

Chief Master Petty Officer Allen W Thiele

Born May 28, 1940
Manitowoc

Died:

Period of Service: US Coast
Guard 32 years

Source: B10, J Gay interview

Enlisted Nov 23, 1958 at Green Bay. Released July 1, 1990. Trained at Cape May, NJ in boot camp.

Served mainly in the Pacific theater, but final years were in the Pentagon.

Medals—many, see interview.

After service worked as assistant manager for the Ferry Line. Participant in Island activities. Married Nancy Rae Hardy (born 1/4/1946) on September 17, 1965. They have a daughter Delia, and a son Patrick.



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Allen Thiele

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

October 11, 2010

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This is John Gay on October 11, 2010, talking with Allen Thiele at his home on Swenson Road, Washington Island, Wisconsin. He's going to tell us about his tour of duty, how he got into the Coast Guard, where he went and what his duties were.

Entering Military Service

Well, my home was originally in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. I was working for a newspaper right across the street from the post office in Manitowoc while I was in high school. The Coast Guard recruiter was the only one we ever saw come around because he came to the post office once a week from Green Bay to Manitowoc. He'd come across the street to the newspaper and bum a newspaper. In those days they cost a nickel a piece. And when he got through he'd always mention to us, "Well, what are you guys going to do when you get out of school?" And we'd say we weren't sure yet. He'd tell us there was always the Service, and they pay \$78 a month, free room and board, free medical, free travel. He said, "What an opportunity!" We said we'd think about it.

That went on for the better part of a year. Finally one day this other fellow and I, I told the fellow the next time the guy comes, I'm going to tell him I'm going to join. I asked, "What about you?" He said, "Yeah, we'll tell him that." So I did. He came around; same story. He said, "What do you think?" I said, "Where do I sign up?"

The guy asked me for my name and address so he could come by and talk to my folks. He was really serious. I wasn't about to back out, then. But my buddy said, "I'll think about it."

So that's how I joined the Coast Guard in 1958.

Did he pay for his newspaper that day?

No! He bummed it. And it had gone up to 7¢ by that time. I always found it a little interesting how the recruiter could be bumming a newspaper and tell you what a good job he had at \$78 a month! And he can't afford a 7¢ newspaper. Well, we always had throw-aways. The first couple that come off the press are never really clean cut. But that's how he got names of people, too. It was his reference point.

But all they had was this little desk in the post office across the street. Every week that's where he came. Other than that, they had an Army station down around the corner. But they never came down and talked to us at all. And they never came to the school.

Anyway, that's how I joined.

So you joined ...

In November, 1958. Then I went to Cape May, New Jersey for basic training. That lasted until March of the next year.

Is that a big Coast Guard installation?

It was the main training installation that we had at that time. The other one that the Coast Guard had was in Alameda, California. They had one on each coast to manage the numbers at the time.

Basic training was twelve weeks?

Thirteen weeks long. But they shut it down for Christmas for two weeks because they just didn't have any training going on then. They said we could do what we wanted to do – if we wanted to go home, we could go home or stay in the barracks.

What is basic training like for the Coast Guard? Is it the same as for the Army?

Well, they spend a lot of time on military drill. They spend a lot of time on the rifle range. We had a big indoctrination into Coast Guard history, and into seamanship.

When was the Coast Guard formed?

The Coast Guard was started in 1790.

About the same time as the Marines?

No. The Marines were before that – they were 1775.

But the Coast Guard was started in 1790. It was started basically under Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury. He told George Washington the country was going broke and if he didn't do something, they both were going to be out of a job. So that's what started the revenue cutter service. And the revenue cutter service moved down to become the Coast Guard – joined with the lighthouse service, which started in 1850 – and then everyone in 1915 became the Coast Guard. So that's where we are today.

Did you learn a lot when you were in training? A lot about the Coast Guard being different from every other service and what you had to do?

