

## **Interview with Thomas Kenney**

### **Interviewed by Chuck Nichols**

This is Chuck Nichols for the National Museum of the Pacific War. It's 16 March 2006 and today I am interviewing Tom Kenney who is a Navy veteran from World War Two. He served in the Pacific.

**Mr. Nichols:** Mr. Kenney, can you tell us when and where you were born, please?

**Mr. Kenney:** I was born in Houston, Texas on June 24, 1923. I was native Houstonian and lived there all my life.

**Mr. Nichols:** And did you have siblings?

**Mr. Kenney:** I had a brother and a sister. They are both deceased now.

**Mr. Nichols:** Did either of those serve in the military?

**Mr. Kenney:** My brother was a yeoman second class in the Navy and served overseas; served in the Panama Canal.

**Mr. Nichols:** And were you parents originally from Houston?

**Mr. Kenney:** No. My parents were from St. Louis, Missouri.

**Mr. Nichols:** And you attended schools in Houston?

**Mr. Kenney:** All three schools. Elementary, junior high and senior high.

**Mr. Nichols:** And you lived in the city, I presume?

**Mr. Kenney:** Right. I lived in the Heights, a neighborhood in Houston, Texas

**Mr. Nichols:** When did you graduate from high school?

**Mr. Kenney:** I graduated from Reagan High School in 1941.

**Mr. Nichols:** Did you work after you graduated from high school?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes. I worked for a short time for the railroad and I was working for the railroad when I went in the service.

**Mr. Nichols:** You remember where you were at, or what you were doing when we got the word that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes. I was at home.

**Mr. Nichols:** Do you remember the message coming over the radio, or getting the newspapers, or what ever?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah.

**Mr. Nichols:** And you were still in high school at the time?

**Mr. Kenney:** No. I was--.

**Mr. Nichols:** You had graduated already?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes. I graduated in early '41 and then, I don't remember, December 7, I think they had---

**Mr. Nichols:** That's correct.

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes.

**Mr. Nichols:** What made you decide to enlist in the Navy?

**Mr. Kenney:** We had to register for the draft and I got my draft card and I just went ahead and volunteered. There were three or four, of us fellows that did a lot of things together, so we all decided we would go in the Navy. I think I was the only one that got in the Navy. One went to the Coast Guard and, I think, two went somewhere else.

**Mr. Nichols:** Where did you go to boot camp?

**Mr. Kenney:** San Diego.

**Mr. Nichols:** Was Great Lakes in operation at that time?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes, it was in operation.

**Mr. Nichols:** Were they the only two basic training facilities they had, San Diego and Great Lakes?

**Mr. Kenney:** As far as I know. Yes.

**Mr. Nichols:** What was your training like out at San Diego?

**Mr. Kenney:** I did my boot camp work and during your boot camp you take a lot of test to see what are qualified for. When I got through with boot camp, they sent me to signal school. So I did sixteen weeks at the signal school.

When I got out of signal school, they sent me to an advanced signal school and told me, at that time, that I was going into the Armed Guard. The Armed Guard was kind of new to the Navy. When they started putting guns on merchant ships, that's when they started the Armed Guard. That law was passed in 1941.

So the merchant ships had guns and I went to signal school, so they had lights on the ship, like, on the ship I was on, had twenty-eight gunners, one signalmen and one lieutenant.

After I got out of signal school, I went to two little small schools for getting

ready to go to the Armed Guard. Getting ready for convoys and things like that. I never did get a boot leave. I thought I would get one then, but I was assigned to a ship. They took me over to the ship and it left that afternoon.

**Mr. Nichols:** Let's step back just a minute. What were your living conditions, and chow, like when you were in boot camp?

**Mr. Kenney:** Of course, you know, we were in the big barracks. I was born in '23 and the depression come in '29, so all the food looked good to me. I was not disappointed in any of the food. I thought I was well taken care of and treated right. My parents taught me, that when you have something to do, you go ahead and do it and don't do too much complaining about it.

**Mr. Nichols:** Where did you go to signal school?

**Mr. Kenney:** At San Diego. That's where my sixteen weeks was. Then I went to San Francisco for the advanced signal school. Then I went to San Pedro for a little signal school. That's where I got on the ship.

**Mr. Nichols:** And you were on a merchant ship?

**Mr. Kenney:** Merchant ship, right.

**Mr. Nichols:** What type of guns did the merchant ship have?

**Mr. Kenney:** The merchant ship had a eight, 20mm's, four on each side. And it had a three inch gun on the bow and had a five inch, an old five inch, gun on the stern. It was the equipment we had.

**Mr. Nichols:** And this merchant ship was operated by the Merchant Marines?

**Mr. Kenney:** Right. Everything done on the ship was Merchant Marine except the guns and the signaling.

**Mr. Nichols:** And what did this merchant ship, what kind of goods did it transport?

**Mr. Kenney:** Well, it was a tanker and we carried oil. The ship was about five hundred and twenty-five feet long and carried 105,000 barrels of black oil. I stayed on that for, roughly, eighteen months.

