

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Moorhead, MN

Eddie Gudmundson
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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EG: I'm Eddie Gudmundson. I live at 1608 6th Street South, Moorhead, Minnesota.

LJ: Where were you born?

EG: Born at Mountain, North Dakota.

LJ: Where about is Mountain?

EG: Mountain, North Dakota, is in the northeast corner of the state in Pembina County.

LJ: How big a town is Mountain?

EG: Probably under 300 people.

LJ: Who are your parents and what did they do?

EG: My father was Chris Gudmundson. He drove truck, hauled cattle and grain. And he had a butcher shop. He also worked and owned a general store in Mountain.

LJ: What was your mother's name?

EG: My mother's name was Christine and she was a housekeeper who took care of her mother, who was an invalid.

LJ: Where did you go to high school?

EG: I went to high school Central High in Fargo.

LJ: When did you graduate?

EG: And I graduated in 1935; then I went to NDSU.

LJ: What did you study?

EG: I studied pharmacy and I was out in 1938 for a year of experience, graduated in 1940 and two of the summers I went to Interstate Business College.

LJ: Were you drafted?

EG: I had received a notice for the Army, and then I enlisted in the Navy before I was called. Yes.

LJ: So you served in the Navy?

EG: Yes.

LJ: What was your military training like and where did you go for your training?

EG: In the military training, I actually got as far as the recruiting station in Minneapolis and they put me to work before I was sworn in because I could type. Then I went to the Great Lakes; and there I was on master-at-arms duty and went to Hospital Corps Training School. Afterwards I was sent to the Naval Hospital, Oakland, California, and then I got assigned to a ship the USS Rixey after that.

The USS Rixey was named after Rear Admiral Presley Rixey, who was instrumental in starting the Navy Nurse Corps. He was the Surgeon General under Theodore Roosevelt. And he was founder of the Navy Nurse Corps and the Hospital Corps Training School and also a Dental Corps in the Navy.

LJ: What were some of your best memories during your training?

EG: During the training, we actually had a pretty heavy schedule so there wasn't time for much although we did go on liberty in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And I met some very nice people and worked with some good people.

LJ: Now you said you went on the Rixey and where did you leave once you boarded the Rixey?

EG: Rixey was commissioned at Moore Dry Docks in Oakland, California and we were stationed on Treasure Island before the ship was commissioned. And the first port that we hit was Pago Pago, Samoa. And after that we had duty in the South Pacific. Our home port was Nouméa, New Caledonia, for almost a year; not that we were there very much, but we received our mail when we came in.

LJ: Now what was your job on the ship?

EG: I had actually three jobs. I worked in minor surgery for about six months and being a pharmacist when I went in, I worked in the pharmacy onboard ship for another six months, and then I worked with a dermatologist for about a year.

LJ: Did you serve in the war zone?

EG: We did. We were with the first invasion we covered was the nation of Guam. We were in there about 10 days and left for a time after the Japs. The Japanese attacked the hospital there; they killed doctors and some corpsmen. We received people directly from the front lines, cleaned them up and then they were transferred to white hospital ships.

The Rixey was a hospital evacuation ship that took troops in ... Marines sometimes and Army and evacuated casualties. We had 12 landing boats for that purpose. And being armed we were rated no protection so we had four 3-inch guns, some 5-inch guns. We started out with about a dozen 20-mm anti-aircraft.

LJ: How many people could the Rixey hold?

EG: Actually they could carry about 1,200 passengers. There were 70 medical personnel, about 20 doctors and 50 hospital corpsmen. But in wartime the crew would probably run close to 500 people. It was 450 feet in length, which was the length of Noah's Ark, and had a displacement of a little under 10,000 ton, whereas Noah's Ark had a much larger displacement. And the ship was, like I say, was 62 feet wide and had a cruising speed of about 18 knots, which is quite fast.

LJ: How old a ship was it?

EG: The ship was just commissioned. We were at the commissioning December 30th of 19, oh, it would have to be probably '41, '42. I should know, because

I went into the service on the 27th of '42 which is January 27th, so the ship was commissioned next December.

LJ: Tell us about some of the people you met during your time in the service, especially on the Rixey?

