

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
www.heritageed.com
Moorhead, MN

Robert Soderberg
Narrator

James Soderberg
Interviewer

June 2014

JS: This is the interview with Robert Soderberg. He was in the U. S. Navy during World War II. The date today is June 29th. Can you tell me who your parents were and what they did?

RS: My dad was John Reynold Soderberg. He was born in Piteå, Sweden. The family came over here when he was 8 years old to Minneapolis. They came because my grandma had a brother there and they could stay with him. They didn't have much money when they came and I don't believe they ever moved out of Minneapolis. My dad worked at a grocery store.

My mother was born in Vasa, Minnesota. I believe she was the 14th child and the youngest child. Since she was the youngest one, she stayed at home and took care of grandpa in Vasa. I don't know who she stayed with or if she stayed alone when she came to Minneapolis. She found a job in a dress shop just a block or so from where my dad worked in the grocery store. That's how they met and got married.

And one funny thing I get a kick out of is, my mother was 6 years older than my dad and she never wanted anybody to know that. Even she said when she died she didn't want her age on her gravestone. She just was funny about her age.

JS: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RS: I have two brothers and one sister. My sister was two years older than me. I was the second one born, June 6, 1920. And my brother next to me, he was born on January 3, 1925. My youngest brother was born on the 8th of December in 1930, so he was 10 years younger than me.

JS: Did anybody else in the family serve during World War II.

RS: Yes, my brother next to me, he went out for the Navy Air Force and they were stationed right here in Minneapolis.

JS: He was in the Navy in Minneapolis.

RS: He was in the Navy Air Force. He wanted to be a pilot and was learning to be a pilot here. But he couldn't take any acrobatics in the plane. If they were rolling it over or going down fast or anything he would throw up. So they discharged him from the Air Force and they sent him to Memphis, Tennessee, to teach something to pilots that he learned very well. I don't know what it was, but he was teaching other former pilots, and he was in Memphis, Tennessee, until the war ended. He was in there three years and never saw the ocean. And I was in 3 years and 8 months, and that's all I saw was the ocean.

JS: Do you remember what you were doing the Sunday of the Pearl Harbor attack?

RS: Yeah, Sunday, Pearl Harbor Day, a friend of mine was over for dinner with us. My mother had a nice dinner. And we were eating dinner when that came across the radio and, oh, a shock. So that's when I heard about the war, right there when it happened on Sunday around noontime.

JS: What did you do before you entered the military, what was your job?

RS: When I was in high school, I was in the grocery store for groceries for my folks and the grocery owner said, "Bob, would you come in the backroom for a minute?" And I thought oh, oh, Dad must not have paid his grocery bill. He wants me to tell Dad to pay his grocery bill. But that wasn't it. He said, "Bob, how would you like to come to work with us in the store?" I said, "I'd love to do that." So they gave me a job there and they got permission from the school to let me out at 2 o'clock in the afternoon so I can walk home and come to work at 2:30. So for a couple of years in high school, I was a grocery boy. I wasn't old enough to drive yet, so I didn't do any driving, but that came later.

JS: After the attack on Pearl Harbor, were you drafted or did you enlist?

RS: I always wanted to be in the Navy. When I was younger, I thought it'd be nice to go to the Navy college, but I never got into it. So I went down on February 14th, I believe it was. I went down and joined the Navy. They said they'd give me 30-days notice when I would go into it.

JS: What was your service time, you enlisted when?

RS: I enlisted on the 14th of February and I was sworn in on the 21st of February.

JS: When were you discharged?

RS: I was discharged on the 5th of October 1945.

JS: Where did you spend your basic training?

RS: I waited quite a while before they called me, and I was just waiting and waiting. In fact, I got an order from the Army to come in for a physical. I had to go into the physical, and I said, "I'm in the Navy." He said, "Are you sworn in the Navy yet." I said, "No." "Well then you're not in the Navy, yet." So I had to take the physical for the Army, too. I finally got sworn in.

JS: Where did you go for basic training?

RS: I waited quite a while and I went to work. I was working in a different job by then and my mother called me at work and said, "Bob, you got a letter here from the Navy. It came at noon." I said, "Well open it up and see what it is." And there was a letter saying that I was supposed to report to the recruitment office at noon that day. So I said, "I'll go right down there." So I went there and when I walked in, "Where's your suitcase?" "What suitcase?" "Well you're going to go to California for boot training." I said, "I'll go get my suitcase." "You're leaving tonight." They had a private train and I think it was 600 men who were enlisted in the Navy and they were going to boot camp in California.

JS: Which city in California did you go to?

RS: Oh, it's a big one.

JS: San Diego.

RS: Yeah, I went to San Diego and when we got there they had a Navy man in charge of us. And to my surprise the one that was in charge of us had graduated from high school with my sister. That was kind of nice. I had been a Boy Scout for many years and I knew Morse Code and flag waving. He had me helping out teaching that to our group.

JS: How long was basic training?

RS: Basic training was just a little over a month; and then they took me out of basic training and sent me to San Francisco.

JS: What do you remember most about basic training?