Yes, because one of the things the Coast Guard could do that none of the other services could do – and that's why they'd never been in the Defense Department, but they are the fifth military service – is that they have the authority under federal law to make searches and seizures on the high seas of anything that's against our country. The other services can't do that. That's why if the Navy gets involved in anything, we've used the Navy platforms through the years.

So they'd authorize it and you'd do it.

No, we'd have to put a Coast Guard person on board – a petty officer or officer on board the Navy ship – who'd have to be part of the boarding party. And the Coast Guard ensign has to be flown. So the Navy is actually flying a Coast Guard flag.

Did that take place when they invaded Tripoli, because of the pirates over there?

I don't think that had anything to do with it at all.

Duty Assignments

So in your training you did thirteen weeks. Inclusive of the two weeks off at Christmas?

Inclusive of the two weeks off at Christmas. And after basic training I went to New Orleans, Louisiana. I was down there and got transferred from the base in New Orleans, where we stood what they called 'hot ship' watches. Those were watches that you stood on any ship that came from behind an iron curtain country, or that was an iron curtain country ship, that came into the U.S. That was to ensure they weren't trying to smuggle anything into our ports, or take anything off the ship.

Did you write up inspections?

No. We stayed on board the whole time. From the minute they hit the sea buoy on the Mississippi River in the Gulf, all the way up the Mississippi – whether they went to New Orleans or Baton Rouge, or wherever. The Coast Guard had personnel on board. They usually had three men; one of them was armed.

Really!

The petty officer in charge was armed.

And you were down there, then – is that called Captain of the Port and Moorings in Pilottown?

Yes. Then I got transferred to Pilottown. We did pretty much the same thing, but Pilottown is right at the mouth of the Mississippi River, where south and southwest passes divide and go out into the Gulf of Mexico.

That's way down. That's 100 miles down. We went down there one time.

If you drive down to Venice, Louisiana, which is the end of the road, then it's probably another five or six miles down from that, yet.

They have some fishing shacks, and ...

There's Pilottown. It's where all the pilots have their station. And they change from the bar pilots who come from the Gulf up to the 'head of passes' they call it – where the Mississippi starts. Then you have the river pilots who go from Pilottown all the way up. They are two separate – and it's a family thing. You pretty much marry – at that

time you married into the family or get blessed into the thing. The average person didn't come in and apply for a job.

That's interesting. So you were down there ...

And I was down there until around November, 1959 – from March until November – between New Orleans, the Captain of the Port and Moorings, and Pilottown. Then I saw this bulletin that showed up that said they were looking for a seaman or seaman's boson's mate to take my orders. Another fellow had a set of orders to go to the fourteenth district, which is the Pacific – Hawaii and west. I didn't know how far west it meant, but I found out very quickly!

So I called the guy up and asked how I could get that set of orders. He told me to talk to the chief. So I did. The chief said, sure I could go. He said it was great – the fourteenth district; I would love it.

So I took the set of orders. I thought I was going to Hawaii. I got to Hawaii, off the plane, and there was the desk for the Coast Guard sitting there. They stamped my orders: Philippine Islands. So that's how I ended up at Catanduanes in the Philippines – Catanduanes LORAN station in the Philippines. It was one of five LORAN stations that the Coast Guard had in the Philippines at that time.

Is that near Manila?

It's about 250 miles northeast of Manila.

The Philippines are really spread out all over the place.

It's huge. We had a LORAN station on Bataan, we had one on Talampulan, and we had one down near Borneo and the one n Catanduanes.

What did you have to do there? What was your ...

I was a watch stander. We didn't do much of the maintenance around the place because they hired Filipinos to take care of a lot of the painting. They took care of our laundry.

And you got less than \$78 a month to afford it.

I got a little more than \$78 a month then. By that time I was making – I had been advanced to seaman – \$99 a month then. I was really moving up! That was in 1960.

Then I got transferred from there back to the Great Lakes area. I was stationed at Algoma for two years at the light station. I stood watches there. There were three of us there – only three people.

Did you get involved in rescues?

