

Interview with Al Gentle, Sr.

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

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Interviewed by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service
Transcribed by Professional Transcripts

This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Al Gentle, Sr. was recorded with his permission on a digital recorder. Copies of the audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska.

The transcript has been lightly edited. All photos courtesy of Mr. Gentle.

(The dictation starts out with dialogue after the phone was answered by Mr. Gentle and before the interview starts.)

Janis Kozlowski: [0:00:04.8] Good morning. Mr. Gentle?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, good morning. Yes, how are you this morning?

Janis Kozlowski: I'm good. How are you?

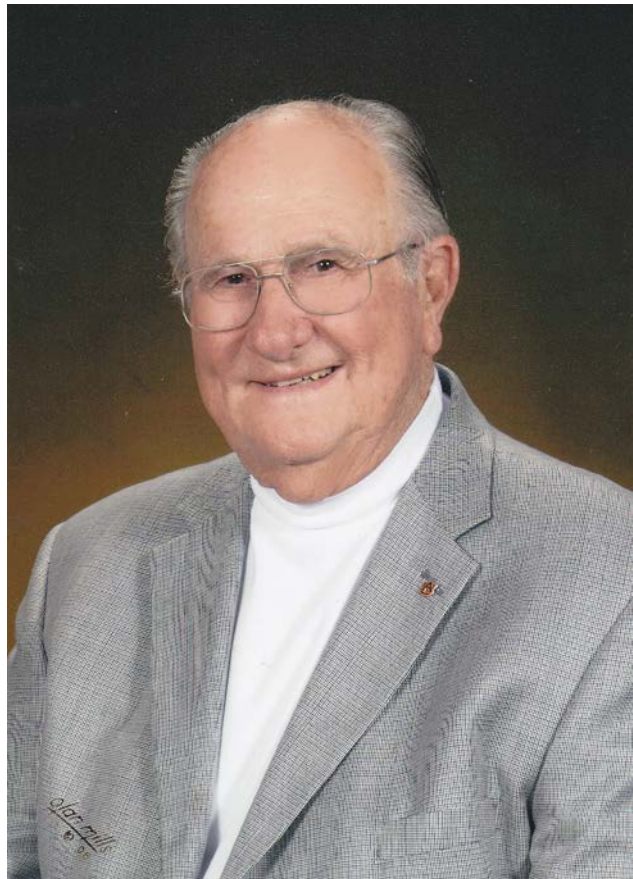
Al Gentle, Sr.: I'm kind of thawing out. It's pretty chilly down here today.

Janis Kozlowski: Is it really? What's the temperature?

Al Gentle, Sr.: About 20-something.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh my goodness, that's pretty cold for Alabama, isn't it?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, no, it gets that way in the wintertime.



Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I had no idea.

Al Gentle, Sr.: We have all four seasons.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. I didn't realize you got that cold down there.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah, in fact we'll have some sleet and snow tonight.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, aren't you lucky.

Al Gentle, Sr.: (Laughter.) Well, it won't be much. Just a dusting.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yep. We have that too. Every now and then there's – well, I recall one year, seems like it was about March or thereabouts we had 18 inches or so. We have ice storms. That's the worst because it brings down the power lines, but I've got a generator so I don't care. I mean, if it happens I can generate my own power.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's good. You're self-sufficient.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Exactly. We have enough food in the pantry we could live in here a good while. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: I guess you learned something from going through the war time and all about taking care of yourself.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh yeah, I guess all of that adds up – that's – I was a radioman and I studied electrical engineering and I know what you can do, you know.

Janis Kozlowski: Right, yeah.

Al Gentle, Sr.: In fact, that bunker at Dutch Harbor, we had a big generator right outside the two radio rooms.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:01:34.6] Hey, let me ask you something before we get started, because I just want to make sure it's okay with you. Do you – is it okay if I record our conversation today?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, that's okay.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, great. Okay. Well, we can start talking then. I just didn't want to be taping you without your knowledge.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, that's okay. Hey, where are you? Are you in Anchorage or.....

Janis Kozlowski: I am. Yes, I'm in Anchorage.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I thought you were.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. Well, can I get started asking you some questions? A little bit of background?

Al Gentle, Sr.: If you don't do it, I'll wander all around (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: No, that's – you know what? That's okay. The only thing I wanted to do was maybe just get a little bit of your background so that we make sure that we have a context for your stories and experiences.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, okay.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:02:23.8] Okay, so – did – when did you go into military service? Do you remember how old you were and maybe where you were when you joined?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, yeah. I can tell you that. I mean I can visualize today how it was. I just graduated from high school, West End High School in Birmingham, Alabama. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. My father worked for AT&T and he was transferred to Birmingham when I was four, so I always considered Birmingham as my hometown. So, when I graduated from West End High School, I didn't have enough money to go to college and I didn't know really what I wanted to study, so I thought well, I'll join the Navy and maybe learn a vocation and some point in time decide what I want to do, make a career or come out and go to college. So I rode my bicycle about three miles to the post office in Birmingham. I went down to the basement and told them I wanted to join the Navy. They said okay.

They immediately gave me a test and then they gave me a physical. I walked out of there with papers. I came home and my mother said, no, she would not sign and thought I was too young. I had an older brother who was a co-op student at Auburn University, which I ultimately went to myself, and he was studying electrical engineering. He said, you tell Pa that you'll learn a vocation and he'll sign. So when he came home from work I did just that and he did sign. So, within two weeks I was off to Norfolk.

As I recall, we had to march about two or three blocks, there were other recruits, to the train station – the terminal, and I had the papers for the group for their Pullman and their meals. I asked them – these guys – some of them are older than I am, 19 or 20 years old, I said why did you give me these papers? Just because you had the highest IQ. So, I saw this sailor, when we got to the train station and he was going to Norfolk too. He had just reenlisted. He had some hash marks though I remember that. I told him what was happening. He said, well, I'll tell you what. I'll help you with this, and so he did. I don't remember much happening.



We got through Portsmouth, Virginia, and at that time you had to go across to Norfolk on a ferry. As I recall, there was a Petty Officer there. I learned that's what he was later. I didn't know what you called them. I'd never really seen many sailors, except at a distance, and he had three stripes. I thought, oh boy, that's a Sergeant was what I thought at the time but that was like an insult, I mean, he said I'm a Boatswain's Mate

First Class. Then he said, you'd better remember that when you see these crossed anchors, that's a Boatswain's Mate. I said, I'll remember, and I did. (Laughter.)

We went across the ferry and it was like a nightmare. Everybody strips down, they're shooting you in each shoulder with shots and all that stuff and it was August. It was July and August – June, July and August. **[0:05:45.7]** It was pretty hot in Norfolk. I remember that, being out in the sun and every morning before breakfast you had to run. I remember there was a boxer, Gene Tunney, who had been in the Navy many years before in World War I, who was on the back of a Jeep cheering us along. So, you didn't have breakfast until you ran. I don't know how far we ran, but I know I was tired. Then we went to have breakfast and drill some more.

We had races with these big whale boats and a coxswain and we would row these oars. During the war they didn't do that stuff. Remember, this is June 1941 when I joined. So, you had a lot of rigorous training and if you couldn't make it up to the exercises, well, they'd send you home.

