

**Arthur W. Erbe  
Veteran**

**Mike Russert  
Wayne Clarke  
New York State Military Museum  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on  
June 3rd 2004, 11:30 AM  
Saratoga Springs, NY**

**Q:** Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?

**AE:** Arthur Warren Erbe, I was born in Rockville Center Long Island, and what was the third one?

**Q:** When?

**AE:** November 17th, 1943

**Q:** Okay, what was your educational background prior to entering service?

**AE:** High school graduate from Greenwich Central School and, uh that was it, when I graduated from, shortly after I graduated from high school, I worked in the summer and in the fall of 1962, I joined the Navy

**Q:** Why did you enlist and why did you select the Navy?

**AE:** Um, basically a friend of mine, we joined on a buddy system, a fella in town that I went to school with by name of William Kelly, we joined on a buddy system, went to boot camp together and I guess the reason that I joined was uh, I wasn't interested in going to college. I didn't have the marks in high school to go to college, didn't have the finances to go to school, and uh, heard so much about the training and education that you can get in the Navy, basically that's why I went, and I want to get my uh, military service done early and get it over with.

**Q:** Okay, where did you go for your training and could you talk a little bit, describe your training?

**AE:** Yeah, after we, after we went in, we left Albany by train took a train to Great Lakes Naval Training Center and uh, just north of Chicago and took boot camp at Great Lakes training center, and uh, I can't exactly remember, seems like I might have been 12 weeks of basic training. We did have a Christmas leave, they let us go home for Christmas for, seems like it was about a week and come back, finished, and then from there we went right, I went right to a machinist mate school, which was right on the base there a, at Great Lakes, went through machinists mate school which was probably eight weeks, I kind of forget what that was, the length of it. Graduated from there and then stayed on the base for a while, did some secretarial work, for the commander on, at the school, and did some typing and stuff for him. Went home in June, it was for, I had two weeks' vacation and then went to Newport and was assigned the USS Kankakee AO thirty-nine and I met the Kankakee at the tanker pier Melville, Rhode Island, which is Newport

Rhode Island area and I was on the Kankakee for about three and a half years, rest of my career in the Navy, was four years. Then we did the service, oh the cruises that we took were, the areas that we hit were basically the North Atlantic. We went down as far, almost as far as the Panama Canal. We went over into the Mediterranean, we did a six-month Med cruise in 1964, and then basically that was, that was our area of operations. Refueling all the time, was a, wasn't a very glorified job refueling, it was a lot of long hours, sometimes 12, sometimes even 24 hours refueling at a time. Long, long arduous hours day and night. Night refueling was pretty exciting when you had an aircraft carrier come alongside you, refuel or sometimes take fuel from aircraft carrier. The USS Roosevelt and some of the bigger carriers and they'd hold flight operations while we were refueling, which was especially at night, was a, was a quite a sight to see.

**Q:** Now why would you take fuel off of a carrier?

**AE:** They, although we were a fleet tanker and I can't remember how much fuel we hold, but we were a pretty good sized tanker this ship was, at the time, it was five-hundred feet long, five -hundred and one feet and uh, although we held a lot of fuel, sometimes we wouldn't have enough different specific types of fuel, whether it be aviation gas or JP5 or a, just bunker fuel and stuff for the, for the boilers if, if they or us was high or low we transfer back and forth, whatever the need may be.

**Q:** So you carried more than one type of fuel?

**AE:** Oh yeah, yeah I think as I remember, we carried JP5 which was a jet propulsion fuel, I believe they used that in jet engines, I'm not, I wasn't in that department so I don't know much about it. Then there was aviation gasoline which I believe they used in aircraft engines, probably a piston engine and again I'm not sure of that and then of course the base, the main fuel was a, was oil for the, for the steam under, steam boilers

**Q:** No incidents or anything?

**AE:** Yeah we had one thing that was kind of interesting, couple things probably, we were down to Caribbean refueling the USS Intrepid aircraft carrier and again was a long hour, hour after hour operation and I was up, I was on break at the time from the engine room, I was the machinist mate working the engine room down main control and I was up on the Av gas tank, which was way up front, on the front of the ship almost up by the anchor windlass getting some air and of course the carrier is right alongside of you, maybe anywhere from one hundred to one hundred fifty feet, seventy five to one hundred fifty feet away, depends on how they're coming, coming close, um of course she's high, her flight deck is way the hell above our deck, so operations are going on, where watching the operational and I'm looking up and all of a sudden, looks like she's getting closer, getting closer, she's getting closer. I mean it happens all the time, then you swing back apart. Well she kept coming closer and closer and I was up there with an old Boatswain's mate, he was an old warrant officer, an old Mustang, and of course he knew what was going on, he knew we were in trouble, so uh, how was it he did, oh he sounded the collision at sea alarm and the gongs go off and then they, they have a mechanism where they can disconnect the fuel lines in a hurry, well it was gas or oil at the time so they all dropped in the sea so that they could, you know, stop your refueling operation, anyway she drifted right in close to us and they had the uh, the hell did they call that, it was a, a platform it was an elevator that they, they take the aircraft

