

George J. Barben
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers

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INT: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please.

GB: George Joseph Barben, born on July 22, 1924 in Brooklyn, New York.

INT: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

GB: I dropped out of high school after one year and when I turned seventeen, I went into the Coast Guard recruitment office and they told me to go home and when you turn seventeen, bring your father down, he'll have to sign you up. I went down to the recruitment office with my father and he signed me up. I was seventeen in August 1941.

INT: Why did you pick the Coast Guard?

GB: My brother was in it. I went to Ellis Island for three months for training.

INT: What kind of training did you receive? Any kind of specialty training?

JB: No, just surviving service life – they make you or break you. [laughs] Discipline, you have to listen, you have to go to bed at a certain time, get up at a certain time, do your stuff, make up your bed first.

INT: Did they train you on any kind of weapon?

GB: No, just military sea watch. They gave me a rifle with no ammunition.

INT: Did you have the Springfield 03 at the time?

GB: Yes, that's the only one they had.

INT: After you were at Ellis Island for three months, what did they do?

GB: Put me on a cruise ship in the harbor, Patrol Boat 139 was a forty-foot patrol boat. In the harbor patrol we kept watch on the civilian ships coming in from Long Island, off the ocean. We got a call Sunday morning, December 7, 1941 that World War Two started.

INT: You were in the harbor then when you received the message? What was your reaction? What was the reaction of those on your boat?

GB: I was up on duty and the two crewmen were sleeping. Sunday morning, we got the call about eight o'clock, Pearl Harbor was attacked. Then about a month, two months later, they transferred me to Coast Guard Cutter *Comanche*, icebreaker, convoy duty. We left in February 1942 for the first cruise, convoy duty. I saw Greenland for the first time on Easter Sunday. [It was] barren, you can't believe it, it's white, all white. [laughs]

INT: What kind of winter gear did you have?

GB: What they had on the ship, not much. When we came back to the States about six months later, then they outfitted us in winter gear.

INT: Was most of your convoy duty up through the north?

GB: Yes, four years and a month, North Atlantic convoy duty between two ships—[says *Escanaba* but corrects self] *Comanche* and I can't think of the name of the second ship.

INT: Did you see any German ships or submarines?

GB: No, I was working in the boiler room as a fireman. When they dropped the depth charges for the submarines, the plates went up in the air on the deck, the steel plates. They didn't have them screwed down or welded down. That's one of the things we had to do when we came back to the States. They outfitted us with 3"/50 guns and more depth charges and sidearm depth charges, like the picture, I'm standing between depth charges. [Shows photo of self standing between two depth charge racks.] That's 1953 during the Korean War. I was a boiler man, tender, in the engine room, boiler room for the thirteen years. The first trip I made, I had six hours on duty, six hours for recreation, you know for sleeping. First two hours were in the gun tub.

INT: What does that mean? Gun tub.

GB: They showed me how to load the ammunition into the gun.

INT: So the tub was the area around the gun?

GB: Yes.

INT: So you were an ammo loader, too?

GB: Yes, in the beginning. You have to do it when you're short crew. When we came back to the States for recreation and refitting the ship, they increased the crew by thirty personnel. Then we had enough gunsmiths, ammunition, and loaders. Four hours on duty, eight hours off. First trip six hours on duty, six hours off, first two hours in the gun tub and then you'd try to sleep and eat.

INT: Was the ship pretty crowded with the others?

GB: Yes. It's an icebreaker, the extra personnel had to sleep in hammocks in the mess dining room and the hallways, companionways.

INT: What were meals like on the ship?

GB: Good, very good. [laughs] Lots of powdered when we ran out of fresh food. Powdered this, powdered that.

INT: Powdered eggs?

GB: Yes.

INT: What did you do when you had time off besides sleeping?

GB: [laughs] Nothing. You had two hours duty on the gun tub and you got four hours sleep, you had to stay awake when you're on duty. Boiler rooms you can't sleep, not on a ship. Nothing was automatic in those days, you had to do everything manually.

INT: What did you use as a fuel on your ship? Oil?

GB: Yes, No. 2 black oil. It was all fuel tanks, not convenience for the crew.

INT: How many engines?

GB: One engine and two boilers, steam turbines.

INT: Must have got pretty hot down in that engine room.