So, we went on with that training and at the termination of the training we sat in an auditorium and they were trying to decide maybe what school you should go to, to further enhance your ability to help the Navy. So, they put out some signals, dot and dashes, dot and dashes, and they said copy this and say whether this is a dot or whether this is a dash. So obviously I did all right on that, so they sent me to San Diego.

[0:07:07.1] It took seven days to get across there on the troop train. They'd drop your Pullman car off somewhere and then an engine would come along later and pick you up and take you some more. So, seven days from the time we left Norfolk I got to San Diego and I was in radio school learning radio and signal flags and using the lights, the whole works. I excelled in radio. I had a very good score.

[0:07:38.2] The war began while I was in radio school, December 7th, early in the morning; seemed like it was maybe 8 or 9 o'clock. I was getting ready to go to Mass. I'm Catholic. So, I'm sitting on the bunk and I heard the speakers say to evacuate, evacuate immediately, the Japanese are bombing us. So, I didn't know where they were bombing us.

So, we went up into the hills and later on I took my wife back and showed her where we went. It was more like a mountain but I was young. By this time I was 18. I turned 18 on July 16th. So we stayed up there all day. There was a lady that had a kind of Spanish adobe house. She fed us. There were two or three of us. That evening they had speaker trucks come around and tell us to come back to the Base, which we did. [Navy panel trucks with horns on the roof]

All of the cooking lamps were out, so they fed you bologna and cheese and issued rifles that had been packed in Cosmoline, they said, since World War I. They were English Enfields. They were not even a Springfield rifle, which we drilled with and used on the range. They were English rifles. So, they gave us a couple of bandoliers of ammunition and a gas mask.

I don't know if they still do this, but we used to wash our clothes ourselves. It was really a luxury if you had a laundry. So, the wash benches – we laid the rifles up there and cleaned them all night long. Then the next day they told us to leave again. So, we did.

We went back to that lady up there because she had good food. She was delighted to see us come with rifles (laughter). Nobody knew where the Japs were. I mean, they weren't telling us where they were, you know. You just knew they could be anywhere. So, the next night there was a Marine base training station sort of adjoining this Naval operating base, so we teamed up with a squad of Marines.

There was a good friend of mine, Bill Brown. He prided himself on being a strong lineman in football and we had these great big walkie-talkies with a whip antenna. It takes two people; one person to carry it and the other to operate it. So I told him, I said you – you carry it and I'll operate it. So, we patrolled the beaches for, I don't know, for maybe a week possibly. I'm trying to think. Now, let's see, I went home on a surprise leave, I had ten days.

[0:10:25.3] It must've been about a week or two before they realized they weren't going to really hit us there. So, they needed space. There were so many volunteers that – so they gave us a surprise ten-day leave. Some people just hung around down there somewhere I guess, but I got on a Greyhound bus and went back to Birmingham, Alabama. It took me four days and nights to get there. I'd sleep on the back seat of the bus and in the stations until another bus came along that went that direction [which would have been east]. I got home Christmas Eve. I got a taxi cab from the bus station out to my house, which was maybe about three miles or so. I think the bill was 90 cents and I gave him a 10-cent tip (laughter). My mother almost passed out when she opened the front door. It was a great Christmas and it was the last time I'd see Birmingham until 1945. I went on back, and we had just about completed the school up there. There were just some formalities, and they promoted me to a Petty Officer Third Class. Everybody didn't get promoted, but the ones who were better radio operators were promoted.

[0:11:56.1] I went to San Francisco to the Federal Building. They had a radio station in the Federal Building that was a Comm center. The transmitters were out in some other locations, but they had receiving antennas up on top of that building and – so, they taught me to be a high-speed radio operator. I was up there when Cavite and Bataan fell. I didn't receive the messages, but it was very – very mournful. I'm going to say people were not happy, naturally. So, let's see – I stayed there – oh, I lived in – (laughter), this is what's funny.

[0:12:38.9] I lived in this little hotel, they paid the subsistence. It was called Astor – Hotel Astor. The elevator was like a bird cage. I remember that. You'd go up in that elevator, you'd see all the wires and everything around you. The room had a transom. You could – you'd open it up and get some fresh air and you'd hear people snoring down the hall (laughter). It had a wash basin in the room and you had a common shower and a john. You had to go down the hall. Let's see – I stayed there a while and had a new Navy base – Air base station – Naval Air Station, Alameda.

[0:13:19.8] So, I went over to Alameda and I was setting up a Comm center and also I worked in the tower of – not as a person who landed the planes but it had a Comm center underneath that, and we would receive messages from the planes and also we would communicate with other air stations. We would go to both places. I was trained to go both places and also I was trained to be a radio operator in a plane. Also, I was trained in gunnery. We would get shotguns and shoot skeet and trap. Then we went to Eureka, California and we would fire off the bluffs at sleeves. I was trained to do that. Later on, I was trained amphibious, but this was – I was there. This is what's interesting too.

[0:14:23.1] Let me reflect back ...you may recall Jimmy Doolittle that bombed Tokyo.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: He left from Alameda. I saw him land those planes that day – B-25s. I don't know how many there were, but later on I found out there were 16. But we never saw the pilots. The aircraft carrier USS Hornet was tied up at the wharf. They were going to probably ferry them because they were bombers. They were not the type of planes you see associated with a carrier. So they lifted it with cranes and put them up on the deck. I just figured they were going to ferry them to some location. I didn't really think a lot about it, but after that it was strange to see those big planes. As it turned out, they took off from the Hornet and bombed Japan. So, we laid our whole plan out on where those planes went. Let's see now – any other big events there..... Nope.

[0:15:27.5] After a stint there, I went to Seattle – to Bremerton. There was a Navy base at Bremerton. It was pretty good sized. Let me see. I did some more training, amphibious-type stuff. Didn't know where I was going, that's it. I left there. I didn't have a paycheck, so I had to call home and get them to wire me some money because somehow or another the records didn't follow me or something. All I knew, I got on a train and I went to Seattle ultimately by ferry to Bremerton, but didn't know where we were going. While there I did some menial stuff, like I recall on one day – this is interesting – they'd give you different duties. You just didn't loaf. So, one of them was to guard prisoners that were in the hospital. They said, if that prisoner escapes you have to serve their time. Well, there was this guy there – I think he was a rapist or something. He was bad. And I was asked to guard. So, I'd just sit at the foot of his bed. I told him – I remember that – I said, you move towards me and try to get out of here you're a dead man. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: So was this a Navy guy that was in the hospital?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, he was – something was wrong with him but he was – he was to be sent to Leavenworth to serve time for rape.

Janis Kozlowski: But was he a Navy guy or just.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: Apparently he was Navy.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, this was at the Navy base in Bremerton.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: There were the Marines there too that did some guard work. Navy and Marines – the Marines and the Navy so to speak, under the Secretary of the Navy, and then also Marine and Navy personnel sometimes work side by side, particularly all the Marine units have hospital Corpsmen. Then too they would have radiomen, with the Marines. So you would have radiomen and hospital Corpsman. At this particular point there was no mixture between me and Marines. This was my job, to guard this guy who was ill, who was ultimately going to Leavenworth, which is in Kansas, which at that time was a big prison for people who were in the service, you know.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: They were a mixture. I don't know much about that except that guy, he didn't try to leave. Let me think now, what else – anything else about that place. Oh, finally I kind of got a clue where we were going when they issued me all this foul weather gear, heavy stuff. I thought, man, I'm going to Alaska. So, I remember telling my mother, I got a lot of – I don't know where I'm going, but I've got a lot of heavy gear, so she knew during the war where I was, you know. She didn't know where, but she knew I was in Alaska somewhere.