**Mr. Nichols:** This merchant ship would deliver the oil to a refinery?

**Mr. Kenney:** No. No. We'd go to refinery and get a load of oil and go out in the Pacific and unload. Then go back and then a trip to Honolulu; and went back, and made a trip to the island of Funafuti, which is below the equator. Then we got on a run that we would load in the Caribbean, come back through the Panama Canal and go to the South Pacific to the different islands. As they fought, as the war progressed, we moved up island to island. At nighttime, or whenever we got there, we'd go into a little lagoon, or an island and the fleet tankers, (there were five fleet tankers at that time in the South Pacific) would come along side and we would unload into them. Some times we could unload in fourteen hours. We would get, maybe, one ship, 40,000 barrels, and another one, until we were empty. Then we would take on ballast and go back to

the Panama Canal, through, and get another load of oil and come back to the South Pacific. It was, kind of like, a pipe line. I'm sure there was a lot of tankers going to keep everything going out there.

**Mr. Nichols:** And you would pick your black oil up on the east coast and have to come down through the canal and to go over to the Pacific side?

**Mr. Kenney:** We'd pick it up in the Caribbean, either Oranjestad , Aruba, or Curacao and then go back through the Panama. It was twenty-six days from Panama to where we would go in the South Pacific, roughly, all the time, and twenty-six days back. We would take our storage either on one side, either on the Atlantic side, or the Pacific side. That would be our supplies. Our milk and everything for the trip.

Then we would go down to Aruba and we could load in fourteen, fifteen hours.

Then we would go down to Aru We would go back and we wouldn't stop if we already had our supplies. We would just go through the Panama Canal. Then go to the South Pacific, unload into those tankers, start back, come back and that's what we did.

**Mr. Nichols:** Was the black oil use for fuel on the regular ships?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. It pretty well thickened from the time they pumped into the ship. About ten days before we'd get to where we were going to unload it, they had heaters that run through the tanks and it would heat it up so it would flow real easy. Then we'd get to those tankers and we would drop anchor in a lagoon, or somewhere like that, and they would just come in along side of us and we would tie up and they would hook the hoses up and we would pump into them and they would leave.

**Mr. Nichols:** How fast would these ships go?

**Mr. Kenney:** The one I was on would go, roughly, probably twelve knots.

**Mr. Nichols:** That's probably about fifteen miles an hour.

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah.

**Mr. Nichols:** What were living conditions like on the ship?

**Mr. Kenney:** It was like a hotel really. We were treated very well. The Navy was separated. In other words, we had our own quarters. We had our own mess hall. Our mess hall was next to the Merchant Marine mess hall. We had our own mess and our own quarters and had good bunks, nice mattresses and they furnished us with our linens and bedspread, which was really unusual. When we went to the mess hall during the meal time, they fed three times a day. When we went there, a Merchant Marine fellow waited our table. We had a menu. They had, like for breakfast, they would have ham and bacon and then you could get your eggs like you wanted them. It was pretty nice, to be honest with you. You ordered what you wanted and he would bring it to you and you could get toast, or biscuits. Then the next day they would change the menu a little bit, so you would, maybe, have hotcakes, or something. The same happened at the noonday and the evening meals. You ordered and the mess hall took care of it.

- Mr. Nichols:** Did you have ice cream?
- Mr. Kenney:** Just a short time out of port. After that, we didn't have it anymore.
- Mr. Nichols:** I think some of your big ships, aircraft carriers and what have you, had ice cream machines on them.
- Mr. Kenney:** No, we didn't have that back then. But, we did have it sometimes, like, two, or three days out of port where they had the room to store it. Of course, for the Merchant Marines, were getting paid; they would sign on for a ship and the galley made, they had a coffee break around nine-thirty and another one again in the afternoon. They had fresh pastry products, cinnamon rolls and cookies and pies and things like that. What ever they made for them, they gave the Navy a portion of it. Really, it was very good. Let me just say that the duty was so good, that I went up for first class and a fellow came down and he said, "Are you going up for first?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "They're sending all firsts to the fleet." I went back to my ship. I didn't go up for first. That little bit of pay was not worth changing my living conditions.
- Mr. Nichols:** After you got through the canal with your tanker, were you accompanied by any Navy vessels?
- Mr. Kenney:** We traveled by ourselves. The only time we had other things was if we went in a convoy, which was not too often. Once in a while they would put you in a convoy if we were going into a pretty dangerous area. Then we had little destroyer escorts and things like that. But, other than that, we always traveled by ourselves.
- Mr. Nichols:** Did they have submarine lookouts on the ship?
- Mr. Kenney:** Twenty-four hours a day. That's what the Navy did. We stood watches and manned the guns and did all the signal work. Yeah.
- Mr. Nichols:** Did you actually get attacked by any Japanese submarines?
- Mr. Kenney:** We had a submarine surface on us in the Caribbean but, of course, they were on top charging the batteries and we saw them and went to general alarm and they went down right away. We started zig-zaging and running the ship at full speed for awhile. When we got into a port where we were going to load oil, the Navy intelligence came aboard and asked us about it. It was my understanding that they knew the submarine was there. It was out of tubes and everything, torpedoes, they knew it was there and just waiting for it.
- Mr. Nichols:** A German submarine, probably?
- Mr. Kenney:** I imagine. So they would finally have to wait and give up, or just die down there, you know? That's the only submarine we had. We had some calls out in the Pacific but, sometimes they were false. A porpoise, swimming real fast at your ship at nighttime, looks like a torpedo. They will just go to general alarm and you see the phosphorus coming up and as soon as they get to the ship, you know, they'll turn and so, we had some alarms but, we didn't get in any battles. We didn't get into any battles until we got to Okinawa.

