

**Walter Davendonis
Veteran**

**Interviewed by Philip Leonard
Hoosick Falls Historical Society**

Bob Adkins: During World War 2, there was a little-known branch of the United States Navy whose job it was to serve aboard merchant ships, and protect them while delivering essential war supplies to the allied fighting forces overseas. From 1942 until mid-1945, 710 ships were sunk beneath them. Yet few people ever heard of them. That's because no one bothered to fully document a record of their achievements. Now, after more than fifty years, their long-forgotten story can finally be told. This is the story of the United States Navy Armed Guard.

[Fades out into a WWII newsreel. A map of the North Atlantic is shown.]

Newsreel Announcer: An ally is in peril. And a lifeline is flung across the top of the world. It is the most expeditious way of feeding embattled Russia from democracy's arsenal. [Newsreel cuts to footage of ships at sea] The shortest route. But for the pregnant ships, the grimmest, the harshest, the cruelest. [Cut to what is presumably the interior of a German air base] A German air base is in Norway and Finland. Detailed reports on convoy movements come in from long-range reconnaissance planes. The Nazis have a magnificently effective plan to change the color of the arctic from white to red. [Cut to planes leaving an airfield] How? Slaughter. Slaughter. Slaughter.

[Newsreel shows shots of planes flying low over the ocean, then cuts to a naval fleet. The planes reach the fleet as sailors sound an alarm onboard. The sailors mount an AA gun. One of the ships is shown deploying smoke]

Newsreel Announcer: Smokescreen. A device to hide the convoy and confuse the attack. Any and all means of defense must be taken against the terror about to strike. High level bombers and low level bombers. Torpedo planes and strafing planes. Submarines. The entire holocaust of Nazi fury.

[Planes begin bombing the ships and AA guns from the ships fire at the planes.]

Newsreel Announcer: In some convoys, only on half of the ships survive. On no other sea route are losses so high, casualties so terrific. Even for those who survive the German onslaught, the end is not yet. Another ordeal, as fierce as enemy action, scourges the ships and the men of the [unclear]. The name of the ordeal? Weather.

[A sailor is shown desperately trying to wipe the snow of a part of the ship]

Newsreel Announcer: [unclear], journey's end. Through its ice-free harbor pour many thousand tons of allied supplies, but sustain a friend whose call for help we are pledged to answer. Here, American, British, and Canadian seamen make their proudest boast. Despite Nazi Hell and arctic high water, we deliver the goods. The goods that bolster Russia in her darkest hour.

[Newsreel ends]

Interviewer: Would you please state your name and where you live?

Walter Davendonis: Walt Davendonis, in Hoosick Falls, New York. I live on Five Carr Street.

I: Have you lived here all your life?

WD: I was born on Clay Hill, Wall Street, back in 1923. I had four brothers and three sisters.

I: Before we get into yours, were your brothers in the service too?

WD: My mother had five people in the service.

I: At the same time?

WD: Yes, she was a five-star mother.

I: Tell us a little about Hoosick Falls, just before you went into the service, what you were doing and so forth.

WD: Well, at the beginning I went into the CC camp, back in thirty-eight, thirty-nine. That was the only job I could get at the time, during the depression. After I got out of the CC camp I came back and got a little job at the Specialty Insulation Company. Then I got a job down at the arsenal for nine months.

I: Watervliet?

WD: Yes, Watervliet Arsenal. What happened is the war broke out then. I quit working there. I couldn't work on a machine. I'm not the type of man to sit there and watch a machine go back and forth. So, one day, another fellow and I, I forget his name, went down to Albany to enlist in the Navy. When they found out that we were working at the arsenal, they said, 'Oh no, you can't do that. You need a permit.' So then we went to see General Gillespie. He was a general at the arsenal at that time, and he was disappointed. He said 'No, I don't think I'm going to let you fellas go. You've been here nine months and we've had to train you and everything else,' and I said, 'Sir, I won't come to work. That's all I gotta say,' and that's the way I put it. He sat there for a minute, then he stood

up and shook my hand and said 'Okay, Mr. Davendonis, I'll let you go, and good luck to ya.'

I: And then you had permission to join the navy.

WD: Yeah, then I got in the navy.

I: Tell us a little about that. How long was it between when Gillespie signed until you were in the service?