[0:18:36.3] So, ultimately there was a ship, the SS Baranoff, which was Alaska's steamship lines. They had probably – the Navy – what's the term – commandeered it I guess you might say, or hired it. So, they loaded a bunch of soldiers on there and I as well, along with other Navy radiomen and some weather people, and we were headed to who knows where. We left there – now let me think a minute. That had to be like April – so the latter part of April. Somewhere around in there. We went to Kodiak Island, but they wouldn't let us disembark. We still didn't know where we were going. That's right. Didn't tell us where we were going. Then finally when we got out of Kodiak they did tell us. They said we're going to stand off from Attu, dislodge these soldiers and there's a group of radiomen going to go off and the rest of you will be backup. So, in the meantime, I'm always thinking, the next way to get better food. I asked the radio group on the Baranoff – I would like to relieve them in order to get out of where I was. It was boring. Then I printed a little newspaper. It was like legal size, that's it. And I copied press. It was transmitted in plain language, not encoded. This was Morse code – dot dot dot, you know that type of thing.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I was pretty good though. I could type pretty good. I had studied typing at West End. Not knowing what I would do when I got out of high school. I took a general course, bookkeeping, accounting and stuff like that. So, I was a pretty good

typist. It seemed like to me at one time I typed 70 words per minute. I could copy that press. So, I would take that down to the – to the galley, to the cooks and swap it out for better food. So I was eating high on the hog (laughter).

[0:20:51.5] When I got to Attu I was not one of the groups that was sent ashore immediately. I was a backup. I continued to work there and relieve those guys. They picked up some injured – and I say injured – there was some wounded and some injured. They were poor guys; they were not equipped really to go ashore with the proper gear. They had leather shoes. We had rubber things that – some of them zipped and some of them had like a little thing that would snap over. Well, in the Army a lot of those guys were in leather boots and they waded ashore in leather boots up there. There was still snow. I could see the snow over there. Of course we were close enough you could hear the battle rage. Anyway, they were bringing them back and a lot of them had frostbitten hands and feet and lost their toes and fingers. So they had some doctors on there that were working with them.

We left there and went to Adak, and disembarked in Adak. I don't know whatever happened to them. In the meantime, somehow or another, I caught pneumonia and so I was in a – they built us some Quonset huts. They had this Quonset hut hospital. I'm going to use that term. They had some Navy nurses. So, I remember they were giving me a sulfa drug and I would sweat. I woke up – I actually kind of passed out I guess, because I woke up and this Navy nurse was changing my pajamas. That's the last female I saw for several years. I'll tell you when I saw the next one. Oh, I did see some entertainers. I'll tell you about that. They'll come back to me. Let's see, anyway they never let you be idle.

[0:22:47.9] So, I was in a receiving ship, that's the term, to be reassigned.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you call it a receiving ship?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No, that's the term they called it.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: The Navy used terms like that. It was called a receiving ship although there was no ship, you know what I'm saying?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I see. Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I don't know. There's a lot of nautical terms they used like "go ashore" when you're not – you're already ashore, but that means you're going on liberty, you know? Instead of going on leave in the Army you say liberty and going ashore, you know. So, like this, I went ashore and saw all around San Diego. I was always an explorer. Same way with San Francisco. I knew all the things like the back of my hand. Also, when I was in San Francisco, there was a library across the street. I would go over there and read all the magazines and papers free. Also, they had a lot of good night clubs in San Francisco. We would go ashore – that's what we called it when we got

liberty. Liberty was when the Army would get leave, you know. But we would call it leave when you had more than three or four days, like five or ten days, that's leave.

So, we used to go to all the night clubs and we actually got a schedule of the floor shows, two or three of us. I remember we would only show up at the time of the floor shows and we would just stand. We didn't have to buy a drink. (Laughter.) We would just stand there and watch, you know. So, getting back to Adak. Anyway, after I sufficiently recovered, which I don't remember how long that was, but I did damage my lungs because I did not go back - to recuperate. Later on, it came to haunt me, so - but anyway, after so long I was shipped - they decided, what they planned for me to do was go to Dutch Harbor.

[0:24:48:4] I flew on a DC-3 as a passenger of course, to Dutch Harbor. That strip - I'll always remember that strip, boy. You can either come in from one way or the other way, but you can't come in crosswise because it is cut out of a mountain called Ballyhoo. On that mountain there was a shack up there where the so-called, they say, Jack London wrote Call of the Wild. That's what they said. I remember flying in there and it was kind of rough at first. I'm trying to think about that. They had some tents and stuff that - the Seabees, that's right, the Seabees built the barracks and the barracks still stand, because I was out there several years back with the Elderhostel. Those barracks are still standing.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:25:42.9] Do you remember where they are at in Dutch Harbor?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Sure, exactly. I can picture it. Put your back to the harbor. Look straight ahead from the Navy Pier. The Navy - the Army Pier was over there where you'd see those fishing vessels go out from, you know that - they go out to the Bering Sea and fish. I can't think of that program, but.....

Janis Kozlowski: Right, right. Oh, yeah, Deadliest Catch.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah, Deadliest Catch. Deadliest Catch. Every time I look at that Deadliest Catch I see myself at Dutch Harbor. Well, right there where their dock is, Ballyhoo Mountain is behind them, okay? Now, come on down here, you know - have you been to Dutch Harbor?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay, you know where the airstrip is?

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, just put yourself - come on around the corner, right there is the big bunker. That was 40 feet underground and the bunker still stands there.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Now, let's see, what was your question again?

Janis Kozlowski: I was just wondering where your barrack was.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, okay, the barracks. (Laughter.) Okay. Come on around from the airstrip to the center of the harbor there where the bunker was – bunker is. In between and off back were the barracks. They're about two or three stories tall. The only big buildings there. They had a beer hall up in front that had a place with an anchor. I remember that. They had a power house, which we had some transmitters then. All over there – all on that side. The Navy, see, was up there in the harbor. If you went there you may have seen the signal tower sticking up out of the ground. Do you remember seeing that?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes, mm-hmm.

Al Gentle, Sr.: If you would get on the ladder and go down there you'd go about 40 feet. We got – we had the radio rooms in there, two of them, and right behind the two rooms was a great big diesel generator. Then you went down this winding concrete walkway so to speak and they had a ready room down below. The Admiral was down there. It seemed like they had a kitchen and his sleeping quarters, and he could also get out down there without ever having to come up. We never saw him unless we went down there, because he would come in and out down below. That – anyway.....

Janis Kozlowski: That stuff is not there anymore, right? The underground stuff.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, it's still there.

Janis Kozlowski: Is it – Is it under the brick building?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No. It's under that signal tower.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: If you look – if you put your – if you come into the harbor on the left is Priest Rock. Do you remember – have you ever heard of that?

Janis Kozlowski: Right. Uh-huh.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I know that place so vividly. Anyway, you come on into the harbor and if you ran straight ahead you'd run into the big bunker.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: See, the signalman would signal ships coming in to the harbor. You follow me?

Janis Kozlowski: Gotcha.

