

Gene Kirkham

as interviewed by Judy Hansen
April 2014

My parents were Fred O'Dell and Glida West Kirkham. Dad was born and raised where I lived in Lehi and mother was originally from Pleasant Grove. I was born and raised in Lehi at 358 West 200 North next to the Denver track by the rodeo grounds. I lived there until I was about fifteen. After that my dad built a new house on the corner of 200 North and 300 West and that is where I lived until I got married.

I milked cows for Delbert Norman early in the mornings then rode my bicycle to Roy Gammon's farm and topped beets until noon. Farm labor was scarce due to the war effort. We would top beets to get credits for our agriculture class. Half of us were topping beets in the morning and the other half of the class would top beets in the afternoon. After I finished with the beets, I went to afternoon classes until about 3:30.

I went to school until mid-November 1943. There was a war going on so I went to Salt Lake City and signed up for the Navy. They called me in for a physical a few days later. On November 22nd 1943 I turned 17. That was the night I was shipped out to Farragut Naval Training Station in Idaho. I was in Navy boot camp. Farragut was divided up into five different camps and I was at Camp Waldron. Each camp had a big grinder where they drilled and a hospital for first aide. It was a big place. They had so many people going through for training there was just no way they would do it all at one base. They had to have swimming pools, drills, yards, fire-ranges, and boats so men could learn how to get into a life boat and operate them. There were so many people. Normally you were in boot camp for six weeks but they just couldn't handle them all in one camp. I don't know how many barracks there was around the grinder but there had to have been ten or twelve. The grinder was the place where they would drill and it was bigger than a football field. I was there for twelve weeks.

After I left Farragut I was put on a Great Northern Railroad troop train and sent to basic engineering school at Great Lakes Naval Training Station that was located along the shores of Lake Michigan north of Chicago in Illinois. It took four days and three nights to travel over and it was the month of February. We had an old WWI troop car on the train that had a stove in it



and we would have to run up to the tender on the engine every time we stopped to get a bucket of coal to keep the fire going.

At engineering school I had done a little work in a machine shop. It was mostly like a regular school. There were math classes; well really all kinds of classes. They would teach us the history of the Navy and what was expected of us. We were on what they called swing shift and went to school in the evenings. Just because we were in school at night that didn't matter, they got us up early anyway and had Phys. Ed, drill, and we would go for walks even out into the city. I was there six weeks.

Then I was sent to a Navy diesel school in Richmond Virginia on another troop train. I can't remember the name of the place but it was in an old Navy yard. It happened that Navy base had a school that taught people how to be a cook. The cooks they were training when I was there were all colored people. The Navy Officers back then always had colored cooks for their vessels. All that has changed now, it's not that way anymore but that is the way it was back then.

They taught me how to tear down diesel engines, how to repair them, how to rebuild injectors, and maintenance in general of the diesel engines that were in the landing craft in the LCVP's¹ and LCM's². That is what we had on our ship. I was in that school for another six weeks.

Whenever they sent me anywhere I was always in a group. My group took another troop train. All the trains I took were pretty well packed most of the time but at least everyone had a seat. We never knew from one day to the next what Corp you would be in or if you going to be in the same one all the way. The troop train I got on in Richmond went down to Birmingham Alabama, then right across the bottom of the country through Texas and then turned north. We ended up in New Mexico, then turned around and went down the Colorado River across into Needles, California and up to a war time camp near San Francisco. It took us about nine days. We stayed there about a week wasting time until they told us we could go to the San Francisco Naval Shipyard and get on a boat. Then they took us to Coronado, California. That is where I went into training for amphibious forces. Then I was assigned to the USS Hunter Liggett (APA-14). I was only there about six weeks when I was re-assigned to a brand new re-construction in San Francisco the USS Hansford (APA-106). We loaded that ship with everything we needed, from ammunition, paint, clothing, food supplies, or whatever. It had refrigeration for some meats and vegetables.

We had shakedown cruises for about six to eight weeks in San Pedro, California. Sometime we were only gone for a day but we were always in and out of the bay. When we would go out on those shake-down cruises they would even have firing practice. An airplane would fly over

¹ Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) or Higgins boat

² Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM) or Landing Craft Mechanical

pulling a cloth sleeve target behind it and we would shoot at it. One time we got lucky and hit the rope that was pulling it and shot the target down (as Gene says laughing).

The day after Thanksgiving in the year 1944 we left at 6:00 in the morning and headed for Pearl Harbor. We picked up destroyer escorts (they were the only ones with sonar that could pick up the submarines) and several merchant ships³. We had all kinds of ships with us that were headed for Hawaii under escort. It took us about nine days to get to Pearl Harbor and we sit there for a couple of weeks. Then we got notice that we going out on a little exercise. We ended up in the big island of Hawaii. They have a big desert on one side of it just like Arizona; cactus and sand. They had the 5th Division Marines there going through training and we loaded them up on the USS Hansford and one other ship. We had most of the infantry. We puttered around for two days and one morning we decided to go for a ride. We went out a little ways and ran into a bunch of other ships that wanted to go for a ride with us – there were attack transports and one hell-of-a destroyer escort. We traveled along slow and went as far as Saipan. They had gunnery practice and then we moved down by Tinian and we had a little drill with the boats. After that night we left.