from the, from the hanger deck up to the flight deck and she ripped a hole in our side, probably, oh I can't remember exactly, probably twenty or thirty feet wide and uh, but it was above the water line so we were safe through, like I said it was her flight platform, sharp square corner, that ripped a hole in us and nobody got hurt, as I remember, and uh, so all hell broke loose and they had to anchor out and Admiral came over, and there was a big inquiry and stuff like that but at the time, had never heard of, as I remember, I never heard if anybody was at fault or what happened, but after a while, I started going to some of the ship reunion, reunions they had once a year, different places and we got looked into, some of the old logbooks and so on, and talking to some of the guys that were there and, and the aircraft carrier was to blame. I don't remember any specifics about it, but that was pretty exciting, we had to turn around, go back up to Boston, we were down around Cuba and we were in the yards for a short time, maybe about a month getting repairs done to it, that was pretty exciting. We were in Newport one time, another thing that was kind of an incident and um, of course it seems like this happens all the time today, but at the time we had a bomb scare, someone ah, we were tied along the pier Two, I think it was in Newport and there was a couple a couple of tankers, think it was the Arcadia, that was the repair ship, three of us tied side by side and it was on a weekend, Saturday or Sunday just, you know basic crews. Somebody called in a bomb scare and of course we didn't know there was a bomb going to go off, or what the hell it was about, and uh, we had to right away you know, get the ships underway and get out to sea in case something, if it did, of course it went off, or if it was a bomb and it went off why were tied up alongside another tanker and so on, be a lot more damage than if you're by yourself out to sea so, anyway that was pretty exciting, we got underway as fast as we could, got the hell out of there.

**Q:** I take it was just a scare, nothing happened?

**AE:** That's true yeah, nothing, nothing ever became of it, um, you know there was a lot of inquiries and stuff like that, the best they could do at the time, course it's so different today, they handled it the best they could and I don't know whether somebody didn't want to get underway or somebody's girlfriend, or what or what it may have been, I don't know what it could have been, I don't know what it could have been, but nothing, nothing became of that.

**Q:** Now in your form, that you sent in you said that your ship was an older ship, do you know when it was built?

**AE:** Yeah it was the SS Kalina, it was a privately owned a, a tanker and it was converted in 1942 to the USS Kankakee to a fleet tanker and I can't remember a lot about the whole history of the ship, but she saw quite a lot of action during World War II, she was over in the Pacific, and uh, I wish I knew more about the history of the action that she was in, over in, in the, in the Pacific during the war but she was very busy, I know by reading the logs and earned quite a few battle ribbons while she, while she was over there and stars. and uh so it was, it saw a fair amount of action when it was in World War II, uh now, and then, and then they put her out of commission, and then they put her back in commission again. I think probably around 1960 or something like that, when the Cuban crisis started coming about and when I got on the ship in 1962 she had just come back from uh, I think it was like in January of 1962 something around that time. She came back from uh, she was in the Cuban crisis and in the blockade down

there, so she had just come back from Cuba and was back a short time just a month or two and that's when I went aboard her. I think I went aboard in June of '60, '62 and I think she got back in the late spring of '62. I remember when I went on the ship, she had just come back and hadn't had a chance to clean up, and of course everything was, I mean it was rusty and you can tell when a ship's been to sea for quite a while, she's in pretty tough shape, but it needed a lot of painting and a lot of, of repairs and stuff. But ah, but yeah for a fleet tanker she, she'd been around the world quite a few times.

**Q:** Now you said she needed a lot of repairs. Being a machinist mate, what did you have to do?

**AE:** Yeah, down in the engine room is where I worked and it was a steam propulsion type of system, we had a single screw, our top speed might have been 17 or 18 knots. Had one uh, or two boilers and one main engine and ah, and when we went into the yards usually the yard birds or the construction people in the shipyards did most of the work, we'd tear down the main engine, and there's stuff that we would do, rebuild pumps and stuff while we were there. Uh, we'd be taking pumps out, they take it over on the base and rebuild them and bring them back on, the same way with the boilers, they replaced boiler tubes and a, a lot of the bearings and stuff like that on a ship. We were in the yards in Bayonne New Jersey, Brooklyn Navy yard and then we were up in ah, in Boston, in the yards in Boston for quite a while, three different major overhauls and then we'd get things back together and it would usually send us on a shakedown cruise or a good test cruise. Usually you went down to ah, ah quite often went to San Juan and Guantanamo Bay, that's where we did most of the refueling and a lot of refueling off the, off the Atlantic coast to.