WD: A week later, I was taken on a bus up to Sampson Naval Base. They had the first unit going at that time. They had a lot of other units, but this was the first one. This was back in '42. We only had six weeks training up there, that's how they were pushing you out. But then they transferred me down to Little Rock, Virginia for gunnery practice, because we never had any guns at Sampson. One of the officers there wanted to know if I knew anything about guns, and I said, 'Oh, I worked in the arsenal making big guns,' and he said, 'Oh, you did? Well, you ought to take a Gunner's Mate rate'. He gave me a book to study for a Gunner's Mate Third Class, and right away, I got a Third Class Gunner's Mate rate, where you'd take care of one gun on a ship. But anyway, the first ship I was on took me down to New York. It was the *SS Kentuckian*. It was an old ship made somewhere in China, (sources state that the *SS Kentuckian* was not made in China) it was all riveted and it had been changed from coal to oil, and a man who lived in Hoosick Falls, he lives in Buskirk now, by the name of Lawrence Cassidy. We called him "Hopalong Cassidy". He was a merchant man at that time on a boarding ship. He was one of the oilers and I was a gunner, and we got acquainted. Anyways, we left New York in a convoy of fifteen ships at that time. We were three or four days out of Nova Scotia, when the ship behind us got hit by a torpedo right in front of the stern of us. All we knew was that the two ships in front of us got hit. And I can always remember the man on the bow, the gunner on the bow would say, we had earphones on, and he said, "Dave," he always called me Dave and I don't know why. Davendonis is an easy name. "Dave," he said, and I said, "what?" and then he shut up for a minute and then he said, "oh, we had a torpedo go by about fifteen feet in front of the bow."

I: That's bad news. Good news it missed.

WD: Yeah, it missed. We lost four ships altogether before we got over to Liverpool. That's where our destination was.

I: How old were you at this time?

WD: Twenty-one, I think. No, nineteen.

I: A young fella at nineteen getting right into the thick of it.

WD: Anyways, then we came back to the States, and Hoppy wasn't on the ship anymore and I stayed on that ship for over a year.

I: What was the duty of the ship?

WD: The duty of the ship was bringing cargo over to England for the invasion. They needed supplies.

I: So it was a supply ship and you were going back and forth across the ocean.

WD: Yeah, that was one of the ships. The next ship was called the [inaudible], I've got a picture of it right here. Can I show it?

I: Yeah, sure.

[Mr. Davendonis opens a folder showing a picture of a ship and the camera zooms in]

WD: This new ship that I was on had more guns on it. It had a big 5"/.38 stern gun, a 3"/.50 bow, and eight 20mms. I took care of the 5"/.38, on which I was a Gun Captain. I took care of any aircraft or surface gun. [pause] We made a trip early in '43. We had to go from New York to Scotland. We lost two ships at that time, coming across. And these submarines, you can't shoot at a submarine because you can't see 'em. Even a periscope, you shoot a periscope and you're shooting at a thing a mile away that looks like a fishing pole, so you can't hit that either. Anyways, we were in Scotland, and we found out that we had to go to Russia, on a Murmansk Run. They always said that was a suicide run. I'd believe it too, because the first convoy lost fifteen ships out of thirty and they had to turn back. It was in the fall of the year, December. Then on December twenty-fifth, Christmas came, and everybody was supposed to have a good Christmas dinner, but the ship was in a storm. They made sandwiches for us, because a merchant ship isn't as heavy as a big-bowelled ship where they could really have your dinner. So the next day, the twenty-sixth, at nine o'clock in the morning, we had lost the sun already, going up north. The sun wasn't shining. It was day, but kind of a twilight day. Now, here comes Sparks, who was a Navy signalman, getting in contact with us. He said, "well, we're going to get in trouble." He said "the bowship *Scharnhorst* and some destroyers are looking for this convoy" and if they ever get to us, we're done for. Oh boy, that was the end of the good news. The first shell hit what I think was the *Sheffield*, a British cruiser. We could hear an explosion on the stern of it. The other Gunner's Mate said, "Hey, we're not dropping depth charges, I think they got shelled," and it was, but it didn't sink or anything, it was out of commission. Everybody had scattered, go anyplace you want to go. And then we looked up on the horizon, we could see star shells, and shells bursting. Sometimes you could hear these shells. [Mr. Davendonis mimics the sound of shells going through the air] And where they were falling, we didn't give a damn as long as they didn't hit the ship. So at eleven o'clock that afternoon, we got news that the *Scharnhorst* got sunk. It took fifteen torpedoes to sink it, and 1700 men on that ship lost their lives with only six survivors they picked up [with respect to Mr. Davendonis, all these numbers are

