

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

SB: Can you tell me what you remember, if you remember anything about your grandparents or your parents? Any memories?

MP: I just remember my grandma on my mother's side. I never met my grandparents on my father's side. I was pretty young when they passed away; we were very close with my grandmother right up until the time she passed away.

SB: What are your earliest memories or greatest memories of your parents?

MP: Of my parents?

SB: Yes.

MP: They were strict, they were kind, and they were involved in a number of things, church choir, church itself. My father belonged to the VFW organization. And he served in World War I, in the army in France.

SB: What kind of responsibility did he have in the army?

MP: I don't know, he was a sergeant. I don't know what kind of responsibility he had but apparently he was very strict. And during my growing up years he used to discipline me more with words than anything else, by telling me, If you were in the army you wouldn't

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

be saying this, if you were in the army you wouldn't be acting like this. What he did was build a resolve for me not to be in the army.

SB: Can you tell me more about your childhood growing up?

MP: Childhood? Well, we were a very close family and like I said my mother and father were the discipline types. Instead of using physical force to discipline they used their mouths mostly. You knew if you didn't clean up your act you knew you were going to be disciplined by being sent to your room or miss out on some exercise that you love, that sort of thing. But they were loving parents, too.

SB: What's your last memory of them?

MP: Well my mom passed away, she was just a little over 50 years old, and she had a heart attack. I was already married by then. My dad remarried after a couple of years and he passed away when he was 87 years old. He had a heart attack and passed away.

SB: What about siblings?

MP: What?

SB: Siblings?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: I had seven other siblings. There were four girls and four boys, eight kids in my family. The youngest one passed away when he was about forty years old. I was still a kid myself then and so I don't remember what he passed away from except that he passed away young.

SB: Where are you in the sibling line? Since you mention that he was forty when you were a kid?

MP: I was number three out of the eight.

SB: Can you share your experience about the first time you tried to enlist in the Navy?

MP: Yes, I was just out of high school; World War II had gotten started. It started in 1942 and they were drafting, but you had to be at least 18 to be drafted, so I was pretty safe until I turned 18, at which time I knew sooner or later that if the war continued I was going to wind up having to go into the service. I didn't want to go into the army because my father had already turned me against the army with his discipline of telling me if I were in the army this and army that, so to avoid being in the army I tried to enlist in the Navy.

I tried enlisting in all the services except the army and the Marine Corps, I didn't want to be in the Marine Corps but I tried to get in the Navy by enlisting. I tried the Coast Guard; I even tried the marine service. I couldn't get into any of them but the Navy finally told me that they would list me as a recruit once I got a draft notice. That when I got the draft

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

notice they said bring it to us. The Navy, well all the services were still discriminating at the time, racial discrimination. I really didn't want to go into the army so the navy finally told me we'll list you, and I said I really don't want to go into the Navy because I don't want to be a cook or a person that makes beds and stuff like that. So just before I was called in, the military changed, the Coast Guard changed, I mean the Navy changed and stopped discriminating so you could go in and be in the seaman branch. So, I was ok with that. When I got my draft notice I took it to the Navy and they took care of the rest of it and that's how I wound up in the Navy.

As a matter of fact, grandma and I got married the day before I went into the Navy [chuckles] and you had to have parental consent then if you were under age, we both were under age so, we had to get our parents consent before we could get married. So, we got married, well grandma's mother lived up in Michigan and her dad lived in Michigan too but they lived in different cities, he lived in Detroit she lived in Allegan, Michigan. And so we went to Detroit first and her father signed the papers for us then we had to go up to Allegan for her mother to sign. Her mother was sick and she worked for a judge and he was sick also so we had to cool our heels up there until they both got well and then and got to see her and she signed for us and by then my time was just about up before going in. So we came back to Cleveland and I called my parents and they came down to the courthouse and signed the papers for me and we got married and the next day I wound up on the train headed to the Navy and in the Great Lakes, Illinois.

SB: So how old were you at that time?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: I had just turned 19 about a month or two before, that was March 4th and I turned 19 in January.

SB: I see. So you were considered under age then, at 19?

MP: No, at 18.

SB: Oh, at 18.

MP: You know they couldn't do anything with me. But as soon as you, you know, virtually as soon as you passed eighteen they gotcha.