We did in the Philippines, interestingly enough. We got involved in a few rescues over there. But in Algoma, not. It was just a light station. We didn't have a boat at all. All we had was the lighthouse. We had to make sure the fog horn was on and the light worked properly.

Then, after that, I got transferred to the Raritan – the Coast Guard cutter, Raritan – in Milwaukee. There we got involved in search and rescue on the Lake – icebreaking in the wintertime. I got transferred there in January, 1963. And we spent probably two months – January and February – back and forth across the Lake, over to Muskegon and Grand Haven, helping the car ferries and tankers that were still moving products back and forth. And you'd get a fishing boat every so often getting into trouble, so you'd be out there pulling them in.

They had a boat that went from one side to the other. How long did it take you to get over to Muskegon.

It depends. In the wintertime, with the ice and that, one time it took us – it's only about a seven or eight hour run to get across – but when we got off of Grand Haven one time we sat off there for two days just trying to break our way in. We were eight miles off-shore, but the ice was unbelievable in thickness.

You've got that westward wind piling it up there.

Yes, around the shore there. There were three ships there punching together – three of us. There was the Raritan and another 110' tug just like us, the Arundel from Chicago. And we had the buoy tender that came down from Charlevoix, Michigan. She had the most horsepower of all the buoy tenders at that time. The three of us were trying to break this car ferry into Grand Haven.

So you were there ...

I was there for two years, until October, 1964. Then I got a set of orders to come to Plum Island. And that's how I found out about Washington Island.

And by that time you were chief petty officer?

No. I had been third class and had just made second, so I was an E5.

So I was here on Plum Island until December, 1965. Then I got another set of orders to a law enforcement detachment, and I was making E6. I had to go to a school, though, down in Great Lakes for a month for instructor training.

Was this like an MP?

No. We had a 17' inboard-outboard boat. We were on the water inspecting pleasure craft for their equipment, to make sure it was all up-to-date, that it was registered and everybody understood what to do in the event of an emergency. That was the law enforcement part that we were involved in. I did that from 1966 until 1969.

In 1968 I made chief petty officer – I made E7.

In 1969 we asked for a transfer out of the area, and we got transferred to Kauai LORAN Station in Kauai, Hawaii.

That was pretty diverse. No ice there!

It certainly was a nice place to go.

What part of the island is that? Is it where you first come in?

The Hawaiian Islands are made up of five basic islands, and Kauai is all the way up to the north. The Coast Guard station there was down on the very south end. It was in Kaloa. We were about 12 miles away from Lihue, which is where the airport is, and where the main town is.

So we spent two years there. Then we got transferred from Hawaii to New London, Connecticut. I was on the weather ship – the Coast Guard cutter ship Owasco, a 255' World War II leftover. It was a boiler – one of the steam boiler type.

And it used coal?

No. We used Bunker C. It was like burning asphalt. It was thick, thick oil.

This is the stuff they couldn't refine any further.

Yes. You had to heat it to move it, it was that thick. So the decks down below, the people who slept down in the real lower decks, where the crews' berthing was – the chiefs had a little better berthing, weren't over the tops of the fuel tanks. But the E5 and below were. They were down and the fuel tanks were right below them. And when they'd heat up that fuel to pump it back to the engine room, you could feel the warmth and the heat coming through the decks. And the summertime is the worst down there, because there's no air conditioning or anything.

We did patrols in the north Atlantic for those two years – about 45-day patrols.

Those were pretty rough seas in the wintertime, weren't they?

They can get a little bit nasty out there in the North Atlantic, yeah.

And then you wound up in 1976 – am I skipping anything?

No, because I was on the Owasco from 1971 to 1973. Then in 1973 they decommissioned the ship and we got transferred to Governors Island in New York, right down on the Battery. There was a separate little ferry – right alongside the Staten Island Ferry – that takes you over to Governors Island. It's a neat place to be, because there were 4,000 Coast Guard there at the time with all the ships we had, and with the bases we had. And in addition to that we had 4,000 civilians that worked there, from the city, every day. So it was a pretty busy island.