RS: Like I said I was a Boy Scout for many years and basic training never bothered me at all. I thought it went awfully fast. After basic training they sent me up to San Francisco to signal school. They wanted me to go to signal school and become a signalman on board ship. When we go in convoy, they were sinking so many cargo ships and so they decided to start the armed guard and that was Navy. The Navy men were put on the ship to man guns and run the ship.

JS: How many armed guard units were on the ship?

RS: They didn't have very many on the ship because they didn't have enough trained. I think we had 14 at first and after that it ended more of like 24, 30 armed guards on board ship that would man the guns. In the convoys you have a lot of signals with flags flying. So that was my job.

JS: The San Francisco training for signal, how long a period was that?

RS: Well, that was very short, too. I had very, very little training there and they told me that I had to take a direct train up to Washington, the state of Washington, Seattle, to pick up a ship. I said, "Well gee, I can't. I can't go out on a ship. I don't know my flashing lights very well." "Well, you'll learn because there's another signalman on there and you'll learn together." So I went there.

There was another signalman there and he had the same amount of training that I had, so neither one of us knew the flashing lights. And wouldn't you know it, the first night out on the ship we get a flashing light message and we couldn't get it. So we had to go and get the ship's radio man and he came down and read the message. I don't remember what the message was but he received it for us and boy did we study every single day on the flashing lights after that. So we learned it pretty good.

JS: What was the first ship you were on and when did you go on it?

RS: My first ship was the Sinclair Rubilene. It's an oil tanker. What they did with the oil tanker was we would go between California and the South Pacific. We'd go down there to ports and refuel the battle ships and the Navy ships with oil. Then go back and get another load and back down to the South Pacific. That was our job. I was on it for almost a year. Then they took me off of that and I forget just what I did right away afterwards.

JS: What was the second ship you were on then?

RS: My second ship was the James Robertson and it was a liberty ship. They were used to haul equipment and things to England, Ireland and all over, wherever they needed war stuff. They would put it on these merchant ships and we'd take it down there.

JS: How long were you on that ship?

RS: I was on it quite a while. We made a trip over to India and we unloaded it at Bombay, India. We were empty and they didn't put us in a convoy. They wanted us to go over to load up our ship with coal and bring it over to Rio de Janeiro where we emptied the ship. We were there for several days. We'd go swimming off the ship and everything.

Then they said they would wait to get so many ships around here, we don't want you to travel alone. We want you to be safe, so we're going to send you in a convoy."

We were in this eight-ship convoy and we were supposed to be safe, so what happened? Four of us got sunk in the convoy. A German submarine came up and torpedoed four of us. We got torpedoed and we were lucky that we were empty.

For one thing, when we got three torpedoes in us, we didn't sink right away. The Navy ships that were sailing with us to protect us, they came along side of us and wanted us to get on their ship but the captain said, "Oh, we're empty we won't sink right away and maybe we won't even sink. So we'll stay aboard." So we stayed aboard the ship and that night it sounded like the ship was cracking up a little bit so we got in lifeboats and tied up to the ship. If it was going to go down any more, then we could cut off and sail away. But we didn't go down any more so in the morning daylight, we went back aboard ship.

I forgot to say that we were lucky, we only lost one man, a Navy man. There was three of them aboard and when we got hit by the third torpedo they got scared and they jumped overboard. The Navy ship found two of them but they didn't find the third one. And so we were pretty lucky that we only lost one man.

We went aboard in the morning and we got some food to put in the lifeboat. We could go and get a little personal stuff to take with us in the lifeboat, like pictures or something. We got back in the lifeboat and we separated from the ship. There were two other lifeboats and we got separated from them. We were all alone and we sailed for two days. The lifeboat had a red sail, so they knew that it was a lifeboat. We come to Port Ilhéus, Brazil where we sailed right into town.

And boy was the town down there to meet us, when we got to the shore. And they treated us real nice for a week. They'd have us stop at the barber shop in the morning and they'd shave us. They fed us good. Then they decided to send us on an airplane over to where there was an aircraft carrier on a shakedown cruise. When the ship goes out to sea for the first time, they would send it on a shakedown cruise.

The Navy men on the aircraft carrier were to take us back to the States and the merchant's crew were flown home. But I was a signalman and they put me up on the signal bridge. We sailed for a few days back to New York and then we got redressed. We got all new clothes and everything and they gave us 28 days to get back to California to the Armed Guard Center in California. On the way there, I stopped at home and asked my girlfriend if she would get married. She said yes, so we got home on a Saturday and then the next Saturday we got married. We had a neighbor that lived next door to me that was going back to San Francisco, too.

JS: August 21, 1943 is that the date you got married?

RS: Yes.

JS: Anything else happen while you were on leave at home?

RS: Well, we had something terrible happen. When we were going to get married, my wife had a brother that was a pilot of a B-17. They were flying in Montana. “Honey why don’t you call Jim in Montana? They’re flying there and they’re going to go overseas pretty soon. So call him and see if he could fly home for the wedding.” She called him, and he told her that he can’t get off because in a couple of days they were going overseas and they can’t get off. So he was sorry he couldn’t come to the wedding.

