about.

**BH:** Yes.

**JD:** But then after talking to my son and after reading . . . he made two trips over there. Kept me scared to death because I knew what I had gone through and I was worried about him. But after talking to him and what they were doing, not letting them do their job that they were supposed to be assigned to do, I just . . . I couldn’t understand it.

**BH:** You think it was a lot clearer in World War II what we were fighting for?

**JD:** Yes. Yes, I do. I do. I had some friends, couple friends in Flagstaff that were on the Bataan Death March. But I talked to them. When you could get them to talk. It was pretty horrific.

**KW:** Did Bernard Cyrette ever talk about that?

**JD:** I never really knew Bernard.

**KW:** Oh, you didn’t? Okay. I was going to just ask one more question about right after the war. They say America experienced an economic boom, and people were able to buy more things. Did you and your family experience that at all? Were you able to buy more things because it was easier to get a job or—?

**JD:** When I got out of the Navy I was down living in Berkeley, California working in the shipyards had two kids and a house payment and a furniture payment and two kids and taking home sixty-six dollars a week from the shipyard. We had money. We could go out once in a while and do things. But you can’t even live on sixty-six dollars a day now. I don’t know.

**KW:** Did you think that a lot of people, other people that you saw, were able to buy things or they experienced that economic boom?

**JD:** Oh, yes. Yes. I think so.
KW: Were you able to buy a television set?

JD: Yes. Working and living in Grand Marais. Had a good job and driving for the freight line. I worked long hours sometimes. But I enjoyed driving or I wouldn’t have been driving for fifty-two years. It’s the hardest thing you have to do at seventy-five years old is to get off the road because I loved it.

KW: What is it about driving that you love?

JD: There’s just something about it. It’s hard to explain.

KW: Okay. Sure.

JD: But after being . . . I went to that Vietnam Memorial there in Washington, D.C. I saw all those young kids that were at the memorial and in different places and it just tears the hell out of you when you see them missing arms and legs. It’s hard to take.

KW: Sure.

BH: Can you explain some of [these photos]? [They look at Jim Drouillard’s photographs]

JD: This one here is in Yokohama after they bombed it. This one here . . . I think this one is a picture I took in Borneo. The rest of these are on the ship. Crew members. This one here was taken in Alaska.

BH: Who’s in the grass skirt?

JD: That’s one of the crewmembers. He was a gypsy.

BH: A real gypsy?

JD: Yes.

BH: And that’s not . . .

JD: LaCotta. That’s me.

BH: That’s you with him?

JD: Yes.

BH: And who is that?

JD: I think that’s when we went across the equator.

BH: Oh, that’s right. There’s that ceremony that they have.
JD: Yes. That’s when we went across the equator.

BH: And that’s another crewman with him?

JD: Yes.

BH: And this is you with some friends of yours?

JD: Yes. This kid in the middle here, this Carl Goss, I’ve searched all over for him. He was my best friend.

KW: And that’s the same guy here?

JD: Yes.

BH: You don’t know whatever happened to him?

JD: No.

BH: When did you lose track of him?

JD: Well, after I left the ship. But I’ve got a letter that his mother wrote to my mother in 1945, I think it is. She was talking about that they hadn’t heard from us boys and no news was good news and hoped we were all right.


BH: So you don’t know whether he’s still living?

JD: Well, Bob is . . .

BH: Bob’s been tracking trying to find him?

JD: Bob’s tracking him. I’ve called back there and talked to the vets and I’ve talked to the American Legion. I’ve talked to everybody back there on the phone and they just . . .

BH: Can’t find out what happened to him. Would you mind if we asked you to scan some of these pictures or Vicky could scan them for you for us?

JD: I don’t care.

BH: We’d like to get them for the project. And if you could identify these, too?

KW: Well, just that he referenced these three documents. We will end the interview here. Thank you for doing the interview with us today.