What did you do?

There I was on a buoy tender. I was the officer in charge of a buoy tender that was 81' long ...

Allen's getting a picture of the buoy tender.

That was a prototype. It was the only one of its kind. Everything worked off the stern.

You replaced buoys, and fixed them?

Yes. In New York Harbor. And we made sure they were on station, in the proper location, that the batteries were working properly, the light was working properly and it was all painted up nice.

Did they get banged up?

They'd get run over at times. New York is an extremely busy harbor. It's unbelievable what all goes through there.

That was our job there. We had the East River up into Long Island Sound. And the Hudson River to just above the George Washington Bridge and all the way down to Kill Van Kull, which is the river that is the waterway separation between New York and New Jersey, and it comes out all the way down by Earle, New Jersey and moves out into the ocean itself.

That was a pretty big territory.

It was a pretty good-sized territory.

So you had a regular path – maintenance?

Each buoy had a maintenance schedule to it. Once every three years at a minimum we replaced all the batteries. But every year we went through and checked to make sure the lantern had enough light bulbs in it. They were six-place lamp changers. So there were six bulbs in it, and as one burns out it automatically ratchets to the next one.

They had the same thing over at Northport that the ferry line has up there – those two lights. They have a lamp changer in them that's the same basic principle. It comes from the same company.

Now, you were actually on Coast Guard, like on Plum Island. Did they have a Fresnel or something like that up there?

The buoys have a Fresnel lens on them. Yes.

What is a Fresnel lens?

What it does, dimension wise, it delivers the maximum amount of light velocity you're going to receive. It magnifies it. You can have a small bulb that's twice the size of what you'd have in your flashlight. And you can magnify that to the point where you can see that three miles away.

That's amazing. I felt that was a pretty interesting invention.

It was pretty interesting.

But we spent three years in New York, there. And in 1976 we got a set of orders and got transferred to Milwaukee. I was on recruiting. I had just made E8 – senior chief – and we got transferred to Milwaukee. We spent from 1976 until 1979 there. I was in charge of the recruiting office.

Did you bum newspapers (both chuckle)?

No, I didn't.

It was different. Because in 1974 our Congress decided there was going to be no more draft, and we went to the all volunteer service. So there was the adage of when you went out to recruit you were just about using baseball bats and butterfly nets to catch them.

It was a different time, because they were just starting to get to the point of there being no mandatory service. It was all voluntary, and there was a lot of skepticism among the American public about wanting to join the service. There were some who wanted to go, but the other ones you had to throw a lot of incentives. There were a lot of incentives – money-wise, promises. One of the things the Coast Guard tried to pride themselves on was you didn't want to have too many promises out there, because if you couldn't follow through on a promise, what good were you. It just comes back to bite you later on. We wanted to have people who truly wanted to be in the Coast Guard.

Did you find it pretty difficult then?

There were times of the year when it became more difficult than others. The hardest time was probably from January until April. After that the kids who were graduating from high school had to make up their minds to do something. Some of them, mom and dad just plain told them – you're out of here, one way or another. That was some incentive there. And what helped, too, was if you found a father who had been in the service previously, they seemed to have some influence on whether their son was going to join the service or not. And we started right after that, taking women into the service. So now there was trying to make that all happen. It was interesting.

Did you have a quota per month?

Yes. Every service has a quota provided. You want to try to make that. It helps everybody. We had a good size area – we had the whole state of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan and just about over to Minneapolis. They had another office in Minneapolis. We were from Eau Claire south and east all the way to the Lake.

What size is the Coast Guard?

The Coast Guard is usually right around 39,000 who serve worldwide.

I was going to say: Your presence is everywhere. You'd think it would be bigger.

Yes. When you think about the fact the Coast Guard has fought in every war this country has ever had. And proportionate-wise, they've probably lost equally as many, so our records show, as the other services do.

