

Atkins, Kelly

Navy

Interviewer: If you would like to begin by starting...I would like for you to introduce yourself to our viewers.

Atkins: We are happy to have you with us. My name is Kelly Lewis Atkins and was named...the Kelly portion of my name was named after a Methodist minister, and I don't know where the Lewis come from. I had some relatives name Lewis. I had six sisters, and I was the only boy. I think maybe they were going to call me Kelly Louise if it didn't work out the other way [Laughter]. That is how the name come about.

Interviewer: Yes, sir, when we were talking a little bit earlier you said that you had grown up in this area...Did you grow up in Clarksville?

Atkins: Yeah, first five or six years of my life was in Stewart County then my parents moved to Clarksville, and I grew up the rest of my life here.

Interviewer: What was life like growing up in the Clarksville area? What was It like your childhood?

Atkins: Well, I had a lot of fun...didn't have much, but no one else did, so we didn't know we didn't have much. I carried papers, and did a lot of little odd jobs. The town was small about 8500 population. It began to grow as the war progressed. It expanded with new industry and Camp Campbell. The Bird Cage which was an atomic storage and it had been growing steadily since then. We are up to somewhere around 135,000 populations now.

Interviewer: Mr. Atkins, what was it like...do you recall...what I was like...I didn't ask you about your school about what school you went to and a little bit about that.

Atkins: Ok, I went to [Hawes] Elementary school on Franklin Street which burned about a year and a half ago. The tornado that we had two years ago damaged it severely, but it was partially rebuilt and then burned. Then Clarksville High...then I went into the service.

Interviewer: Let me ask you on that note, you were talking about the service what do you recall about the time of...well, prior to Pearl Harbor. Did you have access...did you and your family have access to radio broadcasts and conversations neighbors and friends? Did you know what was going on in Europe and with the Japanese also?

Atkins: Well, yes but not as much as you do today because of the communication. We did have radios. There was a little bit in the newspapers about it. We didn't know what was happening and, of course, some of our neighbors and friends had already gone to service. Some had been

killed, and we been notified of that. Yeah, we were aware of the severity of it and, of course, we had rations and various things that we couldn't get... It made you knowledgeable since the war affected that.

Interviewer: Yes sir, prior to the war beginning for the United States, do you remember where you were and the events surrounding in your hearing of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Atkins: Yeah, I don't recall exactly where I was, but it was the next day I suppose because this was on a Sunday and it was the next day I guess that we actually knew about what had taken place. Of course, no one ...communication just wasn't that good then. I believe it was on the following day was aware of what had happened.

Interviewer: Yes sir, so you mentioned that there were a lot people going into the different branches of the services, and did you have a lot of friends and school mates, who were going?

Atkins: Yes, I did. Some of those were older than I was, but I ran with them and acquainted with them and I thought when they left that I had to go become involved in it also. Incidentally, the day I was to leave to go into the service there were supposed to be five others going with me. I was the only one who showed up, but I went all by myself...went through the service by myself. Never saw anyone that I had known, and other people would run into their brothers and their acquaintances everywhere...I would get notice of where someone might be in the town I could get to them...they were gone, or I was shipped somewhere else. Never got opportunity to meet up with any of my friends or anything.

Interviewer: Well, yes, sir. What was the time? What year was it? What was the month and all that you went in?

Atkins: I went in February of 45 and joined the Navy, I thought. I went to Great Lakes for my boot camp training, and after about 12 days there they transferred me into the [inaudible a lot of static in the tape] and shipped me to Camp Endicott on Rhode Island. As soon as we got there and got settled they give us a two week leave and of course we had no money—none of us. We had to call home to get some money and come home for the leave. When we went back we was riding the train in those days, and when we got back we took four weeks of marine training. We went aboard a troop transfer on a train. We spent six days and nights going to California, and shipped out from California. So very shortly after I went in I was on aboard a ship heading for overseas.

Interviewer: Did you know that..What theatre of operations that you were headed too?