**Q:** You said you had an embarrassing moment in Greece?

**AE:** Oh yeah, I won't go into to many details, we pulled in to ah, ah it was 1964, we pulled into Rhodes, Greece, and ah, beautiful place to visit and uh, we anchored out in harbor or near where the Colossus of Rhodes was supposed to have been and ah, we took a little liberty launch back and forth, so were standing on the pier waiting for, a bunch of us sailors standing on a pier waiting for the launch to come back in and the ship to take us back out, out to the ship. So while were standing and waiting in, along the pier there, there's a lot of vendors selling you know a lot of pottery, pottery was one of the uh, things that the people over there, were making a lot of this handmade pottery and hand painted, fired and so on, so uh, I better be careful how I describe some of this stuff, but there was stuff on the uh, the uh, but they had big plates and pottery and things like that and ah, they were pretty detailed about, about human anatomy and so nobody there was, I mean I didn't hear anybody speaking English, I mean you couldn't understand anybody was all French and you know, Italian, no one spoke English, at least I didn't think so. So I hollered to a guy down, it was just a table down from me and I got cussing and stuff and you know nobody paying attention to what you're talking about and this lady right next, she stood right next to me, a little old lady, a grey hair lady, she turns and she says to me, she says, "Oh you American sailors, where about you from?" And you know I just finished cussing pretty bad and I was so embarrassed, I think it's the most embarrassed I ever been in my whole life. I just never expected it, you know, all of a sudden she turned, "Oh you American sailors, where you from, but that was, was, that was very embarrassing.

**Q:** Now you said you were involved in the Dominican Republic crisis, can you talk about that a little bit?

**AE:** Yeah, yeah I actually can't remember when that was Mike, what year it was but, but it was ah, there was some sort of an uprising going on in the Dominican Republic, I remember they sent very small thing, I think they might have sent three, four hundred Marines in or something like that to settle whatever the problem was

**Q:** 67?

**AE:** Yeah, is that what it was?, and ah, ah we went down there and ah, weren't told as I recall where we were going or what was going on, we had no idea what it was about, until we got down there and then ah, then the captain came on and told us we were there to support some of the landings that were going on. So we were just refueling some of the ah, personnel landing craft and stuff that was down there at the time, ah, weren't there very long, as I recall, was a fairly short term thing and ah, historically, I can't remember too much about it, I just remember it being some kind of a political uprising or something to that effect but that was, that was ah as, as far as any action was concerned that's as close as it Mike, the four years that I was in, that was as close as I ever came to that.

**Q:** Okay

**AE:** Always on the East Coast

**Q:** when did, were you discharged?

**AE:** Uh, it was, I wish I looked, and had some dates for you, I believe it was in October of 1966 and what happened was, ah, we got a, they came through with an early discharge bonus for some of the guys and I fell into that category so instead of having four years of active duty, I ended up with, I got a two week cut, so I was just short of having a full four years active duty.

**Q:** You weren't anywhere near Vietnam at all?

**AE:** No everything was, we never went through the Panama Canal, and everything was on the East Coast which, I mean that's the way it was. The ship was assigned ah, to ah, the Atlantic fleet, and ah, ah when I got off the ship, course I still kept in contact with a lot of the guys and I was ah, I think it was probably within a few months after I got off, she took a North Atlantic cruise and ended up in Scotland and in England, and Germany and, and some other, it had some nice, real nice ports, I wish I could have made that cruise but I wasn't going to reenlist for, extend for that.

**Q:** Okay, did you ah, join any veteran's organizations you ah...?

**AE:** After I got out, not right after I got out, it was quite a few years after I got out, ah, in fact I'm 60 years old now and ah, I'd say I belong to the American Legion and the VFW there in Greenwich and ah, I belonged to them probably about 8 or 10 years, so just, more or less just recently I joined up with those, uh, those are the two organizations.

**Q:** and you did say that you keep in contact with ah...?

**AE:** Yeah, ah the Kankakee, the tanker that I was on has an ah, alumni group and we ah,

get together once a year, they're getting together uh, I think maybe around the 25th of June, down in Charleston South Carolina, is where they're going to meet this year. Last year they were out in Oklahoma City, the year before that they were out in South Dakota. One year it's on the East Coast, next year it's on the other side of the Mississippi.

