

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
LOUIS "KAYO" ERWIN

FOR THE  
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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CYNTHIA TINKER: Okay, this begins an interview with Louis H. Erwin, Sr. at his home in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on November 22, 2011. My name is Cynthia Tinker with the Center for the Study of War and Society at UT. Also joining me in the interview is ...

MIKE MCCONNELL: Mike McConnell.

TINKER: Mike is the graduate student with us at the Center. Mr. Erwin, thank you for giving us some of your time today.

LOUIS ERWIN: You're more than welcome. I am proud to do it.

TINKER: Thank you. I just wanted to start, and maybe you could tell us a little bit about your family background? What you know ... Do you have memory of your grandparents?

ERWIN: I sure do. I sure do. My grandparents and all, they lived in Meigs County, Tennessee, and when I was small, I lived with them ... He run a farm, and also, he was a blacksmith. He shod horses and had a little old gristmill and all.

TINKER: Was this your mom's or your father's parents?

ERWIN: That's my father's parents. I'd help him shoe a lot of horses, mules, and all. And I'd help him ground a little corn, quite a bit of corn. Back then, people didn't have no money to pay for it, so they'd take a toll. A toll was a little bucket, about a gallon bucket, not quite a gallon bucket. And you'd dip down in there and take part of the corn out, and that would be your pay for grinding the food. No money back in that time.

TINKER: Just taking part of the corn then?

ERWIN: Yeah, that was your toll, what you paid. A little part of your corn.

TINKER: And that was in Meigs County? What was the town?

ERWIN: That's in Big Springs, Tennessee.

TINKER: Big Springs. Do you know what ethnicity? Were they Scottish? Irish?

ERWIN: Irish. Oh yeah, Irish. And we had a farm. We grew cotton, corn, different things. And of course, I worked in the field many a time. Chopped cotton, chopped corn.

TINKER: Were you with your grandparents a lot because your parents were living with them? Did the whole family live together?

ERWIN: No, my father, he come to Chattanooga, Tennessee, to find work and all. And my mother and I, and my brother—I have a brother. He's two years older than I am. He was in the First Division, Marine Corps. He was at the Solomon Islands and those. My brother's named

Tom. He and I, we helped my grandfather around the farm. 'Til up about, I guess, twelve years old then I come to Chattanooga.

TINKER: You did? Your parents sent for you?

ERWIN: Well, my parents sort of split up.

TINKER: Oh, did they?

ERWIN: Yeah, they ...

TINKER: Did your father find work?

ERWIN: No, he found women.

TINKER: Oh, well, that's a problem. (Laughter) He came to the big city and got in trouble.

ERWIN: He thought the pastures were a little greener, if you want to put it that way. (Laughter)

TINKER: So did you live with him or your mother?

ERWIN: I lived with my mother. I went, stayed a while over in Rhea County, over there in Dayton, Tennessee, over there where the Scopes Trial is. In fact, I was born in Rhea County in 1925.

TINKER: Oh yeah, your birthday. March 1st, right? When you were growing up on your grandparents' farm ... what was school like? How far away was school? What was that like?

ERWIN: School, you had to walk to school. It was about six to seven miles from where you lived. 'Course, you cut across fields and pastures and all.

TINKER: To cut it down to about two or three? (Laughs)

ERWIN: Well, you cut off a little space and all. 'Course, there wasn't no paved roads. It was all gravels and things, back in there. And 'course, winter time you had to go to the woods and cut wood for cooking and your fireplace and all that. In fact, I off-bear'd a saw mill. If you don't know what off-bear is, that's when you cut the logs, and the slabs come off. So there's liable to big end here, a slab. That's off-bearing. You carry the slabs away from the mill, and you drop them up on the hillside. So I was an off-bearer at a saw mill for twenty cents an hour.

TINKER: Oh, well that was some good money then.

ERWIN: Oh yeah, that was. Twenty cents an hour made me feel good. When you go on Saturday and you get you about three dollars or four dollars. That was good.

TINKER: What did you do for fun? Or did you do anything for fun? (Laughs)

ERWIN: Oh, there wasn't too much done. Of course you'd play **Momma Peg**, or whatever you want to call it. That's where you'd take a stick and whittle the ends off, and you've got another long stick, and you hit down on the end of the stick to knock it up to hit the hockey with.

TINKER: Oh. The town was small. Was there like a movie theater or anything like that in town?

ERWIN: Big Springs had two stores. (Laughter) And in one of the stores was a post office. So you'd go down there and get what little you could, but most of the thing was a—had a rolling grocery store. [It would] come around, called a Jot-'Em-Down Man, that you come around. So, you would—didn't have no money. You would take and trade an egg, or a dozen eggs for maybe some lard or something. I would trade an egg for a piece of licorice. And that's how I bought my

...

TINKER: One egg and you could get a whole piece of licorice?

ERWIN: You could get a penny piece of licorice. You'd trade a egg for it. But you'd have to go ask your grandmother, can I have the egg? (Laughter) Course we had chickens, and things like that. We had cattle; we had hogs we had to feed and, uh, just country living.

TINKER: Yeah, and so as you were growing up, once it got into the thirties, did you know about the Depression as a child? Was everything just pretty much the same for you out in the country?

ERWIN: Everything was pretty much the same to me 'til I finally got to Chattanooga. I got out down in here about the sixth grade, I guess it was. And then I got me a job hopping curb, down at in George's Hot Barbecue, and I'd make a little money that way.

TINKER: Oh, like the cars would pull up, and you'd go take their orders and stuff like that?

ERWIN: Yeah, you'd take their orders and then you'd take the tray out there and hang on the—back in the olden days you saw the geedunk stands.

TINKER: A what? (Laughs) I've never heard of that.

ERWIN: A geedunk stand—that's navy slang. That's where you go down and you maybe buy a Coke if you can find it, or a bar of candy or something like that. And back then, if your pleasure—if you carried a girl out, or if you had a girl, then well you'd go to a little old place and buy a soda or something like that. Like a Liggett's Drug Store. They had a little old soda bar, or something in there like that.

TINKER: So how long did you stay in Chattanooga before you went to Rhea County?

ERWIN: I was in Rhea County then I come to Chattanooga. I never did leave.

TINKER: Oh, okay. Did you transfer schools?

ERWIN: Yes, I went to, up in Rhea County, I forget the name of that school. But after I come down here, when I was going to grammar school, I went to Clara Carpenter School and G. Russell Brown. I finished sixth grade in G. Russell Brown. Then I went to Kirkman. Kirkman Junior High and High School. They'd give you a trade. You know, they learn you a trade.

TINKER: It was like a high school and vocational school?

ERWIN: Yeah, you went to school and then, whatever you took up in there—I happen to take typing up. Not typewriter, type you set up for a press. I got throwed out of there for throwing type.

TINKER: (Laughter) You did? You were acting up?

ERWIN: Yeah. So, yeah, and that's when I was seventeen years old. And then, I convinced my mother to sign for me to go in the navy.

TINKER: What was your mother like?

ERWIN: My mother, [she was] very, very sweet and all. She had a hard life, all of her life. Trying ...

TINKER: What about her parents? Did you ever see her parents?

ERWIN: I didn't know them. No, I didn't know them.

TINKER: Was she from Meigs County as well?

ERWIN: Yeah, she was from up in Meigs County, and I never did know none of those, just on my mother's side. My father's side, he had four or five brothers which was my uncles and all.

TINKER: So you knew all your cousins and things from his side?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Did you go to church as a child?

ERWIN: Yeah, when I was going to school, yeah, to play **knocko ball**. You had to go to church, and get your Sunday school paper signed. I brought on up, later on after I come out of the service; I began to play fast-pitch softball. I throwed for four or five teams. I throwed for Standard Coosa, and Thatcher, Builders, and different ones.

TINKER: How did your mother support herself?

ERWIN: She worked in a restaurant in Dayton, Tennessee. Three dollars and half a week. Hard to feed two boys on—try to raise two boys.

TINKER: Were you and your brother really very aware of the situation with her and your father, and that your mother was struggling?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, me and my brother was pretty tight, and we always tried to do something to help her, you know, throw papers or something. We would come where we could throw papers. If we would work anywhere—in fact, carnivals used to come through, back when I was up in Rhea County, Dayton up there. Carnivals, you know, come through and they had walnut trees down there. My brother and I, we go down there and pick up walnuts and sell them to those carnies. Course they'd want you to hull them. (Laughter) If you've ever got that green stuff on your hands, where you're peeling that off, you had to go to the creek four or five times to get that off, that old green stuff ...

TINKER: I hope you charged them good for that. (Laughter)

ERWIN: We made a quarter for a half a peck.

TINKER: That's pretty good. So, I bet your mom appreciated you all pitching in like that.

ERWIN: Yeah. We lived next to a railroad track and a lot of hobos back then. While our mother was working, when me and my brother were a little smaller, we'd hear a train coming. Why, we'd run, get up under the bed or something. First thing you know, knocking on the door, (knocks on table) it would be a hobo. Yeah, you had to stay clear of them.

TINKER: Were they dangerous, or drunkards?

ERWIN: Well, really not drunkards. They was looking for work and everything, too. Bumming something to eat and all. Well, we didn't have nothing to eat ourselves to amount to anything.

TINKER: So you just tried to kind of avoid them?

ERWIN: Avoid them. Didn't want them coming in the house. If we could lock them out, hiding under the bed, we're gone.

TINKER: Did your mother ever remarry?

ERWIN: Yeah, later on in life, but she didn't while we were there. She—later on in life, she married. She married, I believe, while I was in the service. I'm not sure.

TINKER: Did you ever have any transportation? Did you get a car or anything like that? Or did you know anybody with a car?

ERWIN: My transportation was a skate scooter. (Laughter) One of them—no I had no car or nothing. I got a car after I got out of the service. I did get a motorcycle there when I was working at a—delivering for a drug store.

TINKER: I guess social life was a little better in Chattanooga than Big Springs?

ERWIN: Yes, there wasn't too much to do in Big Springs. In fact, my father, he wound up owning one of those stores later on in life after he retired. In fact, it's still in business. It's just a little ole country store, all they got is ...

TINKER: But it's still there?

ERWIN: Yeah, my step-mother run it for a while, but my half-brother and my half-sister run it now. Course, she's a school teacher and they just open when they want to and close. It's just a very little old store, and it's just a wide place in the road.

TINKER: Right, well, what did you like to do in Chattanooga? Did you date? Did you have a lot of girlfriends?

ERWIN: No, not really. I did have a girlfriend or two in the sixth grade. When I went Northside I had one over there for a while, but after I went to Kirkman, why then—I went in the navy when I was seventeen years old.

TINKER: Were you already in the vocational school, then, when Pearl Harbor happened?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: Do you remember that? When it happened, or how you heard?

ERWIN: Not really. I don't remember exactly how it happened. I just—how come me to go in the service when I was seventeen? Well, my brother done gone in the Marine Corps and I missed him. I wanted to find him, so I joined the Navy. I talked to get my mother to sign my papers for me. You had to be signed in, had to have her permission. So I finally talked her into signing. I said, "Well, I'm going get in trouble if I stay here on the streets."

TINKER: Because you had gotten kicked out of the school?

ERWIN: Yeah, I had done got kicked out for throwing type at a guy. He [was] bugging me, and I was trying to hit him with that type.

TINKER: So before you joined, you weren't following the news very much? You don't really remember Pearl Harbor, so I'm kind of guessing. Were you very aware of what was going on? Did you think we were about to go war, or anything like that?

ERWIN: No, I—only when I really got it, I was just worried about my brother. He was already in there.

TINKER: So it wasn't like you were reading the paper, saying, "Oh, no, we're about to go to war!"

ERWIN: You didn't have no money to buy no paper. (Laughter) When I throwed—when me and my brother threw them over on Third Street, we would have an extra or two. Sunday mornings, after we threw the paper, whatever was left we'd take them on the street and sell them for a nickel a piece.

TINKER: What about a radio? Did y'all have a radio in your house?

ERWIN: If I do, I don't remember it.

TINKER: So you didn't listen to radio shows or anything?

ERWIN: No, I might've heard a little *Amos 'n' Andy* back then.

TINKER: That's about it?

ERWIN: That's about it.

TINKER: What did your mother say when you asked her to sign you in?

ERWIN: Oh, no. She turned me down there for a long time. I finally told her, I was just going get in trouble, and finally, she signed me in.

TINKER: Yeah, so it took you a little while to wear her down.

