

## **PREFACE**

**February 4, 2013**

**12:30 PM (PST)**

**Willamalane Adult Activity Center**

**Springfield, Oregon**

**Interview duration: 1 hour, 14 minutes, 31 seconds**

**Interviewee: Frank H. Rile, Jr.**

**Interviewers: Jordan Helms, James Croft**

James Croft is a junior studying political science and history at the University of Oregon. He is originally from Anchorage, Alaska.

Jordan Helms is a senior studying history at the University of Oregon. He is originally from Eugene, Oregon.

## TRANSCRIPT

**James Croft:**

*Alright. So this is February 4th, 2013. James Croft—*

**Jordan Helms:**

*And Jordan Helms—*

**James Croft:**

*And we're interviewing...*

**Frank Rile:**

Navy Captain Frank Rile.

**James Croft:**

*So, to start off, when, where, and why did you decide to join the military?*

**Frank Rile:**

I was shanghaied into the military by my dad. I wanted to go to Harvard when I got out of high school to become a chemist, but my dad managed to get a congressional appointment for me. He wanted to save money on college [laughter]. So he shanghaied me into the Naval Academy, where I went in '34 and got out in 1938.

**Jordan Helms:**

*Had your father been in the military?*

**Frank Rile:**

No, he had not.

**Jordan Helms:**

*Okay.*

**Frank Rile:**

He was with some friends who were talked over what to do with their boys, two or three guys. One of their sons got into West Point and I got into Annapolis, that was how the three or four—

**James Croft:**

*Where was this?*

**Frank Rile:**

He was in Detroit; he was an architect.

**James Croft:**

*Oh, okay. What was your experience at the Academy like?*

**Frank Rile:**

Routine—nothing special. I stood about middle in my class. We graduated six-hundred and five. A couple months ago I heard from a classmate there are eighteen of us left out of six-hundred and five.

**Jordan Helms:**

*What were some of the best things about being in a military academy?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well, one thing that impressed me at first was the equality of it. We had all kinds of rich guys, poor guys—every kind of guy in the plebs, and we were all even-steven [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*What were some things that you didn't like about the Academy?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well...you get very used to taking orders, which kind of ruins your initiative [laughter]. I discovered when I got out I was used—I had to give myself orders to do things! [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*So, you said you graduated in 1938, right?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yes.

**James Croft:**

*And where did you go from there?*

**Frank Rile:**

To the battleship [USS] *West Virginia*, who was one of the battleships torpedoed at Pearl Harbor. But new ensigns just spend a year, so I was only on the *West Virginia* one year, then transferred to the [USS] *Smith* down in San Diego. The *West Virginia* was in Long Beach, California.

**James Croft:**

*What were your jobs when you were on the...?*

**Frank Rile:**

On the battleship we got routed around various departments, learning. Six months in engineering, three months deck force, navigation, on the bridge—that kind of stuff.

**James Croft:**

*So you learned basically everything?*

**Frank Rile:**

You get routed into everything, you see. When I got back onto a destroyer, I never wanted to be down in the engine room. I wanted to be up on the bridge, up in the open air. I don't know whether I was claustrophobic or not, but I never got near the engine room [laughter].

**Jordan Helms:**

*How did things change from when you got out of the Academy, and then when Pearl Harbor got bombed, and you went into wartime mode?*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh, that was an immense change. We were caught, of course, completely by surprise, in spite of—we should have been warned. But we didn't expect anything as far east as Pearl Harbor. We thought the Japanese would attack New Guinea, or somewhere down there. So, the attack on Pearl was a complete surprise, but we should've known. Because in fleet exercises a few years before, the attacking force had done the same thing: had come in from the north, undiscovered, and bombed Pearl Harbor. Just Navy exercises, and that was modeled after British experience at Taranto, Italy. They caught the Italian fleet the same way: in the harbor, came in and torpedoed and bombed the Italian fleet at Taranto, in probably 1940. So, there was a precedent for exactly what happened. We weren't warned. We didn't catch it.

**James Croft:**

*Where were you on the day it happened?*

**Frank Rile:**

I was in overhaul in Mare Island, California. We had been detached to Hawaii a couple of years before, and of course we left all our girlfriends and everything on the coast. So, we wanted to get back. At the last minute—we were scheduled for overhaul in Pearl—at the last minute they switched us with the [USS] *Cassin* and [USS] *Downes*, two destroyers who were in dry dock at Pearl Harbor, got bombed, were on fire, they flooded the dock to put out the fire, the ships got off the blocks and then capsized. They had a very bad time, and we were in a dry dock in Mare Island.

**James Croft:**

*So, you got lucky then?*

**Frank Rile:**

We were, we were lucky on that deal. We were not there at Pearl.

**James Croft:**

*I'm just going to pause this real fast...[recording pauses for question from passerby]*

**Frank Rile:**

He's one of my tablemates [*referring to passerby*]. He works here in the carpenter shop.