SB: What was it like being black in the Navy? What were your experiences?

MP: Well, by the time I went in the Navy, they had stopped discriminating. Well, they had stopped but they hadn't completely stopped because the base that I was trained at was called Great Lakes and Robert Small was the camp that I was in. Robert Small was a black fellow who had been in the Navy and who had been killed in World War II, the early part of World War II. So, they were still discriminating because Camp Robert Small was an all black camp, training camp and the trainers were all white initially. Aside from that it wasn't, there was no difference you know we applied, they tested everybody for training for what they called service schools and so I applied and was given the opportunity to become a radioman.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

SB: So what was the general feeling like when you got to Camp Smalls? How were people feeling? Were they excited? Were they curious? Or what was the overall feeling?

MP: It depended on your what you thought of the war and whatnot. I wasn't all that happy about being in, I was not happy about war because I had heard a lot from my father who had served in World War I, but you know when there's a draft, and you're subject to the draft, what you going to do? If you didn't, if you ducked the draft you wound up going to jail, you know, so.

SB: So, how did you feel or did you have any notion of it then that blacks were able to serve in different armed forces but didn't have the same rights as other Americans?

MP: Well, eventually we did because, I had a good friend that I met at the recruiting station, his name was Daniel Motley, he and I became almost brothers, except for blood, for his whole lifetime. We had families and that we brought up together and everything ...you didn't think a lot about race then, I mean you felt you were lucky to be in the Navy and in the seaman branch rather than in the servant branch. And especially once you went [to] service school and you came out with a rating, which we did. Boot camp was 16 weeks and then service school was another 20 weeks, something like that, and then after you got out of service school you were sent to your first duty station. Both Dan Motley and myself, we were good friends in our company, we went to service school together and when we got out of service school we were lucky enough to be sent together to our

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

first duty station which was a Navy Air Force base up in Squam, Massachusetts.

SB: So what did you do there?

MP: We sat watches; we flew as radio help on some of the training planes and so forth. As a matter of fact we were the only black sailors that were at that base in the radio shack... learning radio.

SB: How was that?

MP: It was ok. A lot of people were amazed that you know, because blacks weren't supposed to be able to do anything you know. We mastered the Morris code and all of the stuff you had to learn to become a radiomen, people were kind of amazed. And I recall, we were the first blacks on that base and when they started bringing other blacks in they were mostly from the south, they were uneducated and so they turned out to be seaman...

SB: How did you get into radio communications with the Navy? I know you said you tested but what did the test consist of? How did it turn out that you got tested for radio?

MP: Well, we had to learn, you had to learn the Morris code. You had to learn all the Navy communication procedures and whatnot in order to serve uh and provide the communication that was necessary. So, that's what you did. You know, we spent about, I think it was about...five months I think it was in the service school and by then when you

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

came out of the service they tested you and those how they only rated a certain percentage of those that come out of the school.

SB: And, so you were rated?

MP: We weren't rated immediately. When we got to the first base...that's where we got our first rating. We were rated as radiomen third class, which was the lowest rank in the enlisted petty officer status.

SB: So, was it normal for blacks to get rated?

MP: At that time it wasn't normal. They were just starting. You know, you had the opportunity to apply and try to be whatever you, whatever turned you on as far as ratings were concerned because we had radiomen, electricians, signalmen, quartermasters, we had machinists. All the ratings that the Navy had, you had access to if you wanted to become one.

SB: I see. So before going to basic training at Camp Robert Smalls, had you heard of Robert Smalls before that?

MP: No.

SB: You hadn't?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: I didn't know anything about the Navy before that. All I knew was if you were in the Army you wouldn't be saying that or you wouldn't be doing that [laughed].

SB: So what do you know about your father's experience in the Army...?

MP: I knew he was a sergeant. But here again at the time of World War II even being in the Army there were only certain things available and I think that's where he learned to be a chef, because he was an excellent chef.

SB: What do you think his experience, did he ever share what his experience was like in the Army during that time because this was before the armed forces were desegregated, right so?

MP: He didn't really talk too much about his [experience], except if I got out of line or one of us got out of line, you wouldn't be doing that in the army you know so it was obvious to us that the Army was very strict and we were lucky that we weren't in the army [laughed].