- Mr. Nichols:** Were you assigned to any specific area in the Pacific where you unloaded your fuel?
- Mr. Kenney:** Just wherever the tankers met us. Wherever we rendezvoused with the tankers. They do transfer that oil, sometimes at sea but, we never did that. We always went to an island somewhere, where it was calm and we could take the ships along side. Sometimes we had two tankers at once.
- Mr. Nichols:** What were some of the islands you went to early on?
- Mr. Kenney:** Let's see. I started at Pearl Harbor and then went to Funafuti and then-----
- Mr. Nichols:** Where is Funafuti?
- Mr. Kenney:** It's down below the equator. It's way down south in Fiji Islands. Then we started and as kind of the battle moved up. I didn't go to Iwo Jima and I didn't go to Guadalcanal but, like, Kwajalein and Eniwetok and Guam and many of the islands in the South Pacific, because we were just on this transfer deal. I made most of them. The last one I was on a ship with a cargo, was on Okinawa. We went in convoy to that. We went by ourselves to the islands where they formed the convoy and then out of there we went in convoy.
- Mr. Nichols:** Were you there to support the invasion of Okinawa, or----?
- Mr. Kenney:** I don't know exactly when they invaded. I know that we went in there and they were still fighting. They were still fighting on the beach. They had suicide boats and suicide planes still attacking. The suicide boats were, like, twenty-four hours. The suicide planes were, usually, early in the morning, out of the sun and then in the afternoon they would come back the other way out of the sun.
- Mr. Nichols:** We invaded Okinawa the first of April 1945.
- Mr. Kenney:** I don't remember just what day we went in there. We unloaded our ammunition; it took thirteen days and nights; then we left. Of course we left by ourselves and we came back to the States and loaded again and went back to the Philippines and when I got to the Philippines, they didn't want the cargo that we had. They were going to send it somewhere else. The war was over by then and the officer said, "Tom, you have plenty of points to get out. I'm going to leave you here and put you on a ship going back to the States." I don't know where the ship went to; it was a victory ship, The *Paducah Victory*. That's what carried the ammunition, the *Paducah Victory*.
- Mr. Nichols:** So you weren't on a tanker all the time then?
- Mr. Kenney:** Well, I spent almost all, I just made one and a half trips on the victory ship. The ammunition run and then I made the one to the Philippines and they took me off. to come back home.
- Mr. Nichols:** You didn't carry any troops on these ships?

- Mr. Kenney:** No. One time when we were coming back from Panama to come to the States, we picked up some aircraft personnel that was down there and worked at the base. It was their time to come back to the States. I think we had about thirty of them. They rode on the ship with us. We never carried any personnel to the battle zones, or anything.
- Mr. Nichols:** You never got attacked by any Kamikaze's, or suicide boats while you were (unintelligible-both talking at once).
- Mr. Kenney:** Every day. Every day we were there they had suicide planes in the morning and in the afternoon and, at night. The first night we were there, we had a suicide boat up against the bow of our ship. The bow gun called to the bridge and, during general quarters, my job was to just relay, I took all communications from the gun tubs and told the officer and he would tell me what to tell them. So, the number one gun tub called up and said, "We hear a motor up here but , we can't see anything." The officer told me to tell them to get down and go look over the bow of the ship, down where it curved down and he did. Of course we were already at general quarters and he ran back and said that there was a boat down there. At that time, the boat just made a big circle to come around. When it made it's big circle to come around, there was an LST there with a 40 mm and went across it and blew it up. It was just a big ball of fire.
- Mr. Nichols:** But you never received any damage to your ship?
- Mr. Kenney:** No. The whole time we were there, we never had any damage at all. We had a lot of shrapnel. You know, we'd pick up buckets of shrapnel off the deck during the daytime. When you could hear it hit the steel parts at nighttime, when, you know, like airplanes would go over and they would fire those shells would explode and you'd get some on your ship.
- Mr. Nichols:** Did any of the crew members get hit with this stray shrapnel?
- Mr. Kenney:** I don't think they ever used a band aid while we were down there. There was a guy that was looking after that ship. They loaded that ship, in Clatskanie, Oregon, at the mouth of the Columbia River. I didn't smoke but, some of the boys that did. They had to walk, like, a mile to a smoke house. It was all in sand, it was a metal building, it had a big sand thing in the middle to put the cigarettes in. All the lights on the ship were covered with glass and everything. When we got to Okinawa and started unloading the ammunition, it was such a different thing. I saw a fellow, with a cigarette in his mouth, up on top of the ammunition down in the hold. It would be about as high as this and they took a cargo net and folded it up and put it down here. They had those roller things and he would take those boxes of ammunition up there like that and he would just shove them down the rollers and they would just drop off and hit that cargo net. They would pick them up and put them up there on the deck. We unloaded into DUKWs and jeeps, amphibious motor cars, both the smaller and the big ones. They would come along side of our ship and tell us what they wanted and they would get it for them and then put it in there. Then they would pull off.
- The deal was, that if you went to general quarters, if you were tied up to the ship getting something, you couldn't leave. If you were approaching the ship and the general quarters went off, you couldn't come to the ship. You had to stay out in the water. Anytime you were at general quarters, they just froze everything where it was. The people that were tied up had to stay and the people that were out, could not approach. (General Quarters: Alarm)