Al Gentle, Sr.: All right. Up on those mountains, you've got Ballyhoo and you've got another mountain that had big guns. I want to tell you about that later. So, they had great – like Guns of Navarone. Had big snub-nose emplacements up there artillery. [coastal guns] Okay, getting back to on track again, let me think a minute. Okay, let's see.

Well, anyway, the Japanese had bombed Dutch Harbor in June, I think it was the 3rd or 4th, simultaneous with the Battle of Midway. As a matter of fact, the Navy had broken the Japanese code. That's when they took Attu and Kiska and they were hoping to draw the main body of the fleet to the Aleutians while the big body – their big main body would seize Midway. However, they had broken the code and they knew the main body was not going to be in the Aleutians. They knew the main body was coming towards Midway, so they had a huge battle by the Japanese carrier Ryūjō. Every – so many planes came over and they blew up the Navy radio station, which was – we get back again to the harbor – was off to the left. They never rebuilt it because the Seabees built this big bunker. When I got there the bunker was there. So, I'm not sure exactly, but they bombed in '42 and I got there in '43. Somewhere in between the two, the Seabees built the bunker and the barracks was under construction, so I don't think I had to stay in a tent or a Quonset hut very long.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:30:42.0] Did you still see evidence of the bombing when you got to Dutch Harbor?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah. I – as a matter of a fact, I'm looking at a little plate where they shot down one the Japanese planes.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I have – I took the plate off the radio and I've got it here in my office. That's about the only evidence I saw, but they killed a bunch of soldiers. The barracks were not where we were [Ft. Mears].

Janis Kozlowski: Right. They were over by Margaret Bay, right?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Right, and we had a sub base over there opposite them, you know?

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Al Gentle, Sr.: A number of – I don't know, you know, the barracks – the branches don't always communicate. I'm not sure the Navy knew they were going to bomb them either. I don't – nobody told them I guess because they killed some Navy radiomen at that station, and they killed, from what I understand, quite a few soldiers who were out that morning, had just lined up for roll call.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: So the story goes. I wasn't there. This is what I was told. Now let me think a minute. Okay, let's see, anything that might be interesting to you. Okay. Oh, yeah. [0:32:04.3] The reason why I know everything is there, as I said, about maybe four or five years ago I heard of an Elderhostel. You ever heard of Elderhostels?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I heard there was one at Dutch Harbor and I got all excited. I said, Emma, I'm gonna show you where I was, because they always heard me talk about it. So we went up there and the history teacher found out about me and he came up with a four-wheel drive. I took him to all of these places, where they had the underground hospital and where the guns were up on the big mountain of Ballyhoo. Big – yeah, we went out on the other side too because I went over there to show him that cemetery by the Russian church and he already was familiar with that. We went on around and saw some other emplacements. (Coughing.) I'm getting over a little bit of a cold.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, would you like to take a little break, or do you want me to call you back later?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No, I'll bet we – sorry, I'll just let me.....

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Gotta catch myself here a little bit.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, take your time.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, let's see now. That was interesting. He was a nice guy. One of the things I thought was so amusing, I think he thought well, you know, this old codger he's this and that, but what amazed him was when we went to the bunker. You go in the bunker and you wind down for purposes because if they bomb it you don't just go straight into it. You have to make a couple of bends. I said, okay, well here's a switch – light switch over here on the right as you come in. He flashed his flashlight over there. Sure enough it was there. (Coughing.) Excuse me, just a minute. I may get a cough drop right here.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I wish I could've shown you that bunker. You've gotta go up there again. Actually, they don't allow people on there because it's the Aleut reservation.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: So I went to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There's a building down there. I told them who I was and that I had been there. They said, well you can go anywhere you want (laughter), so I don't know, they must have called the history teacher. I don't know how he found me.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:34:42.3] The history teacher you must be talking about is Jeff Dickrell.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Is he still there?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah. Yep.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I can't believe he's there. How long's he been there?

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I'm not sure and I think he left for a little while and went to Juneau, but he's back there again because I saw him this past summer and he does a lot of work with the kids in his history class. He takes them around town and shows them things and has them do research on the war, so I'm sure the information that he got from you is very valuable.

Al Gentle, Sr.: He might have had two young children. The person I'm thinking of.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, he does have two kids, yeah.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I think he had two children. They were young then. I have to think about that for a minute. I heard from him later on. Also, I received a sweatshirt, a big thing that says Dutch Harbor. It's in my closet here in the study. They passed through the States and they went to Disneyworld. Then I lost track of them. For a while at Christmastime we were sending each other cards and I lost track of them. I think that's the guy. Really a nice person. I'm trying to think now. [0:36:02.5] They built – they built this huge hotel at the site of where those Army barracks were that the Japanese had bombed, Grand Aleutian.

Janis Kozlowski: Right, right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: So Emma and I stayed in the Grand Aleutian and prices were held..... Down there, you know, they have such a big packing situation, in the cannery. They had a mess hall down there that – oh, that food was outstanding. They would have food from the various parts of the world because their workers were a mixture of various – from various parts of the world. So, I know those places – let's see, none of that stuff was there when I was there during the war. This was later when I went to the Elderhostel. To get back to that bunker, let me think.

[0:37:04.6] It was – I was there for two years, like I say, in that bunker. Over two years. Let's see, June to September. I was promoted one time – twice. I think it was maybe on the Second Class, as I became a First Class and had a watch. That is right. On my watch, two things happened, very important. A troop ship broke in two up in the Bering Sea and we got an SOS. You know what SOS is?

Janis Kozlowski: Help.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Distress, right.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, uh-huh.

Al Gentle, Sr.: So, when everything would get very important, I would relieve the operator and take over myself, which I did. I broke radio silence and put out in plain language what had happened, whereas other ships would come to their aid. There were about, I understand, maybe 10,000 soldiers on there. Big liberty ship. They brought both – they didn't lose a soul. They brought both pieces of that ship into Dutch Harbor and eventually they welded it all together and the ship left there.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. Do you remember the name of that ship?

Al Gentle, Sr.: (Laughter.) No, I don't remember it anymore. So many things happened. I don't remember the name of it and I don't remember which year it was. Let me think a minute. I think it was in '44, yes.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Some – and I think you could find that out.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I'll do some research on that.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I think you can. The Baranoff was the ship I went up on and was part of the Alaska Steamship Lines. I think it had plied those waters with passengers prior to the war, so that ship's captain probably knew that Inlet Passage. Oh, yeah, that's interesting.

[0:39:11.9] We went up the Inlet Passage and then cut across to Kodiak. Well, we had – I was – I guess I was 19 and we had to stand deck watchers too, to look for torpedoes. Now who in the devil is going to see a torpedo, you know? But anyway, we had all of these unusual things happening in the water and I'd never been up there and seen this sort of thing. I could visualize bubbles (laughter). I told them a time or two, I think I see a torpedo. The guy said, get out of there. That's just some minerals in the water or something (laughter). I was not much of a sailor. I loved the sea and I have been on cruises all over the world and up on a lot of the rivers and stuff, but in the Navy I spent most of my time on land (laughter). My brother was in the Army in the South Pacific. [81st Division, 306th Combat Engineers] He landed at Angaur and Peleliu in the Palau Islands and Leyte in the Philippines and also later on was in the Occupation Forces in Japan. He had more sea duty than I did. So, we used to laugh about that.