**Q:** Do you know what happened to the ship?

**AE:** Yeah, I got off in 66, she stayed commissioned, and in 1968 they decommissioned her and it's my understanding that they sold it for scrap, of course it was built about 1942, so it you know it lived its life.

**Q:** Did you ever stay in contact with any particular individuals that were with you?

**AE:** Well, like I said

**Q:** Outside of the reunion?

**AE:** Well course the guys that were in, in the, that go to the reunion are the people that I keep in contact with, there's a fellow right up in Middletown Springs, that I talk to probably every month or two and we get together for coffee and dinner once in a while, so he's probably one of the closest ones, uh, I don't know if you know Wayne Harrington there in Greenwich, this is kind of an interesting situation. Wayne Harrington and myself graduated from high school together and you know, ah, after, after high school we parted ways, I went into the Navy, and I haven't seen him for year, for quite a long time and ah, I got out, got discharged in 66 and I was down at the old station in Greenwich here one night and he came in and I asked him what he was doing and so forth. And he said well I pretty near got drafted, so he said I went and joined the Navy and I says, oh I was in the Navy I just got out you know, not too long ago, this was real close time after I got out and I said where you located? And he says well I'm on a tanker in Newport, Rhode Island, I said oh, I just got off a tanker, what tanker you on? Oh the Kankakee. I said, I just left there you know that was kind of an ironic situation, but I see Wayne all the time, he's down in my shop, I buy wood for him and so on. Course we grew up together, there's ah, another fellow from Greenwich that was on the Kankakee, his name was Adams, I never really knew him very well, he used to work with his brother Dave when I worked for Niagara Mohawk, and he was on the Kankakee back in the 50s but I never really knew the guy. I'd see him around town once in a while, chat with him, but I keep in contact with ah, with ah, fairly actively, I'd say every six months or so on phone, with probably five or six of the guys.

**Q:** How do you think you're ah, your time in the Navy had a change or affected your life?

**AE:** Ah, I don't know, that's a tough question, I guess Mike, it's ah, and it's probably some of the best years of my life. I enjoyed it very much, enjoyed traveling and seeing the world, certainly enjoyed doing my part as a, you know as a, you know for my country, feel strongly about that, uh it was ah, I learned a lot, you know, learned a lot of mechanical things. I was fairly mechanical before I went in, that's how I ended up being a Machinist mate uh, very, very good experience, I certainly highly recommend it, although my son joined the Army. But ah, yeah I was, it was a great experience no question about it

**Q:** Well thank you very much for your interview!

**AE:** Well thank you

**Q:** Oh ah, you have some photographs

**AE:** Yes, yes, this is my boot camp picture, it was taken in boot camp in 1962

**Q:** So you're what, about 18, 19 at that time

**AE:** Yeah, 19

**Q:** What rank were you, I saw the two stripes

**AE:** That was a seaman apprentice

**Q:** Okay

**AE:** Now when you graduate from Machinist mate school, become a seaman and then when you take your examinations for machinist mate become third class and then second class which is E5, so ah, then just before I get out I passed my first class and chief test and you had to have, had to have passed all the tests and which I did, and that would have made me first class E six if I reenlisted it but you had to have four years and just before I left the ship the executive officer called me up to the stateroom, and ah, interviewed me for re-enlisting and ah, he said, you know he, very much wanted me to re-enlist, there's bonuses and so on, he says if you will agree to reenlist for four, I forgot what it was, four years or six years at a time they would promise me any location that I wanted and as soon as the four year anniversary came up I be uh, promoted to E6 which is first class which is at the time, at that time was a pretty fast promotion and ah, in the Navy in my particular rank. These other pictures are, are taken on the ship, this one here is kind of hard to see but it's me at the main controls on the ship, what they call the throttle board okay and this other one here is a friend of mine, one of the guys I keep in touch with and myself, taking micrometer readings.

**Q:** Okay, which one are you the left or the right?

**AE:** This one here, the left. so this other fellow his name is Richard Barsneck (?) I keep in touch with him all the time, he got out of the Navy did some, a little bit of, went to flight school, became kind of a private pilot for, for a little while then he became an air traffic controller and ah, ah, and I keep in touch with him quite a lot and I was just talking to him back ah, on this 911 thing, he was telling me, he was, he was in the, a supervisor's department of a field, then he was a supervisor of a bunch of air traffic controllers and he said it was the strangest thing to look up on the boards, they call them and see not a, not a spot, not an airplane in the sky, he said that was the weirdest thing in all, in all the time he was an air traffic controller for some 35 years, what a strange situation that was he said

**Q:** Thank you

**AE:** Thank you