Atkins: We were pretty sure that we was going to the Pacific because of we were shipping out from. We were issued long underwear which meant we would probably be headed for Japan, but we did wind up in the Philippines. We went in Malate and then crossed through Manila over to Bataan and down at the base of Bataan at Subic Bay and that is where we spent...we were

[inaudible] Battalion the twenty first special was the first one and later that disbanded and we came to the thirty fifth battalion. Our function was to unload the ships and bring in the supplies for the troops. The way did this was by flat barges. We would take those out, indecently; I ran the motor pool---the boat pool at Subic Bay. We would dispatch the small craft out to these various ships that were loaded on to the flat barges and tie them off---buoyed, and at high tide we would beach them. We could drive a truck down and unload them and high tide again we would pull them back off and tie them to a buoy out...we stayed there for about nine months, and then we got ready to disband...we did destroy the camp. We dismantled it...take it down. We headed back home. We returned on a ship...its maiden voyage was USS Robert [inaudible] it had been converted to a troop transport. It was about six bunks high which didn't give you much room to get in... coming back we spend 23 days returning and there were four of us that played double pea knuckle on the deck for this whole time, and we were diverted partially for a few days with another ship in our vicinity that threw a screw...a propeller, and we had to go by and drag it in. It took us about half a day to get a rope to pull the cable over...the water was so rough. Going back...going overseas there were 238 ships in the convoy. This was destroyers and destroyer escorts and troop transports and everything, of course, we would watch the radar and it would turn...sometimes stop..sometimes it would sound and of course all troops had to below. If it is getting torpedoed being below is the wrong place to be [laughter], but we had to go below. Nothing of course happened then, they said there were some submarines following us but they didn't do anything.

Interviewer: That was on your return back?

Atkins: No, when I was going over.

Interviewer: Going over...oh, I am sorry. Yes, sir...what do you recall...did you tell me that it was 90 days that you were there?

Atkins: oh, no about 9 months.

Interviewer: Oh, I am sorry.

Atkins: at Subic Bay.

Interviewer: 9 months there then after that time ya'll...

Atkins: Well we disbanded the camp, and we returned to the states. I was planning on going back in. When we got back I was given a thirty day leave, and I stopped off in Texas on my way home to visit family. I went back to New Orleans to be discharged, and then they sent me back to Memphis...but I was considering very strongly going back in, and fortunately I met this young lady and that changed the plans considerably [laughter]. That was 54...55 years ago, I guess now wasn't it. We have got 54 years under our belt.

Interviewer: Congratulations.

Atkins: They are kind of hard to train, so I will keep her, I think.

Interviewer: I was curious. What was it like for you still in the midst of basic training at the time, or you said...it was February when you enlisted of 45. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the war being over in Europe?

Atkins: Yeah, aboard ship.

Interviewer: ...and the same question that I have to ask is what was it like when the news came down that Japan had surrendered?

Atkins: Well it really didn't have that much effect. We were pretty sure that we weren't going to Japan then. I am not so sure that is what we wanted or didn't want. I think we were still gung ho and wanting to get in the thick of it, you know. I am glad we didn't.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. Well let me ask you what...can you describe to us what it was like a typical day for you? From early in the morning waking up to going about your duties in the day ...could you send us through an entire day and what it would be like?

Atkins: At Subic Bay, basically there was eight of us that lived away from the camp the motor pool---or boat pool it was known as....and our primary duty was to dispatch the barges out to the very ships in the harbor in Subic Bay. Subic Bay was a round bay with an island at the entrance of it. It was about a hundred yards both sides, and during the war of the Japanese had lined mine nets across it, and when one of the ships would come it they would tug and open it up. There was a Japanese destroyer stuck in Subic Bay. P.T. boats laid off behind the reefs, and when a ship came in and they opened the gates they would come speeding in...there was three of them that got out and torpedoed them before they could get the gates closed. The submarine base there...Subic Bay was just a little small village...no paved streets or anything, very crude. There were lots of bands nacidas that roamed the area...that was the original natives...the pigmies. Our day would consist of you know...breakfast if we ate breakfast, and dispatching barges and men out and picking them up...beaching the barges at high tide that is about the only way that we could get them unloaded...pull them up on the beach at high tide.

Interviewer: What type of vehicles were they? What type of ships?

Atkins: LCMS.

Interviewer: Did they prove to be...were they pretty handy as far as equipment?

Atkins: Oh, yeah...they were pretty good. They were twin diesels and you guided them basically. The engines by pushing forward one reverse to turn, of course, they carried about 35 men and they had a ramp that lowered that you could let them off. This what we used and we tied the barges up to them...we carried them out and tied them up right along the side of the ship.