Are the ships armed for the most part?

The larger ones are.

Those are ocean-going, mainly?

Yes. All of our buoy tenders and everything else, we have small arms on them. We may have some M16's and 45's, or 9mm now.

Did you have a lot of contraband interceptions and things like that?

Not at the time I was in. That really came about – well, not at the time I was an officer in charge. They came about later on. The last assignment I had in my career, when I was in Washington in the late 1980's. That's when drug interdiction became the big thing. That was when all the money was stuck out there and they wanted to stop it. We were in the Department of Transportation, then, when President Johnson created the Transportation Department. We went from the Treasury to Transportation. Now we're in Homeland Security.

Is Customs part of the overall?

We're not involved with Customs. They're in a separate organization all by themselves. There was a thought at one time about putting us together, in a sense. But there's just too much difference.

So you're in Milwaukee.

We're in Milwaukee. Then in 1979 we got another set of orders.

Now you're in the service 21 years at this point.

I was in 21 years. Right. And I had just made master chief – E9.

That's got a sixth stripe?

I have seven. There's a picture there where it's probably a little easier to count. There's four years for each stripe.

So we got transferred to Hawaii – to Honolulu. I was the senior advisor for the admiral for the Pacific.

Where were you stationed?

In the harbor.

Is that in Pearl?

No. It was right downtown in the federal building on Kalakaua Avenue. I've got to think back about that! We were there for three years. My job there was to travel to all the Coast Guard stations and visit all of the units in the Pacific where we had them to see if everything was going okay, if the people needed something.

So you were the liaison?

I'm the enlisted liaison to the admiral. He's got a lot of other folks in his filter chain, below him, who keep him advised on things. But this is sort of like getting down to where the rubber hits the road – what does the deck-plate sailor really feel out there; what's really happening. Sometimes you bring back the good, the bad and the ugly.

So you took the pulse of what was happening on board and brought it back to the admiral.

Yes. And if something needed to be done and it wasn't something that when I talked to the other division officers he had working for him – the captains – when it was something beyond what they could make a decision on or when they were reluctant to make a change, then I just thanked them for their time and went to see the admiral. I'd tell him what was happening and if there was some reluctance and it was his call.

Did he act on it?

Most of them are pretty good about that. They don't get the chance to get out and really feel what's happening.

What you've got to separate the wheat from the chaff, too, because there are some who constantly cry 'wolf' and haven't seen a 'wolf' in a really long time. So you've got to find out which ones really count. Once you've got that figured out.

What were some of the kinds of change that made them unhappy?

Because a lot of our stations were LORAN stations ...

What is LORAN?

LORAN means long range aids to navigation. That's what LORAN stands for. A lot of the folks who went over there were mostly on one-year tours. It was a one-year tour of duty and they were reassigned back. We had some whose detailer might not have been the best for them. They were on an assignment out in the Pacific, and if you took LORAN duty, you were supposed to get your first choice; at the very least, your second choice provided you were a good sailor. But they might not have got the assignment they were looking for, or they weren't given due process in their request. And sometimes it just took a phone call from Washington from me to straighten it out with his detailer, just saying, "Just out of curiosity, how did you make that decision for the fellow?" And then get back to him with it.

Some of the others had to do with families.

Problems at home.

Yes. Or they were trying to get back home because of a problem and the skipper wouldn't let them off because he didn't have a replacement. Sometimes it just took sitting down with the skipper and saying, "Look, if he died on you and you didn't get a replacement, what would you have done?" And it's hypothetical. And he'd say someone would have to fill in, so I'd rest my case. They were looking for something like six days off, and I'd say I was sure we could work something out here.

And if they needed somebody as a replacement, all they had to do was ask. A lot of them are reluctant to do that because they felt it reflected on them. And it's not the case. It's all about people.

So you had to be a diplomat. You were judge and jury in a way.