EG: **At one time we were carrying some movie stars and I did meet one that I got a good autograph from. I don't recall his name now, but he was in *The Lost Weekend* and he gave me a nice autograph. The name will come to me, I'm sure shortly.**

LJ: Any other people that really stand out in your memory?

EG: **I worked with a dermatologist that for a whole year and got to know him quite well. He was very good in diagnosis and at that time not much was known about tropical skin disease. We had the only bathtub in the South Pacific and this was used for permanganate soaks and for people with fungus infections and so forth. And we got along quite well.**

I did a little research in prickly heat which was quite common; because the tropics is very hot and the people working in the engine room and that high temperatures often bothered with that. It was said the dermatology line was said to be next to the chow line, the longest line, and some of them were treated by painting them actually with a brush with strong calamine lotion for prickly heat and so forth.

LJ: Any other illnesses?

EG: **Fungus infections were a large thing there until later in the war when we started to take on casualties. I was on actually a team that gave plasma to people before they could get to surgery. It's called a shock team. And this probably would have saved a lot of lives. We carried between 150-200 units of plasma at one time. Sometimes we were able to give fresh blood, which only lasted a few days.**

LJ: Was the fungus you were treating on the body, was that more so with the feet of the soldiers?

EG: **It often would start with the feet, but when the moisture and humidity was high and temperature was high, they would often get secondary infections that would involve other parts of the body, even the ears, so it was quite serious. And the captain of the medical department used to say, "Well, they**

never die and they never get healed.” Some of these were actually shipped out of the tropics before they could treat them successfully.

LJ: How many doctors were on the ship?

EG: There were about 20 officers in the medical department about 11, 12 doctors. Eye, ear, nose and throat; we had a dentist and neurosurgeon and orthopedic doctor and general doctors.

LJ: When you took on injured soldiers and you were treating them on the ship, where would you take them from there, what port?

EG: They were dropped off. Some of them were dropped as far south as New Zealand and during Guam they were loaded. We took a load of patients to Hospital Aiea [?]. It's in Hawaii. And some were dropped off at, I think in other places but there are two hospitals in New Zealand, mobile hospitals, so many of them were taken down there.

LJ: How many years were you on the Rixey?

EG: I was on the Rixey probably about a week short of two years; during which time I did not sleep on land one night. The ship was in and out of port but enlisted men didn't get overnight liberty.

LJ: And you were working mostly with the pharmaceutical end of the . . .

EG: Well, it was medical, yes.

LJ: Any patients that really stand out that you treated?

EG: Not particularly, although I had an ambulatory ward one time. What I would do when I went to chow, everybody would like the Navy food. And if somebody wasn't there, you would check on them carefully. I found out one fellow one time that didn't go and he had a real bad arm. And we were lucky we got him in for treatment.

LJ: Do you still talk to any of the people you served with?

EG: We've been losing some of the people that I had close contact with. A good friend of mine died not too long ago. They say that between probably 1,100 and 1,400 World War II veterans are dying a day, so we've lost a lot of the contacts.

LJ: Losing them fast. Did you go to any of your reunions?

EG: I went to the 50th Reunion in Chicago and there were eight hospital corpsmen there out of the fifty and one orthopedic surgeon that was able to attend. Although he was up in, well up in years at that time.

LJ: When did you leave the military?

EG: I received a discharge on the 25th of September 1945.

LJ: How did you feel about leaving after two years on ship?

EG: At the time, I had applied after the [unclear] Gulf fight, I had applied for a commission. I went to the University of Pennsylvania and I was married there. Then I went to Midshipman School at Notre Dame. And toward the end of the war, they were cutting down on officers only what they needed; so I opted for a discharge and went out on points at that time. I was somewhat glad to be out of the service, but on the other hand there were a lot of times it was quite enjoyable. But being a pharmacist, there were a lot of job openings so I wasn't concerned about getting work.

LJ: Where did you go right after all your training?

EG: I went up as a pharmacist, after discharge, I went up to Bottineau, North Dakota, and worked in the pharmacy up there for my uncle.

LJ: How long were you there?

EG: Our older boy was born there and we were not there too long. After that I managed a drug store at McVille, North Dakota, and after that we bought the drug store in Abercrombie.