ERWIN: Yeah, yeah. So, it was a good thing; I went in the navy. Why, you become a—instead of playin' around, you get a little serious there. 'Course when I went in the navy, why, I didn't pay too much attention 'til I kept seeing guys getting a few raises or two, and then I finally put my head to it and started making a raise or two. I'd make more money, and less work, and ...

TINKER: Were you going to ask that ...

MCCONNELL: I was going to ask, were you keeping up with your brother once you went in the service? Prior to your enlistment?

ERWIN: No, I didn't hear from him. Out there, 'course, sometimes when you get to sea, well you sail about three months, and you would get mail maybe once a month, but that's when they come by and they snatch it, you know. When they hang them on the side [of the ship] and snatch the mail on the thing. They'd have a mail call about once a month. And of course, I wrote back and forth. I didn't write him, for I didn't know where he was. He got malarial fever from the Solomon Islands, in Cape Gloucester. They sent him to Australia for malarial fever and all that.

TINKER: Well I noticed on your form it says you enlisted the day after Christmas in '42.

ERWIN: In December, the twenty-sixth.



TINKER: So your mom made you wait until after Christmas? Or did it just work out that way?  
(Laughs)

ERWIN: Yeah, more about Christmas. But back when I lived in the country up there, we'd pop popcorn, and make popcorn balls with molasses. That was our Christmas present.

TINKER: Before you left to go in the service, did you tell your grandparents good-bye?

ERWIN: Oh, sure, sure.

TINKER: Were they really sad?

ERWIN: Yeah, but I guess glad to get rid of me, too. (Laughter) One mouth less to feed. But they were wonderful to me and to my brother.

TINKER: What were their names? I don't think I asked that.

ERWIN: John Erwin and Belle Erwin. John and Belle Erwin, and they was well known right there in Big Springs. And 'course, let's see, I had an Uncle Red, and an Uncle Lee, and Laurence, and my father. There were four brothers and one girl, Betty Erwin.

TINKER: Did anybody in your family serve in World War I?

ERWIN: I couldn't tell you that.

TINKER: You didn't know?

ERWIN: I don't know.

TINKER: So, when you left, where did you leave out of? You left out of Chattanooga, on the train, right?

ERWIN: Yeah, no, I left—you had to sign up at the post office then. You had to pass a little old test there. Then they shipped me to Nashville [Tennessee]. So I went to Nashville, and had to go through another little test and everything. Then they shipped me to San Diego, California for boot camp.

TINKER: And I'm guessing that's the first time you'd really been away from home.

ERWIN: It was, and you had to go on a train ride. Wasn't no such thing as flying. You had to go on a train. On a train it took about five days to get to San Diego, California.

TINKER: What was that like? Leaving home that first time?

ERWIN: A little sad. Sad and everything. Things come to you and then you get out there, and they start running you through everything. You sorta forget that, put your mind on ...

TINKER: Was there anybody from your area that left around the same time you did?

ERWIN: No, ... when you got to Nashville, I don't know where they come from, different spots around there. But, there was twenty-seven in the boxcar I was in, in the Pullman, I should call it. 'Course, there you got a good bed to sleep, pull-down bed and all that. You riding there, and you got your tickets in your hand to go to the lunch car and eat breakfast and everything. So it wasn't too bad.

TINKER: Well, I was going to ask you. You said you wanted to go in the Navy to find your brother, but you didn't join the Marine Corps.

ERWIN: No. Well, see, he was going from island to island, and I knew his ship. Now, I didn't know I was going get the *Indianapolis*. I knew that his ship would be traveling from different island to island. So, I figured every place I got where we get in close, well I'd ask them, what division, Marine Corps division, was there?

TINKER: And what division was he with?

ERWIN: First Division. So, they'd say, "No, he's not here. They left." Or whatever it may be.

TINKER: So you had it all planned out? (Laughter)

ERWIN: Yeah, I had it planned out. And then, after I got out of boot camp, why they put me on the *U.S.S. Bunker Hill*. That's a flat top. And then I went to Pearl Harbor where I caught the *U.S.S. Indianapolis*.

TINKER: So you did your entire boot camp at San Diego.

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: What was that like?

ERWIN: Oh, tough.

TINKER: Really?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah, they run you through. They run you through everything, but they run you fast through it on account of they was needing men out there. Well you—just about everything they learn you how to—they teach you, rather, how to listen what they say and everything. And then they make you go pass swimming tests, and they march you up and down this, and how to do this. You got to go, when you go pass your swimming test, you got to jump off of a diving board so far, and you got to come down.

TINKER: And you already knew how to swim?

ERWIN: Very little.

TINKER: Was there anybody in your group that didn't know how to swim at all and had to learn?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. In fact, I had to go over there and take swimming lessons. I couldn't pass it when I first went in. You got to swim the length of the pool and back; you got to come off this board; you gotta go down and take your pants off, tie each leg in a knot, bring them over your head to get air in there, to hold you up if you get out there. So, I could come off the diving board all right, and I get down to tie them things, and try to tie one end to the other, but I couldn't make it. So I had to go—took me about two weeks to learn how to go up and back, up and back, 'til I made it and passed my swimming test.

TINKER: Was there anybody that didn't make it at all, that just never could learn?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: What would they ...

ERWIN: Dry land, dry land sailors. (Laughter)

TINKER: So they had to go to an office or something?

ERWIN: Yeah, they dry land sailors.

TINKER: Did the group kind of look down on those people, or did they just think, well, they can't swim?

ERWIN: Oh, no. You didn't take nothing out on nobody, no. If they couldn't pass it, well, they just couldn't pass it. In fact, they asked for volunteers for submarine. You have to volunteer for a submarine. I volunteered for that and couldn't pass it.

TINKER: What couldn't you pass for the submarine?

ERWIN: Staying down there locked in that tube.

TINKER: So they would kind of test people to see if they had claustrophobia?

ERWIN: You have to go to submarine class and everything. You have to pass all those tests, yeah. 'Course we had them—going through boots you had to pass them tests and go in, stay where there's gas and everything. They turn that stuff on you and you have to get your mask on and all that stuff then get out of that thing.

MCCONNELL: In your class, you received instruction from the instructors, but did you also help each other in your off time? Like learning to swim, for example. Did you have a couple of buddies that you worked with on that, on your own, or was it all just instructors?

ERWIN: It was mostly instructors, but they would help you and all. Like I had one of my best buddies—he didn't make it after we got on the *Indianapolis*. Why, he was from an orphanage home over here. His name is George Epperson, and he didn't make it out of that thing. But when somebody would even come aboard or [a] recruit come, and he was a little slow about something or something like that, yeah, you take him and sort of teach him different things and what to do. Oh yeah, I've done that many, many times, and then I've had help through boot camps. Something come up that you don't understand, which I didn't have the education that I ... Actually, that thing may have said the sixth grade; it's really the eighth grade.

TINKER: Yeah, I figured you—yeah. (Looking at form)

ERWIN: My daughter filled that. It's really the eighth, but I was in the ninth when I went to ...

TINKER: You went to high school, but it was more like a vocational.

ERWIN: It was vocational, but I didn't last long in that thing. (Laughter) But I noticed, I just happened to think she put a sixth grade on that thing.

TINKER: Yeah, I didn't think that was totally right.

ERWIN: No, and I didn't—junior high was just mostly play and all that stuff, and this, that, and the other ...

TINKER: Did you have some leave time during basic, or did they just put you straight through?

ERWIN: No, I—when you come out of boot camp, they [are] supposed to give a thirty-day leave. They was needing men so bad so they put me and some more guys on *Bunker Hill*.

TINKER: This was early '43 when you were graduating, right?

ERWIN: Yeah. Yeah, I entered boot camp third in '43, I believe, March the third in '43, I believe. I believe it was. I'm really not sure about that. That's when I entered boot camp, I believe it was. I caught the *Indianapolis*, I believe it was about three months later. Something like that.

MCCONNELL: You were interested in going to the Pacific because of your brother. Did you have any sort of preference on that, or were you just assigned, and you just got lucky, I guess, in a sense?

ERWIN: Just got lucky.

TINKER: That's true because you could have ended up on a ...

ERWIN: On the other coast, but I went to [San] Diego. Or they could've shipped me to Norfolk, Virginia, for training, but they shipped me to Diego, California. After I finished that, then I

caught the *Bunker Hill*. Went over there and caught the *Indianapolis*. This *Indianapolis* has ten major battles, and I'm fortunate enough to serve on eight of those.

TINKER: Did you make any lasting friendships in basic, in boot camp, or was there anybody that you knew in boot camp that ended up on the *Indianapolis* with you?

ERWIN: No.

TINKER: No? Everybody just got totally split up?

ERWIN: Just split up different places. I had a lot of friends on—I spent over two years on the *Indianapolis*, and I had a lot of friends that did not make it, especially in the water.

TINKER: Did you have a preference for what job you'd be doing on the ship, or did they just say, "Here, this is what you're going to be doing?"

ERWIN: No, when you get your orders—I'll explain more about it after the ship had sunk. When you get your orders, or whatever it is, when they send you a different place, whatever division, they'll put you in that division. So mine was a deck division, Fourth Division, the deck division. So I started out at deck hand in there, and whatever they tell you then. You can strike for things in there, for different things that you want to when you're in there. So I went for a boatswain's mate. So I was up for boatswain's second when the ship got hit. I made coxswain—I made seaman first and then coxswain. And after you start getting them patches on your sleeves, you make more money, and you get a little more privileges. So I was up for my second; I'd have made the second, and then I'd went for first. And then you finally you get where you make chief if you want to make, get all them hash marks.

TINKER: You said, when you kind of got in a little trouble in high school, and you kind of felt like you might get in trouble if you stayed home instead of going in the service, did you have any trouble with authority when you did go in? Did you have any, you know, like, "that really rubs me the wrong way?" Or did you just really respond to the structure and the guidance?

ERWIN: No, I had a little trouble with it.

TINKER: You had a little trouble? At first?

ERWIN: Yeah. I went over there, and they had us practicing semaphore. You know what that is. A,B,C,D, all that kind of ...

TINKER: The flags?

ERWIN: Yeah, all that thing. So, we was out there marching one day, and old smarty me, old smarty me while we was marching every day I was doing my ABC's and all this, and he come back here and, "Come here." Chief Blue, I never will forget that. Chief Blue coming out there, "What's the matter with you, Erwin?" I said, "I was doing my semaphore." He said, "I got you out here marching." He said, "You get up on that stand." They had viewing stands. [He] said,

“You get up on that stand there, and don’t let me see you quit all day long.” (Laughter) So I went. I had to get up on that stand up there, and here went the troops, my company, Company Nine, down there; they’re just a-marching. And here old Kayo, he’s up there, “A, B, C, D, E, F,” up there all this. Along about five o’clock in the afternoon—this happened in the morning time. (Laughter) Five o’clock in the afternoon ... finally the roving guard come out there, and he says, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Chief Blue put me out here doing these semaphores.” He said, “Well, you been doing them long enough.” He says, “You can go.” I was gone then. (Laughter)

TINKER: Did you learn your lesson?

ERWIN: When he asked me anything else, old Erwin was there. (Laughter) I had no trouble doing them. Whether it was cleaning the head or ever-what it may be, old Louis was there.

TINKER: Anything’s better than doing semaphore all day, right?

ERWIN: Yeah, and standing out there being embarrassed. And that sun in San Diego, California, ain’t no—well, the grinder is really hot, marching on that grinder. But when you stand up there, and you’re the only ignorant guy up there doing that, it don’t fit too good. But, that’ll do it.

TINKER: That’s a good story. Well, you mentioned your nickname. Do you want to tell us how you got this Kayo nickname?

ERWIN: I got it in East Chattanooga out there. I was a little old bitty thing and all, and they used to have a funny paper. Kayo in the funny papers, that little old guy, and of course they had Kayo wall stations, too. But the Kayo funny paper and all that stuff, so they set us slapping dresser drawers and everything else, so in East Chattanooga, they named me Kayo. So I went all the way, just got that name.

TINKER: Just because you were kind of little bitty like the guy in the cartoon? (Laughter)

ERWIN: Yeah. Looked a lot like him, had a old hat and all that stuff.

TINKER: Uh huh. That just kind of stuck.

ERWIN: It stuck, Kayo. So that’s how I got that.

TINKER: Okay, so you went from San Diego, you went to where did you say?

ERWIN: I went to Pearl Harbor.

TINKER: Oh yeah, Pearl Harbor. And is that where you got assigned to the *Indianapolis*?