Anyway, to get back to that ship. We brought them in. Another event – this was like in '45 – oh just – my birthday, July 16, 1945, I turned 22. **[0:40:37.7]** Just between there and August 1st, somewhere along in there, I was promoted to Chief Petty Officer. That's the highest enlisted – at that time was highest enlisted rank, you know. Chief – you heard of that – Chief Petty Officer?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay, I was Chief Radioman. At the time that the war was over. Let me think a minute now. Oh, again, by this time I was in charge of the Comm center. The other Chief was an older Chief, but he had ulcers so bad that he had to go and the Commander who was – there was a Navy Commander who was a communications officer, just tapped me on the shoulder and told us – Al, you're now the Chief. No, not Al – Gentle. They used to call you by your last name. You're now the Chief. I said okay. I couldn't get any uniforms up there. They didn't sell any uniforms up there. [They made uniforms in Seattle to fit, of Gabardine which held a crease well]

So, some old Chief gave me his hat and it had this old anchor on it that was sort of green looking. You could tell it had been around a while. I loved it. It made it look like I'd been an old time chief (laughter). I've still got it. There was a hospital ship. I think it was called the Comfort, off Okinawa. It got hit by a Kamikaze. We picked up the message again and I sat down because I happened to be there, and took over. Again I came out in plain language, which was not the way to do things, but I wanted to save the people on that ship. So, again, it worked. Nobody, I understand, died. This was from the Kamikaze that attacked but that ship did not sink. But anyway.....

Janis Kozlowski: Did you get in any trouble for doing – making that decision to make that radio call and doing it in plain language?

Al Gentle, Sr.: I probably would have if it hadn't worked. (Laughter.) Nope. In fact, I guess that helped make me First Class and Chief. They knew they could depend on me. There's a story on the side.

[0:43:00.5] At the time you didn't see many black sailors except as they were mess cooks and so forth. They had a guy, brought him up from the States. He was from Arkansas. He was a radioman, Third Class, and they gave him to me. First black we had to put on our watch. I was still, at that time, First Class and had a watch. I asked him, I said, well you know, I'm from Alabama. Why did you choose me. You've got these guys from New York or whatever, the other First Classes. He said, because you know how to get along with them (laughter), which was true.

I remember the guy. He was very smart. He had gone to college. He was – if they wanted to integrate somebody in there, they put the right person there. He melted right in and we never had any racial remarks or anything to my knowledge. Well they knew I wouldn't tolerate it. My mother brought me up never to use that "N" word. We called them colored people. We didn't even call them black in those days, all colored people.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I got along with him well, so that was just another little incident along the way. So, somewhere along about the middle of August the Japanese, you know, they had the atomic bomb, etc. They surrendered. I never was let to go home because they declared me essential. They wouldn't rotate you. If you were declared essential, you didn't rotate. But they did say to me – and I was incidentally in the regular Navy, in fact I had enlisted under a minority enlistment. That is to say, if you're 17, you have a minority

enlistment. When you're 20 – the day before you're 21, you're discharged. Well, the day before I was 21, I was in the Aleutians and I just had fallen into place.

[0:44:57.8] I'd have been put in the Reserves, but I could make some money by shipping over, a nickel a mile I think from Seattle to Birmingham and \$50 a year or something. It was something – some amount of money. It looked like – so I extended for two years. It looked like the war was going to last two more years. This was 1944. Well I only enlisted for – so let me think here. Anyway, that's the reason why I was there so long. They declared me essential and then instead I could choose my assignment. I said, okay, I want more education. So, I said, I'd like to go to a radio technician school. A technician would be one that would repair the sets and so forth. The operator doesn't do any repair. He might do minor stuff like replacing tubes.

Well, I say – I left out an important event.

[0:45:56.7] Christmas of 1944, I spent Christmas on an island called Unalga with seven men. It was a weather station. We had bombers coming across from, I guess, Elmendorf and other bases and they needed to know the weather across the Aleutians. So, we had just seven – I think it may be more than seven. Let me see, I had four radiomen, I had a weatherman, I had a hospital Corpsman and a cook (laughter). So we spent Christmas of '44 there. It was a white Christmas. It was in the Bering Sea north of Unalaska. You know, Unalaska's that island where Dutch Harbor is?

Janis Kozlowski: Right. Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh! I had heard too that at the time they were bombing Dutch Harbor there was an air base on the next island over, Umnak, Unimak, something like that. Those guys came across and they surprised the Japanese. I could've been worse, is what I've been told. But, to get back to Unalga Island, that was kind of a lonesome stay. I think I was out there about a month. They would rotate you. They rotated people. They didn't leave you out there. It might've been more than a month. It wasn't long, but the whole duty out there I thank God I didn't get sent to someplace where I might have gotten killed. It was just boring and mundane and the weather was not good.

[0:47:43.6] We had a lot of fog in the summer because of the Japanese current meeting the cold air from the Arctic. In the winter, there was a lot of snow but not to the degree on that mainland, and it was cold. As I may have mentioned to you the other day somebody said what temperature was it? I had no idea. (Laughter.) (see "Sons of the Williwaw" attachment at the end of the interview)

Janis Kozlowski: Just cold, right?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Just cold and miserable. What you would do is, they had a great big recon car, bigger than a Jeep, and the Seabees had built a body on it and if you looked outside to see how bad it would be to drive to the radio shack, you drove from that barracks up that hill to where we went into the radio room. That's the main thing I was concerned about. How – how bad would it be trying to make that drive. **[0:48:41.03]**

Another funny incident – I had never driven a truck. This thing had a double clutch. You know what that is?

Janis Kozlowski: No.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay, well you had to shift gears. You didn't have an automatic transmission and so in order to shift gears on that – it was like a truck. You had to double clutch it. You pushed in the clutch twice. You pushed it in once, pushed it in again and then shift. So, I had to drive it one time. I had the guys all loaded up in there and I didn't want to tell them this was my first time (laughter) so I kind of ground the gears a little bit, but we made it. We would go up and down that hill in that recon car. That was the only thing I was worried about. In the summer, it would get – they had a lot of flowers over the tundra. It was kind of pretty. It would get pretty warm about August and we would hike up that Ballyhoo Mountain a lot. You had to find something to do. The biggest thing was it was boring. It was just – there was no TV. I read the same books over and over. That was the biggest thing. It was boring, very boring.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:49:54.0] Did the Navy have any kind of recreational stuff for you?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, they had a gym over there. We would go over there and flip the basketball around some. Checked out some fishing equipment and we went fishing. I'm trying to think what they had available. Oh, they had some skis. That's a funny thing. I never had skied in my life (laughter). These guys from the north, a lot of them knew how to ski. My gosh, if he can do it, I can too. So, a couple of southern boys and myself went up there with a set of skis. I went out – there was some – I want to say Mount Makushin. Is that another mountain over there?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Somewhere over there was some kind of a ski slope they made. Boy, I tell you, it was the biggest mess with skis going every which way. That was the only time I ever did that.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Al Gentle, Sr.: But we did have this too. [0:50:55.5] I saw Bob Hope and Olivia De Havilland. They came through there entertaining us. Joe Lewis, who was a boxer. These are the ones I remember the most. Olivia De Havilland ate in the mess hall with us. She sat right across the table from me. She was a petite, small woman. She had nice smelling perfume. I know that.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Al Gentle, Sr.: Bob Hope – I didn't get close enough to him, but later on I used to have – on my job I retired from staff of Southern Bell. I would fly to meet other companies. Bell System it was called. AT&T all 20 something country – companies rather, and we would exchange information, so I would fly a good bit to other locations. So I was flying

one day and he was sitting across the aisle from me, Bob Hope. I mentioned to him, you know, I saw you in the Aleutians. He said, you're right. You know what, he named the month, date and year.