- Mr. Nichols:** So, you actually never went ashore on Okinawa?
- Mr. Kenney:** No. They were battling over there. I didn't go on shore. You could see them. I could see them pull up on the beach and unload the stuff. You could see them fighting and they used a lot of flamethrowers over there. You could see them go up the hills and take the flamethrower and shut the stuff into the caves and things like that.
- Mr. Nichols:** And did guns on the ship ever go into action when you were being-----?
- Mr. Kenney:** No. We were manned and ready to shoot but, we were in a harbor and, like, one time, a suicide plane come right down firing at bridge level, which is about sixty feet above the water. Came right down to the same level that my eyes were. I could just look in the plane there and saw the fellow. He was strafing and he had bombs under his wings. But there was a ship on the other side of us, so we didn't shoot, because it would be like shooting at each other. He went on down and they shot him down and he went off into the water. The fellow, our officer, fortunately, he had been in some battles before and he was pretty cool, so he would say, "Now, you know, we're not just going to shoot and shoot. We want something that we know is going to help." He was pretty cautious about it, what he did. He was cool headed and didn't get excited about things. He was a good officer. We didn't actually get into any gun battles with any ships or any airplanes. We were there where they were but, we just didn't get into it.
- Mr. Nichols:** So you weren't in any place too long. You were busy plying back and forth across the ocean and taking supplies?
- Mr. Kenney:** Yes, that's true. We were only there long enough to unload our cargo and then we'd leave. We went to Okinawa with a convoy and came back by ourselves. In fact, when I left Leyte, in the Philippines, to come back to be discharged from the service, they had already said the war was over with, and the ship I was on came back with all it's lights on. That was more fearful to me than it was during the war, because we had lights on and you could see us and I wasn't sure that everybody out there on that ocean knew that the war was over with. But, we made it fine and we dumped all of our ammunition overboard when we came back off that run because the war was over. I don't think they wanted it; they just got rid of it.
- Mr. Nichols:** Did your ship have any mechanical problems of any kind? Did you have to put into port anywhere to make repairs?
- Mr. Kenney:** Yeah, one time we went into dry dock. One time when we were loading with oil, one of the wing tanks split and the oil was seeping up the side of the ship, we had to pump the oil back out and go out of the harbor there and they fixed the tanks so they wouldn't be flammable. Then we came back in and we went into dry dock. When we went up in dry dock they just took a welder over there and he just welded right down the crack to the bottom and we just went back and got a load of oil and just went on. They didn't even put a plate on it. They just welded it back. While the ship was in dry dock, we still stayed and we lived we lived on it. But we could go on shore and eat and things like that. The galley wasn't open. They gave us per diem to eat. But we could still live on the ship.



**Mr. Nichols:** Did you ever go to Ulithi Atoll when you were in the Pacific?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yes. I tell you, they pretty well got around in the South Pacific because, you know, carrying the oil and things like that, we just didn't have any special port out there. Just where ever they would send us, we would go. In fact, the tankers stay, like in Panama, we would be there such a short time, they would do liberty like, three hours on the port side and three hours on the starboard side. Then you go to sea again. They were just not there that long. A big tanker, and that's not big compared to now days but, back in then, one hundred and five thousand barrels, they put that on there in fourteen hours and you're gone. So, you don't have a lot of time to do things. I stayed on that run a long time. Same captain and it had a different officer. We would just leave the Panama Canal and head out by ourselves and go all the way across the Pacific and unload and come back, put ballast in and start on back again.

Other than being war time, it was great duty. Good. Everything was good, you know?