incorrect]. But that isn't the whole story of the battle. We had to go between North Cape and Bear Island, which is a 200 mile strip. North Cape was controlled by the German Air Force, so we had to go between them. Boy, that was rough. Planes came in, and we knocked two down. Well, I can't say "we". The ships knocked them down. Everybody's firing, and and everybody says, "I knocked them down". We knocked two, and they knocked a few of the destroyers around us. And, well, we got into Murmansk. I think it was January fifth when we got there. We went down the river. By the way, the cargo was two locomotives on the bow, and two PT boats on the stern, and the hulls were all filled with canned goods for the Russian Army, donated by the US. We got into the dock area and they took the locomotives off, the PT boats off before we got to the dock area. It took only four days before they cleaned us out. Then they pushed us out in the river, Anchorage. Now, the river wasn't frozen over yet. Then we went through the first air raid. They were trying to hit the dock areas. They weren't trying to hit the ships at all because most of the ships were out in the center. If a ship was in the dock, they would try to hit it. We went through eleven air raids that I know of in one month's time. February came, and my birthday is on the third of February. The temperature was fifty-two below zero. It was one of the coldest winters they had. It was always the coldest winters they had when I was there. [Both laugh] It wasn't bad when it was fifty-two, but then it got to sixty-one below for a week.

I: How did you go out when it was sixty-one below?

WD: Well, we had these face masks we put on. It had holes in it.

I: While you were waiting to go back, they were just holding you there?

WD: Yeah, they were just holding us there. We had the liberty to walk outside, but now the ice was coming in. Everything froze up. The Russians used dynamite to make sure the ships didn't freeze in. Then your ship is moving once in awhile, but you can't use up all your oil because you've got to have the oil to keep the heaters and boilers going.

I: So how long were you staying there?

WD: Three months. We got out of there in April. We started out there in the end of March. We had ice breakers coming in. We went to the village in Murmansk quite often, since we were there. Had a few drinks. They had a place for the Merchant Marine and the Navy. In one air raid we had, the planes came across our ship, and they were so low that you could actually see the swastika on them. But we couldn't shoot, because we were not ordered to shoot that way [gestures to his right] because on the hills there were gunnery placements, and if you shot you'd probably hit the Russians, who were alright as far as I'm concerned. But when they got by, you could shoot. You could shoot down and up, but you couldn't shoot towards the hills. You could even see the man, that's how low they were. But they were more or less hitting the dock areas, the railroad tracks. So on the way back down, we lost two ships, empty ships. The submarines figure, they

might as well hit a ship, that ship won't be loaded no more. Well, we got back to New York and I had the liberty to go home for a week. So I got home for a week, and then I had to go back down. And when I got back down, we found out we were going to go down into the Mediterranean somewhere. Well, I said 'that's alright, that'd be a nice place to be, it'll be a warm spot now in spring and summer.' And then I found out that our ship is loaded with nothing but 500 pound bombs and detonators.

I: The ship was loaded with them?

WD: Yeah, now it's an ammunition ship. And I forget the name of this guy, he says, "If I knew, I would have asked for a transfer right away," and I said, "Gee, if I knew it, I would too. What are we going to do?" Nothing. We gotta live with it. So on our way across, we didn't lose one ship on the way over. So this is in '43 now, where submarines were easy to detect.

I: And they had subchasers?

WD: Yeah. So we got in the Mediterranean, and we had to go all the way up to Bari, Italy. Now, Bari, Italy is on the Adriatic Coast. We weren't the only ship, there were about five other ships with us, with four or five destroyers guarding us. And we had to hold up, about two days before we got to Bari, Italy, because a German plane hit another ammunition ship up there, blew about three other ships apart and killed, I don't know, maybe 1200 men altogether on the dock and on the ships. And we were carrying ammunition too. So when finally we got there, we saw ships all smashed up. They made room for us in one spot to get the cargo off, and boy, I was glad to see it go. Well, after we were emptied, we sailed down to Oran, North Africa. I met another gentleman from Hoosick Falls, he's dead now, D. Pitt[?]. He didn't know me, I didn't know him. I could tell you a little story about that. We were up on a hill in Oran. The four gunners had there own table, and there were officers at another table. So we're talking about where we're from, and one guy says, "where the hell is Hoosick Falls?" and I said, "Hoosick Falls is way down on Massachusetts, Vermont border, you know?" and then a man stood up and said, "who's from Hoosick Falls?" I said, "I am" and then he comes over and he says, "what's your name?" I told him, he didn't know who I was, and he told me who he was. I told him I lived up on Clay Hill, and he said, "Oh, do you know Edmund Scripsby[?]" I said yes, I know him and he said, "Well, him and I are going to be partners. I'm going to be a lawyer there. I just moved into Hoosick Falls. We might get together someday." Which we did anyways, later on.

