

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Donald (Don) Riel

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Interview in progress.

Ed Metzler: [This is Ed] Metzler, today is the 15th of September, 2006. I'm interviewing Mr. Don Riel. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies which is the archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Don, I would like to start by thanking you for spending the time to share your experiences with us and to add to our archives, and we do appreciate that. Let me ask you to start by giving us your full name and what your date of birth is; where you were born; just a little bit about how you all got started in this world.

Mr. Riel: Well, my name is Donald Riel and I was born in Buffalo, New York, 1923. My birthday is on March 6th.

Ed Metzler: What did your dad do for a living?

Mr. Riel: My father...my father worked in a post office; he was a...well let me think, I guess he was just a clerk at one time and then he ended up being a...a postal inspector and then after that he passed away when he was only forty-four years old. So I didn't...didn't have him too long. So that was...that was in 19...I can't think when the hell it was...1942 he died.

Ed Metzler: During the war.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, beginning of the war he died. And...

Ed Metzler: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I got one brother and one sister.

Ed Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Riel: And my brother...my brother passed away...he was younger than me. He died quite a...oh, around 1980...something like that. And I have a sister that...she's been a nun for sixty some years. Fact, she went...she went in a convent in 1941...1941 she went in. And then, well...

Ed Metzler: So where did you go to high school?

Mr. Riel: Well, I was...I went to Seneca Vocational High School; I was...I was going to be a tool and die maker.

Ed Metzler: Now is that located in Buffalo or did you...?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah. You it was...I had about four blocks to walk to school.

Ed Metzler: So...nice and close?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah...that was...that's why I went there I think because there was nothing...at that time there...well at that time my father was...wasn't too well and we didn't have a lot of money like people had today to send you to college some place. I...I didn't have any idea about going to college.

Ed Metzler: Times were tough back then.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, so...

Ed Metzler: So...I'm sorry, go ahead.

Mr. Riel: Well I...I went to school and I...I became a tool and die maker; I went to work for...I went to work for General Electric and then I...I worked for General Electric for about a year or two and then the war broke out...and I went to work for...and the money started coming. 'Cause at that time I...at that time I was only making sixty cents an hour. So then I went...General Motors and they were transferring over to make Pratt & Whitney engines. And I went to work there and I went to work there for ninety cents an hour.

Ed Metzler: Now where was that physically located...that Pratt and Whitney plant?

Mr. Riel: That was on Eleven Avenue in Buffalo.

Ed Metzler: Oh it's in...right there in Buffalo?

Mr. Riel: It was the...it was the Chevrolet...it was the Fisher Body Company and that's where they made Chevrolet cars. And that was...that was close by to me, too. That was only about oh, half a mile...mile from where I lived.

Ed Metzler: And were you living still where were raised?

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: Okay, so you're still in the neighborhood.

Mr. Riel: Well I...I was born in downtown Buffalo and in the center of Buffalo and I moved...my parents moved...what was called the outskirts at that...that time; it was north Buffalo. So I lived there for...till 1949. And then I...when I got married I...I moved and...and bought a house in Getzville and that's where I ended up...I'm still there.

Ed Metzler: So you were working at the GM...Fisher Body plant, uhm...that was after the war started, I assume.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, it was the beginning of the war.

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: Beginning of the war.

Ed Metzler: So how did you come to be in the military? Were you drafted; did you volunteer?

Mr. Riel: Well I was...uh, I worked in the...in the tool room at the...at the Chevy plant. I was a...machine operator. I was a...oh, they had all kinds of machinery there (unintelligible words), and then...the master mechanic in the tool room tried to get me a deferment and I run for...I run from 1942 to 1943 with nothing. They wouldn't give me a deferment or anything; we just kept fighting, so...

Ed Metzler: And they didn't draft you?

Mr. Riel: No, no, and then they came down...that they were going to draft me, so I went downtown and I joined...I joined the Marines! And I come home...(laughter)...that was a laugh! I joined the Marines and I came home and told my mother, and my mother, oh god!...I had to go back down or get the hell out!

Ed Metzler: Really!

Mr. Riel: So I joined the Navy.

Ed Metzler: Why was she so upset?

Mr. Riel: Well, you know, they'd heard...heard stories about Marines never coming back...

Ed Metzler: Well yeah...storming the beaches and that was it!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, so anyway I went down and I joined the Seabees. I went down and joined the Marines and...or I joined the Navy and they said about...that's when they started Seabees. And I did have a friend in the Seabees already. So then I joined the Seabees and I...got a...they made me Third Class Petty Officer right away because of my job. So they...I came home and...well they give you the old story, you know, you go...you join for six months and training and then you go away for six months and you come back. So I...

Ed Metzler: You made a pretty good deal!