SB: When I was reading and doing some research I came across things known as shore stations or small coastal vehicles and it sounds like maybe some of the crew before they got on the USS Mason were assigned to those?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: There were a few that had been assigned to other, until Eleanor Roosevelt who was responsible for the Mason insisted that they lower the boom on racism. And so a lot of the guys that were serving aboard ship at the time were not in the seaman branch they were in the, I can't remember the name of it but it was the service branch. You know, you cook you clean, you make beds, you know that was all you were entitled to do until Eleanor Roosevelt came along and said you know enough of that. And she was the one who got the Mason going because she said I think that if you want to discriminate, no way, and she's the one that said I think you ought to have one ship in the Navy that is completely black...except for the commissioning officers and some of the higher rated enlisted men and they were there primarily to train us when we came aboard the ship.

SB: What was it like when you first got on the ship?

MP: It was different. We first of all [it] was real noteworthy to even tell people that you were on a ship and that your ship had the same kinds of responsibilities as all the other ships in the Navy. The USS Mason was a destroyer escort. Destroyer escorts were fast and uh, they were fast and well armed with all kinds of explosive stuff because their job was to protect the convoys. The convoys were made up of troop ships, merchant vessels and whatnot that were being used for the efforts of the war.

SB: So, you are 19 years old, you go off to war, and you are on a war ship. You mentioned in the book that you were excited to be on a war ship.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: Yes, we at the time felt that if we have to be in this we need to have the same recognition as everybody else and the only way you're going to get that was to be on a vessel that was doing the same job as any other vessel during the war.

SB: So that was exciting?

MP: Yeah uh I think uh if you looked at the documentary, you still have that? Or did you bring it back? You brought it back?

SB: I never got it.

MP: Oh, you never had it. Well, in the documentary I think that I was one of the people who mentioned that at the age we were, because everybody was either my age or older, they were all young and nobody ever thought they were going to die. Everybody had the attitude that they were going to survive this, were going to do this or were going to do that, on and on. There was no big issue made of it in the press except I think there was one newspaper, it was black owned, down in Norfolk, Virginia. They put one of their reporters on our ship and he made one or two voyages with us. I guess he wrote up a lot of stuff that showed up in the newspapers down south. Nobody heard of the Mason, even after the war.

SB: Why do you think that was?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: Because the country was still involved in discrimination. They just hid it, all the information, and...the general public and people in high places in the government, were calling USS Mason Eleanor's folly because they said we were destined to fail. Nobody had any faith that we could accomplish what they expected of a crew of the navy on a naval ship. We just outdid it; we did so many things that just blew their minds so they just kept it quiet. As a matter of fact...there are many people today that don't know about the USS Mason. They heard about the Tuskegee airmen because that got a lot of publicity. Black guys becoming air force pilots that got big publicity. This USS Mason, nobody ever heard of it, they just hid it. They took fifty years for that to be uncovered and the reason it was uncovered, I don't have all the facts on it. The lady who wrote this book, Mary Pat Kelly, was from Ireland and she had heard of the Mason because the Mason was said to have prevented the Nazis from taking over Ireland. Even though Ireland at that time was very close to England but England was having struggles itself and so it couldn't provide anything for Ireland. They gave our ship the credit for saving Ireland from the Nazis, the Irish people did.

SB: Because of her efforts to write the book that's how it came to light?

MP: I don't know how she got involved. She was over here for something, not for this book, and she met some people off the Mason, you know up in New York. I guess the word got out to her about this black ship and she checked out back at home, and some of the people, her friends and family members, said, "Oh yeah, it was a good ship and the guys were good and everything and they were credited with saving Ireland from the

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Nazis.” And so when she got over here she started doing research and that's how she started writing this book.

SB: So you think because of the book, that's how it generated talk about what had happened?