I: That's a wonderful story.

WD: Then we had 250 Moroccan troops come aboard the ship, and before they came on the ship the engineers came in and put up a canopy. Now, this wasn't a troop ship, but they were the cargo now, and we didn't know what was going on here. Then they put a lot of machinery in the holes and everything else, before they got there.

I: And where were you heading for?

WD: The invasion of Southern France, Tropez. Before we got there, there were convoys going over. And there were smokescreens, the planes were terrible in that area. The dive bombers were hitting some of these ships coming in, you know? The Navy would put up smokescreens. And half of these smokescreens you almost died in from the smoke. But it saved a lot of ships though.

I: So you weren't landing there?

WD: Not yet. About three days after the main invasion, we got there. And these barges would come out, because they didn't have any place for us to go, and they would take the troops off on these invasion boats. And then the barges would come out and pick up the machinery that we had. We only had bulldozers and some other things to clear the land. We were glad to get out of there. When we got out of there, we headed back to the states again. Then I got another ship which was the Blue Licks, it was a tanker in Baltimore, Maryland. We had to go down there to get a brand new tanker, a C2 tanker. It was one of the big tankers, it could hold five million gallons of high octane gas, and on the way over to the pacific we had fourteen P-38 planes for deck cargo, plus the oil. We had to go by ourselves all the way to the Philippine Islands. It took us thirty-two days to get there. We stopped on some islands, but it was all the way by ourselves. Zig zag, zig zag, zig zag. Finally, we had to load the planes off someplace, I can't remember the name of the island. And they took them off in barges. And I recall about two days later, the whole squadron of planes flew over just to salute that, and it was in the New York papers too.

I: To salute your ship?

WD: Yeah, for bringing the planes over. Then we had to go up near Okinawa somewhere because there were two aircraft carriers that needed gasoline, and we had to refuel them. And we always had four big destroyers around us, every time we went off to the side, protecting us. And when those suicide planes came in, my god, they sank a lot of our ships. Of course, we knocked a lot of their planes down, too.

I: Kamikazes?

WD: Boy, they almost got us. About three or four came at us, but we got them because the destroyers told us not to shoot them planes until they came through their barrage, you know? After they shoot, then you start shooting, and we got them. And boy, I was glad to get the cargo empty and get the hell out of there.

I: And then where did you go? My god, you've been in the pacific, you've been all over. Now where did you go?

WD: Well, then we picked up another ship coming in for the refuel, took their cargo off, and put it on. We stayed over there almost six months there. That's it, and then we came back to the states.

I: You were in the Navy, plus Merchant Marine, right? Were there Merchant Marine on those boats? Was it a combination?

WD: The Merchant Marine would run the ship, like engineers, but they would have a Navy Captain, who would actually run the ship. And we would have from twenty-seven to thirty-five gunners, and on a tanker there would only be about forty Merchant Marine, that's the way it goes.

I: What happened then, after your pacific tour?

WD: After the pacific tour, the war was getting over with. After we dropped the bomb, they surrendered about two or three weeks later. We started getting a point system, whoever had the points could get home. And I had enough points, but this guy Gerard Barnes, who was another Gunner's Mate, and was married, said, "Dave, can you take my place?" and I said, "Hey, I've had enough of this, I'm going to get out of here." And in 1945 I got out.

I: Then you shipped home?

WD: Yeah, then I shipped home.

I: Then you got discharged and you came back to Hoosick Falls. Would you tell us a little story? We got your war story, what about that medal? Would you tell us about that?

WD: Yeah, the medal I got from the Russian government. After fifty years, I got that, see?

I: When did you get it?

WD: About four years ago, they gave it to me.

I: Why don't you hold it up, so we can see it?

WD: [Picks up a case containing a medal and holds it in front of the camera] They gave it to the people who made the Murmansk Run. And they always told their own people that they were doing alright.

I: But they can admit it now. So, four years ago, you got the medal.

WD: Yeah. Now that Yeltsin got in there, he says, "We should do something for the allies."

I: And you got your medal. So, you came back to Hoosick Falls, and what happened?

WD: Well, when I got back to Hoosick Falls, I said, “Well, I’ve got to do something,” so I went into the plumbing business, and quite many years I stayed in the plumbing business.

I: And you got married, and how many children did you have?

WD: I had seven children, four girls and three boys. And then I ran for Trustee in the Village in '72, I was in twice, I guess.

I: Well, I thank you for coming and telling us that story, that’s a wonderful story.

WD: I hope it comes out alright.

I: It’ll be great, and we thank you very much for coming.

[Video ends]