**James Croft;**

*I understand. Okay, well, sorry about that. So...where were we? Pearl Harbor...what happened after, you guys were in California, and then?*

**Frank Rile:**

And then we were assigned to protect the West Coast, my division. In my division the flagship was the USS Porter, and then my whole division was the [USS] *Cushing*, [USS] *Perkins*, [USS] *Preston* and *Smith*. Four ship division. We patrolled up and down from San Diego up to San Francisco, for the whole...until October...September of '42.

**James Croft:**

*What did you do on the Smith? What was your job there?*

**Frank Rile:**

I was the torpedo officer and first lieutenant, which is repair officer, on the *Smith*. So, when we were hit, read about it in the [*points to biography*]...hit by a Japanese torpedo plane on October 26th, '42, I was the fireman [laughter]. I was on the bridge, in fact I was the last man off the bridge; I couldn't go off the ladders on each side—the flames were sweeping the ladders—so I went right over the flag bags<sup>1</sup> after the bridge structure and went down the mast stays, hand over hand. I got down on deck and then I and the fire party fought our way up through the—tried to—through the smoke. At first, we couldn't get forward. When the smoke got clear enough, I was on the port side and I got up the ladder and—on the bridge there's a deck above the main deck—and started forward. Then, I don't know for what reason, there was a [word unclear] passageway through the structure. So, I went through the passageway to the starboard side. That was the windward side, slightly, and from there, there were two of my men connecting up a fire hose. I got the fire nozzle, and I was the first man up on the fire with the nozzle. There were...oh, perhaps eighteen men, all corpses, all over the deck—clothes on fire and everything. I put out all the fires and [pause]...then the rest of my crew came up and worked, taking care. There was one kid who was still surviving but in shock—swollen face from the fire—that I had some men take down to the sick bay. Then I went back and reported to the captain the fire was out. The captain was back in aft steering, not on the bridge. As soon as the fire was out we got back on the bridge, and I was on the bridge. Yeah, that was pretty bad day.

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<sup>1</sup> Editors note: bags containing U.S. Navy Signal Flags.

**James Croft:**

*And that was in—*

**Frank Rile:**

Fifty-five men lost. Some overboard, some killed in the fire.

**Jordan Helms:**

*And that was the Santa Cruz?*

**Frank Rile:**

That was at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, not to be confused with—

**Jordan Helms:**

*Santa Cruz, California?*

**Frank Rile:**

—Santa Cruz, California [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*So, how did you end up at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands?*

**Frank Rile:**

We ended up damaged. We got down to Nouméa. Admiral Halsey [*Fleet Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr.*] came aboard and looked over the damage. Then we got routed, alone, back to Pearl. We felt very lonesome [laughter], all alone, going all the way back. Then we were in Pearl Harbor getting repaired about, must've been two months into the next year—February maybe—when we got back out to the West fleet...to Guadalcanal, actually.

**James Croft:**

*So, before...I guess I was trying to go before the battle of Santa Cruz. What happened leading up? Where did you come from? Where did your...*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh, well we got urgent orders in September '42 to join the carrier [USS] *Enterprise* in Pearl Harbor, so our whole division took off to join the *Enterprise* in Pearl. Best speed we could, then the *Ranger*—no, not the *Ranger*... what's wrong with my memory? The other carrier... *Hornet*! Joined us, just before the battle. October 22nd started the battle. There are funny things about the reports of the battle, afterwards. The story in all the histories is that the Smith's skipper went through the wake of the battleship and the spray from the wake was supposed to help extinguish the fire. The only spray was me [laughter]. Because the wake of a battleship is flat, there's no spray. Actually, we were out of control there for about, maybe, four or five minutes while the skipper and the exec [*executive officer*] were on their way from the bridge back to after steering. We were rudder and mid-ships right through the formation at thirty knots [laughter]. In fact, the carrier, the *Enterprise*, had to maneuver to avoid a collision with us; I read that in the battle reports of the *Enterprise* afterwards, years later, when I checked on it. Another thing there's nothing in the history books that tells: in the middle of this air action, with all of us at twenty-nine or thirty knots, the carrier just says "Alright, everyone follow my courses," because the *Enterprise* was dodging like mad to avoid aircraft.

All of a sudden, we were on the starboard beam of the *Enterprise*, about a mile—we were in the destroyer screen around the *Enterprise*. We were here about a mile. Here, about a half-mile outside of the screen, a Japanese sub suddenly surfaced in the middle of this action and fired. They had fired three torpedoes at the carrier. One of those torpedoes, I saw the wake coming right under—it was set low for the carrier. It went right under our ship for the carrier. Now, even the carrier's skipper, on his battle report, thought all the torpedoes he was dodging were aircraft torpedoes. Very few people saw that sub because it, of course, got under as quick as it could. What happened was, when he fired the weight of three torpedoes, he lost trim and his sub involuntarily surfaced because he lost so much weight up in the bow. But, he got under as quick as he could. I was training my torpedo tubes out to hit him, and the *Perkins*, on our stern, was heading for him to try and collide, he was just going to get in a collision with him—none of us touched him. The battleship *South Dakota* fired five-inch shells, right over us, at this sub. So, the gunnery officer of the *South Dakota* saw that sub, I saw that sub, the *Perkins* saw the sub, but our skipper, they didn't see it, they were looking this way. Just after the sub surfaced was when a burning ball of fire passed right in front of my eyes, and that's a burning Japanese torpedo plane. Just missed the bridge. Actually, a part of our windshield up forward of the bridge was damaged by the wing tip, and that was ten feet from me. So that wing tip missed me by I don't know how little [laughter]. I saw the ball of fire, I ran up and over the windshield to look over the windshield forward and the ball of fire was starting up from the crash—all the gasoline. I ducked back and