When they got loaded they called the dispatch, and they would contact us and we would go back and get them.

Interviewer: There is no telling how many tons and mega tons of things that ya'll

Atkins: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: That ya'll moved back and forth.

Atkins: The good advantage was we had a buoy that we placed in the bay, when the good stuff came in like the cans of pineapples and peaches...we would always dump a little off as we come in when the buoy was at low tide we could just wade out and get it [laughter]. Everybody else did things like that too so it wasn't a big deal.

Interviewer: Ya'll handled all sorts of supplies?

Atkins: All of the supplies....everything that come in.

Interviewer: Everything, ok...wow, that must have been an amazing job. Was that coming into the port area to be shipped out further through the Philippines?

Atkins: No, this was just for the operation there in Subic Bay.

Interviewer: That is interesting. I bet that ...that must have been amazing. I have to ask you what was the interaction that you and your fellow troops...how was the interaction with you and the other sailors with the Philipinos?

Atkins: Pretty good.

Interviewer: Where they actually happy?

Atkins: Yeah, they were happy to see the Americans. It improved their economy greatly, and they were very happy. They would wash your clothes, and how they did it I don't know, but they would take your ...of course we wore marine greens that was our issue. They would wash them at the creek or river. We called it a creek and they called it a river, with limestone rocks...and they beat the dirt out of them. They got them clean, of course, they didn't last too long. They would lay them on the bushes in such a manner that it appeared that they had pressed them. I don't know how they did that.

Interviewer: Well they certainly are in the money then...

Atkins: Well, they was very inexpensive...of course it had to be because we didn't make very much money back then.

Interviewer: That is interesting. I had to ask you that question because I was curious how...I know that maybe some of the things that I have read...

Atkins: The relationship now is not that good. They wanted us out, and they got us out. We did liberate them actually. Of course, that was fifty something odd years ago, so they have forgotten...the new generation has.

Interviewer: So that is pretty much what an average day would be like for you? Let me ask you what was one of the most memorable moments? Whether it might be...you might want to share one that was really funny or something that you really enjoyed. A memory that stuck in your mind or something that was really a shock in that...that wasn't maybe the best experience.

Atkins: Well, I guess I had two or three. One that was sort of a wakeup call, I guess was during the marine...the four weeks of marine training at Camp Endicott. We had to go through the gas mask training in thirty minutes, and get into the building with the gas and install that while you were breathing it. Then you had to go by the various fifty-five gallon drums and smell something that simulated gas...some you couldn't smell. Some were odorless and this major wondered if he had made the wrong choice, butthey said the snipers were still there, and it was in the monsoon rain season. We had to dig in on the beach, and about the time you got your fox hole dug it was full of water. It was very cold at night, and we didn't have anything to eat but the breakfast before we disembarked. We were all hungry and all cold and all scared and that was pretty rough.

Interviewer: what was...so when you finally were able to get rations or get a meal. I am sure that, that was something really a blessing to have at that point.

Atkins: Well, yeah...yes and no. Did you know that there are 120 different ways to fix spam [laughter]? We ate that three meals a day for quite a while. There was a great advantage of being in the sea bees. The sea bees were a different breed of people I guess. I thought at the time when we were transferred into it that we were ruined because I wanted to go aboard ship. There were specialties that everybody in the sea bees had, of course, your leaders...your officers were professional people...contractors, road builders, you know this sort of thing. It was a different world than the regular army, and what we didn't and what we couldn't get we stole from the Navy or the Air Force or the Army [laughter]. Our officers didn't care, and then anything that was available we got first so we...the first thing we did actually when we got into Subic Bay was to build a mess hall. Of course, we lived in just tents with plywood and green tarps over it.

Interviewer: it sounds like being a Sea bee was an interesting...and you said that not what you had intended that you thought you were going into the Navy.

Atkins: Actually, I thought I was going to the Navy. Of course, it was part of the Navy.

Interviewer: Is it...later when you saw the film...the one that John Wayne made about the Sea bees was that anything...did you find it humorous, or was it anything?