ERWIN: I went aboard the *U.S.S. Indianapolis*.

TINKER: Did you have a ceremony when you went aboard, or was there any kind of ceremonial—I don't know. I know the Navy has some ceremonies.

ERWIN: When you have a ceremony, you salute that flag when you go on there. You ask if you can come aboard and then it just goes from there. They don't even—they got a man standing there. Either the quarter-deck watch—I had to stand many of them after I got to be coxswain and everything. Then they'll show you to where you're going, and then after you get to that division, then they turn you over to ... boatswain mate first. And then, he's your boss. What he tells you to do and where you're at and gives you a locker and a bunk. And of course the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* has no air conditioning or nothing like that. When you was down below, especially when you got in the South Pacific, you was hot. You could've—we couldn't even sleep down there at night. We got to where we would come topside, if we wasn't on a watch, we come topside and just find us a place on the deck to sleep.

TINKER: It was too hot to sleep.

ERWIN: Yeah, you just use your lifejacket for a pillow.

TINKER: When people were on duty down below, did they have to stay in full uniform?

ERWIN: Oh, no. Mostly when you're aboard ship you wear dungarees. And if they sound GQ [General Quarters] and all, you got to have your sleeves down and all that stuff, for flash burns and everything.

TINKER: Well, by this time, were you a little more into the news and reading the paper and finding out what was going on with the war?

ERWIN: No, wasn't no ...

TINKER: Or was it just word of mouth, like what people talked about?

ERWIN: You'd just have to wait a little, before you hear scuttlebutt, you'd just have to wait 'til chow time or something like that. There wasn't no way to find out no news or anything like that. 'Course, you go down and, people did, when we get letters and different things, they'd say something. Course, you go down and try to be in a group, like, or different. You'd write a letter, they just put "free" at the top, and they'd send it free. But all the rest of the communication—they didn't give us no radios or nothing.

TINKER: Were you writing letters home to your mother?

ERWIN: Just to my mother.

TINKER: Yeah. So what was your training like once you got on-board? Like, did you start your training on the guns right away? I know you said you started out doing the deck jobs.

ERWIN: Yeah. When you go in—the Fourth Division was in charge of the five-inch guns. They had eight five-inch guns. There are nine men to a gun. And that was one of theirs, and then of course deck, you had to do all that. But when you first go aboard, they put me down in the magazine room. That's down below, and that's where you have to put your five-inch projectiles that are about this long. The hull is about like this, and the projectile's like this. You put them on a little old elevator, and it carries it up to top and then they put them in the box up there. The gun crew handles all that. So my first operation was Tarawa. And I was down there, and you could hear all these bombs and shells going off and everything. Ship giving it this, and giving it this, and didn't know whether you was hit or not. So, after I spent—and it gets so hot down there you ain't got no clothes on, just your skivvies. And when that battle was over and all—'course, it took about four or five days, but you could come up and everything. I went and told first, I said, "I can't, I can't stay down below down here." He said, "What can you do?" I said, "Anything to put me topside." So he put me in a hot shells man [Hot Case Man]. So, the next time we started bombarding, they put somebody else down there. Hot shells man is, those guns, you know they're real long and all. When that shell casing come out, it was red-hot and you got asbestos gloves on. You got to stand up there and catch that and throw it back.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

ERWIN: When you shooting at aircraft and different things, they are going right after the other. That first one [I tossed] hit the side of that bulkhead over there, and that old gun captain turn around and said, "Erwin, you want go back in the hole?" I said, "No, no." (Laughter) I didn't miss a one. They thought I was Yogi Berra then. I didn't miss a one. So, then he took me off of hot shells man as recruits would come up, and I made pot-loader. Pot-loader's the one that carries the shells and puts them in a pot, and you put them down. You pull them down; you turn the crank, and set the fuse on them. Then the first-loader throws them in the breach and then the rammer man he takes, and when the gun captain says, "Fire," he takes it and does it that way. So I got to be a pointer. Pointer is the one that points the gun, unless you're on sky-4 or sky-F. Then a trainer is the one that does it this way. I got to be both of them, and finally I'd got on as the gun captain. And all I'd do is when he'd say, "Fire," why, I'd take and fire that thing and drop the breach, and he'd throw another one. Wait 'til the shell comes out, he'd throw another one in there, and you just keep on firing.

TINKER: So this is obviously a really synchronized ...

ERWIN: Nine men, they better know what they're doing. Better know what they're doing. And we had a ...

TINKER: But if even one goes off a little bit, it can mess everything up.

ERWIN: Yeah, if the hot shells man don't catch a thing, these pot-loaders can't get to the pot. They'll fall over them hulls. So you got to throw them over there in a pile out of the way, and you're rapid-firing so fast that it comes out of there pretty fast. And you got to get them out of the pot-loaders' way. You got to stay out of the first-loaders way. First-loader's the one that puts it in the breach. 'Course a pointer and trainer gets to sit down. The rest of them have to stand up.



TINKER: Mm hmm. You said Tarawa was your first one. Which battle was the most intense for you handling the guns?

ERWIN: I would say Okinawa is about the worst battle.

TINKER: Really?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Because of the length of it, or the intensity?

ERWIN: No, Saipan was bad. Tinian was bad. Okinawa suicide planes were just everywhere you'd pop up. They was hitting everything. They hit the *Franklin*. I forget how many men was killed on the *Franklin*. And we was right off the side of them. And they got the *Indianapolis*, got some destroyers. Saipan, flies get so big, they'd be bigger than anything, where the dead would be floating out there around your ship.

TINKER: They were that far out? The dead bodies?

ERWIN: Oh, when you get to bombarding, you're—that's my daughter's house there. (Gesturing to window) You'd be this—if you didn't have a coral reef, you'd be this close to the land.

TINKER: A few hundred yards?

ERWIN: Yeah, just if the ship was—if it had enough, didn't draw too much water, it would be, you'd be that close. Yeah, you could see a lot of things. Course when you first start, you start out here, and you bombard over in there. 'Course they strafe. The planes come over and strafe, and then they bomb and all that stuff. At Tarawa we lost over 2,000 Marines going on the land on account of they didn't figure about the coral reef.

TINKER: Right because they couldn't get in close enough.

ERWIN: They get in there far as here across the street or further like that. It's deep out here, and they hit that thing, and that's as far as that Higgins boat can carry you. And when they drop that ramp, you're coming out of that ramp. By the time you're hitting that water, they just mow you down. And then we got attacked by those suicide boats. We captured some of those.

TINKER: Where was this at? At Okinawa?

ERWIN: The suicide boats? They was just at different ones. They was just them small boats and they'd have depth charger back here and a bomb on the front of it. When they run that speedboat or, it's more like a fishing speedboat. They run it in to there, it'd hit the ship, and it'd throw it up on that there.

TINKER: Would it be one Japanese ...

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Just one on it?

ERWIN: Yeah. And of course we captured a lot of those things there and we brought quite a few aboard. We bring them aboard, why they—after you'd get back over out of the way, they'd put them on the main deck there and make them pull off all their clothes. There'll be their clothes, and they'd spray them down and make them take a bath; keep disease from getting in our ship. Well every man in there [would have] caught it. They make you do all that.

TINKER: Did any of them try to do any harm once you brought them on board?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah, they'd try to get away and all. Finally, you know after they give them clean clothes, they'd give them a set of dungarees ...

(Tape Paused)

TINKER: Okay, you were saying that after they'd give the Japanese prisoners the dungarees and the socks and ...

ERWIN: Yeah, they'd—then when you go to feed 'em, they put up in the brig down there. Every ship's got a brig on it. If you do get yourself in trouble, that's where you go: in the brig. Get a few days back there. Put them in the brig ... where they carry them the food back there and all on the trays. Well they'd pull their socks off and throw it in the trays and everything else, sending it back. They was just hard to get along with. And they were awful young too; they was just like we were. They were young. 'Course, they was just fighting for their country and done what just what they told us to this, we done this. They was doing their job. But they was awful rough.

TINKER: So, Okinawa was when the *Indianapolis* got hit, right? By the kamikaze?

ERWIN: Yes. Yes.

TINKER: And where were you in proximity to the kamikaze hitting? And did you see it coming in?

ERWIN: No, we were—I was on gun eight when we got hit with that. We was—what it was, it hit, they come in from the port side. You got starboard and you got port, and I was on gun eight on starboard side over here. It hit on port side, you're over here manning this side, and they're firing this way coming in, when the plane coming ...

TINKER: So you didn't even see it coming in?

ERWIN: No, I just, when hit on the main deck aft. All we ever found of him was a little bit of his hair and one of his kneecaps. Of the pilot.

TINKER: Wow. That's scary. And how many died?

ERWIN: Eight got killed. And wounded thirty-nine. And some of them got dogged-down in the hatch. When they dog them hatches down and everything, of course that just leaves that little round hole to get out. Then when you get down in there, you twist that thing around. There was one of them froze as he was coming up the ladder there to come out, to get out. And you have to, you know, you have to come port, go starboard. You don't, well, you're going to crowd it up. So, he was trying to get out of that hole, he got froze on that thing, and then when they locked it down, well, he was down in the little department that got hit where all the water was and all. And the others, why, they was just close to the bomb as it was just too tough for them.

TINKER: Who was the captain of the ship? Did you have the same captain through the eight battles you were ...

ERWIN: No, I had a Captain Johnson [to] start out with and all that, on Tarawa and all that. Other one's Captain McVay, Charles B. McVay.

TINKER: And McVay took over when?

ERWIN: I can't tell you exactly when he took over. I can't tell you what battle he took over.

TINKER: I think I have it. (Looking through folder) It says he took command in November of '44. He was at Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

ERWIN: Was that where he took over?

TINKER: Yes, I guess right before Iwo Jima.

ERWIN: You have a date on Iwo Jima there?

TINKER: Let's see. I should know it off the top of my head, but I don't. (Laughs)

ERWIN: Well, let me tell you when it, let me tell you when it ...

TINKER: Oh, that's okay. We can look it up and put it in later in the transcript.

ERWIN: If you look in your thing, I sent you a copy of it.

TINKER: Oh, was it in one of these?

(Looking through documents)

ERWIN: Keep going. Keep going. Keep going. Yes, there it is.

TINKER: February '45. Okay, so he took over the ship in November '44. Iwo Jima's in February '45. Then right after that is Okinawa in March ... Well, first of all, did you like the first captain?

ERWIN: Yes. Yeah, I have no complaints with either captain. I liked McVay very well.

TINKER: Could you tell a difference, or were there any changes when McVay took over?

ERWIN: There are to start with. They have their rules when they come aboard. They—I don't remember Johnson making you have long-sleeve shirts on, but McVay made you have long-sleeve shirts on during GQ [general quarters].

TINKER: So he seemed like more of a disciplinarian?

ERWIN: Yeah. But if McVay was still alive, which he's not, and I was young enough and had to go back to sea, I'd be more than glad to serve under him again.

TINKER: Well, what was the food like on board?

ERWIN: It wasn't all that great and all.

TINKER: Because, you know, you always hear the great things about the navy as compared to the army. Army guys like to say the navy guys, you know, at least they had a nice bed and good food and ...

ERWIN: It's not always that way. (Laughing) It's just what they served. I wasn't a marmalade-eater; I'll put it that way.

TINKER: Well during your time on that ship, you know, that first year or so, did you get letters from your brother? Had you and he started writing each other or trying to?

ERWIN: No, he ...

TINKER: Did your mother write you and tell you anything about him?

ERWIN: Every now and then when she'd hear from him, but didn't hear too much from him. A little harder for him to write. He was in a foxhole, no pencil, no paper. No way of getting no letters to you. At least when we wasn't at GQ or doing our work and all, we could go sit down in the mess hall and write a letter or something like that. And try to write your girlfriend if you had one or all this kind of stuff.

TINKER: Yeah. Did you have a best friend on the ship?

ERWIN: Oh, quite a few of them. Like that Epperson I was telling you.

TINKER: Epperson?

ERWIN: Yeah, George Epperson's, his name. His girlfriend found her a boyfriend, and wrote him a "Dear John" letter. He was all tore up about that. And me and Brown. Brown's a big old tall guy. He survived, but he's passed on now. We'd help him. We called him Squirrel, we called him George Squirrel. We'd help him write it—we tried to get her back. (Laughter) We'd try to get her back. She done had greener grass.

TINKER: What kind of recreation did you like to do on the ship? Games, or ...

ERWIN: There wasn't no games to play on the ships.

