

**A Veterans Oral History**  
**Heritage Education Commission**  
[www.heritageed.com](http://www.heritageed.com)  
Moorhead, MN

**James Wilkins**  
Narrator

**Polly Wendelbo**  
Interviewer

**January 2007**

PW: I'd like to ask you your name and where you grew up.

**JW: My name is Jim Wilkins. I grew up in Battle Lake, Minnesota, in Otter Tail County. I was raised in, I was born in town but I was raised on the farm for the first five years of my life.**

PW: And can I ask you your age?

**JW: I am 91.**

PW: You throw me off at that. What did you do prior to your military service and how did that, your military service, evolve in your life?

**JW: I went to Concordia from the high school in Battle Lake, graduated from high school in 1933, went to Concordia and finished there in 1934, in 1937. I taught and coached at Wahpeton High School for two years. From there, I went to graduate school at Harvard Business, School of Business of Administration in Boston. While I was there, we knew that men members of our class, were being sought for Quartermaster Corps in the Army and Supply Corps in the Navy. And that we could, if the war came along, we could get a commission in one or the other. So I went back to the company in Minneapolis, where I was working, and stayed there until Pearl Harbor. When Pearl Harbor happened, I wanted immediately to get into the service. So I applied for a commission in the Navy and received an ensign's rank and was sent to the same old school, Harvard Business School, where they were training Navy Supply Corps officers. I spent – that was my entry to the Navy.**

PW: And how old were you when you went in?

**JW: I was 25.**

PW: So you were trained specifically at Harvard again after you had been there once for something else?

**JW: Specifically to be in the Supply Corps. Some of the teachers from Harvard were actually commissioned in the Navy and became Navy teachers, so we had some of the same people that we knew when we were there before.**

PW: And then you went through a boot camp experience?

**JW: No, that was the boot camp.**

PW: That was the boot camp.

**JW: Yes, equivalent to the boot camp. That was two-and-a-half months, and then we were told that they needed us now, not four months from now. We need you in two-and-a-half months. So they gave us a choice. We could go on a destroyer as a supply officer or Seabee Battalion as a supply officer. I chose the Seabee Battalion.**

**We were sent to Davisville, Rhode Island, where we met our battalion. The officers were Civil Engineer Corps officers and dentists and chaplains and so on. And where we interviewed the men that we wanted to take with us to do our particular job. These were unlike the Army where you take a body and make him do certain skills, the Navy chose people who were skilled in that profession. For instance, one of our crane operators operated the cranes in the Panama Canal before he went in. My cooks were cooks in large government institutions, Veterans Administration and places like that, where they supervised and fed 1,000 men. We had skilled people. Store keepers, we had clothing storekeepers who worked in clothing stores back in Texas and so on. We interviewed our men and selected the ones we want. Bill and I had over 100 men out of a 1,031 in the supply department and dispersing department.**

PW: So Bill was another coworker?

**JW: He sat next to me in class and we were assigned to the same battalion.**

PW: Now tell me a little a bit about the duties of being on the Seabees? What do the Seabees do?

**JW: Well as a supply officer, one of your most important jobs is to feed the men. Find enough food and have it cooked and prepared properly and served properly for your 1,000 men. And they had officers as well. CPOs had their own "mess" as they called it. The next jobs were small stores where you had toothpaste, cigars, and cigarettes, anything that they could provide for the men. The clothing shop and laundry and all these different little shops that had to be there to take care of the needs of the men.**

PW: And what was the function of the Seabees when you talk about crane operators and that?

**JW:** Well we were assigned to a base unit to build whatever was necessary for the base: the hospital, tank farms, docks, roads, bridges, telephone lines, anything in the way of construction. We built bridges out of mahogany, logs that we cut, things like that. Cut down a 90-foot tree and build bridges. We had people who were qualified to do that, refrigeration men, telephone men, everything. The base ran the tank farms, ran the hospitals and all that. We built it.