MP: I think the book was part of it, she did the book and she did the documentary. Before either one of these things was done, she apparently gave information to her government that she had run across this thing, this ship and some of its crewmember. They invited us over to Ireland to thank us for what we had done for them during the war. She rounded up as many people as she could, as many former crew members, and we were given either two or three weeks of all expenses paid to Ireland, so that they could thank us personally for what we had done for them. During the war that was the first country [and] that was the only country that I can think of that didn't discriminate towards us. They called us yanks, like they called everybody else Yankee. There was another term that they used to use; I can't think of what that the term used to be. It had a derogatory connotation so that people knew that you were black. I recall when we got over to Ireland, this is as civilians fifty years after, talking with people and dancing and what not, people really treated us like we had never been treated before. We had been to England, been in France, in the Azores islands. As a matter of fact we were restricted from the Azores islands because we had gotten into a fight with another ship and they barred our ship. When we pulled the convoy in there they wouldn't let us off the ship. Everybody else, all the other ships, could let their guys go to shore and everything but the

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Mason's crew had to stay on the ship.

SB: Because of fighting?

MP: Because we had fought with some of these guys from the some of the other ships, they said that we were troublemakers.

SB: Were those American ships?

MP: Yeah, American ships. Well they would get into fights, people would use the term nigger and stuff like that and there were some people on our ship that wouldn't take it. So they wound up fighting, beating people up for that. They didn't say that was the reason why we couldn't go on liberty there but we knew that was the reason. The Azores was kind of a jump off spot. If we had wolf pack, which is what the submarines, the German submarines used to run in packs, we called wolf packs. They would run in packs and try to take out as many ships in the convoy as they could including navy, military ships. England, even North Africa, we were discriminated against. We were discriminated against in Bermuda. Pretty much anyplace we went we were discriminated against. I remember one time in Bermuda we wanted to go to the USO and they had USO, United Services Organization. They just did good things for the navy ships, they would come into port and they would offer you entertainment, you could get food, stuff like that. It was a place where you could go to forget for a few minutes that you were in war and in the navy. We were discriminated in Bermuda, in England, in France, and North Africa if

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

you can believe it.

SB: And you think you were discriminated with because of race?

MP: Absolutely. Yeah, because you could go, I remember one time in North Africa and we wanted to go to a USO, and we got right to the door and they turned us away.

“What’s the problem?” “Well you’re not allowed, you have to go to your own USO.” But they didn’t have a USO for us. So that meant you just couldn’t go in and take of the benefits that USOs gave. If you were black forget it, get back.

SB: So what do you think was different about Ireland? Why was your experience in Ireland so different?

MP: It’s just that the Irish people were just completely different in terms of race and discrimination. They were happy that we were there. Like I said, they had the opinion that our ship had pretty much saved them from the Nazis. Because the country that should have been helping them couldn’t. England was being bombed out of sight and they were taking care of themselves. They didn’t want to send nobody to Ireland.

SB: How was it traveling to all these different places and then coming back to America and still dealing with discrimination?

MP: Well, you just kind of recognize the fact that when you’re in the US you’re going to

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

be discriminated against and try not to put yourself in a position for that to happen. For instance down in the navy yard in South Carolina they had places where you could buy food but you had to go around to the back door and if you refused you never knew who was going to walking overhead and telling you to get back. They had segregated drinking fountains, segregated toilet facilities, and you were expected to do what blacks were to do, which was to go where it said black, where it said "negro." Dan Motley and I used to buck that, we found out being a lie, we would get off the ship and go right to a white drinking fountain.

SB: So I assume you were in a few fights?

MP: I only got in one fight and that was in North Carolina. It was at a combination grocery and initial, like a fast food place that you could buy stuff. We went in right outside the Navy yard and they had a marine on the gate for checking your ID and stuff in and out. We were coming back to the base and we wanted to get something to eat and we went inside this place and they told us we had to go around to the back. There was three or four of us and we said were not going around to the back. They said we couldn't stay inside so we walked out and this guy, a white sailor in there drinking a coke, he came out behind us and he had finished his coke and he had his bottle and he came up to us and said something about, "Well you guys ought know that your not supposed to be inside and your supposed to go around back." We said, "We have the same uniform that you have on, why do we have to go around back when you can walk inside." I think he called one of us a nigger and I floored him. I put him right down on the ground and then we

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

were afraid because the marines, this was right across from the entrance from the base, and the marines saw this, and I just knew were going to get done in by those marines, but we didn't. I told Dan that's the last time we go on liberty in this place. After that if our ship put into port in South Carolina we didn't go ashore, we figured our problem was doomed.