TINKER: No? Not even cards or anything?

ERWIN: Our best bet on the ship ... we would be able to see a movie—this ship had two search planes on it, caterpillar on each side. Course it had hangers down, you had to fold the wings back and put them back in there. We could push these planes out on the quarterdeck out there and strap them down and then set up benches in there and have movies. When, you know, you wasn't in danger and all that stuff. So that was most of our pleasure, when we got to see a movie.

TINKER: Do you remember any of the ones you watched, or ones you liked in particular?

ERWIN: They had a—well, old Westerns. Old Westerns and things like that.

TINKER: Like the old, old ones?

ERWIN: Well, take old Roy Rogers, or ...

TINKER: Gene Autry or something?

ERWIN: Yeah, Tim McCoy, and things like that.

TINKER: Yeah. Is that the first time you'd seen a movie? When was the first time you saw a movie?

ERWIN: I saw a movie down on Market Street [Chattanooga, TN]. They used to go to—they had serials. And they'd entice you to come back to see the end of that serial. They'd cut that thing. I used to go to the Rialto Theater. It cost a dime when I had a dime to go and stop by that outside market before we get there and get a nickel's worth of grapes. Grapes and—if I had fifteen cents I was in like Flynn.

TINKER: (Laughter) That's nice. That's a good memory to have. I like watching movies. I kind of wish I was around for the old movie days.

ERWIN: Yeah, them old cowboys and the horse and everything falling down this ditch. Shut it off right there. (Laughter) You wonder all week, what happened to that guy? (Laughter) I got to go back and see what happened to that dude.

TINKER: Kind of like how they do on television now. They try to leave a cliffhanger so you have to watch next week.

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Okay, so after Okinawa is when—well, is there anything—do you have any questions?

MCCONNELL: Could you just sort of describe the daily routines of the ship? Because I was thinking, there were so many men on this ship, over a thousand I would imagine. What was daily life like? I imagine it was pretty cramped, close quarters.

ERWIN: Yeah, you just had your things to do. Well, during peacetime, the crew was around 275-325. Wartime, 1,200 men. So you was just all cramped up. You got to find you something to do. When I had a little off-time and all, I'd go up in the bathtub. You're not familiar with a bathtub; it's just called a bathtub. It's on the stern of the ship, and there's about eight to ten twenty millimeter rounds. That's the one you strap yourself into, and them things. And you could go up there and sunshine, or sunbathe, or get up there and relax. You could write a letter up there if you wanted to. You're liable to run into your buddy or something, gab with him and different things. That would be most of your recreation time. There wasn't ... just too much to do. You know, down in those ships when they're so crowded like that, they got four bunks, and they're up and down the wall, here's four by four. When you sleep, you're sleeping within that. And everything got to be up tight and out of sight. It's just got to be jammed up.

TINKER: Right, because you can't have clutter. Well, talking about it being so crowded, were people sometimes, you know, edgy, getting on each other's nerves? Were there ever any fights or trouble breaking out?

ERWIN: No, sometime you might—somebody dragging in the food line or something. You know what I mean by dragging? Breaking in or something like that. If you want to get there first, get there and get in line. And when you get in line and all. Course, we had to bury, I forget how many men at sea. I forget what island it was at now, but they'd bring them back and they'd still be strapped in them seats that—where the Higgins boats went in. They just had to put a piece of canvas down, and roll them over in there, and take it and sew it up and all. They had a bunch of them layin' in the hallway before you went to the chow room back there. Just in the little old quarters you had to go through, and things like that. On the ship, no fighting hardly unless they were in one of them rooms or off-places where they get to shooting dice or something. Somebody gets to cheating. Or card playing if they had a deck of cards, and they'd start a card game.

TINKER: Sometimes people would get mad?

ERWIN: Yeah, of course you didn't make no money. I just made a dollar a day, thirty dollars a month, and most of that money was left on the books. Every two weeks you could draw a little

something to get you soap, or whatever it was; most of the time in the shower we had to use that old saltwater soap, anyway.

TINKER: Was anybody ever caught for stealing or anything like that?

ERWIN: No, we didn't. No, we stole some Spam.

TINKER: (Laughing) So you never got caught?

ERWIN: The supply room, it had them five-gallon cans of Spam, and of course there's wire cages and all that. A bunch of us, we took some screws loose up there, and we get us a box of Spam. We was buddies with the baker down there, and about four o'clock in the morning, if he was on watch up there, why, you'd smell that aroma coming up there to you. We'd go steal a can of Spam, and we'd nick a little out of there, we'd steal the Spam. (Laughing) And when you go down to the bread rack man there and get, old Spinelli was his name,—get him to give you a couple loaves of bread. We'd take it back up there, and we'd all make a Spam sandwich and split it while we was on gun crew.

TINKER: Spinelli. That's a good one, where was he from?

ERWIN: (Laughs) I'd be darned if I know. (Laughing) But you'll see him in some of them pictures. He just, he made it, too. He'd be in the cook division, bakery division, but he's in there. He looks like an Italian—Greek or Italian.

TINKER: I was going to ask you about the mixture of people and where they're from, on the ship. Did you kind of gravitate towards other Southerners, or was it just based on the person?

ERWIN: No, some of my best buddies and all, well, they was different. Different kinds.

TINKER: Just from all over?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Were there any African-Americans on the ship?

ERWIN: Yeah, they were cooks. But they were never back where we were at. They were always—they cooked for the chiefs. Chiefs and officers. There was a cook division. They just stayed up forward where all the officers was.

TINKER: So then for you all, it was just white Navy cooks. Just regular enlistees.

ERWIN: Yeah. And then ever—what division, ... you'd have so many days on the serving line. You'd have to get in the serving line.

TINKER: So there wasn't much of a chance for you to interact with ... African-American sailors?

ERWIN: No.

TINKER: You hardly ever saw them?

ERWIN: Very, very seldom ever see them, you know, back of your ship. But you would see them—well now, I saw one quite often. I had, before I made coxswain and all, I used to have to clean up the chief's head. That's back where the brig was and everything up there, too. I had a black buddy on there, and I don't know his name or anything like that. He cooked for them up there, and when he'd be cooking something there and I'd be back there scrubbing down and different things, he'd say, "Want some eggs?" And we didn't get no eggs. [I would say] "Yeah, yeah sure."

TINKER: Oh, that's nice.

ERWIN: Ham sandwich. He'd slip me a ham sandwich.

TINKER: He'd fix you up, huh?

ERWIN: Yeah, we'd talk a little, though. We couldn't, you know, mingle together. You're talking about different things. There was a Mexican boy in our group in San Diego there, at boot camp. He wouldn't stay cleaned up, hair hanging over. Chief Blue, he made him go in there and get his sea bag and all, bring it out on the ground right there, and put it out there. And he done got on him four or five time. He just took all them butt buckets—you know what a butt-bucket is?

TINKER: Cigarette butts?

ERWIN: Cigarettes, and where ... you can't spit on the ground there, you know, you spit in that bucket. He put that—took that bucket there, Chief didn't. He made him take them buckets, pour over all them clothes and different things, made him get over there and wash them. That boy still out there, four o'clock the next morning, washing them clothes.

TINKER: And this is because he wouldn't what?

ERWIN: Wouldn't keep clean.

TINKER: Because he wouldn't keep clean?

ERWIN: Because he wouldn't change his bedclothes and different things.

TINKER: So Chief's teaching him to clean?

ERWIN: Yeah. Teaching him to be clean. You know, every so often they come around there, and you got to stand there for short arm inspection. And you stand there with nothing on, and



they go all over you. They spray you down. So, if you don't stay clean in there, why, it's just not good for anybody.

TINKER: You don't want to get sprayed down. (Laughs)

ERWIN: You don't. (Laughing) If you don't want to hit that thing, that shower. You got to go in one of them smoke-rooms and stay in that thing for a while.

TINKER: So after Okinawa, you all went to Mare Island, for the repairs? Is that what happened?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: That's the order of events?

ERWIN: Went to Vallejo, California.

TINKER: And how long were you there?

ERWIN: Almost three months.

TINKER: So I imagine you had some downtime then?

ERWIN: Oh, that was a pleasure. (Laughter) That was a pleasure. You had that little old—all you had to do was stand the fire watch every now and then. A fire watch is when they're doing welding and different things, you got to stand down there with your fire extinguisher. You don't stand there; you sit down and do ever-what you want. He's over there welding, but half the time they would not do two weldings all night long. Most of them tell you ... "Lay down over there and go to sleep if you want to. I'll wake up when the roving guard comes." (Laughter)

TINKER: And this was civilians, right?

ERWIN: Oh yeah, yeah, and go on liberty every night.

TINKER: So you were still living on the ship though?

ERWIN: No, no, they put you in barracks.

TINKER: Oh, you were in barracks?

ERWIN: Yeah, you just—while you stand watch there you go. You're not allowed on the ship, except when you ...

TINKER: That must have been a pretty nice three months.

ERWIN: Yeah, just staying there and take it easy. But after I got—after the war was over and I got my thirty-day survivor's leave, course the war was over then, and you had to have points to

get out. You couldn't just say you wanted out. So I come on back and took my thirty days leave, and my orders says go back to Nashville, so I went back to Nashville and got over there. I had thirty-eight points; it took forty-four to get out, and course there's a drawing them. Being single and all—if you was married you automatically got ten points. If you're single, you don't get ten points. You just got a half-point for overseas. So, they sent me back to Coronado, California, for amphibious training. Got back out there, and it took three months for that. When I mustered in, they went over my records all that, and say, "You want stay in, [or] you going get to out?" I said, "If points drop enough and I can make enough points, I'll get out." So they just put us over there in the barracks, and I didn't have to go through all of my amphibious training.

TINKER: You didn't? Were you glad of that?

ERWIN: Yeah. You go to San Diego there, you go catch a ferry, you had to catch a ferry to and from. You can go over there and run through all the money I had on the books. Women and whiskey got me. (Laughter)

TINKER: I was going to ask you what you and your buddies did in Vallejo. (Laughs) A little bit of everything.

ERWIN: Yeah. We got—U.S.O. was very, very good to us. Even when you come on home on leave in different states, you'd have to be on the train and stop, and ... most all those train stations and everything, they'd set up in there, and you'd have you ham sandwiches, or milk, or coffee, or something. Well, I never drank coffee in my life. Soft drink or something like that.

TINKER: They had a good set up in Vallejo for you too? Did they have dances, or ...

ERWIN: Oh yeah, that and different things. But most of the time, by the time you hit to the first bar, I'm home free, home free. (Laughter)

TINKER: And how did the civilian population—I mean was there ever any trouble with the men that weren't in the service? You know, sometimes you see that, but is that sort of a myth a little bit?

ERWIN: Sometime you saw ...

TINKER: I guess, you know, in the movies they portray it as the townies versus the soldiers.

ERWIN: When you was with—when you had your sailor suit on, and all that stuff, and you look pretty sharp, you'd get a girlfriend pretty quick. And they figure if that sailor wasn't there, why, I'd get this girlfriend. Sort of have a little trouble about that.

TINKER: But you were never involved in any big blowout fights or anything? (Laughs)

ERWIN: No, the Paris Inn got a little rough there in Diego, California.

TINKER: The what, the Paris Inn?

ERWIN: Mm hmm. It was nightclub, entertainment and all, if you had enough money to get in. 'Course, when I was in the boot camp and all, I wasn't twenty-one. You couldn't get into places. I got in buddies with yeomen, and told him I lost my I.D., and I told him my age. Instead of eighteen, I was twenty-one.

TINKER: So you had a little trouble there, at the Paris Inn.

ERWIN: Yeah, a little [at] Paris Inn. In fact, I had some—I got a picture of the Paris Inn. Where is that at?

TINKER: I can pause the tape. Do you want to get it, or maybe later?

ERWIN: Let me think just a minute where it's at, you can pause it if you want to.

(Tape Paused)

TINKER: Well, we paused for just a second there. So, we looked at the picture of you and your buddies at the Paris Inn. Now, did you get in any real trouble? You didn't get in any real trouble, right?

ERWIN: Oh, no, I've never been, I've never had, never got in no trouble in the navy. Never got marked up, or wrote up, or ...

TINKER: All it took was that one whole day of the semaphore, right? Set your feet on the right path. (Laughs)

ERWIN: Yeah. It learned me to respect, is what it did. And I do it today. I respect.

TINKER: Okay, so after you all had your time at Vallejo and Mare Island, do you remember the day when you left?