**PW:** When you were in, so you were in during wartime. Where were you mainly stationed, where was your center?

**JW:** We left Davisville, Rhode Island, on the day before Christmas. The four trains went across the country to Hueneme, California, where we waited about a month and took a ship from there to Guadalcanal with a stop of about three weeks in New Hebrides until the Japanese were driven out of Guadalcanal. We took several transports and several destroyers and went up to Guadalcanal, which by then was cleared. We landed there on Easter Sunday in 1943. Of course, we went right to work building our camp. That was the first thing. But while we were building camp, the men who were assigned to repair the Henderson Air Field and build a fighter strip and build docks and so on, went to work. They were working within a day or two after we got ashore.

**PW:** Do you have a particular memory you'd like to share during this time or for instances of battles or . . .?

**JW:** I think the most exciting, we had 90-some alerts, air raids and bombings while we were there. They're documented. The most interesting thing was that the Japs seemed to know when we had a movie. They came over usually in the middle of the movie so we had to shut it down and go home.

But the most exciting thing was in June of '43, when the Japs sent over 100 bombers and fighters. We were alerted in the morning that they were coming and sent up, sent up all the fighters that we could. And during that time the battle took place in the afternoon, which was the largest air battle of the war, up to that point in the South Pacific. They shot down some over 90 Japanese planes – it depends on which report you read. And it was exciting because most of us who were not fighters were standing on the beach watching it over the land, over the water. And when a Jap plane was hit, the whole island would cheer.

**PW:** During the times of these alerts, you said you had 90 alerts, because you were involved in hazardous time do you have any decorations or medals or something for that.

**JW:** No, because we had 1,000 men and 31 officers. And none of our group was hurt in any way by enemy fire. We lost one casualty because of a machine accident, that's all. But we had these bombings and shrapnel. We were in

**foxholes at night and so on, but nobody was hurt because we never saw a live Jap except in jail. They had them in the prison compound.**

PW: Did you have any personal contacts with any of the Japanese?

**JW: No.**

PW: Okay, I saw that you had some memorabilia. Do you want to tell us about that flag that you showed me and what it is?

**JW: Bill was my partner. We slept in the same tent and he had the dispersing and I had the supply. We were friends for all those times we were there and we explored the island a lot.**

**On our free time, we would take off and go to different parts of the island and one day we went out into the jungle and we found a Japanese helmet, Japanese mess kits, hand grenades. I even carried a grenade, which I was not supposed to, which was live. I didn't know it. We picked up a Japanese flag, which Japanese families wrote on the flag. The man tied it around his waist under his shirt for good luck. We found it and brought it home with us.**

PW: You talk about Bill. Is Bill still living or do you have contact with him?

**JW: I kept contact with him until about 10 years ago and then he moved and we lost contact. I don't know. I tried to find him through the Seabees and they have no record of it.**

PW: Do you have any other interesting people that you met while you were in the service?

**JW: No.**

PW: You talked about an opportunity you had to see a PT boat and your experience. Do you want to share that with us?

**JW: Bill and I went from Guadalcanal to Tulagi one day. He went to pay the men that were working there building a tank farm and I went to see that they were well fed and get the supplies to them. We had to stay overnight so we didn't have anything particular to do. We walked down to the PT boat base and saw these beautiful boats which were 78 feet long and have two big Packard engines. They have two torpedoes, several anti-aircraft guns, and a crew of 12.**

**We talked to a young man named Lieutenant Lyons (sp?), who was captain, and he was going out that night and I said may I ride with him and he said, "Certainly." And Bill got a ride on another PT boat. And we cruised from Guadalcanal up to Santa Isabel Island and back three or four times in a beautiful moonlight night and one of the most interesting things that I had was I asked, or Lieutenant Lyons (sp?) said he was going to take a nap and I**

should take control of the PT boat. And I said, "Where will you be?" "On a mattress behind you. If you need me, call me."