Mr. Riel: ...I went away for three years! (laughter) Oh gosh, so that...that was it. And then...well that's how I joined the doggone Navy; I became a...a...I was...I should have...if I would have been smart enough in the beginning, I would have been a Second Class or First Class Petty Officer right away... 'cause the guys that...the guys they had in there...that were First and Second Class didn't know as much as what the hell I did!

Ed Metzler: They didn't have the experience.

Mr. Riel: So then...Sam Cross who was my Chief Warrant...Warrant Officer...he wasn't a Chief, he was a Warrant Officer...he told the Chiefs one day, he says, "Riel's going to get Second Class," and he says, "if you don't give him a Second Class, I'm putting him in for First Class next month!" (laughter) So that's how I became a Second Class Petty Officer. But otherwise...I forget what the hell we got a week...ninety dollars a month then, I think.

Ed Metzler: That...that was good money back then!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah.

Ed Metzler: So...

Mr. Riel: Well it was overseas pay, too. With the overseas pay, I think it came to around ninety dollars.

Ed Metzler: So where did you do basic training?

Mr. Riel: I...I was in Camp Perry...Camp Perry. I spent...I was in Camp Perry and then I got...I had...I got...strep infection and they put me in the hospital and I spent...I spent, oh, twenty-one days to a month, I forget, was in...in the hospital down there.

Ed Metzler: That's a long time.

Mr. Riel: Yeah. Oh yeah, they...they (unintelligible)...

Ed Metzler: You must have been a pretty sick puppy!

Mr. Riel: Oh god was I sick; I just laid in the bed and the Corpsman would come around every day and grab me by the toe and, "Here's your pills." You know they gave me...at that time you didn't have penicillin; we had sulfa.

Ed Metzler: Sulfa drugs.

Mr. Riel: And that's what they'd give us...those sulfa pills. And I still today that that's what saved me...was them damned sulfa pills.

Ed Metzler: I'll bet it was.

Mr. Riel: So anyway...then...then...I was...I was in another...I don't remember which one it was...it was the 93rd or something like that, and I lost that outfit...was gone when I got out of the hospital, so then they...they put me in the 107th, and I was the only guy with hair. They didn't give me...they didn't give me a haircut again.

Ed Metzler: Oh, that's right because you were in the hospital.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, shaved everybody...but I...I come out and I had hair.

Ed Metzler: I bet that didn't last long.

Mr. Riel: No, they didn't cut it off!

Ed Metzler: That's right, I guess...they let you go ahead and grow it when you were actually past...

Mr. Riel: So, that's how I ended up in the 107th. And I...

Ed Metzler: So after Camp Perry where did you go?

Mr. Riel: Camp Perry...we went to...Rhode Island...to Quonset Point...Quonset Point, Rhode Island. And from there we went to Camp Parks in California.

Ed Metzler: Camp?

Mr. Riel: Parks.

Ed Metzler: Where was that located?

Mr. Riel: Uh, outside of...Oakland...around Stockton between...

Ed Metzler: Somewhere in the Bay area?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, we...we used to get a pass to go to Oakland or...or another one. And then from there we went down to Oxnard, Port Hueneme, and then we went out...that was...that was...that's when we went to...

Ed Metzler: Where'd you go out from...Long Beach or...?

Mr. Riel: No, no, we went from Port Hueneme we went to...we went to Kwajalein.

Ed Metzler: Okay...

Mr. Riel: Yeah, we stopped...we stopped at Pearl Harbor. We stopped at Pearl Harbor and I think in Pearl Harbor we...we took down some tanks, storage tanks and

took them out to...out to the islands where there's...we took them to...to the Kwajalein Atoll and...

Ed Metzler: So what'd you do at Kwajalein? Was that just a stepping stone to...?

Mr. Riel: That's where I was...I was a still operator there.

Ed Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Riel: That's where I operated the water stills. I was a truck driver and a water (unintelligible); I got...I had...some...I forget what the...Ellis...I think his name was Ellis was a dynamite crew guy and our...he was blowing up the beach and I was...they were blowing the beach up for coral, and...

Ed Metzler: What...to harvest the coral or just clear it out or...?

Mr. Riel: I don't...I don't remember what the hell they were going to do with it, but anyway he was dynamiting the doggone stuff and...and it was too close to me and I got hit! I got...I got a big piece of coral in the back and they...they...

Ed Metzler: Now this is while you were operating the still?

Mr. Riel: That was...that was after the stills, and I was...I wasn't working then. I was...I was on, you know, off...I was off duty. So then...then I got a job operating a...a cement mixer...because...because I only had one arm! My other arm was in a sling.

Ed Metzler: Now coral...coral is a pretty nasty stuff; that will cut you up big time!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, oh yeah!

Ed Metzler: Tell me about how...what...did you have to go to the Medic and...?

Mr. Riel: No, they sewed me up right there on the doggone beach!