ran into the shelter of the bridge structure. The director crew was jumping down; I was in more danger from the director crew landing on me than the fire [laughter]. They came down like a solid wall of boots and got off on the ladders. So, I was there in the rear of the bridge structure, looking right and left at flames on both sides. That's when I decided to go aft, not try to get down the ladders [laughter].

**Jordan Helms:**

*That was intense [laughter].*

**James Croft:**

*So, after that, what happened? Did you guys go back to...you went back to Pearl Harbor, right?*

**Frank Rile:**

We went back to Pearl Harbor for repairs. I remember now, the next two months was the grimmest period of my life. We were in shock without knowing it, you know? The funniest thing I can tell you: the ship was being repaired day and night. I was the watch officer one night while we were being repaired; I was then a JG, lieutenant JG—

**James Croft:**

*That's a junior lieutenant?*

**Frank Rile:**

—Junior lieutenant, yeah, lieutenant junior grade. It was one o'clock or two o'clock in the morning and they were using pneumatic hammers and everything on the ship. I was so fed up with the lack of sleep and my crew having no sleep I ordered the workmen all off the ship. Just gave them orders, "off the ship." Everything stopped. I went to bed, my crew went to bed, and nobody ever criticized me [laughter]. The skipper didn't give me hell; nobody said a word. But, a week later, my exec arranged for us officers to have a house ashore [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*So you didn't have to put up with the noise any more?*

**Frank Rile:**

Right [laughter]. Nobody heard of that, except—this is a new story for you guys. I’ve since thought, “Imagine that, in the middle of a war, and I ordered ‘get off the ship!’” [laughter].

**Jordan Helms:**

*What were some of the things that you guys were doing? I’m assuming the trip from Pearl back to the Pacific Theater was a fairly long trip. What were you guys doing during the trips? Did you get to have any fun or was it just all work?*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh, it was mainly just running the ship. It’s not fun. You stand watches and sleep when you can. Right after our disaster for the Smith, I spent the next three days—until we got down to Nouméa—I slept in the wardroom. Because the deck was hulled so the officers’ quarters had been flooded with water, bloody water from the crew up front. Our quarters were really unlivable. Furthermore, I didn’t want to sleep alone. There was a coding machine right next to the couch in the wardroom. I slept on the couch in the wardroom and the officer on the coding machine was banging away all night long. Didn’t bother me a bit, I was glad to hear noise from the crew. When we got repaired, we ran from Nouméa to a little island called—not Corpus Christi, but something like that<sup>2</sup>—bringing supplies up to Guadalcanal. Things were so desperate in those days because the Japanese were putting all their power to try and—well they did—bombard Guadalcanal at every opportunity; they were trying to take the place. To provide gasoline for the aviators on Guadalcanal, we carried gasoline barrels on the aft on the deck. There was no pier at Guadalcanal, we just kicked them overboard near the beach and they drifted ashore for the aviators. When I think back, it’s almost unbelievable that things were so desperate, but the Marines were desperate. How we took Guadalcanal is a classic in itself for the Marine Corps.

**James Croft:**

*So, you’re back at Guadalcanal now?*

**Frank Rile:**

Up and down, yeah. We did that for about...April or May of ’43 we got ordered down to Australia and we were called [General Douglas] MacArthur’s Navy, because MacArthur was in charge in Australia. See, [Fleet Admiral Chester] Nimitz had the Pacific up to a certain dividing line, and MacArthur had everything west of that, out of Australia. So MacArthur started up the

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<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: he is probably referring here to San Cristobal.

western islands and Nimitz and the Navy started up the eastern islands, up towards Palau and the rest of them. Then I got detached to put a new destroyer in commission in June of '43. So, I went back to the states to Staten Island, New York, and Bethlehem Steel was building a new destroyer called the *USS Pickering*, and I was the exec. I had the meanest skipper in the U.S. Navy [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*Why do you say that?*

**Frank Rile:**

His name was Lamb. He was mean and years later I found out why he was so mean. He had been a sub skipper out to the west side of Manila, in the Philippines. He had been near where the Japanese ships were landing and didn't even fire a torpedo. So they cashiered him out of subs and sent him to destroyers. He was a bastard. I had a year with him.

**James Croft:**

*That was spelled Lamb, L-A-M-B?*

**Frank Rile:**

L-A-M-B. Raymond Lamb. So, I hope nobody sues me.