So I had control of the thing at 50-55 miles an hour for 2-3 hours during the night. When we got back after the war, we found out that Jack Kennedy was also at that PT boat base. But of course we didn't know it. We would have probably not thought anything about it because he had not been president and we didn't know anything about him.

PW: Can you remember your worst military meal?

**JW: Yes, on the ship going over, we were on the motor ship Daystar, which had stopped in Australia on the way back from the South Pacific and one of the things they took on was a load of mutton for us to serve. And all of our men were from Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. The officers were from all over the United States. But as soon as the first man saw the mutton, he cried out "mutton, baa" and everybody took large helpings of mutton and dumped it over the side.**

PW: So it wasn't the favorite meal?

**JW: They wouldn't eat mutton.**

PW: Did your military service, do you feel it defined any of your outlook on life?

**JW: I think what it did was make a man of me as far as leadership was concerned and I had the confidence after the war to go into leadership jobs.**

PW: When you were discharged, what was your rank?

**JW: Lieutenant commander.**

PW: What did you do after leaving the military?

**JW: I went back to the company I had worked for, Moore Business Forms, and I spent 30 years with them in sales management, covering at one time 23 states with about 4,000 dealers like Knight Printing in Fargo and Pierce and so on. I had nine salesmen on the road and about 4,000 dealers.**

PW: Did you use any of the veteran benefits after your service?

**JW: I went to a Dale Carnegie Course and was asked to become an assistant leader of the next Dale Carnegie Course. Because what I did in that, I took several courses at the University of Minnesota night school, but nothing further, because I already had a year-and-a-half at Harvard Graduate School of Business. And later on I finished that when I was working for Moore Business Forms at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and got my MBA there.**

PW: Were you married when you went into the military?

**JW: Yes.**

PW: So you left a wife, did you have children at the time?

**JW: No.**

PW: Do you have any other stories that you'd like to share with us or experiences? Or any lessons you've gained during your military life?

**JW: No. Well, after I came back from New Guinea, I was sent to a four months' course back at Harvard, in the same school I went to before, to learn how to settle war contracts, dispose of the material left over from Navy contracts.**

**I spent a year on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor of the Northwestern Bank Building in Minneapolis dealing with General Mills, Honeywell, Northern Pump, all those large companies that had war contracts. To help them get rid of the material that was in their factories that the Navy didn't want. And that was good experience, too, because it was selling and dealing with companies and dealing with scrap dealers and buyers. I was the senior assistant to the officer in charge there. We had 42 people in the office, just doing that sort of work, half of them military men and half of them civilians.**

PW: So you were in the service four years?

**JW: Almost four years.**

PW: And you were primarily down in Guadalcanal the whole time?

**JW: Guadalcanal and New Guinea for 15 months and then back in the states for the rest of the time.**

PW: How would you like to be remembered?

**JW: Does this have anything to do with the Navy?**

PW: Well it can be if you'd like to be remembered as a patriot, a father?

**JW: I guess I'd like to be remembered as a good husband and parent. I don't think much about the Navy.**

PW: You served at a time in our country that it was a very difficult time. You stepped forward and did things for our country that needed doing but was not a good . . .

**JW: I stayed in the Reserve for 17 years after the war, going to drills regularly, going on active duty in Minneapolis Airport and to Seattle to Sandpoint. I tried to get duty on a carrier, but I couldn't. I had a total of 21 years in the Reserves.**

PW: That shows a very patriotic heart.

**JW: Yes.**

PW: As we're looking at some of your pictures, do you want to tell me about this picture and your experience about it?

**JW:** This is a picture of a Japanese transport that was bombed by our forces and set afire. The Japanese ran it aground so that the bow was up in the air and let as many of their men off as they could to rescue. Bill and I found it and took off our clothes, swam out to the ship, went all through it, that part that was above the water. And then when we came ashore, I found a Japanese tank that had been left and we tried to get in that but found we were much too big. The Japanese could get in it but we couldn't.