Ed Metzler: Wow!

Mr. Riel: Sewed me up on the beach...never...in fact nobody...they didn't have the sick bay opened up there at all or anything. So I...I it probably got a little bit twisted around there...one...one thing should have been before another. But anyway they ended up sewing me up and then they...

Ed Metzler: Now this was in your arm?

Mr. Riel: In...in the shoulder in the back.

Ed Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Riel: And...and...right in the shoulder blade. So then I ended up...as I say, running a concrete mixer with one arm.

Ed Metzler: Well tell me about the operation of the still? Now that's...is that a pretty straight forward job or is that complicated or...?

Mr. Riel: Well it...it...the still is like a big tank...oh god...they...they were about...probably...six feet long or something like that, you know; approximately six feet, eight feet long, and about four foot in diameter, and they were oil fired. What you did was...you drew in...you pumped in sea water into the still...then you boiled it and it would come out on the other end or it would come out on the end...and it'd go into...you'd put it in a bucket or in a...in a sealed can...like...and that's how we got fresh water.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, you must have had some kind of condenser or something that would take the steam and then condense it...

Mr. Riel: Yeah, well...it's like a boiler...

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: ...it's like a boiler and, as I say, and...and the steam and everything turns it into fresh water...

Ed Metzler: Yeah, and the salt stays down in the still.

Mr. Riel: ...and...and after awhile you got to take that doggone still apart and take the heads off and chips all the salt out of it just like...just like...well...just like...today...today on boilers we'd take after...after a year...approximately a year's running or a season's running you'd take it and you...got to wash out all the tools or brush out all the soot and everything out of those tubes.

Ed Metzler: So the...the island depended upon that for fresh water, then?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, that's how we got the fresh water. We had...I don't even remember how many stills we had; I know we had two or...or that we had any extra ones...I don't know, but we had two stills running all of...same time.

Ed Metzler: So then after you took your shrapnel from...from the coral, they patched you up and you were...what'd you say a concrete...?

Mr. Riel: A cement mixer.

Ed Metzler: A cement mixer...operator.

Mr. Riel: I ran a cement mixer. Yeah, one of them portable jobs, you know, and...I...you dumped...they...they'd dump the stuff in and I'd mix it up and just pull a handle and dump it out.

Ed Metzler: So this was on Kwajalein?

Mr. Riel: No, that was on Ebeye.

Ed Metzler: Ah, (unintelligible)!

Mr. Riel: On the Kwajalein Atoll.

Ed Metzler: Okay, okay.

Mr. Riel: It was on Ebeye.

Ed Metzler: How do you spell Ebeye? Do you know?

Mr. Riel: E-b-e-y-e, I think or something like that.

Ed Metzler: Okay. And now, so what kind of facilities did the Navy have at Ebeye; that was a big...what...port and...?

Mr. Riel: No, there was a...well, it was...it was a port. We had a...we...that was a...the first time in was a...PBV base.

Ed Metzler: Ah, Catalina?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, and we used to...had the PBVs there and then we went down a little...down the line...we built storage tanks...that...there...the tanks we took down in...in Pearl Harbor, we put them up on...on...the island was called Bennett I'm pretty sure...that we put the storage tanks on. There's a couple of islands in there that we worked on. I don't remem...I didn't work...I worked on Bennett, I know that. We used to get...you know...I mean...I really never had a real permanent job until I got to Tinian.

Ed Metzler: So how many guys have we got in the 107th? I mean...

Mr. Riel: Oh god!...I don't remember; I think...

Ed Metzler: ...I mean, but I mean this is a big group of guys?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I think we had about seven hundred of them.

Ed Metzler: That big?!

Mr. Riel: I'm pretty sure it was close to that.

Ed Metzler: So you got everything in there from...

Mr. Riel: 'Cause we've had...we've had...two or three hundred of them that belonged to the...to the outfit now...yet...(unintelligible) hundred of them belonged. And I mean a lot of them didn't join us after the war; a lot of the guys go home and...well they didn't want nothing to do with it.

Ed Metzler: Just want to forget about it.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, they just say, "No, what the hell do I want to join that for?"

Ed Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Riel: Oh as I say...I...I...as I say, the same way with me. When I joined...or when I came back you might as well say...it was 1964 and before that I just didn't have the time. I mean I...I was married and I...I didn't have no time to to...or money to spend to go to a reunion, so I didn't bother with them.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, you had other things to do.

Mr. Riel: And I did...after that then I did.

Ed Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Riel: And I've been going to them...well I missed a few. I missed...I...in...'96 I missed one because I had a heart attack then in '96 and a couple of others that were...at the wrong time, you know or when...it's...it's...when...when I was...I worked construction and I had to keep on working; I couldn't take the time off. And in New York State when you work construction, you've got about four to six months off; it all depends on the weather.

Ed Metzler: That's right.