**Mr. Nichols:** I imagine things were tense, though, crossing the Pacific with no other ships accompanying you or anything.

**Mr. Kenney:** It's kind of like, I guess, I figure that it's kind of like you getting up and going to work as a young fellow and you know, you could have a terrible wreck, or something like that. You finally get where you just live day-by-day, you do your job and, of course you have watches to stand but, me being a signalman, I didn't have any watches. I was on call twenty-four hours everyday. They had buzzers on the ship. They had one by my bunk and one on the bridge and one in the mess hall and if they needed me, they just pressed that buzzer and I knew to go to the signal tower and do whatever work I had to do.

I did stand watch. There was a bosun's mate on there and he and I would go at night time. If they were standing six on and six off, we'd go where we would be about half of their watch and we relieved them for fifteen or twenty minutes and they could go back and get some coffee and come back to their place. Then we would move to the next gun. We actually had two on the bow and then we had two, one on each starboard and port side and then we had two on the stern. Not having any watches to stand, you know, I could take a nap anytime I wanted to. It was good duty. I just wasn't a Navy man to stay in.

I knew it wouldn't always be that way. The Armed Guard was disbanded in '46. I would have had to go back to the fleet. I don't think the fleet would have been like living on a merchant ship.

**Mrs. Kenney:** Tell them about the storm.

**Mr. Nichols:** Did you get in any typhoons?

**Mr. Kenney:** We got in a bad storm one day. We were in the storm for five days. It was overcast, and back then, they didn't have all the technical instruments, so they, actually, navigated with sextants. So they would take a shot of the sun everyday at noontime and then, if the sun wasn't out, they would do a star.

We were in this bad storm for about five days and they couldn't get a shot to know where we were, and on the fifth night, the skies opened up and all the stars come out and they all ran up there with their sextants and took shots of it; then down to the chart room and marked out

where we were. During this storm, you toss and turn so much. So we knew the compass setting but, we just didn't know how bad the sea had changed our direction. They got the shot and we found out where we were. We didn't have any radar, we didn't have any sonar, we just had the big gun and the 20 mm's and, of course, in convoys, the signalman is real busy.

Every afternoon you get all your orders for what you're going to do the next twenty-four hours. It all comes from the commodore of the convoy. There is a big mass of ships in there, all, in like, and he puts up the signals and then they come back down the rows. Then you put them up and you gotta be sure everybody's is correct. Then you write it down, what's on each. When you get through, you just give it to the officer. They go down it and it's got codes for what they're going to do- turns and zig-zags and speed limits and things like that. That last until the next afternoon and then they start again. So, a signalman is really busy. Being a signalman on a ship is like, twenty-four hours for that, whatever days you're on a convoy, like four days, or five days.

**Mr. Nichols:** Did you use signal lights?

**Mr. Kenney:** No. No lights at night. If it was really an emergency, they have, kind of, a rifle light. It's real long and it's got a barrel and it's about three inches in diameter and is full of little holes. You aim it and it's just, you don't get any glare out of it. It just goes and the person that's looking at it can see it. I think they only used that one time in the three years I was in there. But in the daytime, yeah, you're busy with lights.

**Mr. Nichols:** Were you using a semaphores?

**Mr. Kenney:** Very little. When you're in the lagoons and the ships are coming in along side of you, like the Navy tanker, to come in and get oil, you use semaphore for, some directions. You can see their men and they can see you. No, not ever, but everything else was lights and, of course, signal flags.

Nighttime was nothing except you just,----when you got through with your convoy, a little small boat comes by your ship and picks up your log book and take it to the commodore. He goes through everything that's been done in that convoy in your log book. Then, when you get, he signs at bottom, you know, like, "Enjoyed working with you." "You did a good job," or something like that. Then they bring your log book back. Everything I did, either the captain, or which ever mate was on duty, had to sign it. I didn't have any authority. I just give them the signal and they would sign for it. I had a copy of it and they had a copy of it.

**Mr. Nichols:** You didn't do any radio communications? I guess the radio man had that.

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. And they were Merchant Marines.

**Mr. Nichols:** And they probably wanted radio silence quite a bit out there.

**Mr. Kenney:** You would probably have to be going down before you would break radio silence. They just listened.

**Mr. Nichols:** After they sent you to the Philippines, to send you back to the States, how long did you stay in the Philippines?

**Mr. Kenney:** Near as I can remember, I was there about three weeks. Now I stayed in the cook's and baker's camp. Their Quonset hut, which wasn't bad, because they baked a lot of stuff and they bring back a big tray and set it down. You usually ate before everybody goes through the line. They'd say, "Hey, come on over and eat over here." Which, I don't know, how legal, or technical that was but, I'd go eat with them.

I stayed there about three weeks and then they had ship, a tanker, going back to Galveston, Texas, and I lived in Houston. I got on that ship and I got to Panama and they diverted it and sent it down to get another load of oil, or gas. So when they diverted it, then they took me off and, the next day, I left for the States on a liberty ship. I made that trip back to the States on a liberty ship.