LJ: How long were you in Abercrombie?

EG: From fall until the drug store burned down in May. After that I went to the Moorhead Drug Company where I stayed for some time. And later managed that and after a while bought in on the store there with Joel Nelson.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through while serving your country those years on the Rixey?

EG: The final thoughts, I'll probably a lot of times, I appreciated being where I was because if we had to abandon ship in the South Pacific, you could last for

several hours in the water. Whereas the people who served in the North Atlantic, it was so cold they might only last 15 minutes. So I did appreciate that. I've often felt quite a responsibility if something happened while you had to load patients; that took four hours to load. If you had to, you'd be like the captain, you couldn't leave the patients, you'd have to go down with the ship.

LJ: Any special memories you'd like to share that come to mind?

EG: This was considered a lucky ship. And although we were never hit, we had a suicide plane come in about 100 feet or about mast height through a smoke screen. I was on deck there and I thought he was going to start strafing. I hit the deck. He pulled out. He didn't hit the ship and it happened so fast the gunners couldn't even fire at him.

LJ: And did you have a sister ship that . . . ?

EG: There were three sisters ... there's the Rixey and the [USS] Pinkney and the [USS] Tryon were all named after surgeon generals. They were all hospital evacuation ships. They were not painted white and did not rate protection for that reason.

LJ: Any special stories about different places, different ports or people that came on the ship.

EG: We used to like to go on liberty in New Zealand, especially Auckland, New Zealand. Although, in order to get there, you had to go through 90 miles of minefields, which were our own minefields, and it was blacked out but the food was very good. They'd have what they called, "stike and iggs" or "steak and eggs" down there and sometimes you could go to the movies and it was a good liberty place.

LJ: Mr. Gudmundson, how would you like to be remembered?

EG: Ah, well I suppose, I probably would like to be remembered as a caring person. We took care of over 10,000 patients and it gives you a good feeling to know that you may have helped somebody or might have saved somebody's life.

LJ: Definitely, anything else?

EG: I don't believe so.

LJ: Thank you so much, Mr. Gudmundson.

EG: **I was thinking when we went in the invasion of Leyte; we were in there two days and they wanted us out of there on the 22nd. On the 23rd, the Battle of Leyte Gulf and this was where the greatest naval battle in history took place, the day after we got out of there.**

LJ: Where is Leyte?

EG: **In the Philippines, yes.**

LJ: That took place after you were . . .

EG: **Yes, we left on the 22nd. That took place between the 23rd and 26th of October of '44.**

LJ: So close.

EG: **Yes, but it would not have been an asset to have. See what they did in the harbor when they went in. Well we were there probably before Douglas MacArthur. We were earlier in the morning before he returned. But they laid a smoke screen that covered the entire bay, you couldn't see anything. We had two smoke generators on the ship that generated smoke and they had five-gallon pails that you dumped in the water. You couldn't see anything at all. The Japanese, they didn't know whether they were going to drop bombs in the harbor during that time. But at the same time, the Japanese came in with four, three fleets and they kind of converged and that's where the sea battle was. It was such a big, big battle.**

LJ: A day after you got out of there?

EG: **Yes, one of the things – I probably mentioned it before. We went on Friday the 13th, we went up in, which some people consider unlucky, in a 13-ship convoy up to Guadalcanal. We moved into berth eight and at noon we moved out; we had ammunition aboard. We were unloading ammunition at Tulagi and two hours ... it's on a moonlight night. We were there for two hours and during that time, [USS] John Penn moved into our berth. And a couple of Japanese planes sneaked in and they killed 100, about 150 men. They hit the ship. You sat there for that long, but we weren't really worried because we would never have known. You're tied up to 540 ton of ammunition on a bright moonlight night and you sit there for two hours.**

LJ: But that was the sister ship that was hit?

EG: No, it was John Penn had been [unclear]. No we didn't know. And I don't know if they showed any lights. They were bright enough they wouldn't have to. But see radar will usually catch something but they came in low, so they couldn't catch that. I guess that's probably about, about it.

LJ: Well thank you so much, Mr. Gudmundson.

EG: Oh did you want a glass of lemonade?