And you've got to be at a point where you may have to blow the whistle on a captain and say the skipper on the unit – it's not 'pretty.' It's not pretty what's happening there, and the admiral would have to take care of it.

Especially after the second time or third, something like that?

It never usually got that far. They were pretty close to the beginning.

So he was really sensitive to the right information.

Yes. And it was a pretty interesting tour, mainly because I traveled to ... Well, we had LORAN stations in Japan – four of them in Japan. The ones in the Philippines, which was part of that area, they had already been given back to the Philippines. They were repatriated back to them. We had one out on Iwo Jima, Marcus Island, Kure Island which is just off of Midway; Johnson Island, 700 miles south of Honolulu. We had them down in Kwajalein, American Samoa, Yap, Saipan, ...

Where is Kwajalein?

Kwajalein is down in the Marianas.

The Marianas are below Johnson Island?

Yes. It's all the way down.

So that's really down.

Yes. It's southwest of American Samoa.

So you had a lot of air miles.

I had a lot of air miles. And I wasn't traveling alone. There were two other chiefs from the division I worked in – the Human Resource Division – and they traveled along. One of them was a drug and alcohol counselor. We had alcohol on the units out there, and you might have some who imbibed too much.

I suppose it gets kind of lonely and they find that ...

Yes. And they usually have an amount you can drink. You're allowed three bottles a day – that kind of thing. So there's a limit. You can't sit there and just get yourself sloshed. That's not going to work.

It's different from the old British navy where you were allowed a half pint of rum.

Yes. (Both chuckle) But you were allowed a couple of beers a night. And they had a record for it.

So they watched it.

Yes. You logged it down. As you took it out of the refrigerator you had to log it down.

Really.

And at the end of the week you paid for it. They collected once a week instead of paying for every bottle. It was an honor system, and it worked pretty well. We didn't have any problems with it. You weren't allowed to have it in your room. You had to have it in the rec room.

Did each person have his own room, or did they share quarters?

A lot of them were two men to a room. The chief had his own room. The skipper

had his own room.

Were these land-based?

These were all land-based. Yes.

So, what is a LORAN unit like?

It's about 26 people on an average LORAN station. They have a LORAN building which houses their generators. And they normally have four generators. They can run two at a time and can provide more than adequate power when they've got everything up and running – all of the transformers.

I forget what the voltage that these things put out. They have 130' – 140' antenna from where their signal is broadcast.

So it's all electronic.

Yes. And the ships use LORAN stations. When you're a ship out at sea you're looking for three LORAN stations that would form a triangle, which helps triangulate where you are.

(Brief interruption)

So there were 26 people there. Is it a pre-designed building?

It's a pre-designed building. There's one building that houses just the electronic gear, there's the LORAN building and the generators are in that and the radio. Because each one had a radioman.

So you had a specialized technician.

They had usually four or five electronics technicians. They kept the electronics gear working. Then you had about three engineers. They took care of all the engineering plant.

And you used triangulation in order to coordinate ...

No. They didn't. The ships at sea did. They just put out a signal. And there's usually a master station that puts out the signal. And it bounces off of slaves where they send it. It goes from the master to the slave and back, and the time difference in milliseconds is what the ship is going to pick up on their LORAN gear. And it's going to help them identify where they're at.

You would probably be able to get yourself to within ten miles, maybe; five miles of where you were in a circle. They're usually figured in a 30 mile radius. You'd be somewhere in that area on the ocean.

Does the GPS system obviate that?

That's so accurate today.

You don't need the LORAN?

All the LORANs are gone. All the LORAN C's are gone; the LORAN A's. The LORAN A's were for like 150 miles or 250 miles. The LORAN C's were designed to broadcast for up to 800 miles, or almost 1,000 you could pick it up. But 800 was pretty normal. And then we had Omega. And there were four Omega stations, only, that took care of the whole world. There's one in Hawaii, right on the island of Oahu. If you drive across the H2 expressway from Honolulu to Kaneohe, you'll see this large antenna that's hanging between two mountains off on your right-hand side as you're going to Kaneohe. You'll see this other wire coming down, and there's a Coast Guard Omega station there.