We had a situation in the Navy yard itself where we were standing in line and a lot of the white people couldn't understand, and this was a mixture of white people who were working there and navy guys, you had to get in line to get up to where you bought your food. So Motley and I were in line and this black guy, older guy, came up and said come here. We said what do you want. He said come here. We said were not going to give up our place out of line. The white guys are looking at us, they didn't know what to say or do. The black guy came up to us and said, you guys are supposed to go around the back; you're not supposed to be in this line. And we told him, do you want something, he said yeah, go around the back, [and we said] we're not. And nobody bothered us. From then on, all the sailors off our ship in that navy yard if they wanted to get some food or something, they would go get in line and nobody would bother them. We kind of set an example.

SB: So how was the transition from being on the ship, you know kind of with comrades and then, did you have to worry about that same kind of discrimination on the ship with the officers?

MP: No, the skipper was great. The commanding officer, as a matter of fact, most of the

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

officers were good. It was just that we had some enlisted guys on there that were there for training purposes, to train blacks. A lot of time they would get their nose out of joint but our skipper broke that up. If this was the way you're going to act then you can't be on this ship. He got rid of a lot of the white sailors for that very good reason. As a matter of fact our boss, he was the chief radioman, he was the head of our radio shack, he didn't like blacks. He used to mouth off and what not. We finally got him transferred off; I think somebody threatened him so he got off.

SB: How was the transition from being on the ship and not really too much having to worry about it and then porting somewhere and having to deal with it, you know that kind of discrimination?

MP: I don't know. Like I said there were some places we just didn't get off the ship because we knew what to expect. We tried to get off the ship in places where it was indicated that you were no different than anyone else. We used to try to get [away sometimes] because some of the black people were just as bad as the whites, you know, they'd go off looking for a fight.

SB: What were some of your fondest memories of your time on the USS Mason?

MP: I think when I discovered, or when I broke the code that the convoy, at least this one German convoy was using. Because they couldn't communicate under the water so they always had to come up at night in order to communicate with each other by radio. There

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

was one night that they weren't too far away and I was, I used to spend a lot of time there. Because I became the head of the radio shack, so I used to spend a lot of time in the radio shack and I was listening and I managed to break, everybody tried their best to try to break the German code, and I'm not sure that it was, it might have been just the code that the submarines in that particular wolf pack was using. I'm not sure, I never did find out. I was never given credit for having broken their code. I think there was one article, it might be in here, about me but it doesn't come out actually and say that I broke the code.

SB: Looking back on the whole experience, what are your thoughts looking back over fifty years later?

MP: Oh, its more than fifty years. It was fifty years in 1995. I don't really give it a lot of thought. The thing that bothers me and amazes me at the same time is the fact that all this stuff has been written, all these books have been written, the documentary, and most people have never heard of the USS Mason. When somebody starts to talk about it and they look at you and say, I never heard of that ship. Oh yeah, here's the proof, right here. You probably got a lot out of some of the stuff that this guy wrote, this was illegal, he was not supposed to keep a diary. But he managed to keep this hidden until the war was over and he was back home. He didn't write it, he gave the information to the guy who wrote the book, who was a professor at Ohio State University and the son of the first captain that we had on that ship.

SB: So what was it like to get, maybe you can share the process of, how you came to find

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

out that the ship was going to get commendation after all this time.

MP: It was very difficult to believe. And especially the period of time that elapsed. Like I said, fifty years. And today, it's a shock to people when somebody brings it up, I don't bring it up, but sometimes it just comes up. People say I never heard, a black ship? A completely black ship? Impossible. No it isn't, here's the proof.¹

SB: So it was difficult to believe when you found out that the ship was going to receive a commendation?

MP: It was a real shocker. We had had one reunion based on this woman, that when she found out about it that she tried to get in touch with all the ex-members. Which is how I found out about it because we were called; I don't know if it was a phone call or letter, I don't remember which. But anyways, we had the first reunion up in New York on Staten Island. That was the first time I had seen anybody from that ship except Dan Motley who we both lived sixty miles apart and like we brought our families up and so forth. As far as seeing any of the other people, never saw any of them, never even thought about them until she came out and called everybody, got this reunion together and decided she's going to write this book, she's going to make this documentary, which she did. And then the highlight of it all was the trip to Ireland.

SB: What happened at the ceremony for the commendation? Were you there?