ERWIN: No, not right off hand. I know I had an awful good time at Vallejo. Vallejo's a good little old town.

TINKER: I meant to ask you, was your wife from Tennessee? Did you meet her when you moved back home, or did you meet her somewhere else?

ERWIN: I got married—we got married after the war was over.

TINKER: Oh, but she's from here, too?

ERWIN: Yeah. She's an East Lake girl.

TINKER: Oh Okay. So after the ship is repaired, were you all just heading back out to sea, or did you go to another port from Mare Island?

ERWIN: From Mare Island—well first, after you're over with, you go out for a shakedown cruise; lasts about a day or so. That's when the civilian personnel in charge of puttin' all these—doing the work. Then they go on the ship with you, and you just go out there and make a run. We come back there to Mare Island, and then they brought the component parts of the atomic bomb. Of course, we didn't know what it was.

TINKER: But you knew you were getting loaded up with something?

ERWIN: Yeah, they had guards and everything, and there was sort of a rumor we was gonna make a special run, a special mission, ever-what you want call it.

TINKER: So you knew something was up because it had guards?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Was it Army guards?

ERWIN: No, mostly Marines.

TINKER: Marine guards.

ERWIN: And they brought that thing aboard, and then when we head out, why, made a speed-run to Tinian. Fast as that old cruiser can go. Put that thing off, and we left—after we put that thing off, we went back over to Guam and fueled up. We left Guam, and we'd been gone about four days, five days.

TINKER: So you didn't stay at Tinian at all? Just dropped off ...

ERWIN: Just dropped off the atomic bomb.

TINKER: And left the same day.

ERWIN: Yeah. And then we was headed for Leyte in the Philippines. They was gonna make a run on the mainland of Japan. Here's the sort of route that that ship was on. (Points out on map)

TINKER: Oh yeah. So you literally were just about right in the middle of the trip.

ERWIN: Yeah. Closest land was about seven miles away, straight down. And you didn't want to go down there.

TINKER: No ... Okay. So as far as you all knew, you were preparing for the invasion of Japan.

ERWIN: Right.

TINKER: Everything else you're oblivious to, right?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: So the night you all got torpedoed, were you asleep at the time, or were you on deck?

ERWIN: I just got off the H-12 watch.

TINKER: Twelve o' clock?

ERWIN: I just come off the H of twelve. You stood a four hour watch; you stood on a five-inch gun. And your job when you stood the watch was the same job you had on your battle station. I just come off there, and I swung my hammock up on the forty millimeter mount up there. I just laid down, and then it, give a great big blast and hit, so it done knocked me out of that sack. I go down there and the ship give a big list. Well, around the bathtub I was telling you about, the bars up there, that's where lifejackets hung. And we all had a big—we made big knives out of files. We take and made ... and then you take glass things and make the handles for them. I started cuttin' them lifejackets down, and the rest of them were running around there and hollering too, and they was helping. So, I said, "the ship's going to go down." I said, "it doesn't give too big of a list, and the bow is done." What you see is gone. By the time we pass them down, and we looked out there, it was, I guess, two or three hundred people in the water. I run down the side and dove in. Swum about as far as a little further from here—away from that house, and all I can see is a fantail going down and men still jumping off of it. It went down in less than fifteen minutes.

TINKER: There was two hits right?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: Did you notice the two, or was it just the one, and then you're jumping off. I mean, I'm sure it happened so fast.

ERWIN: No, before I ever jumped off the two had done hit. They—well actually, before anybody, before I ever saw anybody in the water. See, you don't jump off ship 'til they pass the word, "Abandon ship." All communications was knocked out, and the guy that's on watch, which would have been a boatswain mate, a coxswain is what I mean, he has to go around and blow that whistle, "Abandon ship, abandon ship." Well, by the time he'd get—no time flat he couldn't get around to tell all. We all started hitting the water. And just, wasn't no communication whatsoever.

TINKER: And it's pitch dark?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. And that first night I must've heaved about four times. When I hit the water, why, I swallowed some oil in that saltwater and heaved and heaved and heaved. Got it all off my stomach.

TINKER: When was the last time you had had a meal before this?

ERWIN: At suppertime, I guess, before I went on watch.

TINKER: So, six, seven, eight, something like that?

ERWIN: They usually started around five, five-thirty.

TINKER: So, when you're in the water—so you're heaving the oil and the seawater out, and what are you noticing immediately around you?

ERWIN: I'm just trying to swim ... get away from the suction of that ship.

TINKER: Did you see people getting sucked down with it?

ERWIN: No, not really.

TINKER: Did you hear anything, other than the ...

ERWIN: Well, there was a lot of hollering going on, and "Help" and different things. See, a lot of them got caught, and they was burnt real bad.

TINKER: Was there fire on the water?

ERWIN: I couldn't say whether there was or not. I was swimming. There was some fire when I saw the ship going down. I don't know whether it was on the water or on the thing. I'm sure there was some around where that oil spilled.

TINKER: How long do you think you swam before you finally felt you were far enough away from it?

ERWIN: Oh, it wasn't too long. It was just—course I got that lifejacket on, too. I don't know, seven, eight minutes, maybe.

TINKER: How many people were around you?

ERWIN: The group I was in, the next morning—course you didn't know that night. All you'd hear is hollering, and this and that and the other. Next day, when we all started to trying to group together, like, there was at least 250 to 300 in it. And when they picked us up, there was fifty-six.

TINKER: In your group. And were the groups close together, or was there another group far away?

ERWIN: Within four days and five nights, they was four or five miles apart, in that length of time, different groups.

TINKER: Four or five miles apart.

ERWIN: They get—you see some of them where they had got a few life rafts off, you see some of them with life rafts, and you see the nets, where they got off. The group I was in had nothing but kapok lifejackets. No water, nothing of a, no food. I did—I kicked all my clothes off except my skivvies, and took my socks, and at day time, I'd wring them out, put them over your eyes, keep the glare from the sun and saltwater from burnin' your eyes so bad. Waves would be so bad sometime, you know, with just your neck [above the water], [it's] going up your nose and all, so I just took them off of my shoulder, run them down on my arm, and sort of set in them a little, put me up about here. So I wouldn't ...

TINKER: So you were about up to your high chest. You weren't in the water up to your chin or anything?

ERWIN: I was to start with. 'Til everybody got to drowning.

TINKER: That night?

ERWIN: Next day, I was still in that thing like that, and I said, "This ain't going to happen." I just, if it just got me—then those flaps that come around here, they went over my arms. That sort of helped me.

TINKER: So you were able to figure out how to at least get yourself up to your chest?

ERWIN: Yeah, keep that from going out my nose and everything. Keep the water from going up there.

TINKER: So that first night, it's just the immediacy of it?

ERWIN: Just like a fish bobbing, going up and down there.

TINKER: And just all you're thinking about is how I can keep my head up out of this water?

ERWIN: How I can keep going. And also, those guys that drink the saltwater, they go berserk on you. Commence fighting you. Take a bite.

TINKER: Did that start happening pretty fast?

ERWIN: No, it was about, I'd say on the last of the second day, third day. When you get so hot in the daytime, it's bearing down, and then at night it gets so cold.

TINKER: At any point did you start thinking about your mom and home?

ERWIN: Every day, every hour.

TINKER: All of it constantly?

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: And when did thoughts of food become your constant thought?

ERWIN: Food didn't bother me near as much as thirst. Thirst—you just—usually, I keep a glass of water sitting here just about with every meal and most all the time, even with all them pictures, just about.

TINKER: Still today you keep a drink handy?

ERWIN: Water. That thirst, if you don't get that water, you're in bad trim.

TINKER: Did you pray?

ERWIN: Every day, every night.

TINKER: Just felt like you were praying constantly?

ERWIN: We all prayed.

TINKER: Were people praying out loud?

ERWIN: Sure, we all did.

TINKER: Was there anybody in your group that kind of emerged as a leader? Or were there several people?

ERWIN: We tried to look after each other, but when you're in a situation like that, the highest officer, highest ranking officer is in charge. Happened to be Dr. [Lewis] Haynes. He sort of took over the group and handled it, but you learn to help one another.

TINKER: Was there anybody in particular that—really sticks out in your mind, like, maybe you tried to help and they didn't make it or that you did help and they did make it?

ERWIN: The ones right next to you did. And your legs would get so bad, hurting so bad, when they're just dangling in the water, you would form a line, you'd get a group together and lock around each other's waists, sort of hold you up ...

TINKER: To rest your legs, yeah.

ERWIN: ... 'Til the sharks would get so bad, and then you'd have to pull your legs up.

TINKER: How soon did the sharks and barracudas start coming?

ERWIN: It started on the second day.



TINKER: The second day. So you were there that night—two nights, and then the next day.

ERWIN: Well in different groups. I'd say my group. Different groups, they was—some of those guys that had life rafts, why, they run into, is my understanding, they run into a group of sharks before they got over here to where ... I was at. Up here the ship just went so far, not too far, so far, it was still running, the screws still turning when it went down. It was still going, and these that got off, a few rafts over here. They had a little better than we had. There were a little water on there, and a little rations, and different things. It'll show you pictures in these different books that there were more men than there were room for lifejackets, and they'd have to switch out and in. They—I understand, I don't know, I didn't see that, there was some fighting going on about that. Yeah, not getting out. The ones that get in wouldn't get out [of the rafts]. But I wasn't in that group.

TINKER: I think I remember reading in that *Fatal Voyage* that some of the guys would see mirages. They'd think they saw somewhere to get something to eat. Is that right?

ERWIN: That is correct.

TINKER: And they would literally think they saw it in the water and dive down—go into the water on purpose.

ERWIN: The group I was in, there'd be four or five get the wise idea, get it up in their head they'd drink saltwater. Said, "Look, I see land. Come on, let's go." And then, you'd start to go off and you'd tell them, "Hey, hey, hey, that's not land, that's not land." Try to talk them out of it. No, you go try to pull them back, and that's when they'd fight you and they'd keep on going. Go so far ...

TINKER: And you couldn't fight them because you didn't have the energy to ...

ERWIN: To get them there. First thing you know, why, you'd see one of them just pull his lifejacket off, and he'd give up. Oh yeah, it happened in my group.

TINKER: Was that mainly from the saltwater?

ERWIN: Yeah, and then people just giving up. You've got to hold your cool. But, yeah, in fact, I started with five of them one time, and I started swimming, and I said, "No, I'm better off in this group, so we'll just stay in this group." So I just went back to the group, but they about had me convinced that there's land over there. Oh, yeah, they'd see hot dog stands. They'd see bars, ice cream places.

TINKER: Yeah, that's what I think I'm remembering from that book, that they were literally seeing places to eat.

ERWIN: Yeah, you go out of your head. Try to take a bite out of your shoulder, and think you had a piece of ham.

TINKER: Boy, the mind can be a really strong thing, but it can be a fragile thing too.

ERWIN: Yeah. When you once give up, why, you don't last too long. You got to set your mind to, "hey I'm going to make it." What would really be bad, sometimes too, is you'd pray at night for it to get daytime, for you was freezing at night. And daytime you pray for night, you get so hot and all. Next day, you'd say, well they'll see you. Then you'd see planes flying so high that they couldn't see your head sticking out of the water. You'd think, "well, they saw us, they saw us, they saw us." And you'd keep waiting and waiting and waiting.

TINKER: So you'd get your hopes up.

ERWIN: No help would come.

TINKER: Was there ever any, early on, discussion or did anybody ever say like, did you try and encourage each other and say, "They'll come looking for us. They've got to know that the ship ..."

-----END OF TAPE ONE-----

TINKER: This continues and interview with Louis H. Erwin, November 22<sup>nd</sup> at his home in Chattanooga. And so you were saying that no, you all didn't really talk about the plane, that someone was eventually going to come ...

ERWIN: Oh, yes, yes.

TINKER: Oh, you did? Okay.

ERWIN: Yeah, we would talk. We'd try to convince some of them that, well they saw us, and then we keep waiting and waiting and waiting. Oh yeah, every day you'd just say, "Hey, look, hold on. Hold on, we're going to make it." Finally, when Lieutenant Gwinn—you'll see him in a lot of those pictures; I knew him. He come over flying a bomber, and something happened to his radar, radio antenna, or something. He was crawling back through the plane and saw the heads sticking out of the water. He was low. He was looking for submarines. He wasn't even looking for us.

TINKER: And he's the one that first saw you?