**James Croft:**

*I'm just going to pause this for a second...So you were in Staten Island you said?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yes, putting a new destroyer in commission. I was the exec and navigator. Then we put her in commission in, I would guess, October '43—something like that. We went to Bermuda for shakedown, through the canal and up to the Aleutians. We arrived in the Aleutians on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December.

**James Croft:**

*Where were you in the Aleutians?*

**Frank Rile:**

The first landing was the Navy base at...

**James Croft:**

*Adak?*

**Frank Rile:**

No, east of Adak. They had an officers' club. We spent Christmas Eve throwing snowballs at each other and going to the officers' club. Then we got sent out to Adak. We were based at Adak, and I don't remember the other ships in our division. But, from there we made raids—two raids—in the next few months, over to the northern Japanese island and shot up the fishing boats. We didn't have any opposition, but we made a night attack. To some extent it influenced the Japanese Navy. They realized they had to protect their northern island when they were headed, originally, for Australia. They wanted to take Australia. So they were headed, originally, before we opposed them, down to—Guadalcanal was a step on the way to Australia. We stopped them at Guadalcanal. So, to some degree, we influenced them that they had to protect their northern part too. If they didn't we would attack there.

**James Croft:**

*So, after Adak, where'd you go?*

**Frank Rile:**

From Adak we would run out to Attu, the western most Aleutian island that had been occupied just the year before by the Japanese. In fact, our medical officer went ashore and picked up bones and stuff from the battlefield on Attu, which the rest of us—I didn't want any bones [laughter]. From Attu, we would take off for there. Once in a while we would get back east to...I'm trying to think of the harbor—

**James Croft:**

*Was it Dutch Harbor?*

**Frank Rile:**

Dutch Harbor! Yeah, and I met a girl. We had one weekend in Dutch Harbor and I met the nicest girl, a secretary working in Dutch Harbor. For a while she was the love of my life, after a weekend [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*I'm going to guess nothing happened with that?*

**Frank Rile:**

We won't mention that [laughter].

**Jordan Helms:**

*So, you're doing all this stuff, going back and forth from the Aleutians. What exactly brought you guys to Okinawa in '45?*

**Frank Rile:**

Let's see, when did I get detached? Oh! I was all set to take over from the skipper. I was the exec, I'd been on there; I was well trained. I lined up all the officers—in my reports back to the bureau—all the officers were lined up so that each one could fleet up one step and I could fleet up from exec to skipper. Well all that managed was that I made myself available, and Admiral... what is his name? I should remember it... wanted a navigator on his staff, wanted a Naval Academy graduate on his staff. There I was, ready for promotion. So, in June of '44 I got detached from the *Smith* to go to a staff, and I was very, very disappointed, because I wasn't a staff officer, I was a shipboard officer. So, I ended up on Admiral—I'll get it later—staff as navigator. I lasted with him until the end of December '44. Then I got transferred to the—just a second [looks at biography]—*USS Mobile*, a cruiser at Ulithi. I don't remember anything special we did on the *Mobile*... well, yes, I was on the *Mobile* from there to Okinawa. The day we arrived at Okinawa was May 3rd, I think, just after the landing had been underway, I think it was on May 1st. We were approaching; we were about five miles south of where we were headed. There was the battleship [USS] *Nevada* and all of a sudden one Jap plane came down, and one gun off the *Nevada* was able to fire before it hit the *Nevada*. Big explosion on the *Nevada*, and we all thought to ourselves, "My God, this is a terrible place," and it was. We got daily air attacks for the next two months. I may have the original date of landing wrong, it may be April 1st, I don't know. But, we were there two or three months. Then, I got detached in the beginning of August.

**James Croft:**

*What was it like having air raids all the time like that when you were there?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well, every ship there had a smoke generator. The ships in the anchorage, when an air attack was coming, we would all light up smoke and it was like a dense fog. We'd hear the aircraft above us, searching, trying to look for us, but they never found us in the smoke. Toward the end of our period there, we got word the Japanese battleship—a tremendous battleship, had eighteen-inch guns, biggest guns in the world, bigger than our Navy's sixteen-inch. She was one of two tremendous Japanese battleships; I've lost her name too. She was on her way down to bombard Okinawa.<sup>3</sup> All of the ships there, anything with guns on it—our *Mobile* and everybody else—formed up and we got underway the night before to meet that battleship. We were going to attack. But, we had so many carriers by then, the Jap carrier aviation caught her halfway down, and they must've used six or eight torpedoes and sank her. So, we never got to gunfire with her. Yeah. But, that amazes me. We got underway to meet that battleship [laughter], and luckily didn't have to. From there, I got detached and went to the East Coast to the *USS Savannah*, and then we rigged—they made repairs in the aviation part of the ship to put in decks and bunks to pick up soldiers coming back from Europe, because the Europe war was over. So, we made two or three runs to Brest, France, and picked up soldiers and brought them back to the states.