Then I went to Dallas, Texas and they couldn't find my records. So I was in Dallas for awhile. No duty, just muster every morning at 0800. Couldn't leave. Couldn't leave the base. They kept me there for awhile and then they finally decided, "Well, we're going to send you on to Camp Wallis," where I was going to be discharged.

I got to Camp Wallis and there was no records for me there. I was not busy, I just made muster every morning at 0800. I did not have any duty assignments there.

**Mr. Nichols:** Where was Camp Wallis?

**Mr. Kenney:** It was, let's see, about thirty miles south of Houston. It's down close to Galveston.

**Mr. Nichols:** You were almost home then.

**Mr. Kenney:** I was almost home but, couldn't go home. I was there for awhile and finally, one day, I went in and talked to the officer and I told him, "You know, they can't find my records and I just live like thirty five miles from here. He let me go home one afternoon and then be sure that I was back at eight o'clock the next morning for muster.

I met a fellow that I had gone to church with down there and I told him I was down there and that my record were lost somewhere and he said, "Let me work on that." Within about two or three days he saw me and told me he got my records in and I was going to get discharged. So, I got my discharge.

**Mr. Nichols:** And this was when?

**Mr. Kenney:** April of '46. I went home.

**Mr. Nichols:** What did you do after you go back to Houston?

**Mr. Kenney:** I went back to the railroad.

**Mr. Nichols:** Back to the railroad?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah.

**Mrs. Kenney:** But you didn't stay there at the railroad.

**Mr. Nichols:** When did you get married?

**Mr. Kenney:** I got married in '47. I got married in '47. I was married, had two children. I had a son in '49 and a daughter in '51 and I was married thirty-eight years to my first wife and she died with cancer and I was single for a short time. Then I married Rainey and yesterday we were married twenty years. So I been married about fifty years-----.

**Mr. Nichols:** So you have a long married career then?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. About fifty-eight years. (laughs). Good marriages, both of them. I left the railroad after about ten years and went in the grocery business. That's where I retired from, the grocery business.

**Mr. Nichols:** You didn't go back to school, or anything?

**Mr. Kenney:** No. I tried it one time and I just couldn't make it. It was just, I guess, I don't know why, it just wasn't a thing for me. I was pretty well set in what I was doing.

**Mrs. Kenny:** Tell them about when the Marines came aboard while you were at Okinawa.

**Mr. Kenney:** We had two fellows on our ship that were taught to run the electric wenchers for when we got over there to unload. When we got to Okinawa, they brought Marines aboard to run the wenchers, so they didn't really need the two fellows that we took along. So we shared, you know, we ate good on there. So, they shared food and those guys were glad to get out of eating those K-rations. It was a good thing for them. They worked hard to. I guess they come off the island over there to unload the ammunition. We didn't really get to unload, you know, constantly but, it, I think, as near as I can remember, it was somewhere around twelve, thirteen days we were there and then we left on our own. We came back to the States and loaded with some kind of general cargo and that's when we went to Leyte.

Things were kind of, winding down then and they said, "We don't want it." The officer said, "Well, they are going to send it somewhere else. No need for you to keep riding with us when you already got your time in." So they sent me back to the States.

**Mr. Nichols:** How many miles do you think you've traveled on your trips back and forth?

**Mr. Kenney:** (laughs out loud). I don't know.

**Mr. Nichols:** How far is it from Panama to Okinawa, for example?

**Mr. Kenney:** It, a-----

**Mr. Nichols:** Five thousand, six thousand miles?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. Somewhere around there. Yeah. It's hard to believe that ship was only going twelve, thirteen miles an hour but, you know, it never stops. I mean, we don't stop for any fuel, you don't stop for any, you just don't stop. You just, twenty-four hours a day. It's just like a big city moving. You don't stop until you get to your port. Like, we clear, the signalman has to clear a

port when you go out. You tell them, you have some codes and things and you clear the port and then, when you clear the port, you're on your own, unless you would meet another ship, or unless an aircraft carrier, not a carrier but, one of those patrol boats that look for submarines, unless they come over. Sometime they would challenge you and you had codes and you changed them at 12:00 every day. They would come over and they would ask you who you were and you'd just send them the code and you would just keep on going.

A lot of times we had gone across the Pacific and never seen another ship. I know there was ships going back and forth because one load of oil wouldn't do those ships that long. There was probably, like, a train of them. Probably when we left and got back to sea, another one probably pulled in the next night. It was like a pipeline across there.

**Mr. Nichols:** What was your rank when you left the Navy?

**Mr. Kenney:** I was a signalman second class.

**Mr. Nichols:** That a two striper?

**Mr. Kenney:** Two stripes, yeah. I could have gone up for first but , I just, I just didn't want to. I thought I had good duty on that merchant ship and so I just didn't go up for first class. I would only make twelve to fourteen dollars more a month, but it would have been a lot different life from then on, so.