ERWIN: He spotted us. And then after he spotted us, he thought it was Japanese, and he was going make a bomb run on it. And he happened to see everybody waving their hands and different things. Then he come over and done his wings this way and left for a while.

TINKER: But you knew then?

ERWIN: Yeah. And he dropped—not in the section I was in, but in another section he dropped some rations, or not rations, but water, but as soon as it hit the water it busted. After we got picked up, after Adrian Marks come there and that PBY [Consolidated PBY Catalina] started to

picking up. He'd taxi around, and we'd swim between the pontoon and the fuselage. They'd throw you a line and drag you in. After the fuselage got full, why, that's when they'd shut the engine off and start takin' us out and putting us on the wing of the plane. And on the plane they had a little old cup, 'bout like that, and it was just full of grease when it got to me. Just what you'd see where the hands had been on it. But you only got two sips and every man just take two sips out of the same cup. You know, 'til it run out and they'd pour a little more. They'd make you pass it around.

TINKER: Because they didn't want you to get sick?

ERWIN: Well, that, and nobody took advantage of it, just turning it up and drinking it. Everybody done just what they're supposed to do. Course there, after they took us off ...

TINKER: Do you need to get a drink?

ERWIN: Oh no, I'm fine. After they took us off and put us on the *Cecil J. Doyle*, why, they give us some broth for a day or so. We really didn't get no good—after they put us on the *Cecil J. Doyle* that carried us to Peleliu, where we stayed in a makeshift hospital four or five days. Then we caught the *U.S.S. Tranquility*; it's in there in these books. We started getting a little food there, but they really—when we got to Guam and put us in the hospital.

TINKER: Was there anybody from your ship's division, you know, that was on the guns with you that was in your group in the water.

ERWIN: I couldn't tell you that. I don't—I can't remember one. I knew all of them's name there, but I don't remember seeing them right in the water with me.

TINKER: So out of the about 250 to 300, when they picked you all up there was 56. Did Marks talk to you all when he landed the PBY, or is it all just kind of a blur after that?

ERWIN: No, he was busy taxiing around out there, until they shut it off. And that was—I guess I got picked up about six or seven o' clock, and it was two o' clock before the *Cecil J. Doyle* got there.

TINKER: So everybody just loaded up on the PBY and waited for the *Doyle*?

ERWIN: Yeah, that was just a hang-on thing. And then we got cold there, and that's when he put the parachutes and tied us down, keeping us from sliding off the wings. We stayed on that 'til they come, and then we got lifeboats and carried us over there.

TINKER: Did you see the other groups getting rescued as well?

ERWIN: No, no, they—we couldn't stand up. Your legs was out from under you.

TINKER: Well, I almost don't know what to say now I'm so ... Okay, so when you got on the *Doyle*, you got some broth and started feeling almost like a human being again?

ERWIN: Well, next morning—they sailors on the *Cecil J. Doyle*, they give us their bunks. But next morning when they got everybody off of that PBV, they sunk it, and when they turn them 40 millimeters mount loose on there, I come out of that sack again. I thought I was going back through the drink.

TINKER: I was going to say, how did you sleep that first night? I guess you just passed out, didn't you?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah, when I got a dry bunk and all that. But when they sunk that plane, I guess about nine o' clock the next morning, and all that ...

TINKER: You went shooting out of your bunk?

ERWIN: Yeah, I hit that deck again, and I said, "Uh-oh, they done got us again." But then there was corpsmen around there and different things.

TINKER: Keeping a good eye on you all?

ERWIN: Just telling us, "Well, they're just sinking the plane."

TINKER: Did everybody that was rescued out of the water survive? Or was anybody so ill that they couldn't make it after they got out of the water?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah, some of them even lived 'til they saw them dropping the raft-like things. Some of them just popped over like that, excited.

TINKER: Oh, oh, okay. How long were you on the *Doyle* before you transferred to the ...

ERWIN: Just about four days, five days, before they put us off over there at Peleliu. You was just in one of them little old shack-like things that had doors up, windows I guess you'd call it, up in there. And there might've been six to eight people to each little old shack like that. I believe it might've been an old camp, some kind of camp.

TINKER: It was probably the best shack you've ever been in, right? (Laughs)

ERWIN: I didn't remember too much of it there. They was trying to do everything. Of course, when you got on Guam, and you got able to—I wasn't a basket case, other than when you hit the deck and you can't stand up.

TINKER: Your legs were still weak?

ERWIN: Yeah, they give out from under you. Just from dangling in the water.

TINKER: Was anybody still having trouble mentally like still seeing things, or was everybody, once you got to Guam, was everybody pretty much okay?

ERWIN: All except the ones that was eat up pretty bad and ones that were hurt and burnt. They was still basket cases. But the guys that could finally, you know, get around, and I don't know, [had] a little more strength and all ...

TINKER: So how long were you in Guam?

ERWIN: Spent a month there in the hospital. Of course, they fed you good there, and then you had to go write your story, what happened. This, that, and they was after the captain and this thing. And they asked you where you was at and what you was doing, this, that, and the other. What you could remember and different things, and they run you through all kinds of meetings—not meetings, inquiries I guess you'd call that.

TINKER: Like a debriefing, sort of.

ERWIN: Yeah, they were going to find out what happened.

TINKER: Well, was it during this time that you started hearing what happened? When did you start asking questions? You know, because you don't even know what happened this whole time.

ERWIN: It was about sixteenth of August, something like that. I heard over the loudspeaker that the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* was sunk, and it got sunk on July the thirtieth. Well, actually the night of the twenty-ninth. But now, that's when they started ...

TINKER: Started reporting it?

ERWIN: Yeah. Released it. It was about in the middle of August.

TINKER: So two weeks later they're finally reporting it.

ERWIN: Now, I was already back—I was on Guam.

TINKER: And then that was when you found out a Jap sub had sunk you all?

ERWIN: Course, I knew, out in the water, that we got sunk by a sub, too. But, four torpedoes in all, two hit the fore and two hit the main powder room; that's what blowed it half in two. The powder room.

TINKER: Well, when did you find out that you all had carried the parts for the bomb?

ERWIN: Same time.

TINKER: Almost the same day?

ERWIN: Same day. It was just about the same day. The cargo—we finally found out what the cargo was on there.

TINKER: And was that an official finding out, or was that just people talking?

ERWIN: Yeah, yeah. Far as I know, it was official.

TINKER: What was going through your mind at that time?

ERWIN: Get home. (Laughter)

TINKER: So you didn't care nothing about no bomb, you just wanted to get home?

ERWIN: The bomb had done its job, and ...

TINKER: And then you find out that you had carried the parts?

ERWIN: I was ready to head back to the United States.

TINKER: You just wanted to get on with it?

ERWIN: Yeah. You were so—they had a parade for us in Diego, California, when we got off the ...

TINKER: When did you get back to San Diego?

ERWIN: I can't recall what date it was. When we got back to Diego, California, they had a parade for us. 'Course the U.S.O. [previous United Service Organization] and Red Cross and all was done there, passing out candy and gedunks and all that stuff. As we come up through there on buses and everything, people running out of bars hand you a glass of beer, a bottle of beer. Man, you felt good.

TINKER: By then you were feeling good? (Laughter)

ERWIN: Yeah, they had that thing, and then they take us out to Ieya out there.

TINKER: To what?

ERWIN: Ieya, it's a camp. It's a camp where they issue you some clothes and got some clothes and all. That's where you get your papers to come home on thirty-day survivor's leave and all that stuff. Get you some shoes, this, that, and the other.

TINKER: When did you find out how many people had perished from the ship?

ERWIN: I don't remember that exactly.

TINKER: But was it kind of immediate or a lot later on?

ERWIN: It was later on.

TINKER: It was much later on?

ERWIN: Yeah, when they had, you know, they had all those inquiries and brought the captain up for court martial. I didn't have to testify up there, but you had to—the ones that actually had testify was the people on deck, was on duty. Such as, oh, my friend Coxswain E.H. Keyes did. They had Dorney, Captain Dorney, a Marine. Giles McCoy, in fact he's the one that first started our organization. They had quite a few up there, and they had all them inquiries, and that's when you started finding out more about it.

TINKER: I was reading here from the *Indianapolis* organization website that says they convened the inquiry in Guam, August 13<sup>th</sup>. So that's quick. They started looking at McVay pretty quick.

ERWIN: Well, there's a thing about that. I don't like to talk about it much, but they used him as a scapegoat. This Admiral King [possibly Admiral Ernest J. King], I believe his name was, this captain's father had a run-in with—he was an admiral, too, if I'm not mistaken. They had a little get-together, and he took it out on this Captain McVay. And he was trying to prosecute him, which he did. Got him for all that zigzagging, and actually, who the crew blames and always has and always will is the people on Leyte.

TINKER: The communications people?

ERWIN: When you muster in at a place, when you got a certain time to muster in, and they don't start looking for you 'til after seventy-two hours, then something's wrong with the communication. So that's where I [lay] blame the blame.

TINKER: That *Fatal Voyage* book—and I told you my dad had asked me to read that, and then we talked about. And just from reading that one book, that was what he always communicated to me, is he thought that that communications department completely missed. It was complete negligence, he thought, that they did not start looking for you all for three days. I mean, when a ship doesn't show up, somebody should've noticed.

ERWIN: Yeah, see, they want to blame him for the zigzagging and all.

TINKER: They want to blame him for the actual sinking.

ERWIN: Yeah, for not holding a zigzag course, and not—and the captain asked for an ... an escort ship to help escort us back. And there wasn't one available, and this, that, and the other. They just want to pin that zigzagging on him, and not giving to the word "Abandon Ship." Well, all the communication is out, how's he going to give the communication, other than what I told you all a while ago, a man go around the boatswain pipe and blow it.

TINKER: Right and you didn't even really have much time to do that.

ERWIN: No, and you might've—some of them up here, what little ... the whole bow was done off the ship anyway. So but they just, this man here, he was a good captain to me, and he done his duty.

TINKER: Did you all know at the time ... the inquiry was going on at the time?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: Did you all get a sense then, early on, what was about ...

ERWIN: Yeah, we knew they ...

TINKER: You just thought, okay, they're going after him.

ERWIN: They're going to pin it on our captain. So, we started—when we first started our organization, Captain met with us and everything in Indianapolis. We met at the Severin Hotel up there in 1960 and started the organization. We started back long, long ago, we started working on getting him exonerated. And finally, we got him exonerated in 2001, I believe it was. I believe it was 2001. But, over fifty years—course, you know the man committed suicide.

TINKER: Yes.

ERWIN: And took his navy revolver, in 1968 I believe it was, when he committed suicide. He kept getting so much hate mail and different things, and he just had enough of it I guess.

TINKER: Were you already out of the service when the actual court martial took place?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: Did you keep track of that?

ERWIN: Just what I read in the paper and different things.

TINKER: You already knew they were just looking to pin it on ...

ERWIN: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: What did you think about—this was another thing that my dad and I used to talk about. It's hard to wrap your mind around that they, to prosecute him actually brought over Hashimoto, the submarine commander to be a witness for the prosecution against McVay.

ERWIN: Yeah.

TINKER: Were you aware of that at the time?



ERWIN: Yeah. All of that, and, course my E.H. Keyes is one of my buddies running around with me. He was up there doing all that inquiry.

TINKER: What did you all think of them doing that?

ERWIN: Oh, I just, I thought it was very, very wrong even suggesting to pin it on Captain McVay. I just, it's just—they wanted to, I guess—I don't know whether they was trying to cover up for somebody on Leyte or this King I was speaking of now. I don't know whether they was trying to cover up for somebody, or cover up for the whole navy. I don't know, but it's just a disaster, wasn't this man's fault. They, I guess, I don't know, I don't know all about it. Did you see the Japanese captain that sunk it? Did you see his picture?

TINKER: Oh, I did. Mike didn't see it.

MCCONNELL: No, I haven't seen it.

TINKER: They got a picture of when they were bringing him over for the trial.

ERWIN: You flip through there. There he is standing on his bridge. (Showing photos)

TINKER: Yeah, there's another one there. So you came home in the fall. You took your thirty day survivor's leave? Then it would've been in the fall sometime?

ERWIN: Yeah, let's see. That was, I spent ...

TINKER: So you were in Guam a month, all August.

ERWIN: I must've come home in October or November.

TINKER: Had you already contacted your mom to tell her that you were coming home?

ERWIN: Oh yeah, yeah.

TINKER: Did she already know about the ship being sunk?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. There's a picture in there where I come out in the paper here. Yeah, there's a picture there. What it said on it. (Showing photo in album)

TINKER: Was there a point when she thought that maybe you had passed away?