**James Croft:**

*How was that, was that an interesting experience?*

**Frank Rile:**

It was interesting, yeah. I remember, when we were in Brest, there were German prisoners of war being worked by Americans who put them in working gangs. One of them was trying to talk to us, but we were very snooty to the Germans, of course. We hated them...nothing special about that. My next duty was—let me think...depending on what this says [*points to biography*], I think I got orders then to the Navy Department in Washington—shore duty. I had been at sea from '38 until '45...more, '46, maybe.

**James Croft:**

*Eight years?*

**Frank Rile:**

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: here he is almost certainly referring to the Japanese battleship *Yamato*, which had a sister-ship, the *Musashi*.

Yeah.

**James Croft:**

*This is a question I had earlier, but before joining the Navy, had you ever had much experience on boats? Had you ever been to sea?*

**Frank Rile:**

My dad built a house on Lake Orion in Michigan. He was an architect in Detroit, so I spent my high school summers up in Lake Orion. Did a lot of rowing. He didn't buy us a sailboat or anything luxurious, even a canoe. It was a rowboat. We were about two miles from town, and I had a girlfriend my own age, Astrid Johannes,<sup>4</sup> who lived next door. We were buddies for probably from the age when I was about nine until seventeen. Every summer, we were buddies. Almost brother and sister, it was not a real love affair as teenagers, you know, we were kids. We hiked everywhere; we hiked two or three miles into the town near Lake Orion, or rowed two or three miles there, and swam all summer long together. So I was a swimmer and familiar with water, used to rowing. At the Naval Academy I rowed crew, but I wasn't a heavyweight—heavy enough for the main crew. I rowed on the hundred and fifty pound crew. I was number seven on an eight-oar boat. Raced a little bit, but it wasn't a very big sport. We didn't even get mentioned in the yearbook [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*Had you ever been to sea for such an extended period of time?*

**Frank Rile:**

I had never been on a ship, no. Wait a minute, I did! I had a cruise from Detroit across the Great Lakes with my dad to Cleveland I think when I was going back to school, because I went to a boarding school in Philadelphia from age nine until I graduated at age eighteen. So, we commuted every summer.

**James Croft:**

*So, back to the—you were assigned to the Naval Department in Washington, you said?*

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<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: This is the editor's interpretation of the name due to no record being available to confirm spelling.

**Frank Rile:**

Yes, I was. I ended up secretary of the uniform board. I regretted that I wasn't part of the elite, which was the gunnery gang. In the Navy, the gunnery gang, in those days, was the elite of the Navy. I had not been a gunnery officer aboard ship, so I wasn't assigned to anything gunnery. They ran the fleet; they were on the first deck of the Navy department. I had a little couple of rooms up on the second deck, the uniform store. I'm very proud—I designed the best looking uniform the Navy now has.

**James Croft:**

*Really, that's their current uniform you designed?*

**Frank Rile:**

That's the whites—we called it then the tropical whites, instead of the stiff-necked old dress whites. This was an open neck with shoulder boards and medal insignia, short-sleeved. I've since seen lots of it, and I am proud of that. I made something that will last for a thousand years and I made a couple other changes. In wartime we had discarded the Navy sword; I reinstated the Navy sword. We at that time had in wintertime a dark blue hat cover for officers, in summertime white. I threw away the wintertime black. Now, all naval officers wear a white cap year-round. I'm proud of that too [laughter]. For the enlisted, we did away with what was called the 'enlisted flat hat.' The enlisted flat-hat used to have the name of the ship on the flat hat, so in doing away with that I dreamed up the 'ship name sleeve mark.' The Navy enlisted uniforms now have the ship name right on their shoulder, in a curve. Those changes are still in and will last, as far as I know, forever. I'm proud of that.

**James Croft:**

*So you really did a lot with the uniform department?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yeah. During the war, Admiral King [*Fleet Admiral Ernest King*] tried to change a new uniform. He tried to make some—I forget what color it was—we already had khakis. He had some kind of a deal which was absolutely unsuccessful; he never got it through. Admiral King, the head of the whole Navy! I managed to do what he was trying to do, get a beautiful new uniform, and it is good looking. I remember on a subsequent cruise I had to Pearl, after I was retired—they had two weeks occasionally they would recall retired for training—I was on a



training cruise to Pearl and got in touch with a classmate, who was a skipper of a sub. When I saw him, he had these Navy whites on, and it was gorgeous. They were blazing white, beautiful, and it still is beautiful. It's a good-looking uniform.

**James Croft:**

*It seems like you really enjoyed your time doing that?*

**Frank Rile:**

I am very proud of that Navy uniform business, when originally, you know, it's a very peon-type of job in the active Navy—fooling around with the uniform [laughter].

**Jordan Rile:**

*So when did you finally get to captain your own ship?*

**Frank Rile:**

From the Navy Department I got ordered over to CINCNELM, which is 'Commander-In-Chief, Northern Europe and Atlantic.'<sup>5</sup> I was on the staff over there in the legal department, which is the most boring post-place in the world [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*What rank were you at this time?*

**Frank Rile:**

I was a commander then, full commander. I retired from that job in the beginning of '59. I went back to San Diego; we had bought a house in San Diego—before I retired, or after? May've been after, I don't remember. My wife was a Californian, one of four sisters, so she had her whole family there. So I became a Californian. I've been in California until '09, when I moved up to be with my three daughters who are up here in Oregon. I was living alone, although I had a wonderful girlfriend down in Lompoc, California. For forty years!