We were anchored off Tinian, just north of Saipan where the planes would go off to bomb. They would leave early every morning in the dark. Japan was within reach of the B-29 and so they would go off to bomb. I don't know how many would go but they would be gone for hours. We'd go to chow at noon and we'd see them coming back. Every once in a while when we got done with chow we'd see a smoking B-29 coming back. The longer it went in the day the lower they were and the more they would smoke when they returned. That is why they originally wanted the invasion on Iwo Jima, so they could get a landing field further up in the pacific. This would give the planes that were badly damaged a place to land to save the crew. We did get a landing field there and the first airfield was named after our Lt. Commander of the beach party, the first Naval Officer killed on Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima isn't worth a dime. It is nothing but volcanic ash and rock.

They told us we were going to Iwo Jima. Nobody had ever heard of this place but this is where we were going. We were the assault transport on Red 1.⁴ We would load the marines in those boats and took them into Iwo Jima. We also had seven doctors with us. We had what they called a 'beach party' that were corpsman and just about any and everything else. They went in also. The first four waves to go in were amphibious tractors and our beach party went in on another ship and got on those tractors. After they were in, we started on the boats and took troops in. We landed on red 1 which was right under Suribachi. I was on a LCVP going back and forth taking troops in and the wounded out. We were there seven days. We had our ship unloaded completely of men and supplies. Any wounded we picked up we took either to the

³ Whenever we would run out of ammunition or what not they would tell us where to find a merchant ship in an anchorage and we would go to them to refill our supply.

⁴ At this point in our interview Gene became very emotional as did everyone in the room. You could see the pain in Mr. Kirkham's face as he remembered the events of Iwo Jima.

hospital ship USS Mercy, the hospital ship USS Hope, or back to our own ship where we had doctors.

I lost my boat (LCVP) the third day. There were rough seas that day and when we landed, there were nine foot swells (waves). When a swell would hit, you'd go. We were sitting there and a swell hit us in the rear, turned us sideways, and pushed us up toward the beach and then we couldn't get off. Within minutes it got hit by shells and eventually sunk. We got on the beach and stayed there until one of our own boats came in. When it was unloaded we ran, jumped in it, and they took us back to our ship. We stayed there that night, showered, got clean clothes, then when one of our boats came back in we traded crews and went back out and they came aboard. There were 29 LCVP's and four of them were LCM's that were big enough to take a 10 wheeler truck in loaded with ammunition. The LCVP's could take a jeep and a trailer but they mostly took supplies in a sling that was lifted off with a crane that had been taken to the beach previously. They had all kinds, and all colors going in there; they had been in enough invasions they had things pretty well figure out how to do it and what to do. We ended up losing 9 boats during that engagement. We had one break in the seven days we were there. After seven days we ran out of anything we could do. The group we went in with also was done so we left as a unit with an escort.

When I was on the ship I had a station to go to. I can't think of the term they used but if it was hit by a torpedo I was in the crew that would go and put a patch or band aide on the whole ship to keep it from flooding any worse. On the landing craft I may have had to repair the engines but I never had to stand any duty watches on the ship in the engine room. I only went down to the engine room on ship a couple of times to look it over to see what was there.

While we were anchored in Iwo Jima, I saw the flag go up. I actually saw both the 1st and 2nd flags being raised. When I saw our flag I thought the war was over. Not so! Everything there was repetitious and we just did what we had to do.

After we left Iwo Jima we headed south for Guam. They had a big military hospital there and we had a lot of injured people on board. We held a funeral one day going down and buried the dead at sea. After we took the injured to Guam we headed down nearly to Australia and picked up the Army's 4th Calvary that had been left down there after some of the battles in the South Pacific. We stayed down there in the Marshalls and Carolinas going here and there picking up different troops. Some of them knew we were coming and some didn't. We had to wait until they could get everything together and we'd load them up on the ship and take them to the Philippine Islands. After that we headed up for Okinawa.

We got to Okinawa ten days after the initial invasion. We stayed there. Even after we unloaded, I don't know why, but we stayed there for quite a while. We helped every night with aircraft raids and we made a lot of smoke with a smoke generator to cover up the merchant ships that

were in there with ammunition; that way the enemy kamikaze aircraft suicide planes that were looking for ships to crash into couldn't see them.