ERWIN: Yeah, yeah, she ...

TINKER: I bet it just tore her up.

ERWIN: Tore her up, yeah, bawling and squalling, climbing the walls.

TINKER: Were you able to call her on the telephone before you came home?

ERWIN: Yeah, after you—once they hit stateside, well, you can use a phone.

TINKER: I bet she was happy to hear your voice. (Laughs)

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it said overexposure and all that kind of stuff on it. They had a write-up in the paper, with a picture.

MCCONNELL: (Looking at pictures) There's Spinelli, from earlier.

TINKER: Oh, Spinelli?

MCCONNELL: Yup, he's in the picture on the top.

ERWIN: Yeah, that's him.

TINKER: Definitely Italian-looking. (Laughter) What was the first thing you did when you got home?

ERWIN: Let's see ...

TINKER: Or what were you looking forward to doing when you got home?

ERWIN: Looking forward to getting with my brother.

TINKER: Was he already back home?

ERWIN: Yeah, he got out. He got out a few months before I did. Before I did, of course they give you one hundred dollars when you get discharged. You know, when I first come back, before I went back to, had to go back to Coronado, California. When I really got out of the service, I got discharged in Memphis, when I left Coronado, California, when I got discharged in Memphis. All the buses on strike, trains is on strike and all. I hitchhiked.

TINKER: On strike? Why were they on strike?

ERWIN: I don't know. They just—I don't know. When I got discharged in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1946, December the fifth I believe it was. No, January. It was January the fifth, I believe when I got discharged. See, when you go back to get discharged, you got to go through all the physical and everything and check you all out. Come out, and was going to go to the bus station to get me a bus ticket. They give you one hundred dollars is what they give you. They were on strike. The busses were on strike, and rail was strike, so I started hitchhiking on the edge of Memphis. That's where they discharged me. I was hitchhiking, and here come an old log truck along. Didn't have no windshield. They done knocked out all the glasses. No doors on it. He done put his load off, and he was coming back, and he stopped and said, "Where you going" And I said, "Headed for Chattanooga." So, he said, "I'm going as far as Jackson, Tennessee."

Jackson's about forty miles or fifty from Memphis. I said, "That'd be fine." So I climbed on that, climbed in the seat with him. Here we come, he was whistling all the way down through there. I was about to freeze to death. So he got to Jackson, Tennessee, he said, "Well I got to go back in the woods, here." I said, "Okie doke." So he put me out. It was so black, about twelve o' clock or midnight, I guess. It was dark. You couldn't see your hand in front of you. I got out there, and I said, "Where in the devil am I?" I was scared, everything else, and I kept waiting and waiting, and there ain't no cars, ain't nothing coming.

TINKER: Uh huh

ERWIN: Nobody on the highway. So I guess about two o' clock in the morning, I saw two lights, two dim lights coming. When he come on over here, I jumped up, and I was hitchhiking, and it's a Mayflower truck. He done carried his load to Memphis and dropped it. And what'd it say right on the front? "No riders." (Laughter) So, it was a black man driving it. He asked and said, "Well, where you going?" And I said, "Chattanooga, Tennessee." He says, "I am too, but I ain't supposed to have no riders." I told him that it's cold out there. And he says, "Get in." So I got in that big old thing, and he says, "Get you some of the comforts." He had a stack of comforts where he covered up furniture with. He said, "Get you a couple of them comforts, or ever-what it is, and just go to sleep. I'll wake you up in Chattanooga." It wasn't five minutes, I'd done hit that thing, covered up good.

TINKER: You were out. (Laughter)

ERWIN: Sound asleep. The next thing I know it's about nine or ten the next morning, he's, "Hey, sailor. You're home." I thanked that man, and I could've kissed him and hugged him and everything else.

TINKER: Did you still have your uniform on?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and I had my ruptured duck sewed on to here. You know, when you get out, why, they sew a little duck on you there. And come on there, and I got that black man's name and everything, and after I went to work for a beer company, Ellis Distributing Company, Falstaff beer. They had the Heinekens, Country Club Malt, and all that kind of stuff. I went to work for them. I go get that old man a box of cigars and a case of beer, and at Christmas time I go get him a bottle of whiskey ... So I done that for years, and ...

TINKER: Was he living in Chattanooga, too?

ERWIN: Yeah, the man did. But he was out of—this was his home port, here. He was carrying to Memphis. So then I went down there one Christmas to carry him another bottle and everything. He got transferred back to Memphis, so he was gone. I never seen him again.

TINKER: Do you remember what his name was?

ERWIN: No, I wish I did. But I'm sure he's ...

TINKER: I'm sure he appreciated those cigars. (Laughter)

ERWIN: Ever so often I'd carry him a box of cigars and a case or two of beers, sixteen ounce Falstaff.

TINKER: I'm sure he appreciated it.

ERWIN: Yeah, me and him, we got pretty good buddies. I'm sorry I don't remember his name.

TINKER: Well, I'm sorry, too. I mean, it pays to be nice sometimes.

ERWIN: Oh, man, he was good to me. Told me to cover up there.

TINKER: Yeah, brought you home.

ERWIN: Yeah, getting me home. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well, when you got home, did you live with your mother for a while? Come back home? Or did your brother already have a place?

ERWIN: No, we lived with my mother there before I—I guess I went to work for Tri-State Cigar Company at first when I come back.

TINKER: Tri-State Cigar Company? Had she remarried by the time you got out?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and I had a half-sister. She wasn't too old. I don't remember how old she was.

TINKER: How did you come to work at the cigar company?

ERWIN: My brother worked there.

TINKER: Did he.

ERWIN: Yeah, and I lasted with the cigar company about, I guess, seven or eight months, and I didn't like it. I got an opportunity to go with the Gerst Brewing Company. I got a job with them and stayed about three years. Gerst Brewing Company was a company in Nashville, Tennessee.

TINKER: How do you spell that?

ERWIN: G-E-R-S-T, Gerst. In fact, it's a famous restaurant today. German people own it. Gerst Restaurant, over in Nashville. So, I worked for them about three years, and then I got an offer to go—I quit that and worked for Combustion I guess about a year, Combustion Engineering Company. I got laid off there, and I was coming back through town and my father worked for Ellis Distributing Company. I worked—he says, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm looking for a job, I got laid off." I done went over to Chattanooga Paperware in North

Chattanooga and got me a job, but it was twelve o' clock at night. I never did go to work. I was supposed to go to work twelve to eight, I believe it was, the next morning. So I sure didn't like that, and my father said, "Well, Ellis over there needs a man. Go talk to him." I said, "No, I'm not going back in the beer business." He said, "Well, go over there and talk to him." So I went over there and talked to Mr. Ellis, and he owned Ellis Restaurant and some more stuff here in Chattanooga, so he asked me to go work for him. So I spent thirty-five years with him.

TINKER: Well that worked out.

ERWIN: Yeah, I started driving a truck and then I made supervisor, and then a manager.

TINKER: Yeah, just worked your way up?

ERWIN: Yeah. I stayed with him, like just a little bit [shy of] in thirty-five years.

TINKER: When did you meet your wife?

ERWIN: I met her one time when I—right before I come home on leave. I met her when I come home on leave, before I got out of the service. We wrote back and forth and all. And then I got out, come back, and we started dating. We married May the 4<sup>th</sup> in 1946, and I got out in January. So January, February, March, April ...

TINKER: So, you met her on leave, and then you went back and got discharged, and then ...

ERWIN: Five months later we got married.

TINKER: And what was her name?

ERWIN: Thelma.

TINKER: What was her maiden name?

ERWIN: Thorne. Thorne, yeah. She was a twin.

TINKER: Where did you meet her at?

ERWIN: Actually through my father. He knew her.

TINKER: Oh, Dad really came through in the end didn't he?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah, later on in life. (Laughter) He threw me down to start with. He put me out to pasture.

TINKER: So he just happened to introduce you to her?

ERWIN: Yeah, and my brother, he—the girl that he went with, too, they were buddies, my wife and them were running around together. And [I knew her] through my brother, too.

TINKER: So you all did some double dating?

ERWIN: Yeah, yeah we'd get a car every now and then. We didn't own no car.

TINKER: So you just liked her right off?

ERWIN: Yeah, yeah, she was a pretty good girl.

TINKER: What did you like about her?

ERWIN: All of her. (Laughter)

TINKER: Did she have a good sense of humor?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, Thelma had an awful good sense. You can see her picture's right in there on the wall.

TINKER: We'll look at her before we go. So did you all have a big church ceremony, or did you just kind of go to the justice of the peace? (Laughs)

ERWIN: Are you kidding? JP got us. (Laughter) Five dollars. [The justice of the peace said] "Stand on this carpet, stand on this carpet. Where's your witness?" I said, "Didn't bring one." [The justice of the peace said] "My wife be your witness." [I said] "Okay." (Laughter)

TINKER: This is just like in the movies. (Laughter)

ERWIN: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: Well see, it just goes to show you, it's not the wedding that makes the marriage, is it?

ERWIN: No, not—my brother, he got married two weeks before I did, and he and his wife—he's still living, he's eighty-eight now, gets around good, went through the Marine Corps, and he's had a good life. And his job, just about, 'course after he left the cigar company and all, went to a liquor company. He was a salesman for a liquor company for, I guess, thirty, forty years.

TINKER: So you're beer and he's liquor?

ERWIN: We're alcohol. (Laughter)

TINKER: So ... I told you I've interviewed Charles Coolidge, the Medal of Honor winner, and his—you know, Medal of Honor winners, it kind of becomes their business—or not business, he never made money from it, but the story-telling and sort of a little bit of celebrity just comes

right away. When did people start asking you to tell your story? Was it pretty early on? Or did it kind of start out slow?

ERWIN: I tell you, really when it started really getting going, when *Jaws* come out. See, it was mentioned in *Jaws*.

TINKER: That's right, that captain.

ERWIN: Quinn.

TINKER: Yes, that boat captain.

ERWIN: Did you see that write-up?

TINKER: Yeah, in the newspaper.

ERWIN: Where they got *Jaws* and all? That's really when it started, and then it started to spread. And then our organization ... the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* Survivors' Organization. I've got letters from everywhere, Germany, different things.

TINKER: Yeah, we were looking at that one on the cover of the book from Poland.

ERWIN: Yeah, there's some more in there from just where you never think about. How in the world did they find out about this?

TINKER: Well, how did people find you in particular in the big metropolis of Chattanooga?

ERWIN: Just through the organization, mostly. Just through the organization, they—here, you want to read that letter from that ...

TINKER: What letter?

ERWIN: From Oak Ridge, she's a—you may know her. Let me see ... (Looking for letter)

TINKER: Well, I'll pause it.

(Tape Paused)

ERWIN: Where were we at?

TINKER: I paused the tape. We were looking at pictures and things, but I think I was asking you about how people were finding you, and you said it was because of the movie *Jaws*. That's kind of what brought the *Indianapolis* to the public's attention again. Did you see the movie?

ERWIN: Oh, yes.

TINKER: Did it really affect you? Or did it just bring back some memories?

ERWIN: It brought back some memories and different things. I liked it and everything. 'Cause that Quinn, I don't remember that Quinn.

TINKER: (Laughter) I guess not.

ERWIN: I've got a final sailing list of that all in there about that long. And it's a stack of them, and it's got all their names and their ranks and everything. It just makes you feel bad. It's just page after page, and you get out there. It'll say "wounded." If you survived, it'll say "wounded." And the rest of them is just "dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead." When you go down in alphabetical order, and then you look at it, and there's one of your buddies, the one that didn't make it—and there's so many that wrote letters and called you and different things asking you, thinking they're still alive. And asked you all those questions and all. It makes you feel pretty bad.

TINKER: Have you had children or other family members of some contact you? Like, say there was a child of somebody that died, and they didn't really get to know their father. And they called you to say, "What did you know about my father?"

ERWIN: Yeah, "did you know him, and do you think he's still alive, or do you think he died in the water, or went down with the ship?" Yeah, this lady been—niece, she writes me card about all the time. She lost her uncle on that ship, and she didn't know the uncle. And she's been trying to find out everything and all, and she just calls me all the time. I guess there's six or eight cards in there that she's sent. She's even come by here and talked with me.

TINKER: Some of them just really want to know, but there's really no way of knowing what happened to so many of them.