Atkins: Well, I always said the humorous part...the reason for Sea Bees was to build roads for the Japs to retreat on [laughter]. So you know the Sea Bees were often...I wasn't, but often times the Sea Bees were ahead of the marines, the army, and everything else. They were up front, and they played a big role. Without them they couldn't build the bridges, and landing strips and that sort of thing, so they played a great part in the war and ending it as soon as they did.

Interviewer: I have never had the pleasure of meeting anyone who did your job before, and I thing that is amazing. That must have been something else, and I ...there are so many questions that I trying to make sure that I get to everything. One is...by being in the Sea Bees did that...did you get a different kind of wage as compared to other ...

Atkins: No, it was just regular.

Interviewer: Did you have hazard pay or anything like that? Did you get any sort of extra hazard pay?

Atkins: No, they didn't at that time. There was nothing special about it. I got a couple of steps in rank pretty easily by doing what I was doing, and I really wasn't doing a great deal except operating a boat and...

Interviewer: I didn't ask you what your specialty was...

Atkins: I didn't have one [laughter]. They asked me if I could ...knew anything about tying knots, and I said not at all then they said can you run a ship? I said I probably can...well not a ship...a boat, they didn't call them ships. Now that's what ...they put me aboard, so that is what I did.

Interviewer: I have to ask you this...the boat that you ran did you have a good mechanic that helped you to keep it...

Atkins: Well, we had mechanics...we got in trouble with our mechanics thought. We found a Japanese Amphibious tank that had been abandoned, and we got to working on it and got it running. We carried it out in the bay one day, and we checked everything but the water pump. We sunk, and our commander wasn't too happy with it or us either.

Interviewer: You didn't get to take a good long look at it did you?

Atkins: Well, it was sort of a bad place where we sunk [laughter] at low tide. It was sort of dangerous with a small craft, so he wasn't exactly happy with us about that.

Interviewer: I am sorry...I had just a flashback to your different ways in preparing spam. I just was thinking about that...did ya'll have your choice of some other different foods?

Atkins: Not at that time we didn't ...it was spam or nothing [laughter] and it fixed...it was three meals a day...it was spam. Then I guess they ran out of it and had to do something else.

Interviewer: Well did you have access to any of the fruits from the islands?

Atkins: No there weren't any fruits available to us. We had fruits that was shipped in. We could get them, but we didn't get them all of the time, but occasionally we would...going overseas...going back, I went aboard ship one day earlier. Here again my name starting with an A put me in trouble sometimes. As a mess cook, and I had worked at a grocery store in the summer during school vacations in the butcher shop, and I knew a little bit about cutting meat. They put me in the butcher shop aboard ship which was a real nice thing to do, you know, two or three hours a day. We could go the galley and we had access to that. I ate basically loaves of fresh baked bread with butter and canned pineapple. I happened to open the door one day on the potato bin because it was sort of moving, so we didn't too much eat in the mess kitchen.

Interviewer: Well who all did you cook for?

Atkins: All the troops.

Interviewer: Normally what would be a number?

Atkins: Boy, our ship...this was just going over we had about 1800 troops aboard the ship going over.

Interviewer: Goodness, that is quite a few people to feed right there.

Atkins: Well it...we didn't get a great deal of meat, so it wasn't a big job. Most of our meat cutting was basically officers aboard ship [laughter].

Interviewer: Well, did you continue to do any of the cooking? Once you got...

Atkins: No.

Interviewer: You all had an established mess hall by then. Did you say that was the first...

Atkins: Well we didn't have ...when we first got there we didn't have... we ate rations and things. Then the first thing we did was build a mess hall. We had some cooks, unfortunately, they weren't too good [laughter]. They improved I guess.

Interviewer: What were your tour of duty about how long would you stay in the area like you were talking about?

Atkins: Well, when we hit Malate and crossed into Bataan that is where we stayed until we come back home in that one area. We were building it up.

Interviewer: Well did you have...Mr. Atkins, did you have the number of point built up by the time the war was over to....or did you have that type of system?

Atkins: Well not really, but the Sea Bees were being basically disbanded because ...so that is the reason why I got out earlier. I probably would have to stay another year had it not ...if I had of been in the regular Navy.

Interviewer: That was one...

Atkins: An advantage that I got from being transferred in was to get out early.