Mr. Riel: I mean you've to the weather...then I worked in...I was working in the...in the paving...road...road work, and you only...at that time...when November came...no, no paving anymore.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, it shuts down.

Mr. Riel: So then they shut right down and you were down from November to April; what the hell...that's the way it worked.

Ed Metzler: So you...you worked in Ebeye; you worked on Bennett Island and then where did they send you guys?

Mr. Riel: Then we went to...well...after that, it was Tinian.

Ed Metzler: So Tinian had already been taken and stabilized.

Mr. Riel: That's what they said.

Ed Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Riel: That's what they said. When a...when a guy's shooting at you all the time, it ain't stabilized!

Ed Metzler: Yeah, I guess stable means different things to different people.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, we run...we run bulldozers (unintelligible) and...and their planes would come over at night for crying out loud and you'd have to get off and get under the dozer so you wouldn't get shot!

Ed Metzler: So tell me...tell me about that then. So you landed there...and it had been taken from the Japanese...

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: ...pretty well blown up, I guess?

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, well what that... them air strips were nothing when we got there. What the hell, we had to rebuild them all over again.

Ed Metzler: So is that where you started...working on the air strips...first thing?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, oh yeah.

Ed Metzler: That was job one?

Mr. Riel: I was a bulldozer operator on the air strip.

Ed Metzler: So what are you pushing around...volcanic soil or is this coral like...?

Mr. Riel: It...it's coral...

Ed Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Riel: ...well everything was made out of coral there, and I...I worked in the...after that I...I worked down in the asphalt plant then and they used coral to make the asphalt; that's what they did with that.

Ed Metzler: That's what you've got to work with, so I guess that's what you use.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, that's all they had was coral. Didn't have...didn't have no rock like around here (unintelligible).

Ed Metzler: Or sand or...

Mr. Riel: You...you just...(unintelligible) they shot up...they had...coral...well you might as well call it a quarry; they were down there and then they'd shoot...they'd dynamite that and...and then they'd haul it over to the...asphalt plant and make asphalt out of it.

Ed Metzler: So the runways would have what...some sort of a rock like base or...aggregate base...?

Mr. Riel: Well that was made out of coral, too; it was all coral.

Ed Metzler: And then you'd put the asphalt mix on top?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah.

Ed Metzler: That sounds like *a lot of work!*

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, oh yeah!

Ed Metzler: How many...how many dozer operators did they have going? It must have been an army of them!

Mr. Riel: Oh god, they had them all over; I don't...I...I never did count them. I know we had enough of them!

Ed Metzler: So how did they get all of your equipment in? They just bring it in on a troop ship or a...supply ship?

Mr. Riel: Well, they come in on...come in on LSTs.

Ed Metzler: Just like you guys did.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah.

Ed Metzler: So what were your housing arrangements like? I mean...you living in a tent; you...?

Mr. Riel: Tent, we lived in tents...six men to a tent. Six men to a tent and then we...we lost one of our guys; he got...he got...well he...I might as well say he got sick and they couldn't do nothing for him so they sent him home. And that way we went down to five but we never did get another guy in our tent. We had five; we had...one guy was a welder; the other guy worked...he worked on...on...he worked with the road gang, so...and then another guy worked with the carpenter crew and the other kid worked on the...he...he was mostly a...worked in the kitchen all the time...the youngest guy we had, so...but

otherwise...made a good crew. We had a couple of good guys; I got...I'm still in contact with one; he lives in Connecticut and we call each other. And sometimes I go see him and sometimes...he came down to see me in '99...was the last time he was down to my place...so...and we...we went down to Niagara Falls then and he wanted to...wanted to go down in the Falls, so we went down there. Niagara Falls...I live twenty miles from Niagara Falls and I'm hardly ever there.

Ed Metzler: Wow, that's the way it is.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah.

Ed Metzler: It's so close to home then it becomes so familiar that you don't really care to go there even if it's one of the wonders of the world.

Mr. Riel: No, well, I...I've been there enough, so I...I know what the hell it is.
(laughter) That's about it.

Ed Metzler: So did you guys get pretty close as a...as a group there in that camp?

Mr. Riel: Oh, I would say so; we...we used to contact each other and when...when I got married Whaley (sp?)...Whaley came and McKay (sp?)...they both came to my wedding. And then when Dick Fitkin (sp?) got married he called me up and he said he wanted me to be his best man at the wedding, so he came to Buffalo to get married. So then I called Roy Whaley and I said, "Roy, come on down;" and...and I let Roy be the best man for the wedding instead of me. So...and...now Roy...Roy passed away and McKay passed away and the other...the youngest one, Alerding (sp?)... Carl Alerding...I can't find him no

more. I don't know where he is...I never hear from him...or never heard from him again. He lived in Hastings, Michigan, and...