**James Croft:**

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<sup>5</sup> Editor's note: There does not appear to be an acronym for 'Commander-In-Chief, Northern Europe and Atlantic'. The interviewee says 'CINCNELM', while defining it differently than standard usage would. He probably means Commander-in-Chief, Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean.

*With the legal department, what did you do?*

**Frank Rile:**

We fooled around with legalities. The standard thing that we couldn't get with Iraq—one of those—is when we're in one country we have an arrangement where if any of our men get in trouble we handle it, not the local foreign authorities. So our men are still under our jurisdiction. It was a matter of jurisdiction. There were just three of us in this little office.

**Jordan Helms:**

*Is that like the JAG department, or something along those lines?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yeah, like that. I don't remember anything interesting about that job, except England was interesting. This was in London.

**James Croft:**

*Did you enjoy your time abroad?*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh yeah, we loved London. Got out to...my wife got a trip down to Venice, which I didn't get to do. She and another Navy wife went down for a weekend and had a good time. We all enjoyed that, my two kids went to school: one in an English school and one in the American school.

**James Croft:**

*That must've made for an interesting household?*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh yeah.

**James Croft:**

*So, I'm sort of at a loss as to what to say....*

**Frank Rile:**

Put it on pause, we can chat for a minute. [recording pauses].

**James Croft:**

*Back on. So, in your whole time in the military, where was your favorite place to be? What was your favorite experience?*

**Frank Rile:**

I would say—I had two tours of duty in Japan—I would say Japan would be my favorite place, now.

**James Croft:**

*Why do you say that?*

**Frank Rile:**

It's a very interesting place. The Japanese, after we got over our initial animosity [laughter]—I never contacted much of the Japanese men, never any of their ex-military or anything. But the Japanese geisha girls, gosh, they treat you wonderful, and with the Japanese drink, we all enjoyed Japan. Because we were, in those days, the occupying force. We were real masters of Japan.

**James Croft:**

*When was this?*

**Frank Rile:**

This was during the Korean War. I remember thinking for us occupiers that was the safest place on Earth. You could be alone, midnight, anywhere in Japan, and nobody did anything threatening. We were the real masters of Japan.

**James Croft:**

*You were the authority?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yeah, absolutely. I remember being in places alone, and I'd stop at an inn to get supper or stay overnight. I enjoyed all of Japan, very much. Because it's—for one thing, being masters—

it's a very male society. The females walked three paces behind in those days; they may be more equal now that they've been democratized. But it is a very interesting country. Another place I'd like to visit would be China. I never got to Shanghai, which I would've loved to see. I did get to visit—recreation visits—for maybe two or three days down to Hong Kong. So I've been to Hong Kong. Right now I've got a grandson teaching English in Hong Kong to little kids, I don't know whether they're English or Chinese kids. He gets home for Christmas.

**James Croft:**

*Did you like Hong Kong?*

**Frank Rile:**

He likes it very much; he loves it.

**James Croft:**

*Did you enjoy Hong Kong? What did you like about it?*

**Frank Rile:**

Wonderful food. Chinese food is almost the best in the world when you get the real stuff, particularly fish and everything. No comparison, it's far superior to Japanese I'll tell you.

**Jordan Helms:**

*So what exactly were you doing in the Korean War?*

**Frank Rile:**

In the Korean War we were up at Inchon, I was on a troop ship—I was exec. We were with MacArthur at the Inchon landing. That was a stroke of genius; MacArthur was a top-notch genius of a general. We were way behind the enemy lines, completely took over, and then the enemy—the North Koreans—were all cut off from North Korea. What I remember about Inchon: terrific tides. Something like twenty-five foot tides. So at low tide there are miles of mud flats, and at high tide it's all ocean. My skipper got assigned to be—they captured a little island next to the town of Inchon that connected with a causeway, so we had occupied the town—then he was ordered to be king of Walmi-do was the name of this little island. I was skipper of my ship, right in the port. Nothing exceptional happened, but that was the best part. Then we loaded—this is Christmas of '51, I think—the Chinese came in to help the North Koreans and they were

overwhelming the Marines up at the lake.... anyway, that was when the Marines advanced to the rear—they did not retreat [laughter]. We went in to the name of the little port for Inchon, to load all the Korean railway workers. I got assigned as beach-master for loading three troop ships with all these railway workers. What it amounted to, they had a tremendous corral of Koreans trying to get out, many of whom, presumably, were the thing. But they had their families; they had their bicycles and everything. We loaded, of course, the families and everything, but when it came to bicycles, “Sorry buddy, bicycles stay on the pier,” and there they were. All night long I was loading sailors on the coldest damn night of the year, and I had nothing but very thin clothing on. I damn near froze; it went down to twenty degrees at night. In fact, it was an extremely cold winter for Korea. So, I did get all these loaded, and we got under way at dawn down to Pusan and unloaded all the Koreans. That was the biggest operation I remember, particularly being beach-master and freezing to death [laughter]—and scared too! When I left the ship they got some strange kind of message, and I said, “What does this mean?” The radiomen said, “I think it means that the Chinese won’t get here for the next four hours.” So I was scared, too. The Chinese didn’t get there for a couple days, I don’t think, but they did get there right after we left.