GB: Yes. When we had alerts with the claxon ringing, the officer would come down with a .45 on to make sure you didn't leave the engine room or the boiler room. He had orders to shoot you if you were trying to leave.

INT: Being on convoy duty, where did you end up in Europe?

GB: No. Off of Europe, off of Russia. We went between Iceland and Greenland. About four days when the ships was unloaded, empty, we took them back to St. John's, Newfoundland and we turned around two days later and we left with a convoy, back and forth, Iceland and Greenland. We had sometimes, when the Navy took over, off of Iceland, continue to Russia and Scotland and England.

INT: So basically you kept convoy duty from North America to Iceland to Greenland and then you picked another convoy up and came back?

GB: Yes.

INT: How many times do you think you did a round trip?

GB: [laughs] I never counted. Four years and a month North Atlantic duty on a ship.

INT: How long would it take you to get from the United States to Greenland and Iceland approximately?

GB: We were stationed in Boston, ten miles an hour—that's at full speed—twelve knots, about two weeks, ten days to go 1500 miles. St. John's to Greenland about a week.

Then I got out in '45 and stayed out two years and I couldn't find any steady jobs with good pay. I went down to the recruitment office and asked to come back in and I went in in '47 and I stayed until '56, two enlistments. My wife [INT interrupts]

INT: What rank were you when you got out?

GB: Boiler Tender First Class, BT1.

INT: You started to say something about your wife?

GB: She put the kibosh on me when it was time to reenlist in 1956: "I don't know what you're doing, if they have mermaids on the ship or what, I'm scratching my head, your children are starting school." So I got out in '56. They talked to me about two days, everything under the sun, to reenlist. You need money, we'll help you. I said, no, you can't help me.

INT: What did you do between '47 and '56? Where were you stationed?

GB: At a warehouse in Jersey City for three years and I got my rank back—when you come back in the service, they drop you one rank and three months later you earn it back. I reenlisted in 1950. I got married in 1949, I thought I was going to make a career out of it. During the Korean War they transferred me out to Honolulu, Hawaii for two years duty on DD [destroyer] escort.

INT: Where was your family living?

GB: In Brooklyn. They transferred my family out to Hawaii no cost to me. Packed everything, furniture, and took it out and transferred it. My family flew out no cost to me.

INT: What did you do out of Hawaii?

GB: Escort ship DE *Forster*.

INT: Was it a nice break for you, not being on an icebreaker and being out in the Pacific?

GB: Yes, same duty. Six months out, two weeks in, and six months out. Except we didn't have enough fuel left and had to go off to Dutch Harbor, Alaska for fueling to make it back to Hawaii. [laughs] We were off the coast of Korea, about twenty miles, fifteen miles and work the rescue grid, where the planes had to go down or the ships. We didn't go into Korea, just the grid off the coast. We stopped in Japan for two weeks of recreation between two trips.

INT: Did you ever have to rescue any downed flyers?

GB: No, thank God. I never heard of a plane going down in the water, maybe over land, China.

INT: How did you feel about your officers?

GB: Good, they treated me good.

INT: How about your food during the Korean War? Was it any better? Any changes?

GB: Same. No powdered milk, well, we had powdered milk on the ship when we ran out. You have to use it or lose it. [laughs]

INT: Did you have any times that you found anything amusing or funny?

GB: No, never found any funny stuff. In Hawaii I was off duty with my family and we were walking down the beach. They were shooting a movie, Hollywood, Burt Lancaster and an Englishwoman, I can't think of the name of the movie. It's about war ...

INT: "From Here to Eternity."

GB: Yes. "From Here to Eternity."

INT: You saw them shooting that?

GB: Yes, they invited us for lunch. We had a box lunch when they stopped to feed. They asked if we wanted to go in as an extra, the family, the child George, my boy. He died last December in South Carolina, he was fifty-four years old, he was a Baptist minister fifteen years. I lost my wife May 1st this year. Everything's backwards. [pauses] That's the only thing I can think of, the movie.

INT: You actually sat and had lunch with them?

GB: Had lunch with Burt Lancaster and the woman.

INT: Deborah Kerr?

GB: Yes, Deborah Kerr.

INT: Were they filming that famous beach scene?

GB: No, on a walk, not the beach scene. [laughs] I wouldn't be an extra, you know walking through the scene. They'll pay me but I said no thanks.