Ed Metzler: Now you...

Mr. Riel: ...Dick Fitkin lives in Connecticut and we...we talk to each other.

Ed Metzler: Right. You mentioned that...there was a few shots fired and a few flights over from the Japanese after you guys were on Tinian.

Mr. Riel: Yeah well...they...

Ed Metzler: Tell me about that.

Mr. Riel: Oops I pulled that pin off...yeah.

Ed Metzler: Op...here...give it here.

Mr. Riel: They...

Ed Metzler: Keep talking; that's why we've got two microphones.

Mr. Riel: Well they...they just pulled the...the planes flew over and then...that was the end of it! They'd fly over and fire a couple of shots and...

Ed Metzler: Would they do this at night; during the day...?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, at night...trace...tracer bullets. We could see the tracer bullets coming.

Ed Metzler: Did you guys work round the clock or...?

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, oh yeah!

Ed Metzler: So you might be on the night shift out there in the lights?

Mr. Riel: They had it out...they...we worked day and night. We worked day and night.

Ed Metzler: Well did any of you get hit?

Mr. Riel: Not that I ever remember.

Ed Metzler: Was mostly a nuisance that ways...?

Mr. Riel: I don't ever remember anybody getting...getting killed or anything on it. We got fired at a lot of times, but...

Ed Metzler: So you got pretty good at diving under a dozer, huh?

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, wherever you could hide; wherever you could hide. All our...all our...machines were armor plated.

Ed Metzler: Really?!

Mr. Riel: That's what we did in California; we armor plated all the dozers so that they couldn't do...do any good when they fired at us.

Ed Metzler: So armor plating around where the...operator was?

Mr. Riel: Well wherever you were because they were all open.

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: I mean there was no...there were no cabs on or anything like today.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, that's right. No air conditioning (unintelligible).

Mr. Riel: All you had...all you had was a sheet that was all.

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: There was nothing...there was nothing, you know, no armor plating around you or anything like that.

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: The armor plate was on the deck to save the machine.

Ed Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Riel: If you got under the machine, you were safe. If you didn't get under that machine, you weren't!

Ed Metzler: Yeah, so how many...how many landing strips were repaired or built there on Tinian? There must have been a bunch of them!

Mr. Riel: We had...we had...the north strip; I don't know what the hell they had down there...that...that was a pretty...that was the biggest one. And then they had the fighter...fighter strip and then they had the other strip where they...I think they were B-25s we had out there. That's where they used to land all the time. And that was the smaller bomber that...

Ed Metzler: Yeah, medium bomber.

Mr. Riel: ...the 29 strip I think was around six thousand feet long or something like that.

Ed Metzler: Boy, that's a lot of asphalt!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, well they...there was...you know they...they...lot of times they...they didn't make it when they landed, too. We had a hump built on the end of it so why...if they didn't take off, they just stopped when they hit that...or climb over the top of it...one or the other...but...

Ed Metzler: So did you see quite a few of them that didn't make it off?

Mr. Riel: I never...I never saw one, you know...do it, but I saw them at a junk yard.

Ed Metzler: Afterwards?!

Mr. Riel: In fact I got a couple of pictures of them, you know, just...just the wings sticking up in the air and everything...that...down in this...in this scrap yard the supply...the supply depot used to be down where the scrap yard was. I called it a scrap yard or the junk yard, and that's where they would take all the planes and just put them down there and pile them up and (unintelligible).

Ed Metzler: They call that the used parts depot now! (laughter)

Mr. Riel: Yeah, so...recycled...

Ed Metzler: Right.

Mr. Riel: ...recycled today and in a junk yard today is recycled.

Ed Metzler: Well were there any ground troops left on the island, you know, snipers or anything like that?

Mr. Riel: I'd say they were. They...they were down in, you know, they...they had caves all over them damned islands. We didn't know where they were half the time. And then they...they had...they had the...I don't know what the hell do they call them people out there that lived there? You'd think it would be (unintelligible)...

Ed Metzler: Tinin...Tininians?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I think it would be (unintelligible) at sea. But anyway...them...them people there you didn't know whether they were...(unintelligible) they had their...we had their camps that they had special camps that they kept them in.

Ed Metzler: Oh really?

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: For kind of compounds...for what we'll call the civilians.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, yeah, they call them civilians, so...what the hell.

Ed Metzler: So you didn't ever actually see any Japanese per se?

Mr. Riel: Oh, not that I remember. I...I mean I've seen...I've seen them in a distance shooting...that's about all, but I've never...never had anything...anything with them up close...never had anything to do with them fellows.

Ed Metzler: So did you guys eat well over there?

Mr. Riel: Pardon?

Ed Metzler: Did you eat well? How was the food?

Mr. Riel: Eat well...oh yeah! Oh, we had good cooks.

Ed Metzler: Really?!