¹ Referring to personal scrapbook organized by Lois Peters.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: Yeah, a lot of that information is here.² This was publicized in 1993, stuff like this that people had never seen. I was telling you about Dan Motley, this is him. He and I turned out almost like brothers. This fella looked white but he wasn't. He had quite a bit of white in him but he wasn't white. That's what this whole book is about. Its got all kinds of information, pictures of people, things that people had to say and do. It's just loaded with all kinds of stuff.

SB: Did you recognize anybody when you went to New York for the reunion?

MP: A lot of them had passed away already. I don't remember, I think we had less than a dozen people. This book tells you somewhere, how many people went to Ireland. A lot of them were hard to find. And then speaking of discrimination, there was discrimination against the people themselves, against each other.

SB: What was that?

MP: To give you an example: when we went to the first reunion on Staten Island in New York. This guy, where is he, his name is, you don't need to publish this, but anyway, they were checking to see what people had done and what kind of career they had had and so forth. They, he found out that I had an education, that I had a professional job as an

² Referring to personal scrapbook organized by Lois Peters. It includes newspaper clippings, photos and pamphlets regarding the crew of the USS Mason.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

accountant. They were asking you all this stuff about your life and what you had accomplished. Boy he really got his nose out of joint. He didn't like me at all; he didn't like me when we were on the ship. I brought this [scrapbook] over because I thought you could browse through it, there's a lot of information, just make sure that I get it back. Its full of all kinds of information. These are some of the guys, most of the guys, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7, I don't think there were, maybe more that they were able to find.

SB: So what was the ceremony like? Can you share with me about the ceremony?

MP: You mean when we got the citation? No, they gave a history. It was held in Washington D.C. President Clinton was the one who awarded after fifty years. So they had a big, kind of a big thing going. They said what the ship crew had accomplished, and what have you, and the fact that it had been hidden away for fifty years, that we had been given an commendation but never any recognition because it was hidden, it was in the archives. So he brought that out. It was kind of a tearjerker. Some people sat there and cried. The place was loaded. It was in one of the huge places there in Washington D.C., and it was loaded to the gills. And when they got through saying what we had accomplished and everything, then Clinton gave the commendation. A lot of people in the audience just broke out and cried.

SB: Yeah, I'm sure. That's quite a big deal from no recognition to finally being recognized.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

MP: Right. Like I said, people to this day don't know anything about this ship or the people that were on it. When we were in Ireland, we were privileged to not only be commended by the, what was her job, she was kind of a thing to Ireland from this country, I can't think of the term. We were also recognized by the queen. The queen was there not really to do anything for us but she was there because they had put in a new railroad or something and she was there to give honor and open it up and we happened to be there and she came over and she shook everybody's hand.

SB: I saw a couple pictures of that.

MP: Of the queen? Yeah, she shook everybody's hand.

SB: You also saw Van Morrison?

MP: Yeah, we met him. He heard about us and so he invited us to one of his shows.

SB: Oh wow, did you go?

MP: Yeah.

SB: How was it?

MP: It was fun. We visited several of the cities. I know we were in Belfast. We were...I

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

can't think of any of the names of the cities but we traveled throughout both north and south Ireland. The north island and south, southern island. I think it was at the southern, south Ireland that we were being honored at a huge city hall. The place was humongous and it had a big balcony and we were the guests of honor. While we were there they had one of the biggest pipe organs that I've ever seen, that grandma ever seen, and they wanted to know if anybody knew how to play the organ and grandma pointed me out. They said would you mind to come up and play the organ and it was so big they had a guy to pull the stops for me, it was such a big organ. I played ode to joy and when I finished the place went crazy. I mean people were standing up and yelling and screaming and clapping and I didn't really understand what was going on until the guy who had been doing the stops for me, he says, "You know why these people are so excited? And why they are making so much noise?" He said, "That's our national anthem." Ode to joy, that's one of the songs I never forgot. Never forgot how to play it.

SB: Came in handy. Is there anything else about your experience on the Mason you want share?

MP: No, it was this New York 019 convoy, and this was what we got the citation for, it was because we saved this convoy. It was at the time it was really something. We had 60 foot seas, I don't know, did you read this? Did they tell you how high the seas were? We were in a tornado, I mean not a tornado, a hurricane for I don't know how long. I think this was really the highlight and it was almost at the end of the war that this was done. Every day we would go down to chow and usually talk about which ship had gone down

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

and how many people had been lost.