Is that the one they first built in World War II? They dragged the cable up between two mountains?

That was for a different type of communication, I think. This was for navigation. They have that one there. There was one in Australia. There was one in Indiana. And I'm trying to think where the other one was – over in Europe someplace.

So those waves ...

Those waves were supposedly big enough to provide. So Omega was the alpha and the omega, so to speak. The LORAN A was the beginning of it all, and the Omega they felt was going to be the ending; really being able ...

And it's all replaced ...

And it's all replaced by GPS. And now they've got breadcrumbs and everything else. You can figure out where you're going and where you're coming from. You can figure everything within a couple feet.

It's amazing.

We've come a long way.

Anyway, we had that tour in Hawaii. Then I got transferred again in 1982. We got transferred to Dubuque, Iowa.

That's an odd place.

Yes, it is an odd place. People would probably say, "What are you doing in Dubuque, Iowa."

You have to think about the fact that the western river system is federal waters, for starters. So that places it under Coast Guard control. It's all buoyed because it's all

navigable – all the way up to St. Paul. It's the longest coast. It's the longest coast in the U.S.

Did you have stations all the way down?

We had buoy tenders. I don't have a picture of mine here. But I had a 75' tug, and I pushed a 130' barge out in front where we carried our concrete sinkers, our chain and our buoys. I had the upper Mississippi River system. I was part of that – the upper Mississippi system being from St. Louis, north. But my area was from Davenport to St. Paul.

That used to take us usually five days to run down to Davenport and work our way back. Then from Dubuque, Iowa to St. Paul – that was usually ten to twelve days' run.

So you were on the go all the time.

You'd be in for a couple of weeks; maybe a week-and-a-half after you made the entire trip. Then you'd go back out and do the same thing all over again.

Did the Mississippi cause damage to the buoys now and again?

The Mississippi doesn't cause the damage. It's the tow boats that are pushing 15 barges out in front. When you think about the fact that on the upper Mississippi the maximum amount of barges that the tow boats are 15 – which is three barges wide and five long. Then you've got your tow boat besides. And that's only because the lock system isn't big enough to take the whole thing. There's only one lock, and that's at lock 26, right above St. Louis, that they can push the whole 1400' in at one time.

So what do they do?

They have to separate them. If the guy's going up-bound, the lock will open and he'll push in nine, and he'll separate those and he'll back down. They'll close the gates, flood it, lift them up. They have what they call a 'mule' out there. They have a wire they hook onto the barge and they pull it out up on the wall. Then they close the gates, the water goes out and the tow boat pushes in the rest of the barges and himself. They lift them up; he pushes up to the other barges, jacks the wires up again and he takes off. It's a good two-hour process.

And I imagine there's a lot of things that can go wrong.

There's a lot of things that go wrong. But when they're going up-bound they're light. Most of them are not carrying much of anything. The Mississippi is only designed to have a nine foot draft, so the barges can't draft more than 9'. And as they're going up-bound and having nothing in the barges at all, they're only drawing about a foot of water. So they'll shove those barges any which way they can. If there's a bit of a shortcut they can make on a turn ...

That's when they get the buoys.

Right over the tops of the buoys.

So you've had the Mississippi from the top to the bottom, practically, in your career.

Well, I made the run from Memphis, Tennessee all the way to St. Paul. That's quite a trip. And I've made what they call the 'Saint to Saint' – St. Louis to St. Paul. Because when the boat in Keokuk, Iowa – which was the other one right below me. I was in Dubuque and he was in Keokuk. He had from Davenport down to St. Louis. And when he was in repair status, then I'd have his run, too. So I'd have from Saint to Saint. And when I was in repair then he'd have from Saint to Saint.

After those four years, an opportunity came up. The group commander that was in charge of the upper Mississippi boats told me, "Master Chief, I want you to apply for the Master Chief of the Coast Guard's job." And I knew what it was. It was no surprise to me what this was going to be.