Mr. Riel: Oh did we...cooks and bakers; good ones! One...one guy there in...out there in the room...he's...he was one of the cooks.

Ed Metzler: Really?

Mr. Riel: I forget what the hell his name is now, but no, we had good cooks. In fact, one of them just died this year...Frank Biladino (sp?). He was...he was the head cook. And cooks, oh god!...bakers and cooks...make anything! No never...never...you'd have a complaint; sure everybody has complaints about the food, but really the food...the food was nothing to complain about (unintelligible).

Ed Metzler: Well after you repaired the runways, what were the next types of projects that you guys got involved in?

Mr. Riel: Well drilling. We had...we had to get water.

Ed Metzler: So you're not using distilled water anymore?

Mr. Riel: No, oh no, we were drilling wells in. We were drilling wells and I...as I run...I run...I was the mechanic in the Water Department and on the motors for all the wells.

Ed Metzler: So how deep did you have to drill the wells to get potable water?

Mr. Riel: It all depends; some...some were deep and some weren't. We had one that was three hundred feet deep. And then you know...we...that...we would...put the pipes and the pumps down the hole; drill the holes...they used to drill the holes and then that was it; drill until you hit water...fresh water.

Ed Metzler: So this is more than just an atoll then. I mean Tinian must be a pretty good size island.

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, yeah.

Ed Metzler: So you really got some serious...

Mr. Riel: Had to...had quite a few wells on Tinian. And then they had the water truck...would run around and if...sometimes one well...well wasn't working or something, they'd bring water over there and store it there. And then they had water trucks that would take it back to the camps. And we had tanks there that we'd fill up their trucks with...fill the tank up and when we filled our water trucks up then. Yeah quite a few wells. I don't...I...I really...I really don't remember any more how many we had...

Ed Metzler: Yeah, but I mean I...

Mr. Riel: ...I know I had...I had one of them amphibious jeeps...that's what I used to run around in...that was my truck and I'd carry my tool box in there. So if one of the wells was broke down and I had to work on it, I had everything right there. I was their mechanic in the...in the water department.

Ed Metzler: I'll be darned. So how long...how long did that last?

Mr. Riel: Till the end of the war; till the end of the war.

Ed Metzler: Yeah I've heard...

Mr. Riel: That...that was the longest job that I ever had, and...

Ed Metzler: I've heard that...my...my recollection is that Tinian was where the most of the B-29s left to go to Japan. In fact that was where the atomic bomb...that's where the Enola Gay was and Boxcar that went to Nagasaki...

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: ...did you ever see any of that operation?

Mr. Riel: I...all I did was see the plane. I've never seen...I was never...anything...on...I saw the plane and where they had the bomb, that was all.

Ed Metzler: Really?!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, and if I can say so I think it was the best thing we ever did.

Ed Metzler: Well it definitely brought things to an end.

Mr. Riel: And I...I tell people that today; I tell them if it wasn't for the A-bomb I wouldn't be here because we were ready to go to Japan when they...when they dropped it.

Ed Metzler: Is that what they told you?

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: Really?!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, so what the hell. That's the way...the way...I mean that's my...I...I don't feel sorry or anything for them people. I...I'm just glad they dropped it, so...so I could get back home.

Ed Metzler: Yeah. How do you...how do you feel about the Japanese as a result of World War II?

Mr. Riel: My mother come home with a shirt “Made in Japan,” and I made her take her back!

Ed Metzler: Is that right? (laughter) What, was this right?

Mr. Riel: And after the war, I said, “Ma, there’s no way,”...I...I guess you could in a way you could call me prejudice because I’m not...I’m not thrilled with them people. I...I’m still...I still remember the war...I guess...what the hell it is...

Ed Metzler: You bet.

Mr. Riel: I’m from, I’m...as they say...as a...I tell my kids I’m from the old school. I...I...it’s hard to explain how the hell you...you know...how...but...as far as I’m concerned I...I’m...I really don’t want anything to do with them. I...I would...I talk to them and everything else, you know, I mean I don’t...I don’t...I’m not nasty to them or anything like that, but...but I’m not thrilled with them.

Ed Metzler: So what were you doing when you heard about the atom bomb being dropped?

Mr. Riel: What was I doing?

Ed Metzler: Yeah, what were you guys...that must have been a pretty exciting time.

Mr. Riel: Didn’t know a doggone thing about it was; we didn’t...I don’t know if the guys told you anything or not, but I didn’t know nothing about it. I knew they had something there, but it...I didn’t know what the hell was going on.

Ed Metzler: But after they dropped it, you must have heard that...that there was big bomb drops.

Mr. Riel: That...that's all. That's all I heard and then it was...then we were ready to get on the ship to get the hell out of there.

Ed Metzler: How'd you feel about that?

Mr. Riel: Good, good, good. And then...then we didn't know where the hell we were going. We ended up in...