ERWIN: After you once hit that water out there, they got to be pretty close to you before you can recognize them. Time you're out there, and they're all around, and then they commence disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. Then, sort of goes out of your mind. Say, "Old Johnson was here with me yesterday, and he ain't here." You wonder ...

TINKER: It's because you're so centered on your own survival, I think you probably can't hold all of that in your mind. You think?

ERWIN: The guy that you rested your legs on, and the other one behind you is resting his legs on you, and so you get sort of close. And then all at once, they're not there, then say, within two days later, it's already about out of your mind. You done forgot who it was and who, but uh ...

TINKER: Which is understandable. That's survival. Did everybody that went into the water and survived receive a Purple Heart?

ERWIN: Yes.



TINKER: Everybody did?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: And was there any kind of special pension or anything for you all?

ERWIN: No.

TINKER: No? Just the regular benefits?

ERWIN: Later on life when things developed, if you're service connected, that's when you get wounded in the service. Then things begin to develop. Why, it took me—to get even thirty percent it took me over fifty years.

TINKER: To get thirty percent disability?

ERWIN: Yeah, now, now I'm classified at a hundred.

TINKER: Did that happen to a lot of you all?

ERWIN: Most of us.

TINKER: Well, that's good. Were there any other benefits that you utilized? Did you have the G.I. Bill or anything like that?

ERWIN: Yeah, I went to Hamilton Training School, G.I. Bill for a year. Paid \$120 a month.

TINKER: When you first got out.

ERWIN: Mm hmm, yeah I worked a little at Standard Coosa Thatcher and went to school, too.

TINKER: What were you going to school for?

ERWIN: Automobile, a mechanic thing, tune-up, like specialist or ever-what you want to call it. Hamilton Training Center.

TINKER: That just didn't work out?

ERWIN: That was just to get my \$120 a month. (Laughter)

TINKER: So you didn't really want to be a mechanic? (Laughter)

ERWIN: I don't sort of go for that grease.

TINKER: Well, hey, I have to say, my grandfather owned a gas station and garage for forty years in Gatlinburg, and when I went in the service, I was an aircraft mechanic. (Laughs) Grease can be good.

ERWIN: Yeah, I don't believe Thelma would appreciate me coming in laying down on her pillow with a greasy neck, and greasy ear. (Laughter) I don't believe that would've worked too good. I would've had to cut a trail.

TINKER: Have you had a lot of invitations to talk to children at schools and things?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I don't go no more. I used to go a little, and talk to them. Now they hook me up on the phone. They'll call and ask me. Well, I just had a call the other day from a Baptist church down here, and I told them, "no." They dropped by here, and I just don't travel no more. And I've got—in those things, in one of those books there, there's schools where they've hooked me up, they wrote me a letter, and then they respond to my thing after I go over there. Over that, and then students ask me, after he's through talking to me, why, they ask me questions and I answer their questions if I can. Oh, yeah, I do that all the time ... I'd say it's been two months ago, another survivor come to town, the one that wrote this book right here. The one that just wrote that book, he come to town. He lives in Clarksville over there. We all ...

TINKER: Edgar Harrell.

ERWIN: Yeah, he—I forget the name of this church. We went up there, and he gives a speech—and I went up there, and went through his speech with him.

----- TAPE TWO SIDE TWO-----

TINKER: So, you were saying you went with Mr. Harrell to his speech. When you all have gotten together, have you found that you all pretty much have the same story, or are there any real glaring differences?

ERWIN: There are differences. Everybody sees it a different way. Yeah, there's differences. He can tell you things that come to his mind, or he saw while he was in there. I can do the same thing, but it's liable to be different. It's just—only thing that you're going to be able to describe, long as you're in that water ever-what it may be, is just what's in that little group right there. Not the 250, the about eight or ten around you, or six or eight, or ...

TINKER: Have you found that when you all have had your reunions, with everybody getting together and telling their story, you kind of piece together the big picture? Have you over time kind of gotten the big picture in your mind of what happened?

ERWIN: Yeah, this is just like when we go to reunions sometimes, we don't get up and talk like we used to, but they pass you the microphone, and you get up and tell a little of your story if you want to and all. It's then, I begin to see where some of them have fights and everything, ABOUT fighting over the rafts. I didn't see ...

TINKER: That wasn't your experience?

ERWIN: He was liable to have been ten miles away from me, or five miles. No way I could see that. Everybody has a different story.

TINKER: Even somebody in the same group you were in?

ERWIN: Oh, yeah. You're liable to see—they ask you a lot of time how close sharks get to you. They get pretty close. Sometimes you're liable to see ten feet in the water. First thing you know, they done rubbing against your legs. You pull them up to your chest, trying to get out of there. And then you see some more, where you hear a lot of screaming at night and you don't know exactly what's happening, but you just put in your mind that, well a shark's got a hold of him, and he's just gone. And then those that go ahead and pass away, you never know when a shark gets them.

TINKER: How were you with water after this for the rest of your life? I mean, did you just not want to go in the water?

ERWIN: I'm a fisherman. I like fishing. I got a pontoon now. Me and my brother go—I don't go as often as used to. My son has got every kind of boat you ever seen up there.

TINKER: Oh, yeah, because you said your son sells boats.

ERWIN: Yeah, he's ...

TINKER: As far as swimming, did you go to the ocean; did you go to the beach?

ERWIN: Oh, saltwater, I don't ...

TINKER: You just avoid it?

ERWIN: I don't go in saltwater. I go out on—he's got them big Harbor Masters up there, high as sixty, seventy-foot long. All them are sea-raised, and oh yeah, we get on that. We go up the river, and first one thing and the other. And then I had a forty-foot Stardust, the wife and I did, kept it for five years. Happiest thing you ever have in your life, when you buy the boat. The next happiest is when you get rid of it. (Laughter)

TINKER: Because it's something you feel like you have to use because you bought it, right?

ERWIN: If you want to throw your money away, just buy you one of those. Don't tell my son that. (Laughter) He moves a lot of boats. In fact, he's the number six seller of Stingrays.

TINKER: Sea Rays.

ERWIN: Yeah, Sea Rays.

TINKER: I saw that on the pre-interview questionnaire for us, that he also went in the Navy, your son did.

ERWIN: Yes. Yes, he's Vietnam. He's Vietnam. He was stationed on the *U.S.S. Denver*.

TINKER: Did he want to go in the Navy?

ERWIN: Yeah, when he got out of school, yes.

TINKER: What year was that?

ERWIN: Ask me something I can't remember. (Laughter) I don't remember. There's a picture of him hanging on the wall down there, in his uniform.

TINKER: He was on the *U.S.S. Denver*? What did he do?

ERWIN: I believe he was a radioman. I'm not sure about that. He had his own little old thing there. Shows what a businessman he was, he'd slip double colas on there. He sold Cokes and made money on there. (Laughter) He was in business.

TINKER: Well, he's a natural-born businessman.

ERWIN: Yeah, he's pretty sharp. He owns three marinas. He owns one in Gadsden, Alabama, Gold Point up here, and Chickamauga.

TINKER: What about your daughter? Did she ever think about going in the service?

ERWIN: No, bless her heart, she lives in that big house right there.

TINKER: Right across the street from you?

ERWIN: Yeah, right there. When you come about forty or forty-one, that's forty-one. This is forty.

TINKER: Well, is there anything I've missed?

MCCONNELL: I don't think so.

(Tape paused)

TINKER: I did forget to ask you about McVay's suicide. At the time were you all still having regular reunions at that time, and what was everybody's general feeling and thoughts about that?

ERWIN: We were all hurt, every one of them. You cannot get a sailor that served aboard the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* to say one word against that man. We were all on his side and for his side,

and we are concerned, very concerned, were concerned, still concerned, why they would do the man like that. And if you ...

TINKER: You think that's why he killed himself?

ERWIN: Mostly, oh, yeah I know that's why. See that was his father's life, the Navy was his life, and he was a dedicated officer. He just got handed the wrong hell. He just, he didn't deserve what he got, and that Admiral King and the rest of them that tried to put all this stuff on him, they should really, really feel bad about it. You just don't go around and treating people like that. That man did everything he could for his men, and all. There's no finer captain that I would want to serve.

TINKER: Do you know about his experience in the water?

ERWIN: No, see, he was lucky. He got a raft.

TINKER: He was in one of the raft groups?

ERWIN: And he was in a raft with not too many people. Never saw him in the water. Didn't even know he was in the raft 'til later on. And I'm sure that the men he was with, I don't know who they are, I'm sure he treated them fairly.

TINKER: I remember several years ago they made a movie about it. Did you watch that movie?

ERWIN: Are you talking about the one that ...

TINKER: I believe it was one of the Keach ...

ERWIN: Stacy Keach, yeah.

TINKER: Stacy Keach played McVay.

ERWIN: And John-boy, ever-what his name was.

TINKER: Yeah, Richard Thomas was in that. Did you watch that?

ERWIN: Yes.

TINKER: Did you think that was pretty fair?

ERWIN: I can't put it all together right now.

TINKER: Because I remember watching it. It seemed to me at the time a pretty, I think, down-the-line portrayal. I don't think it leaned one way or the other.

ERWIN: I can't put it together right now. I can't put the scenes together.

TINKER: When you came back home—I mean today with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, there's a lot of talk about PTSD, post-traumatic stress, and some people don't even like to call it a disorder. I saw one psychiatrist the other day on television, and he said he doesn't even like to always call it a disorder. He said he thinks that in a way, it's normal because you've been through something traumatic, so why wouldn't you have dreams, or stress, or things like that? Do you think you, when you came back home, do you think, looking back, maybe you had some—did you have dreams or nightmares, or do you think it kind of affected you that way?

ERWIN: Still do.

TINKER: Still do?

ERWIN: Still do today.

TINKER: You still have the dreams?

ERWIN: At different times, things come up that get on your mind. You think about somebody. I've got Billy Akins. He's a Chattanooga boy. He's real bad sick, now, and bless his heart, he passed away. I think about him. He's in a wheelchair, and I wonder a lot of them that don't make it, you just sit back and you think about it and say, now, why didn't that happen to me? And you see all them that's dead, and did not make it and all, then you look and you laying there at night, wondering, why did I make it? Why did it take his life, and it didn't take mine? Think about it all the time. There's many, many nights ...

TINKER: Do you think you reflect more on it now than you did when you were younger?

ERWIN: Oh I know I do. There for years, we didn't talk about this, hardly. Nobody knowed anything about the *Indianapolis*. Nobody asked you all these questions. I can't go nowhere now. I was at a rally meeting last night that happened up at my son's place up there. The sheriff was there, Hamilton County sheriff, and his head deputy and all of those things, and here after he sort of breaks up, why, here comes this man. He's done read all about the book. He's done asked me a million questions, here comes somebody—which is all right with me. My son takes me to lunch every Friday. We usually go down here to the Cracker Barrel or something. I cannot walk in there without somebody talking to me about this, and I've always got—I carry cards with me. There's some right there on me, and I give them a card. First thing you know, I hear from them. They've got a question. People know about the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* now, and they talk more about it. I'm proud that they begin to realize that people does something in the war, and it hangs on the rest of their life.

TINKER: It's like, you know, this appreciation people really have now for the World War II generation. That's helped. This project that we're part of, Dr. Johnson started it. He started interviewing World War II veterans when they were still in their sixties. So I'm really proud of our project because he actually was starting this before Tom Brokaw did his *Greatest Generation* book and everything. So, he saw the importance of it really early on. What got him started, I believe, he found out some WWII veterans were throwing out their papers. Their letters or their

memories and their military papers, and he just thought that was terrible. You're throwing away history. So that was really the impetus for him starting the project there at UT. So, we're really proud of that. I guess we'll wrap up now. I just want to thank you for being a part of our project and giving us so much of your time today. It's been a real honor.

ERWIN: That's no problem at all. When I go to Murfreesboro over there, there's doctors over there checking me out and everything. Find out I'm on the *Indianapolis*, then they really get a conversation. I have to come back home, and I promised them ...

TINKER: Some of the clippings and things? (Laughter)

ERWIN: Clippings and things. I send them out all the time. So, I sent them some, and then this doctor out here—in fact, I have a black doctor out here at this VA, and I think the world of him. For his Christmas present, it's been 317 survived [*Only 317 Survived!*]; I give him a book and signed it for him and everything.

TINKER: See people are interested. They appreciate it. That's really nice of you to do that.

ERWIN: It's really nice. I appreciate you people spending you time down here.

TINKER: Well, thank you.

MCCONNELL: Thank You.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----