There's one in every service. It all started in 1967 in the Army when the General of Forces from the Army wanted to find out what was really happening with all of his troops – and there was just a multitude of problems that were going wrong at the time, and he would find out after the fact. He said, "I need to have a senior enlisted who can be my eyes and ears out there." So he created this position for a sergeant major in the Army. From that it all got started and the other services picked up on it and did the same thing. The Coast Guard was the last to pick up on it.

So you spent your time where?

In Washington, D.C. I was selected by Admiral Yost. I never knew the man. You put a letter in requesting to be considered for the position. It was just dumb luck.

It had to be more than that.

Well, the background I had didn't hurt me a bit. I hadn't had the same job twice.

I think probably acting earlier in your career as the eyes and ears ...

For the admiral in the 14th in Hawaii, that helped. And also the different units I was in charge of, and the locations they were, and LORAN duty – I'd been through it all, so to speak.

So that's the highest post ...

It's the highest enlisted post you can get in any service. It's normally a four-year tour. The Air Force sort of changed theirs. Some of them only spent two years; some spent four. I never quite understood how they did that in the Air Force. By and large, most of ours are four years.

And you title was ...

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard.

And that's a single position.

Yes. The only person I answered to was the four-star admiral – the commandant of the Coast Guard.

So you had people reporting up to you.

I had other – like the job I had in Hawaii – there were 17 of those master chiefs around. They were the ones who kept me advised as to what was happening in their area. And in turn I also traveled. My goal was to try to visit every unit, but that's almost impossible – there's over 1,000 units in the Coast Guard. So you're never going to do that.

I went to visit, one time, the Coast Guard units from Brownsville, Texas, which is on the Mexican border, all the way to New Orleans, which was the district office. And that trip alone took us eight days. And we flew to a couple of them with helicopters out of the Corpus Christi air station.

The helicopter flew me around to a couple of them. But the majority of them we drove to because of their locations. And it allowed us to spend a little more time. I didn't like to spend ... A lot of them go in and do what you'd call a 'dog and pony show.' I hated that. It's all show and no blow. I like to spend a little time and just sit down – have a lunch with them or something. Or if they're going out on a boat call, I want to go along: talk to me; tell me what's going on; how do you like it here.

Did you have any particular incident that struck you as being really important?

Not that I can think of. Not anything that was earth shattering. It was just little things. I went there in 1986. And we were really into women in the military. And we had more women who were wanting to be aboard ship, more women who were wanting to be in some of the different units in the field. And here comes fraternization. It's a word that's still out there today.

I get the *Navy Times*, and it sort of tells me what's happening. The Coast Guard has one page in it – all the rest is Navy stuff and some from the other services.

The Navy now, this year, has already relieved 16 commanding officers for lack of trust and other things. Of the 16, there is probably half of them for fraternization. Here's a person who's a captain. Now think of somebody who's only an E5. And it goes both ways. You can have a mid-grade female officer, and she's got her eyes on some young fellow and she ... it works both ways. So you can't say it's always the guys who start the problem. There are some, but it works the other way, too.

That's still prevalent today, and I think it will be for quite a while. I don't know how you're ever going to get away from it. You put boys and girls together, as they say, and what are you going to have?

Babies!

You're going to have problems. Most of them aren't going to have babies – they've got that figured out; they've gone past that point.

But it was an extremely interesting tour.

Did you serve the four years then?

I spent the four years there. We left there in July. I took two months' leave and we came here and built our house.

Did you get a full 30 in?

If I would have gone from September of 1990 until Thanksgiving I would have had 32 – I was 3 ½ months short of 32.

That's really interesting. You've certainly had a great career and certainly done some terrific things.

It's been a really interesting career.

Thanks, Allen. I appreciate your sitting down and recording all of this. I think it will be worthwhile not only for the archives here, but certainly in Congress where all this will end up. Thanks, again.