Janis Kozlowski: Really.

Al Gentle, Sr.: He amazed me. I didn't know where it was. I just – but he said, yes I remember it was so and so, and so and so.

Janis Kozlowski: He had a good memory.

Al Gentle, Sr.: He did.

Janis Kozlowski: That must've been quite a thrill to see Bob Hope and Olivia De Havilland at such a young age.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, yeah. Well, it was. I mean – and I don't remember what she did to perform. Bob Hope, he got up there on the stage in this gymnasium. They had a stage in there. The Seabees built this gymnasium where you could play basketball and stuff. But you know, I would stand these eight-hour watches and I would be so tired of sitting around there that I would go and sleep. I went to some movies. They had movies. You would walk around to the different locations. The Seabees – they had really good living arrangements. Their food was good. They used to have, I remember this, peanut butter on the table and stuff like that. The Navy did not have that. These guys were all older, you know, the Seabees.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Al Gentle, Sr.: And they had older cooks. Their tables would look like a boarding house table. They'd have mustard and all that kind of stuff on the table. They would have movies and I'm trying to think. I don't think I ever went to any Army movies. I don't know that I did. Just the Seabees and the theater. It was right beyond that cluster of buildings. **[0:53:33.7]** But what you're thinking about, that power house, that's a concrete building. That was the power house, where they generated the power.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I would imagine that's still standing.

Janis Kozlowski: It is, yeah. They still use it as a power house.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah. Well, we had transmitters in there as well as of course power. But if the power failed, we had our own generator, because you would have to have that so you could keep operating. Well, let's see, then when I left – finally left in September, I got an extended leave, that is to say travel time and then 30-day leave, yeah. We were so glad to get home.

[0:54:22.5] We flew across the Aleutians to Anchorage and then to Seattle because I needed to buy uniforms. Well, I got to Seattle. That was interesting. Funny. I wasn't ready to go home. In Dutch Harbor, they said to me, you pick out where you want to go, and I told them I wanted to study to be a radio technician. Then they came up with the River Rouge Plant in Detroit, Michigan. That's the Ford Motor Company. They had a fleet – three-year radio material school. In other words, guys who had been in the fleet may not be able to compete with the young men right out of high school. So we had to study electricity and had to go through some math and all that good stuff. Before I went there I got that leave and came home. When I got to Seattle all I had to show I was a Chief was that hat (laughter). So, I had to buy uniforms. See, they don't issue uniforms to Chiefs and Officers. You have to buy them, you know.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Al Gentle, Sr.: But they give you a clothing allowance. You get some other allowances as Chief. When you make Chief, well, you eat better. I was in a room with another Chief whereas before I was in like a dormitory, you know. Barracks. So I had a clothing allowance.

So I went ashore. See, you use that term even though I wasn't on a ship. But even at base you went ashore. So, I went ashore and went down to one of them – a tailor made them. The guy was going to make my uniform. I was so happy to be there, I never got around to getting it checked out. I was in jeans that were called dungarees and that cap. Man, I was eating high on the hog. I wanted milk and everything else (laughter). So I came back and I said, I tell you what I just didn't have time. What do you mean, you didn't have time. I said, I'm going to have to go out again tomorrow. They said, well what about the uniforms? Well, anyway, I went and arranged to have it made. It seemed like it didn't take him long, a day or two and I was back and putting the uniforms on. I think I got some dress blues and grays and some khaki colored ones. Three sets. I didn't get any whites. Oh, I got a topcoat. I had to get a topcoat. You got a new hat with a white cover and a navy cover. I arranged for all that.

[0:57:06.8] Then I think I left and went home. Oh, yes, I had not drawn a paycheck I think the whole time I was over there because they gave you soap and stuff. If I did it was a small amount because I didn't spend much money and I didn't gamble. So, I had plenty – I had plenty of money. I decided I'm not going to sit up all the way to Birmingham. I'm going to get a Pullman. That's easier said than done. So I went to the train ticket office and it was near lunch time. There were some women in there. They were about to break for lunch and I said, I'll take you all to lunch. There were three of them. I'll take you all to lunch. It'll be on me. Okay. So, then we head back.

I said, could you get me a Pullman? (Laughter.) I said, I'm traveling under orders. Oh, you're traveling under orders? Which I was. I said, yeah, so they got me a Pullman. I didn't have to sit up all the way – and it took a while to get back. I mean that's pretty good – they had to go to Chicago and Chicago down to Nashville and Nashville to Birmingham, something like that. But I stayed on the same train I think. I believe I did. No, I'm not sure. I could not have. I must've changed in Chicago, yeah.

Anyway, having left there, I went up to the River Rouge Plant. I was there for a while to finish the course that we had to do, which included building a superheterodyne radio set just from scratch. They'd give you a schematic and you'd go cut out the place for the tubes in the metal – sheet metal shop, and you'd go to the storeroom and get the resistors and capacitors and all that good stuff, and then you had to assemble it. It had to work. So, that was one of the requirements to get out of there. I don't recall having a big problem with that. Later on it came to good use because when I studied radio at Auburn I had to do the same thing, except it was easier at Auburn because they used what was called a Heathkit and everything was in there to do it and all you had to do was follow directions (laughter).

[0:59:23.5] Anyway, I went on over to the Great Lakes. These were all fleet guys and Marines too, Marine Master Sergeants. It seemed like we all were high-up ranks, Chiefs and Marine Master Sergeants. I got ill because of that lung. That pneumonia had done something to me. Most people when they would get pneumonia would go home and recuperate, but they didn't send me home. I had to go through all those winters, several years, before I ever got home. So I went in the hospital and I remember I was spitting up blood. So, they said, oh my goodness, you know, you might have TB. **[1:00:11.6]** So they put me on a hospital train to go to Sampson, New York, the Finger Lakes. You ever heard of the Finger Lakes.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, yeah.

Al Gentle, Sr.: It is a beautiful area. What's so funny to me is they put me in one of these wire basket-like things and carried me through the main terminal in Chicago. People were looking at me, so I took the covers and put it over my head (laughter). I was embarrassed. They put me on this train and it was like racks. They would hang you down here and put another guy above you, maybe three high or something. Then, I got to Geneva. That was the nearest town. They had this gray ambulance with a red cross on the side that looked like the same ones Army used except theirs was olive. The guys were pretty rough. They threw you in there, so to speak. They'd say get up and walk and get in there, so I did. They put my sea bag in there. They drove me to the hospital and then I was bedridden for, gosh, about six months I guess. It was a long time.

I did have some lesions up there, but they couldn't find the bug. I don't think they ever did, but they wanted those lesions to close before they would release me. But in the meantime, I got to leave because my brother, Ed, had come back from Japan and he had fallen in love and was getting married and I was going to be his best man, so, I got to leave and I went back to Alabama to be his best man. I came back. It seemed like maybe a week or so later they were going to have a honeymoon up in Niagara Falls and they were going to come by and get me and take me on the honeymoon with them.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Al Gentle, Sr.: So, I asked for leave. They said, no, you can't have it. I thought, well I'm going anyway. So I used pillows and stuffed the bed and told the guys, I'm gonna be back. I'll be back in a couple of days, I said, but I'm not missing out with my brother and

his wife. I said, I haven't seen him in a long time. We were close friends. I liked his wife too. They are both living today. He's 92 and she's a week younger than me. So, we went to Niagara Falls and came back. They didn't do a dang thing to me (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Really? So they – do you – they must've found out that you were gone.