After we left Okinawa we went back to the Philippines and got involved taking troops to different islands and making landings. We were all loaded with the Army's 4th Calvary Division. We had them through-out their training for several weeks and we were all ready to go to Japan for assault invasion. We were waiting for our orders and would have been one of the first ships to invade. In fact, we had a two star Admiral aboard and were going to be the amphibious flagship into Tokyo Bay at the end of the war. We got the Admiral aboard and we were supposed to lead the parade. We were one of the happiest ships in the ocean when we heard about the dropping of the atomic bomb.

There was one picture they took of the USS Missouri and the signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender and you can see the fantail of our ship the USS Hansford. We were right next to it when the picture was taken. We could see a lot of the goings on but we were just not on the right ship at the right time – but we were close.

About two weeks after the war we were on occupation duty in Japan. They had a pretty good little train that would take anyone who wanted to go up to Hiroshima to see where the bomb had been dropped. I took the trip. The train was nice, clean, moved along pretty good, and was narrow gage. Every day that train took train-loads up there. If you have ever been out in a desert valley where there are no towns, no cars, or anything; if you burned off all the brush, put in some paved roads, curbs, gutters, sidewalk, even a railroad track; no people, no houses, no buildings, no smokestacks; that is what it looked like. It was as bare as could be. You've seen melted glass – well that is what it was; maybe there was a melted brick or something. I saw one steel wheel off of a train out in the middle of it. I don't know where the rest of it was, the axel, or anything else; it was just one wheel.

Anyway, the war was over and we started hauling troops home⁵. If they had enough points for discharge we brought them home. We went down to some island in the southern part of Japan and loaded up. They told us there was a typhoon coming in. You remember, there was a typhoon that wrecked Okinawa right after the war; this typhoon done a number on everything. They got on the public address system and said if we could have everything loaded and be ready for sea at 1:00 we could head for the States. We had to go through the break water by 1:00. You'd see officers out doing whatever needed to be done because they wanted to go home (Gene laughs). We were out of there all right. We went on the north circle route and that typhoon really stirred up the water. We were with another ship and a British aircraft carrier when we left. We never saw them all the way around the Aleutians and coming down to Vancouver. It was rough and it was foggy. We'd see their search lights at night because they would flash messages up on the clouds so the signalman could read the messages off the blinks on the clouds.

⁵ Operation Magic Carpet

We bought troops into Seattle once, into Long Beach twice, and into San Diego once. We made all the trips from the islands of Japan. One time we made a trip over to Shanghai, China and went up the Yangtze River. We took some replacement troops in and picked up some that were ready for discharge to take home.

When we finally got into California I had two more days before I was ready for discharge. I was in the Navy for 2 ½ years. We pulled out of San Diego and I'm glad they did because I got a trip through the Panama and we went through Chesapeake Bay, Norfolk, Virginia. That is where they decommissioned the ship. I read they made a merchant ship out of it. I was discharge and sent off the ship the next day and I went to Shelton, Virginia. They give me enough money to come home. Right after I was discharged, I went out to get on the bus to go to town and there was a man standing there wanting a quarter for the bus ride. He said, "You're a civilian now." I paid the quarter to get into town. I was with Dean Ihler from Salt Lake (originally from Carbon County). We decided we'd fly so we went into Richmond, Virginia and ran into some guys we knew. One of the guys lived there so we took a taxi and went over to see him and then that night we got a flight out to Chicago on Delta Airlines. In Chicago, we got on an old DC-3, the last two seats, and left there at 9:00 in the morning. We got to Salt Lake at 6:00 that night.

I hit the highway with my thumb and was home in about an hour. I got a ride to Murray going down old Highway 91. I no sooner got my feet on the ground and some teenagers picked me up and brought me to Lehi. There wasn't a damn sole home. Well, dad was home but my mother and sister was at the church for some reason. I scared the hell out of my dad. He could hear someone coming in but didn't know who it was. He was surprised to see me. I got home in May 1946.

After I got out of the Navy I bummed around. There was no work. Geneva Steel and the brick yard was both closed down. Everything was shut down. These places were changing from military to civilian and it took a year. I never got a steady job until November. I went to work in an auto-part store in Salt Lake. I stayed there for a little over a year but could see there was no future in it so I quit and went to work at Geneva Steel. I'd always wanted to get into machine



shop and I was able to get an apprenticeship as a machinist. I worked there for 38 years in Central Maintenance.

I married Emma Lou Gene Peterson November 6, 1946. I have four children, Peggy Lou (Michael) Williams, Danny (who married KayeLynn Ernst from Lehi), Laurelee "Sam" Nozumi, and Glade (who married Judy Curtis from Lehi).

I lived on 1st South and Center for a while and I traded that home for the home I raised my family in at 340 West 700 South in Lehi. I had a pasture next to that place so moving there was more convenient. After Lou Gene passed away in August 2006, I re-married Jan Estes on 9/11/2010. I moved into her home on 970 west where I currently reside.