**Jordan Helms:**

*Did you get to meet General MacArthur?*

**Frank Rile:**

I didn’t personally get to meet him, no.

**James Croft:**

*One question I have, and this goes back far, but when you graduated the academy you entered the Navy as an officer...what’s it like entering the Navy as an officer?*

**Frank Rile:**

You get scattered out to the big ships, because they want those years training on a big ship rotated around. So, we got sent to various cruisers and battleships. I had put in for a cruiser, but I got the *West Virginia* instead. You just report aboard, brand new ensign. You’re in this division, you’re the junior division officer of this division, and your division officer is the guy that gives you orders. Very routine. They didn’t throw a party or anything for us [laughter].

**Jordan Helms:**

*So why did you decide to leave the service?*

**Frank Rile:**

I was passed over for captain, originally. I had been decorated with the Navy Cross, which the benefit—[interruption]<sup>6</sup>

So I got retired promotion to captain. I didn't enjoy being passed over. Furthermore, that privilege of getting promotion—I didn't get a promotion in pay as retired, I was still paid as a retired commander, but I got the rank of captain, which was with my class. So I wasn't embarrassed with all my classmates to say, "Oh, I failed."

**James Croft:**

*So, when it was all said and done, how many years did you have in the service?*

**Frank Rile:**

Twenty-one on active duty and four years at the Naval Academy. Years before my time they had counted Naval Academy time in addition—gave you retired for twenty-four or twenty-five years. Then they said, "No, no more counting the Naval Academy as four years, so you only retired for twenty-one." [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*After retiring, was it a difficult transition or was it an easy transition, or...?*

**Frank Rile:**

I remember sitting at the bar in the officers club down at the Marine base in... can't think of the town near San Diego. I remember sitting there, having a drink, and thinking, "What now?" I went into real estate and was no good at real estate. So that didn't work. My dad had died in '47 and had left me a bequest, so I was playing the stock market. From then until now I played the stock market. I still play the stock market a little, although the market is so terrible now I've been out of the market for four years. I still watch it every morning and most of the day on TV, and tell myself, "Well, you got to get back in!" My daughters, my oldest daughter, jeers at my claims of

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<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: on the tape at this point there is an interruption. An unidentified passerby says, "I've got a quick question, sorry to interrupt you. You didn't leave anything on that table, did you?" Frank Rile says, "No." This interruption is omitted from the transcript.

having invested all these years, so that discouraged me quite a bit, getting no credit from my oldest daughter [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*Was there anything about your service that surprised you or that you weren't expecting?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well, one would be that uniform business was a great thing. The other was—

**James Croft:**

*That you enjoyed that?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well, yeah. I'm very proud of having that uniform. The other thing was getting decorated with the Navy Cross as a result of the fire on the *Smith*, which is completely unexpected. But, I helped save the ship. The chief engineer flooded the forward magazines—he was fighting the fire underneath the forecastle deck—and I was up on deck with the fire hose.

**James Croft:**

*These are just kind of ending questions, but is there anything about your service that you think might surprise or interest somebody else that's a civilian, that doesn't have a military background?*

**Frank Rile:**

Yeah, civilians are usually interested in any stories I tell about the Navy. When I get together with Navy guys we end up telling sea stories of things that have happened. For instance, everything that happens to ships I've had happen in the Navy, with one or two exceptions. I've been on a ship aground, I've been in ship collisions, I've been in ship fires, I've been on a cruiser with a turret explosion at Okinawa—on the *Mobile*. The breach of a sixteen-inch gun didn't get fully closed when we were bombarding, so the breach blew open and the shell barely cleared the gun. It wiped out the gun's crew in the turret and it could've fired the magazines, but it didn't. The only thing I can say I didn't experience that a lot of Navy guys did: I never had enemy shellfire hit the ship. The rest of my division—the *Cushing*, the *Perkins*, the *Preston*—all were in night actions in November '42 after we were damaged and back in Pearl. They were in night

actions with American cruisers against Japanese cruisers, destroyers, and a battleship, or two battleships. They all got sunk—the rest of my division—at those two night actions in November. They were terrible defeats for the Navy. The Japs surprised us completely; they had practiced night actions so they were skillful at it. We had not practiced; we did not have radar. One ship had radar and we were so inexperienced that the officer in command of the forward cruisers in the night action didn't use the radar—didn't use the brand-new radar. He didn't trust it; we didn't know what it was. Four cruisers sunk in this night action, plus the destroyers. So, in effect, although we had a terrible catastrophe, we were saved from the worst in November. It was a bad time, I'll tell you; the U.S. was desperate in the Pacific in those days. The Marines on Guadalcanal and the few ships...