**Mr. Nichols:** Before we turned the recorder on, you were telling me about your wage scale. Would you like to tell me again how much you were making?

**Mr. Kenney:** Oh, well, I went in and, I think, an apprentice seaman got \$50.00 and then a first class went to \$56.00. Then when I got out of signal school, I graduated well in my signal school so I went to third class and it was \$78.00 a month.

**Mrs. Kenny:** A week?

**Mr. Kenney:** (laughs). A month! Then when I went to second class, it was like, ninety something, yeah, and then first class would have been, just over, a \$100.00. We didn't have any pay officers. We only got paid when we went into a port and the officer would get the money and pay us. Like, if we were out for five months, you just don't get paid.

**Mr. Nichols:** You don't need money anyway.

**Mr. Kenney:** No. There was no place to spend it. We didn't even have, like, a barber, or a ship service, or anything like that. Anything we had, like, when we go to Panama, and somebody would go ashore, we'd say, "Hey, will you get me so-and-so?" Or, "I'll get it." or something. You would just buy little stuff like candy and stuff like that and put it in your locker. So you get paid whenever they gave it to you. Like you said, there was nothing to spend it on. No. We didn't have any movies. We had books and things to read. Of course, the signalman, I was responsible for that, so when I went on that ship I redid all the lights and the stands and the flag bag and everything and then, took care of them after that. As long as I was on that ship, that's what I was responsible for and when go into port, they go in and inspect it. You really didn't

have a lot to do other than just be one of the fellows.

**Mr. Nichols:** Was there a physician, or a corpsman on board in case you----?

**Mr. Kenney:** There was a purser. All he had was aspirin and band aids and things like that.

**Mr. Nichols:** A first aid kit?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. We didn't have any services like that. We just had one Naval officer. I didn't tell you but, the first time I went out, I went over to get on this ship and they put me on there. I went up on the bridge and the captain, I introduced myself and he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was your signalman on the ship and he said, "No. You're not going to be the signalman on my ship." Now, he was Merchant Marine. So I said, "OK." and went on back down and told the officer, "Well, we have a little problem here. The captain said I can't be the signalman on the ship." He said, "Well, come with me." So we went back up there and he told the captain, he said, "Now this is Navy and he's going to be the signalman. The other signal man is gone on leave." The Captain said, "You stay. But, you stay up here to be sure he does it right." That's, kind of, one of the stories I had that was unusual, to go on a ship they assign you and then they tell you they don't want you. I was the only signalman on there, you know? It was interesting.

**Mr. Nichols:** Do you have anything else to add? Would your wife like to prompt you on anything?

**Mr. Kenney:** I think one of the funniest stories I had with halyard on the main mast for the flag. You know, we didn't fly an American flag when were going back and forth. But, we had the halyard for it in case we needed to. The officer told me, he said, "The halyard on the main mast is down and you need to replace that." I said, "OK." I didn't think too much about it and then, in the afternoon, he said, "Did you replace that halyard," I said, "Not yet." He said, "I want that thing replaced. I said, "OK." I went down and got a roll of signal halyard and, I don't know if you know how a signal halyard is but, it opens up in the middle and, kind of like one of these Chinese fingers, you can put it on and pull it tight and it gets tighter. I went over there and I got me one of my buddies, one of the gunners, and said, "I need you to help me." and he said, "OK." I said, "Now, what ever you do, don't let this roll of signal halyard go overboard, because we are going to really be in a problem. I'm going to take it up there and put it through the hook up there on the jack."

Now, I'm not a airplane person, or anything, so I chucked it in my belt and I started up that mast and I got up pretty high. Of course, the ladder decreases down in size according to how the mast gets smaller as you go up. It was a metal ladder. **(Side One ends).**

## **SIDE TWO:**

**Mr. Kenney:** When I was standing on the deck, the jack didn't look very long but, when I got up there, it was like ten foot out and it had a cable going down to it. So, the pulley was out on here, so I had to go on up the other ten foot and get that cable and pull that jack over to the mast and put the line through it and let it back down again. I had to feed it out and I tied it back in my belt and then I started back down. I got back down to the deck and I fixed it off at the snaps and things on it. I've always said, "I'll bet if you went to that ship in mothball somewhere and found it, you

could still see my fingerprints on that ladder going up and down.” That really scared me. (laughs). You know, that flying bridge is about sixty feet above the water and where the wheel house and everything is. Your lights set out over, you can look straight, and that didn't bother me so much but, that really got next to me going up on that mast. I guess it's because I could look into the ocean and knowing the ship was way over there, and so, I've always thought that was a interesting thing.