INT: Are there any people that stand out that you served with?

GB: The Four Chaplains Memorial, I have a video at home that was made about six months ago. I was in that convoy when they got it.

INT: When they were killed?

GB: Yes, February 3, 1943 five after one in the morning. I just came on duty at midnight. The ship went down twenty-nine minutes later. Then three months later I was coming down with an empty convoy, our escort sister ship behind us sweeping, she got torpedoed, the *Escanaba* from Michigan. Two survivors blown overboard; 140 people gone. No, I don't have nothing funny to remember in the service.

INT: Have you kept in touch with anybody that you served with?

GB: Well, I remember that I got a letter in Greenland from the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) – that's the only thing I can laugh about. You have to go register with the draft. If you don't, thirty days later we're going to pick you up and prosecute you. I showed it to my executive officer and he laughed and brought it to the Captain, Commander Currie/Curry. He said call George in, he said if they want you, let them get you, ignore it. When I first came out of the service in 1945, I had to register with the draft. I was surrounded by cops. Medals on, hash marks on. We've been looking for you for four years. They thought I was an imposter so 15-20 months later they squared it away, they called the Coast Guard captain in Manhattan to make sure I was a bona fide guy. They apologized profusely.

INT: After you left the service did you ever use the GI Bill?

GB: No, I never had a chance. They had a 52-20 club, 52 weeks 20 dollars a week.

INT: Did you use that?

GB: Yes.

INT: Did you use it up?

GB: No, I tried to get a job. Two days a week. And the second year I had a job as an elevator driver in Manhattan on Park Avenue. That was the only steady job and I got fed up with that six months later so I went down to the recruiting office [to see] if they'd take me back. They took me back.

INT: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

GB: No. I don't belong to no clubs. I never had the time, I had to raise my family, my wife and two children. I had an offer in New York City, they were starting up a veterans club and a Coast Guard officer called me one night and [asked me to join]. I said I don't have time, I have to work for a living. So when I came out I got a job at Con Edison, like Mohawk-Niagara, in the boiler room. Ten years, then I left the city to come up here 38 years ago, 39. In 1966 we bought the [inaudible] for summertime only, never all year round. Circumstances, I wound up all year round.

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

GB: It made me an adult, grown up, wise in the ways of living. Discipline, they make you or break you.

INT: Could you tell us about this photograph? Where and when was that one taken?

GB: [Shows photo of self on deck.] Pearl Harbor 1953.

INT: Can you tell us about these?

GB: [Shows photo of self with Senator Hugh Farley and photo of Certificate of Merit for service in the Korean War.] That's Senator Farley with me at Riverfront Water Mall, about 200 people were down there. They took a photograph with each one of the veterans of the Korean War. I think Senator Farley was in the Korean War.

INT: You received your high school diploma, your granddaughter said?

GB: Yes, about two years ago. The NY governor allowed WWII veterans that left high school to complete for service, said you earned it. [laughs]

INT: Could you tell us about this?

GB: [Reading oversized certificate: *Imperium Neptuni Regis*] That's the second ship I was on, the [USCGC] *Modoc*. "To all sailors wherever you may be, to all walruses, polar bears, seals, porpoises, whales, sea serpents, penguins and other living things" [INT interrupts]

INT: Now why did you receive that?

GB: We crossed the Arctic Circle. [reading] "... points north and pursuant to wartime duties."

INT: So that's similar to crossing the equator, they have a similar ceremony. Do they do the same ceremony? What do they do when you cross the Arctic Circle?

GB: Nothing, give you the certificate.

INT: They didn't have any kind of initiation or anything?

GB: No, no. It's too cold. [laughs] See, they got a stamp down there to make it official.

INT: Is there anything else you want to add?

GB: No, I can't think of anything. We were married 56 years and I lost my wife on May 1st this year. I was her caretaker for 16 months. She was at a nursing home for two weeks and then she asked to come home to die. I woke up Sunday morning and she was dead, I couldn't wake her up. I called my daughter and she dialed 9-1-1.

I lost my son in December '04, 54 years old, asthma attack, he couldn't breathe. I went down to see the funeral in South Carolina and then, I don't know, the funeral for my wife.

Everything's backwards; I was five years older than my wife. I'll be 81 in July, next month.

INT: Thank you very much for your interview.