Interviewer: Yes, sir, and you said afterwards you came back and that you had considered making a re-enlistment. When you got back to Clarksville what was it like? Did you bump into a lot of people that had gone into the Navy?

Atkins: Oh, yeah...

Interviewer: People who had spent different service....different tours of duty, and different branches of the services.

Atkins: Yeah, I met a lot of the friends that had gone before me and this sort of thing. Of course, I made new friends.

Interviewer: What was it like during that time....you had mentioned that ya'll were gung ho and there are two questions that spawned from that I have to ask. One being, what did it mean to be a young man and ...well by that time it wasn't just volunteer...it was...the draft was still going on. Of course, you definitely made the choice to in because of your early...

Atkins: I got my draft notice when I was overseas [laughter]. They were either early or late one or the two.

Interviewer: What did it mean to be able to serve?

Atkins: Oh, I am very, very proud of it. I don't ...I have often thought about had I not gone what would have happened. I don't know that I would want to do it again, but I am very glad that I did. It is an experience that you know you will always remember, but you might not want to do it again.

Interviewer: The other thing is how do you think...I mentioned the gung ho factor. What was it like for the young men you were working with and yourself when you realized...in reading, we read things that make us think that the young men in any war and young men and women today think that....I guess, what I am saying is that they do not realize the seriousness of what they are going into, and they have this feeling nothing happen to me individually. Did you see any of that, and did you see the change?

Atkins: Yes, I don't think that any of us... because at that age I don't think that you are that concerned...I think maybe you feel like you are invincible and nothing is going to happen to me,

but we were very patriotic and very proud. There is a difference from then and now...much difference in it.

Interviewer: Well, let's see if I have got...one of the things that I didn't ask for you to share with us a little bit about...that I actually thought of a little earlier in our conversation, and for some reason I sort of moved away from it. If it is something that you feel comfortable talking about...one of the things that I have here on the notes that have been brought to my attention is...well, I will change this and ask you do you recall coming in contact with any of the Americans that were subjugated to the death marches or been in P.O.W. camps in the Philippines?

Atkins: Not that...when we were there it was at a later date and they had all been freed or moved or dead or something none of them where there at that time.

Interviewer: So is it accurate to say that ya'll didn't see as much of the atrocities that had been there earlier?

Atkins: No, it didn't show up. You heard about, but we didn't actually know it. We knew what Bataan was, and how it was...what had happened there. The march the Bataan death march was prior than going into Subic Bay. The road...you could look down and see seven different roads or see the road seven times go around and around this was where the death march occurred. Of course, it was many, many of them left dead on the side of the road.

Interviewer: Were there still vehicles and things that had been junked....

Atkins: Yeah, you saw a good bit of vehicles.

Interviewer: Those were civilian as well as military vehicles?

Atkins: There were very few civilian vehicles....most military.

Interviewer: Was there ever any threats that ya'll had while you were at Subic Bay from being fired on by the Japanese?

Atkins: occasionally, most of the Japs...I call them Japanese now, but back then they might wonder out half-starved to death, especially, when we got the mess hall and the food. They would come dragging in just bones starved to death. Of course, they were out of there mind too they didn't know.

Interviewer: Did you get a lot of those people?

Atkins: Oh, yeah there were several of them, and they greeters would still kill some of them up in the jungle because they were on the vans. Of course, the Japanese killed a lot of them too, but they were very vicious tribe of people.

Interviewer: Well something else here, what were some of the differences between the circumstances and everyday life between the officers and the men enlisted in your unit?

Atkins: We didn't really see that much difference between the officers. They were sort of shoulder to shoulder with you. We didn't respect the code, I suppose of enlisted and officers like you do in some branches of service.

Interviewer: So everybody was pretty much working people?

Atkins: Yeah, you know we followed their orders. If they told us to do something we did it, but it wasn't snap to and salute and all this it wasn't spit and polish. That is why I said...they were a different breed of people than some of your other officers today.

Interviewer: Just trying to make sure that I have everything in the notes that I have made ,and ..

Atkins: Well, I am sure that I have been doing a lot of rambling.

Interviewer: No, sir, actually you answered several of my questions for me before I even had to ask, and I appreciate that of you. I have been trying to keep up. I appreciate everything that you shared with us. Well you went to several differentas part of your training, you went to serve in different areas, and you were in many different places that probably a young man from this area that you probably didn't think that you would go to and visit.