**Mr. Nichols:** How tall is the mast?

**Mr. Kenney:** Oh, golly. It's a normal tanker mast. I felt like it was about eight hundred feet when I started climbing it. I just wasn't used to that. I didn't go up and set in the, you know, when they go for lookouts. I didn't never go up in that thing and set there, so it was all new to me. Like I said, it didn't really bother me too much until I looked down and saw my ship over here and me out over the water here. That was, altogether, like, if I had fell off, they would have never found me. It was rough water and I didn't even wear a life jacket. I just didn't think to much about it until I was up there where I was and then I wasn't going to back down and then back up again. So, I just kept on going. I can truthfully say it was a good experience for me and I learned a lot.

**Mrs. Kenney:** And to serve your country.

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah. It was a lot of, you know, it was a lot of boys that went in and, it's interesting like in convoys, how they maneuver all those ships. One night we had a bunch of ships and you go and then, all of a sudden, when it gets a certain time, and you all change, and go like this. Then you go like this and maybe back like that. One night, we all turned and the outside ship didn't turn and it was just going and missing the bow of one ship and the stern went all the way through the convoy. It was like two o'clock in the morning, so then they have to put one of escorts back with that ship because it's a ship out there by itself. Then they take it and put the escort back with it and everybody else kind of, watches and then they bring that ship back around and it's like four o'clock in the afternoon before they got that ship back up in it's place again. The only bad thing I ever saw about the convoy it just didn't make a turn but, it's amazing. They turn at slow speeds and up speeds, maneuver and everything like, at one o'clock in the morning, or whatever it is, and everything just keeps going. Those escorts! At nighttime sometimes, you'll be standing on the bridge and they'll just come in a go around your ship two or three times, looking for submarines. They are just really something else.

**Mr. Nichols:** So you were changing headings all the way across the....?

**Mr. Kenney:** Yeah, sometimes. Of course when we wasn't in convoy, there wasn't any, like in a danger zone, we just travel a straight course. You get where there are submarines and things, they give you a zig-zag course and you move them back and forth. They had zig-zag clocks that had a pin for every minute and it's just full all the way around. When you get a zig-zag course, if you're going to go, like, one way for fourteen minutes, they put a pin there. So, up in the wheelhouse, when it hits there, you know to make a course change. I never was on a ship with an automatic, anyway, where the ship turned the rudder. We always had helmsmen to do the work. The Panama Canal was real interesting because they it was such a strategic thing during World

War Two. When you got there and started through, the pilot would come aboard and he would bring, like, fifteen Marines with him and they would just, one would go by the engine order telegraph and one would go up in the pilot house with him. One would do this and one would do that. Then they would get around on the ship and they'd tell you they didn't want you to do, like, even throw a chewing gum wrapper in the locks. They were just real strict. When they would get out of the locks and you start for the other side, the pilot would tell the helmsman, "You see so-and-so up there? I want you to get to 186 on you compass and go for that." He would kind of watch and, pretty soon, he'd correct him a little bit. I have seen a pilot take a helmsman off and get another one. He would tell the captain, "Get me another helmsman up here." They didn't want to get any ships crossways where they would stop traffic. Pretty interesting.

**Mrs. Kenney:** Tell them about when you got the message that Roosevelt had died.

**Mr. Kenney:** When we were in, I don't remember where we were but, we were waiting to form a convoy and, of course, when your loaded with black oil or ammunition, you're not really the most favorite in the harbor. They put you way, way back. They pressed the buzzer and I went up there and they said, "Look at this." But they were using yardarm blinkers, they weren't using the signal lights, they were using the yardarm blinker. There's two. One one on each side of the yardarm. I started watching it, and it was an all purpose message and so I got one of my buddies up there and I said, "This is going to be a long message." So I said, "You take it down and I'll read it." It was like, group 186, so, I mean, it's going to have 186 words in it, or something like that. They sent it on the yardarm and then I would just tell him what, and he just wrote it all down. That's when they told about Roosevelt dieing. That's the one and only all purpose message I ever took when I was in the service. Then I come home and had a good life.

**Mr. Nichols:** Well, that's good.

**Mr. Kenney:** I enjoyed the museum up here. I really did.

**Mr. Nichols:** I have enjoyed our interview and we thank you for your service and we hope it never happens again.

**Mr. Kenney:** I don't think they will re-draft me at this time but, I enjoyed it and I thank everybody that's been involved, like you volunteering and what they've done up here. I think it is so much credit to be given to a lot of people that have not received it yet. You know, we have the Vietnam and the Korean War and things like that, and, really, my heart goes out to those fellows, because, I think, in World War Two, everybody was involved. They were doing ration stamps and they were doing without gasoline and without tires and things like that. Everybody was helping and people working in the ship yards. I just want to thank everybody for all they've done, especially those boys and thank all those people that are over in Iraq now doing their work. God bless them that they all come home.....(TAPE ENDS)



**Transcribed by:** Bob Grinslade  
17 July 2012  
Fredericksburg, Texas

**Finalized by:** Bob Grinslade  
19 August 2012  
Fredericksburg, Texas