SB: Did you still feel invincible?

MP: Yeah, like I said I was about twenty by then and among some of the youngest guys on the ship. Motley and I were the same age right to the date. We just, I don't know, we felt there was no way we were going to die. I think a lot of the younger people like myself, we were invincible, we ain't going to die.

SB: Anything else?

MP: About the ship? Its keeping track of people until a couple years ago, but people are slowly passing away. Its something you don't think about a lot unless somebody brings it up. The latest thing, you met Jerry Valentine and her daughter didn't you? We had them over for dinner and you and Tyson were here. I don't know how the subject came up, here again, she had never heard of it. And so let us have, let us read the books, let us see the documentary. Ruth, another one had never heard of it until she met us. Well just about all of our friends, what few we have left, had never heard of it until somehow or other the word got out. Like the Newton's, they had never heard of it.

SB: What do you think is the biggest lesson of that experience for you?

MP: Well I don't know. One of them was that you can do whatever you put your mind to.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

I think that along with my mother and dad, and your grandma here, helped to me to get where I got. It was because I had built up the confidence in myself that you can do whatever you have to do. You can do it and you can do it well. The places where I was discriminated against after coming out of the military and getting an education and trying to get ahead in my career even though a lot of the times I didn't get the job because I was black, I never let that stop me. That in addition to the encouragement from both your grandma, my mom when she was living, your grandfather, and the confidence that they put in me and the confidence that I had in myself that you can do whatever you need to do to further your career and to make your life easy.

Grandma and I would periodically sit down and start reminiscing about all the stuff that we've been able to do, the places we've been able to go because of that. I can't remember how many countries we've been to and all the different jobs that I've had. Taking on the attitude that we both had was that if you want to move up, you got to move out, and that's what got us away from Cleveland. Because I was pretty much at the top of what I felt was my career but really wasn't anywhere to speak in terms of advancement except I was maybe head and shoulders above my counterparts, my black counterparts. Moving from Cleveland to Auburn, friendships with people who not necessarily gave me anything but gave me the encouragement to do this and do that to get ahead.

SB: Do you think that experience on the USS Mason helped build that confidence?

MP: It may have. I never thought of it that way. I'm sure that the fact that we were on that ship and the fact that I moved up to become head of the radio shack was a big

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

accomplishment. I can recall when the officer who was in charge of communications called me down to his stateroom. They had demoted one or two of our guys in the radio shack because we were in port and they had took liberty and then they had to go on watch that night and the ship was leaving port the next morning. They came back from liberty and went on watch, and we would never had known this except that when convoys were headed out usually you got an encoded message about where you were going but it was all in code. You didn't know where you were going until maybe the third day out at sea. Then the head of the convoy would call the radio rooms and say open message so and so and have it decoded. That's when you found out where you were going, before that you didn't, all you knew were you were out there with your convoy, you didn't know where you were going. What happened was that these two guys came back, went on watch, and went to sleep. They missed the message, they didn't know that at the time. About three days out at sea, the convoy commander told us to get so and so message and have it decoded. We didn't have the message. He said you got to be out of your mind, that message was sent, everybody got that message, all the other ships had the message. Our ship was the only one that didn't have it. That's when we found out that these two guys who went on liberty and came back and went on watch, missed it. There was a whole series of messages that they never got. They had a captain's mast, this was a disciplinary thing. They had a captain's mast and both of them lost their rank because of that. I think that kind of put this one guy really against me because the officer who was in charge of the radio shack and communications after, and we didn't know they had broken this guy, but he was head of the radio shack. And so when I got called down to the officer's quarters and he told me that I was now head of the radio shack, I told him that I didn't

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

want to be. And he said, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you." That's when I became the head of the radio, head of all the radiomen. So that meant not just the radio shack itself, but I was responsible for people being on watch, those who could go on liberty and stuff, I was the head of things. I lost favor in the radio shack because of that but I really didn't ask for the job, I didn't want it, but he told me I'm not asking you I'm telling you.

SB: All right, thank you.

MP: Was that good enough? You got enough?

SB: Yes.