Ed Metzler: Well at least you weren't going to Japan.

Mr. Riel: No, no; we would have been going to Japan. That's why I say, we...we would have gone to Japan. We were luck...we were lucky that we stayed...I think we were lucky we stayed on the island if Tinian, 'cause the guys...the guys that went to...Okinawa they had it worse than what the hell we had it; oh god!

Ed Metzler: Now you talking about the Seabees?

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, because I mean...

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah.

Ed Metzler: ...that was a much larger island; much harder to secure...

Mr. Riel: Yeah, even...well with the Seabees and Marines and...my...my brother-in-law was on...on Okinawa and he was in the Army. So...

Ed Metzler: That was tough duty!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, so...what the hell...So as far as...as far as the (unintelligible), I...I...except for what the hell I got I...I think I probably ended up pretty good.

Ed Metzler: I'd say so.

Mr. Riel: But I come back home.

Ed Metzler: You came home.

Mr. Riel: I came back home; sure, I'm crippled up, but what the hell...I'm still alive here anyway.

Ed Metzler: Well are you still carrying any pieces of coral around in your body?

Mr. Riel: I don't know. (laughter) I don't know.

Ed Metzler: I wonder if that shows up on an x-ray of your shoulder...probably not.

Mr. Riel: You know I had a lot...lot of things show up on x-rays you don't know what the hell it is. Alright I...I...as I say...it took them...it took them...from 1944 to 1964 to find out what the hell was the matter with my backside.

Ed Metzler: Really?

Mr. Riel: So...that's a long story though. But anyway...

Ed Metzler: Was it related to the war?

Mr. Riel: Yeah, oh yeah.

Ed Metzler: What was it?

Mr. Riel: I...I hurt my hip and it got so bad that they never could do anything for it, and then I finally found a doctor in 1964, an orthopedic specialist that found out what the hell was the matter with me and they operated on me. I mean...they told me I'd never...they told my wife at that time I'd never walk again. But I...I showed them how to walk. I...but then...but then I got worse. I...I had a heart attack in '96 and I got lost...I spent a year in a hospital...

Ed Metzler: Wow.

Mr. Riel: ...and had to learn how to walk all over again.

Ed Metzler: Were you married when you went overseas?

Mr. Riel: No.

Ed Metzler: You were a single man?

Mr. Riel: No, I didn't get married till 1949.

Ed Metzler: So were you doing much writing of letters and stuff back home or getting letters from home?

Mr. Riel: Oh yeah, yeah. I had a girlfriend, yeah. I had a girlfriend; I had a Dear John letter too.

Ed Metzler: Oh you got the famous Dear John, huh? (laughter)

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I had a Dear John letter, so...well...I, you know, I had, as they say...my mother...my mother was alone; my brother...my brother ended up having to go; they finally drafted him and they sent him to Africa. And then my mother was alone so I was glad to get the hell out! I did...I came back here and they sent me to the hospital when I came back. I came back to Sampson New York and I spent...I spent...I came back in October and I got out of the naval hospital at Sampson in December. So then I...that was it.

Ed Metzler: How did you feel about your officers and commanding officers and the officers that were heading up your battalion over there? I mean were these good guys or hard to deal with or...?

Mr. Riel: No, they were all pretty good; they were all pretty good. As I say...as I say...Salvison (sp?), he was quite an old guy; I didn't have much to do with him. But Sam Cross was a...what the hell was his job? I think he was a...like a land surveyor or something like that and he was...he was real good. As they

say, he's the guy that gave me my Second Class. He told the Chief Petty...I had a little trouble...I had a little problem with the Chief Petty Officer, you know, and Sam Cross stuck up for me and...and told him, he says, "Well, Riel get's Second Class or he's going to be First Class," and that was it! No problem! So then...oh, we had a couple of other officers, but they weren't...they weren't really any problem. No, no fights or arguments or nothing like that.

Ed Metzler: I've...I've seen photograph of the communications tower there at Tinian which I understand some of your mates built; that must have been a big thing!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I didn't have nothing to do with that; that was...that was probably the Electrical/Fire Department...I didn't have nothing to do with that. As I say, I was in the Machine Department and I didn't have nothing to do with...with electrical business so that was it. I didn't...I wasn't...that was...I really don't even know what the hell company that was...that...that did that.

Ed Metzler: Yeah, I don't either.

Mr. Riel: You know...I...

Ed Metzler: It's a big thing, I'll tell you that!

Mr. Riel: And then in C com...I was in C Company and C Company had the Water Department and we had a lot of...a lot of C Company men were in the...truck compound too. And...and in fact Chief Feeley (sp?) was in the Machine Shop. And then...we had a lot of...lot of...you know they...they kind of had them spread all over the damned place.

Ed Metzler: Well, had a lot of jobs to do.