Al Gentle, Sr.: They did, oh, yeah. The guys told him, said, he's gone. He's gonna be back. He'll be back in a couple of days. He told me to tell you all that, but he said he was going. I don't remember what all they said to them, but they told them. Let's see now, what happened there? I stayed there a while and finally I got released to be under a doctor's review in Birmingham, which I also got a claim for the VA. Periodically I was seen at the VA to get x-rays and so forth over the years, but that brings you back to home.

[1:03:32.5] I went on to Auburn and studied Electrical Engineering and majored in Communications. This is interesting. They had asked me to lay out the summer of 1949. They didn't use the term intern, but in essence that's what it was, to work for them, to see if we liked each other. Well, there was a recession, and they couldn't hire me, but they told me, they said you keep your grades like they are now and you've got a job. I said, okay.

So, anyway, I went on and finished. I saw a guy over in Atlanta. He said, what – when are you going to work? I said Monday. This was like on a Friday, so I went to work. Graduated on Friday, went over to Atlanta, back to Birmingham and went to work on Monday. Worked 35 years and I moved up from Student Engineer to Engineering Manager of an entire staff. A lot of things happened. **[1:04:29.0]** Four children born and now seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. So you ended up having a good family.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yep and we all just had a great time this weekend because Emma and I celebrated our 60th wedding anniversary.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, gosh, congratulations. That's wonderful.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Thank you, well the kids arranged to have our marriage blessed and I didn't know it, but Father Kelly who is our pastor, we had this in the chapel. We had about 50 some people there. He – we went to renew our vows, which was interesting.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, how nice.

Al Gentle, Sr.: They booked this luncheon at a very nice place and we had – I had a proclamation from the State Senate, a proclamation from the Mayor. I was pretty active in this little town of Hoover, which is 75,000. In fact, we have a room named after us up at the senior center and I have a room named after me at Auburn.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, how nice.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yep. So once a year Auburn gives me an opportunity to sit in the engineering suite. So my son, who lives in Maryland, Al Jr. is a retired Navy Commander, flies down and takes me to Auburn and we go up there and have food and drink. He's a graduate of Georgia Tech. He went to Tech on a Naval ROTC scholarship and he served four years and 16 years in the Reserves, and he's retired. He loves those trips and they all love old Al, so that's how it goes now. Ask me some questions (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Well, you did a fantastic job answering a lot of my questions. Do you have a few minutes for me to ask a few more?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Sure, I've got plenty of time. Okay, let me see. [1:06:26.3] Did you – were you able to keep in touch with your family at all while you were in the service?

The interview ended abruptly at 1:06:38.4.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, just one second here. I just have to get one more thing set up. Okay. Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I don't know what happened with that connection but maybe just a few more questions. I won't take up your whole day.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay. [0:00:16.6] Hey, listen, can I get a copy of the DVD whenever you get it made?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, absolutely. Here's what I usually do is, when your interview is done we'll transcribe it and we'll do a summary of it and index it and then I'll return the whole thing back to you and if I have any questions, like what did you say that boat's name was? I couldn't read it, or something like that, I might ask you a few questions to help me clarify things.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Sure. Sounds good.

Janis Kozlowski: Then, once it's finished I'll make you as many copies as you want. I usually put them in a little notebook and I put the CD in there with the audio file and the transcript and everything in there so that you can give it to friends and family.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, you're very efficient.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, if – it seems like the least we can do for your time and effort that you put into this, so.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, I thank you. Well, go ahead and fire away.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, let me see. [0:01:12.8] Oh, well the question I was asking is you said that your mom kind of knew that you were going up north to Alaska because of the kind of gear that you were issued, but did you have very good contact with your family when you were in Alaska?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yes, by mail. The mail was good, but you – it was censored and – but she knew where I was and maybe every now and then I would drop a hint, but she never knew the location. She just knew I was up there somewhere in cold weather.

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh. And how about – your brother was in the

Al Gentle, Sr.: Southwest Pacific.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, and did she know where he was?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Not – she knew he was in the South Pacific, but that's about it. He landed at Angaur, Peleliu, and Leyte. She never knew those things, no, not until he came home.

Janis Kozlowski: How about you? Did you know where he was?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No. I knew he was in the South Pacific. Oh, I was – I'm glad you brought that up. He's five years older than me. He had graduated from Auburn. He came into the Army one year behind me. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Combat Engineers. **[0:02:25.5]** We met in San Francisco at the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel. He was going south and I was going north. At the time I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I was shipping out. He knew where he was going and he was going to the South Pacific.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow.

Al Gentle, Sr.: But we did see each other right before he shipped out to the South Pacific. Shortly thereafter I left Alameda and went to Bremerton.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, okay. Did you.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: We had good mail. I mean I would get mail from them periodically and he would receive mail from me. They were pretty good about getting the mail.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, that's good. That was the.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: There were no stamps. It was free.

Janis Kozlowski: Was that the Army transport service that brought your mail in?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No, it probably came in on the Navy planes.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: We had – yeah, we had Navy transports. What did they call them? They were VR squadrons. Anyway, they were – they brought passengers and they brought mail. They brought other things too, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. [0:03:37.0] Now, what about news about other theatres of the war. Did you get – did you have a newspaper or any kind of radio broadcasts?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah, we did, and also as I may have told you, we copied the press – the Associated Press and others transmitted by CW, by code. The news. We would copy the news. Then, later on they had a little paper, the Dutch Harbor News. In fact, I've got some copies of it here.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I've never seen that. So that had the – that kept people informed about what was going on?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah, yeah. I'll have to do one of them up. I'll mail it to you.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, if you think of it that'd be great. I haven't seen one of those.

Al Gentle, Sr.: You haven't? Well, I'm sure I can find one somewhere. I don't know right this minute where I will look but I know I've got them. Yeah. Maybe one or – I grabbed one for VJ Day I think, I'm sure.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. If you find it and you're willing to send it to me, if you don't want me to keep it I'll scan it and send it back to you.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I can copy it.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yeah, I probably wouldn't send the original. It's probably yellowed with age.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: But I can copy it. I've got a – a copier, a fax, copy and printer all in one.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, sounds like.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: Scanner too, I think, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: You're pretty well equipped there.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I am. I – even though I'm ancient I try to stay current.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) [0:05:06.9] Do you remember what your first impressions were when you arrived in Alaska, either on Kodiak – well, you didn't get to get off in Kodiak, but the first time you got there what.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, the first of Alaska I saw was the Inlet Passage. It was beautiful. I was scared to death. I knew I was going into a combat zone and I was scared. I was only 19, but it – I remember the beauty along the shore, as it went along the shore. I've since been back up the Inlet Passage on Alaska Marine Highway Ferry System, and I still think it's awesome going up that passage, seeing the eagles and the whales and all that stuff. That was my first impression. Then as it went across, it became bleak (laughter) and Kodiak, I only saw it from the deck of the ship, but it didn't look too inviting. Then just thereafter it was bleak. Only time it looked decent was in the summer when the orchids or whatever these flowers – they said they were orchids, were blooming in the tundra.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. And what about that ride across? Was that a pretty harrowing trip?