After the Santa Cruz Islands battle, the *Enterprise* had taken three bomb hits, no torpedo hits. The skipper had managed to avoid all the aircraft torpedoes and those three from the submarine, which he didn't know about the submarine [laughter]. He did a magic job, but he did take three bomb hits. That was the only operational U.S. carrier in the Pacific after that battle, that's how desperate we were. Damaged, we were the only operational carrier. That was desperate days. Nobody knew that, least of all the Japanese [laughter]; we didn't want them to know that.

**James Croft:**

*Is there anything that you think it's important for civilians to understand about the service?*

**Frank Rile:**

Let me see... would you guys be interested in joining the service? You were considering it. So you're a good prospect. Let me talk to you a while [laughter]. You're not interested?

**Jordan Helms:**

*Me? No, I was debating on going into the Air Force, my brother was in the Special Forces, and my dad was in the Air Force.*

**Frank Rile:**

Oh, you two are both good prospects, see. When I talk to civilians—for instance, now that women are accepted in the military, of course it's long after my daughters were eligible. But, I could imagine if they had been eligible I would've tried to get a daughter into the Naval



Academy. At one of the reunions down in Santa Barbara—they had an annual picnic; it was a lot of fun. We all had sea stories, traded stories, and got a lot of drinks and had a picnic. There was a young, female, junior grade lieutenant. I was absolutely fascinated talking to her about what it was like at the Academy, “Did you date other guys? What did you do?” She was married and had a little daughter right there at the picnic with her, she was a young girl about probably twenty-eight, twenty-nine. I was absolutely fascinated; I couldn’t get enough anecdotes from her.

**James Croft:**

*So is that something that, I guess...well, what do you think about women in the military? It seems like that's something that really....*

**Frank Rile:**

It’s—women want equality, and if they want to get into the service I’m all for it. I frequently ask myself, “If I were skipper of a ship now, and some of these women are aboard, how do I treat them all? How do I operate the ship? Do I get the men together and say, ‘Now listen, nobody lays a finger on the girls?’” [laughter]. One of my favorite movies that I watch every time it comes on TV is *A Few Good Men*, about the Marines and the Navy. I love that movie—I just watched it three nights ago. One of the characters in the movie is a lieutenant commander woman lawyer who—have you seen that movie? Do you remember it, both of you? Did you like it?

**Jordan Helms:**

*I did.*

**James Croft:**

*Yeah.*

**Frank Rile:**

A good damn movie! It had a real story, a real purpose. It didn’t just fool around with some fool love-story or something; it was a real account—very good. I, myself, wouldn’t try to recruit people. But, anybody that was interested, I certainly—like we’re doing now—I talk it over with them, tell them all about it. Actually, I think the best service to get in, the one that’s, I would say, easiest, would be the Air Force. They stay on the base, they’re back at the base every night;

everything is happy and hunky-dory. The Navy goes out to sea for months at a time, we miss our families; we're out there all alone. It's hard work [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*I had a friend's dad who was in the Air Force tell me the exact same thing about the Navy and the Air Force [laughter].*

**Frank Rile:**

Is that right? Yeah, I think the Air Force is the best one. I would not like to be an infantryman in the Army. But West Point is a damn fine university. 'Course we've licked them six years now in football [laughter].

**James Croft:**

*Point of pride?*

**Frank Rile:**

Right [laughter]. That poor guy—did you watch the Army-Navy game this year? You did? The poor Army guy who fumbled, right in front of the goal line...he was down on the bench like this after that fumble, and Navy won because of his fumble. Oh, that was pitiful for him.

**James Croft:**

*At least you kept the record going though. So, I have one more question, I don't know about you, Jordan?*

**Jordan Helms:**

*I've got one more.*

**James Croft:**

*When you reflect on your service, does anything arise that you think is, I don't know, interesting or important or stands apart for you, I guess?*

**Frank Rile:**

Well, more and more over the years I've been more and more proud of having served, and the retired pay is a wonderful blessing. So, that's a surprise.

**Jordan Helms:**

*So, looking back on everything that you've done with Navy, are you happy your dad shanghaied you into going to Annapolis?*

**Frank Rile:**

Exactly. I've said to my kids, "Now, I realize, boy, what a debt I owe to my dad." I used to fight with him; I used to quarrel with my dad. Now, God bless him [pauses]...it makes me choke. I owe everything I have to my dad. [pause]...that makes me very sad [pause]...because he had a bad time—we won't go into that.

**James Croft:**

*Understandable. Well, I don't have any more questions.*

**Jordan Helms:**

*Yeah, I don't have anything else either.*

**James Croft:**

*Is there anything else that you want to say? I mean this is your chance to get on the record with whatever you want to say about your military service.*

**Frank Rile:**

Both of you guys are still eligible to get in the military [laughter]. All you've got to do is sign up [laughter]. I'm kidding you, of course. What are your plans for careers?

## **TRANSCRIPTION NOTE**

None.