Mr. Riel: A lot of guys...I mean...we had...we had heavy equipment operators in C Company; we had Water Department men; we had...we had some Electricians, too, and we had...(recording momentarily stopped)...we had...

(end of tape 1, side A)

Mr. Riel: We had everything on (unintelligible).

Ed Metzler: That's true!

Mr. Riel: Sure it is.

Ed Metzler: All fuel handling and...

Mr. Riel: You know we had to have piping in the kitchens and everything so...

Ed Metzler: That's right.

Mr. Riel: ...so what the hell! We had...we had everything.

Ed Metzler: So where did you land back in the States after the war was over?

Mr. Riel: In...where the hell did I land...Portland, Oregon.

Ed Metzler: Oh, up there!

Mr. Riel: Up, up the Columbia River!

Ed Metzler: You didn't come into San Francisco like a lot...

Mr. Riel: No, we were supposed to go to Pearl Harbor and they said Pearl Harbor was loaded. And then they were going to San Francisco and that was loaded because it was...we...we came back in October...Navy...Navy Day I think was October 26th or something like that. It was Navy Day anyway...was going on and all the ports were loaded so they sent us up the Columbia River to Portland, Oregon. We stayed in Kaiser Shipyard.

Ed Metzler: Really?

Mr. Riel: Oh, that was a nice place!

Ed Metzler: Really?!

Mr. Riel: Oh the people...the people were nice there, too, in...in Portland...yeah.
Yeah, Portland was a nice town. So then we were in Portland for quite awhile and then...from there we came across the top of the United States and come to...we landed in Buffalo and...I called...I called my mother and told her I was there and from there we went to Sampson and we ended up in Sampson, New York, and I ended up in the hospital there...just to see what the hell they could do for me. So then that was it. And I got discharged in December.

Ed Metzler: So do you feel like being in the war changed you as a person; changed your outlook on life?

Mr. Riel: I don't know. I (unintelligible)...really, really I...I wouldn't say so.
I...I...lot of...lot of things...yes; lot of things yes, and...and other things like...well I don't know what the hell I'm trying...I...I...I don't think it's changed me any. Sure it's changed my life all around...what the hell.

Ed Metzler: Everybody's life will change, you know.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, I mean what...what...I don't know what my life would have been like before.

Ed Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Riel: I didn't have a chance; I was a young kid for crying out loud. I was only...what the hell was I?...I was...twenty years old? I think that's what I was...about twenty years old. I mean...what the heck...even...what does a twenty-year-old kid know?

Ed Metzler: Not as much as...

Mr. Riel: He just started life!

Ed Metzler: That's right, that's right!

Mr. Riel: Sure, I...I probably had...I probably had more problems with life before that because I think I was only sixteen years old when my father died and I...I mean I...I didn't...didn't have much of a life; I didn't have much of a father or anything else.

Ed Metzler: That's right.

Mr. Riel: I do remember my father, but I...I didn't...oh, that's about it.

Ed Metzler: Okay. Well, anything else that I haven't remembered to ask you that I should have before we end this interview?

Mr. Riel: Not that...not that I can think of. I mean, I think...yes, I think I talk too damn much! (laughter)

Ed Metzler: No, you never talk too much! (laughter)

Mr. Riel: Yeah.

Ed Metzler: On this subject.

Mr. Riel: I think I told you before my wife used to say, "You don't talk to me, but you talk to everybody else."

Ed Metzler: Yeah, my wife says the same thing!

Mr. Riel: Yeah, well, I used to tell her, "Well, geez, you've got to talk to me!"
(laughter)

Ed Metzler: Well before I end the interview let me...let me thank you for what you and all the other guys did to win that war.

Mr. Riel: Okay.

Ed Metzler: We would be in a mess if you guys hadn't gone, so we appreciate that. Don't say it very often, so I'm saying it.

Mr. Riel: Yeah, that's...well...it...it's...as I say...when we got on that ship, we never knew where the hell we were going!

Ed Metzler: Or what the future held.

Mr. Riel: I heard...I heard of...you know, I heard of Pearl Harbor from...from when I went to high school. There was one guy that was worked in...or that was a machinist or tool and die...(unintelligible)...he was...already at Pearl Harbor working when the war broke out. I mean they...they had guys over there. I don't know why...why this guy ever got to...to go to Pearl Harbor, but I...I found out that that's where he was working...over there...when...when the war broke out. Uh, you hear a lots of damned stories, too.

Ed Metzler: Oh yeah. Okay, well...

Mr. Riel: That's about it, I guess.

Ed Metzler: Alright, thanks for spending the time to tell us your story.

Mr. Riel: Okay.

Ed Metzler: Appreciate that, and I'll go ahead and just cut it off now.

Mr. Riel: Alright.

Ed Metzler: Thanks again!

(end of interview)

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