Al Gentle, Sr.: It was – we had a storm and I remember – I'm glad you asked that question. [0:06:18.1] The ship ran up on the crest of the waves. The screws came out of the water. I remember that. It shook.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh!

Al Gentle, Sr.: (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: That couldn't have been.....

Al Gentle, Sr.: You realize what I'm talking about? The waves were like, I don't know how many stories tall, and the Baranoff was not that large of a ship, and it went up on the crest of them and it went – it seemed like it poised up there and the screws were turning and the ship just shook.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I know that feeling. That must've been pretty frightening in the middle of the ocean.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, plus for some land lubber who was just out there for the first time (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I bet. Let me ask you about your radio experience. [0:06:58.8] It sounds like you were a really good radio operator. Did you ever use that skill later on in life?

Al Gentle, Sr.: I have to tell you a story about that. When I dropped out of Auburn to supposedly work for Southern Bell and they said it was a recession and they didn't have a job for me. The local beer hall, some of the veterans were out for the summer or whatever, we would meet and talk about places, so they told me to join the 5220 club. Well, the 5220 club was \$20 a week for 52 weeks, unemployment compensation. So, when I went in there to apply, they said what skills do you have? I said, International Morse code (laughter). No, they did not have a job in Alabama for that.

Janis Kozlowski: Let's see. [0:07:50.8] What – did you keep in touch with any of the guys that you served with, or did any of them really stand out as being exceptional people in your mind?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, yeah, I mean I remember them, some of them. In fact I would sort of grade a list of what they could do and gave them responsibilities according to that, like some copied what is called fox. They'd just sit there and they'd copy the messages all day. They were coded, five character codes. You'd send them down below to the coding room and they would decode them. In the headings they would have addresses coded, so a lot of them they'd copied did not belong to us. They belonged to people all over the Pacific, so they were called fox, and they broadcast simultaneously from San Francisco and some other points too. You had to copy them night and day because some of those messages didn't belong to us. Then you had other operators that were skilled and you did point to point, let's say from Dutch Harbor to Adak and Dutch Harbor to Attu and Dutch Harbor to wherever, sending messages out, specific messages.

They had one guy, Fisk. I still remember his name. He was a scrounger. He could not – they could not break down any of his messages, he made so many mistakes. So I pulled him off of that and he was to scrounge and get food or whatever, something good. Beer, whiskey, whatever he could get.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.)

Al Gentle, Sr.: We called him the scrounger. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Did he turn out to be pretty good at that?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, he was exceptional. I often wondered when he got out of the Navy what he did for a living.

Janis Kozlowski: That's funny.

Al Gentle, Sr.: But you do that you – when you're in the position of authority and you're responsible, you have some that make good coffee and you have some that you say don't you touch the coffee pot.

Janis Kozlowski: (Laughter.) Let me ask you a question about radio traffic.
[0:09:53.6] Did you – did the Navy and the Army kind of share radio traffic or did you communicate very well?

Al Gentle, Sr.: No. There was no interplay between the AACS and the Navy radio. No interplay at all.

Janis Kozlowski: Did that prove to be a problem?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Nope. No. Not to my knowledge.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Okay, maybe one more question, then I'll let you off the hook.

Al Gentle, Sr.: (Laughter.) Okay.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:10:25.8] I don't know if you're aware of it, but there's the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area that's based out of Dutch Harbor. It's one of the National Park Service Areas managed in partnership with the Unalaska Corporation and then in December 2008 President Bush designated Valor in the Pacific. That includes three sites in Alaska. It's Attu, Kiska, and an aircraft wreckage on Atka and five sites at Pearl Harbor and the Tule Lake Japanese Internment Camp in California. They call that Valor in the Pacific.

[0:11:05.5] My question is, is it important to you that there is a national recollection of what happened in the Pacific and in Alaska during World War II? Is it important to you that there are places like this that people will remember your contribution?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Absolutely. In fact, I'm very disappointed because most people you speak to don't know about the Aleutian campaign and they don't know that the Japs took our land, so I say maybe 1 out of 100 know about it. Yes, I'm unhappy because they don't.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. Well, you know, that's our whole goal. [0:11:47.6] We're trying to spread the word and get the stories out, so I really appreciate you – this kind of interview – I can't tell you how much people appreciate this kind of first person experience, so I really thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, if you have any other question, just call me back. I'm going to be – I'm almost home bound now. I've got spinal stenosis. I used to – as I mentioned to you earlier, I led tours with the Friendship Force, which is a cultural exchange organization, and there were people all over, Thailand, Australia, Brazil, you mention it, Soviet Union – just a lot – lots of travel. So all of the sudden, cut my travel down.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah. So, you're probably feeling pretty isolated then.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, no, every now and then I get somebody that comes through here to take us to Mobile Bay and we'll cruise or we'll go to – [0:12:42.7] we owned a condominium for a long time on the Gulf Coast and I would love to go sit on that deck and smell that salt air.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, it's beautiful down there.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Yes, you've been down to Gulf Shores, Alabama?

Janis Kozlowski: I have, yes.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay, well we were eight-tenths of a mile from that public beach, West Beach, on the beach, it was called Emerald Shores.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I'm jealous.

Al Gentle, Sr.: It's gone now. We had a – Hurricane Ivan beat it up pretty bad. It was built in 1984. I bought it on paper, so I owned it as a result of buying it on paper since '84. In 2004, Ivan hit. We had it 20 years and we used it quite a bit. A developer came out of the woodwork and said, hey you know we'll build a high-rise there and we'll give you a comparable unit and we'll let you upgrade to a larger unit at preconstruction cost. So everybody voted, yeah, that sounds good. We get a new unit. Well, the guy went and tore our unit down – our complex down, went bankrupt. We had to sue them (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, no.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Oh, it made – boy, yeah, people hated him.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I bet. Oh.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, you know, as I say, if you think of something else I'm here most of the time so.....

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: We have a senior center. We go up to that for lunches and do various things and – but most of the time I'm around here now except going to doctors and dentists.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Well, as I said, I'm going to send this over to get it transcribed. It will take a little while. I've got somebody lined up to do it, but in the meantime do you want me to send you the audio disc?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Well, whatever you normally do. Just do that.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Eventually you will send me the audio disc, is that right?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes, I'm just – I just started yesterday working with a lady who's a professional transcriber, so she's doing one interview and we're going to work through it and then I'm going to send her all the rest, including yours, so she's – I think she'll be able to get through them very quickly because that's just her job. So I'm guessing it'll take maybe – maybe as long as two months.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Mm-hmm.

Janis Kozlowski: Is that okay with you?

Al Gentle, Sr.: Sure.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. All right. Well, I'll get moving on that and let's keep in touch with each other. You're on e-mail, so I can communicate with you that way too. If anything – if you decide you don't want to wait and you want copies early, I'll give them to you or if you think of anything else just get in contact with me.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Okay. I'll do it.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:15:21.4] Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate this and I'll be in touch with you.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Thanks a lot Janis and you have a nice day.

Janis Kozlowski: You too.

Al Gentle, Sr.: I appreciate it. Talk to you later.

Janis Kozlowski: You too. Bye-bye.

Al Gentle, Sr.: Bye.

End interview at 0:15:33.9