**PW:** Any other experiences when you were by Australia and any of the people you met?

**JW:** No, nothing there. Oh, well on our way home, we had to find our own passage from New Guinea to San Francisco. We found a merchant ship that was going to San Francisco by way of Australia. We had no hurry. We were not in a hurry. So we said, "Let's go." It was a merchant ship.

The purser on the ship had girls in many of the ports. And when we got to opposite Townsville, Australia, he conned the captain into stopping outside the Great Barrier Reef and sending him into Townsville to see his girl. Bill and I asked to go along and the captain said, "Fine. You want to go along, you have to bring back a quart of Scotch a piece, because I'm running low." So we said we would do that.

We got ashore and it was a town just like you see in the western movies with an old hitching posts out in front of the buildings for their horses. We went to the saloon and asked for Scotch and they said they were closed until late in the afternoon and it would be too late to get back to the ship. We talked to the person in charge and he said, "Well, if you need it that badly, put it under your shirts and go out through the alley and do not let anybody see you, you can take it back to the ship."

We played Hearts with the captain every night on the way back, because he was a great Hearts fan. On April Fools' Day, we found one of the Merchant Marine officers that was a little gullible and made up a telegram from Admiral Halsey saying that every ship had to have an officer in the crow's nest because the Jap submarines were near. He was up there two hours before he found out.

Bill and I were sent ahead when we left Guadalcanal. We went down to Nouméa and New Caledonia. Our job was to find out and get as many supplies as we could from the Seabees base there for our battalion. Well we found we couldn't get very much. I knew former governor Harold Stassen from Minnesota and went to see him. He was on Admiral Halsey's staff. He couldn't help but we had a lot of fun talking politics. Because he was already looking ahead to run for president and he said we have a big job to do when we get home.

**When we were in New Guinea, Bill and I met two Australian Army officers. One was Captain Gunther (sp?). He had been with the Australian Army in Tobruk when they fought Rommel in Africa. He made the statement that, “When you fired a shell at the Germans, you got one back right at you. When you fired a shell at the Japs, it took them a number of shells before they got the range.” He was a friend of Errol Flynn and used to sail in the South Pacific with him – a typical Australian type with a big mustache, very brown, very personable. We gave him some Scotch and water one night and he protested because it wasn’t Scotch and soda. But he gave us a case of beer in bottles to be served warm. It was packed in straw. That’s all I can remember.**

PW: Did you enjoy your military life?

**JW: I enjoyed it very much. My wife has often said that “you had a good time,” and I did. Since we didn’t have any injuries, no illnesses, didn’t lose any friends, it was a fascinating experience. There was a lot of disease. There were over 300 of our 1,000 men, sent home for malaria, dysentery, foot rot, and gangrene. So there were a lot of losses – but none through military action.**

PW: You talked about your friend, Bill, that you shared a lot of experiences with together because you traveled together all the time.

**JW: Bill was from Tacoma, Washington. He was a couple of years younger. We sat together in two-and-a-half months of class and then we were assigned to go to the same battalion together. Yes, we were good friends.**

PW: So what are some of the things that you did and how did you get around to do them?

**JW: We had our own jeep for our department. So in our free time we could take off and go wherever we wanted to. Trading was fun. But I don’t smoke, neither did Bill, but my father sent me a box of cigars every now and then. And we had one storekeeper named Schroeder (sp?) who was good at trading with the Quartermaster of the Army. He would get a side, a quarter of beef or so for a cigar and one time he got a typewriter when ours failed by giving the Quartermaster a pair of sheets. The lieutenant saw the sheets and wanted one set for himself, so we got a mimeograph machine for that. He was always trading something. One night I was sleeping and one of the chiefs woke me up and said, “Do you want a few loads of prime groceries.” “Sure, why?” “The Army has moved out and left all of their groceries, all of their supplies. And there’s no guard.” I got five trucks and a bunch of men and we took all the best canned goods in the dump. We ate well for quite a while after that.**