And it happened that two days later, we were out with the maid-of-honor and the best man of the wedding celebrating and when we got home, I said, “We better get in the house. I see your mother walking back and forth in the window there and something’s wrong.” So we went in the house and sure enough the Air Force had called her mother on the phone and asked if she was alone and she said, “Yes. I’m all alone.” “Well, I’m awfully sorry but we have to tell you that your son’s aircraft crashed. He and the whole crew were killed in the crash.” And oh boy that was an awful, awful thing to find out. Then they shipped his body home to us in Minneapolis. We had a burial in Minneapolis and that was quite a shock for me and my wife and mother, boy oh boy. But that’s what happened.

JS: After your leave when did you get went back to California?

RS: I had 28 days to get there so I got in with a neighbor that had to be there, too. A friend of his was driving so I went with them and we drove to California.

I went to the Armed Guard Center and they sent me over to Guantánamo Bay and put me in a communication pool. Ships would come into Guantánamo Bay and if they didn’t have a signalman aboard, they’d take one of us to put us aboard. So they could take it back to the States.

They put me on a Chilean ship and the only one that spoke English on the ship was the captain. So the captain and I were the only ones speaking to each other. I was on the ship for four-five days. When the ship came into the United States, they had pigs and a cow that they had to kill. They can’t bring livestock into the United States so they killed them and cut them up and froze them for food.

JS: What can you tell me what your best memories are of being in the military?

RS: I joined the Navy to see the sea. See the world and boy I saw it. The Armed Guard Center ships would come in and they would change the crew. That’s one thing that I didn’t care for. They put gunners and signalmen on. There’s only two signalmen on a ship, so I’d get on a ship and there was only one other signalman. So every time I got on a ship, I didn’t know anybody on there. I hadn’t sailed with anybody.

JS: So you had to make new friends all over?

RS: I had to make new friends on every ship that came. I never got to get close enough to the whole crew because the gunners were working on the guns and I wanted to.

JS: Do you feel that your military service was a benefit to you?

RS: Oh, yes. I really loved the Navy. I loved it a lot. We had tools and stuff on the ship. If I had some time, I could go into the shop and make a basket or something. I made a lot of different things aboard ship. I'd take a shell of a gun and gut it with a hacksaw and make an ashtray out of it. And I brought home a few ashtrays. I made lamps out of the shell of the gun and made cigarette lighters out of them. I made a lot of things, so I have a lot of memories of the Navy in my home. My wife was kidding me, I was bringing home too much stuff and where am I going to put it? But it was awfully nice. When we were traveling alone, which we did do a lot of, then I would be busy. Somebody would need some sewing on a shirt or put buttons on the shirt or something and I'd do that. So I get a lot of extra work and I really liked doing that.

JS: How did you feel about leaving the military when you left?

RS: Well, I was very, very glad to leave because I had been gone for four years and I missed being with my family. I had a couple of leaves where I'd come home for a couple of days. I just wanted to be living with my wife and so I was happy to get out when the war was over. They had a unit there where if you had enough time in the service so you could get out. They'd put you up into a unit where you waited until they discharged you. They put me on a train and sent me to Minneapolis and I got discharged in Minneapolis.

JS: After your return home did you use any of the G. I. Benefits?

RS: Yes, I did. I used a benefit for a partial loan for building a house. I had money to build a house and I got a builder that would let me work and build on the house and get credit for it. So I did a lot of the building, putting the siding on there, putting the flooring and the roof. I worked from April until August to build the house. And so I made a very, very good buy on that house because I had a lot of hours building it.

JS: What did you do for a job when you got out of the military?

RS: When I got out of the military, what I wanted to do was to buy a grocery store. I loved the grocery business and so I wanted to buy a grocery store. I had some of the money left that the Navy gave me and I found a grocery store right in the neighborhood where I lived and I bought the grocery store. I got a loan from the Navy for paying for it. We bought a store that my dad had once worked in and where my mother met him. That's the store I bought.

Our hours were long but we weren't open nights or on Sundays. So I had time for other things, too. I had it for six years but I had to sell it because a chain store built right across the street from me. They were open evenings and Sundays and long hours and I just couldn't do that. I had four good years and two hard years in that grocery store. When I wanted to sell it, nobody would buy it because of the big grocery store across the street from us.

I sold it to a fellow that wanted to have a store that sold different things, not groceries. He'd pick up stuff and bring it in the store and sell it. And so then I got out of the grocery business.

JS: How would you like to be remembered?

RS: Well, I really hadn't thought about that.

JS: Do you have any closing comments?

RS: Well, yes. I have a closing comment. I loved the sea. I just loved being out at sea. I spent time in, I think it was, five ships. But there's a liberty ship out East and one out in California, the one out East has a trip that you can go aboard. It is a six-hour day aboard the ship with your meals. You go out in the ocean and the fighter planes would fly by during the trip. They're awfully good meals, and ...

JS: So are you going to take the trip?

RS: So I asked my wife if she would like to go on that trip. Oh boy, she sure would. So we're signed up for September 6th and we're taking that trip. Going on the identical ship that I was on that got torpedoed. I'm sure looking forward to that trip. And so that's what I'm waiting for right now.

JS: Thank you for the interview.