Atkins: Oh, yes, that is true. You know, I never expected to be in Rhode Island or even in California. Of course we spent...I didn't mention this at least I don't think that I did. We spend 6 days and nights going on a troop train to California. I might have mentioned it earlier, but I don't think that I did.

Interviewer: No, sir, so you did the cross country train trip then.

Atkins: It was some beautiful scenery, but it was a long boring journey.

Interviewer: Did ya'll make stops on the way?

Atkins: We stopped for everything (laughter) even if a cow walked across the track we stopped. That is why it took so long.

Interviewer: You mentioned some of the games that you played. You mentioned that you played double pea knuckle with fellow soldiers. Was that something that was common place when you were spending ship time or when you were on the train?

Atkins: On the train it wasn't that convenient or easy to play, but aboard ship, you know, it was. When we come back under the Golden Gate Bridge we were all so happy be back. We all got on one side and the captain of the ship had to get on the PA and told us that some of us would have

to move to the other side so that they could dock the ship. It was lifting because we were all on one side.

Interviewer: Good gracious.

Atkins: Coming into the San Francisco Bay and coming under the Golden Gate is a unique experience. I never thought about doing that and really don't care about doing it again, but I did it once.

Interviewer: But that really let you know that you were coming home.

Atkins: That we were coming home, yeah.

Interviewer: It is the gateway of being home again. Interesting, that is amazing that you said there were so many people on the side, and the ship that you were talking about that was the Robert Tree?

Atkins: U.S.S. Robert Tree.

Interviewer: Well I just I want to thank you so very much for taking the time to share with us about your story.

Atkins: Glad to do it. I didn't have a great deal to tell.

Interviewer: Yes, sir, you had a wonderful story to share with us about your service to us, and we want to at this time to thank you for your effort during the war for all of us. We appreciate that.

Atkins: I didn't do much, but I was glad to have been in there.

Interviewer: Well, thank you.

Atkins: Thank you.

Interviewer: It was interesting. You had a unique opportunity to be on the side of being a school age young man, and you and your family making the contributions that you did toward the war effort. Then you got to see the other side by actually going into service. I wish I had of thought of that early, but that is ok.

Atkins: They probably wouldn't have inducted me. I was the only male child. I had six sisters, and I was the only male child, so they probably would have turned me down.

Interviewer: Turned you down....some sort of deferment because of you being the only boy.

Atkins: Probably, you know, they want take the last surviving male child of a family into the service.

Interviewer: Yes sir, I tell you what I do see a big difference in being able to talk with you and with others....I wish we had a way to have that kind of...and the pride I don't think is as puffed up –wrong kind of pride—I think that it is the pride that is good and a righteous pride that we had.

Atkins: Yeah, I think it was sincere. I do.

Interviewer: I wish we had that again. I know that we do in different places, but not on the larger picture that we did...during that war. I mean just amazes us to think about how everybody pulled together, you know.

Atkins: You know I told you earlier that I was the only one that showed up in Clarksville. There was a Navy recruiter in a station wagon that picked us at the post office. It is the old federal building now. Of course, my other boys didn't show up. We went to Dickson and picked up one, and then we went from Dickson to Nashville. The next day they put us in the YMCA that is where we spent the night. The next day they swore us in. I should have told you this earlier, and of course here again, Atkins I was the first one called up. Big big chief and he gives me a stack of papers about like this, and he said sit down son and sign these. Well somewhere someone told me to read what I signed before I signed it. I picked up the first one and started to read them. He slapped me on the back and said just sign them you are in the Navy now, so I started writing (laughter).

Interviewer: Well you were doing the right thing but he sure changed things, didn't he?

Atkins: Yes, he did.

Interviewer: That is amazing it is nice that the YMCA put ya'll up, but that is interesting that you just made the track, or did he just drive ya'll all around in the station wagon from town to town?

Atkins: Yeah, well he drove us from Clarksville to Dickson and then on to Nashville. That was his function, I guess.

Interviewer: I am sure that he was glad to have ya'll.

Atkins: Bring them back alive...

Interviewer: Well I want to thank you for helping. I mean I just couldn't have ...

End of interview

