

Richard Smith

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Interviewee: Richard Smith

Interviewer: Ennis Barbery, Linda Ladas

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E Barbery: This is a life history interview for the Museum of Chincoteague Island and for the Chincoteague Island library. Today is February 23rd, 2015. We are interviewing Richard Smith in Salisbury. He's going to talk about his time on Chincoteague as well. We are in Salisbury, Maryland today. Linda Ladas is here helping with the interview. My name is Ennis Barbery. I'm the interviewer today. What is your full name?

R Smith: Full name is Richard H. Smith. Richard Harrison Smith.

E Barbery: And you said you had some nicknames.

R Smith: Well yes, Smitty. Most people wouldn't—that would how they would know me on Chincoteague would be Smitty because, I don't know, my wife—all my friends call me that at home. When I met my wife I guess I said, "Well, you don't have to call me Richard or anything like that. Just call me like everybody else does, Smitty." So it just sort of stuck. All the time I was there I think everybody knew me as Smitty.

E Barbery: When were you born and where were you born?

R Smith: I was born in July 9, 1922 in East Liverpool, Ohio to immigrant parents. My mother was from Germany and my father was from Britain. They both came to this country and met at Ellis Island. That was the beginning of the products for me.

E Barbery: What did they do for work there?

R Smith: My father was an experienced pottery decorator. So he had no problem getting work. But my mother was younger. She was just out of high school when they met. So after they were married she went into the potteries. That was the potteries center of the world at that time. My mother went in the potteries and learned how to become a gold stamper which is to stamp the decorations around the edge of the dish. So she learned that trade. So they both worked in the pottery up until they retired in about 1960, 1958.

E Barbery: Is that decorative pottery?

R Smith: It wasn't decorative but it was practical pottery. It was used for, you know, for—they had different kinds. They did make some decorated pottery, but the bulk of it was for use, actually use.

E Barbery: Did you have brothers and sisters?

R Smith: I had a sister named Betty. She was three years older than I and we got along very well. Like brother and sister, we had disagreements, but we really got along well after she got—after we moved down here she got ill and so I had to take care of her. I didn't have to, I did take care of her and it wasn't any burden because we had been very close, you know, when we were children. Then my parents moved, came down here. Of course that's another story, how I got down here.

E Barbery: So you brought everyone to the East Coast?

R Smith: If it too long, you just let me know. As soon as I got out of the service. When I was in Chincoteague I was stationed in the infirmary. And so I met Nettie. I met Nettie in about July, August and we were married New Year's Eve 1943. I hadn't aspirations of being on Chincoteague for the duration. So we got married and then I didn't have to stay at the infirmary, I could—I was going home every night to Nettie's home. It was just like any young couple we were, you know, happy as we could be. Then the infirmary burned down. There were three other pharmacists', mates and myself with no job. I was transferred to Norfolk aboard a ship; the USS Randall That was in April of '44. I was on the Randall for the balance of the war until I got out in November '45. It was a troop transport ship that carried combat troops wherever they were going to go. Sometimes it was nice and sometimes it wasn't. While I was on the ship I was awarded accommodation for—I don't like to use the word—being an heroic medical attender. I just don't like that because I was just doing what I was supposed to do. And I was also awarded the Bronze Star. I was in three battles. I was in Philippines, Guam and Okinawa. While we received—my ships received a presidential unit citation from the Philippine president. That was all that. We came back to the states I guess maybe it was in August '45. I forgot to mention when I left Chincoteague in April, my wife was two months pregnant. I never got to see my son until he was about a year and a half old when I got to see him for the first time. That was quite a thrill too. Even though he was frightened of me he was scared to death every time I would go near him. I guess probably because I'd been in the South Pacific and I was brown and I had black hair. All I had to do was walk toward that crib, or whatever, and he would throw a fit. And then I would cry. [laughs] And I'd say he doesn't love me and all that. But it was just a natural reaction. He and I have always had a good relationship—is a retired school teacher. He went to William and Mary College and he met a lot of Chincoteague people the four years that he was attending William and Mary too.

E Barbery: I've heard that. There are a lot of Chincoteague people at William and Mary.

R Smith: I can't remember the name but I know he got married and he became very friendly with another couple—the man was down there as a student and he had his wife there too. They had apartments in the same apartment building. They both had Chincoteague ties. Why I think they got along pretty good.

E Barbery: I want to go back for a just minute to your more early childhood. What was it like growing up in Ohio? Where there other languages in the house; you said you were German?

R Smith: My mother was the youngest of nine children. Eight daughters and one son. When they came here my grandmother, who was pretty fluent in English, and fine in German naturally. And all of my mother's sisters and her brother could speak fluent German. When my mother came along, my grandmother said, "There will be no more German spoken in this house, because this girl is going to be an American girl." So my mother knew some obscenities I think. [laughs] I never did hear my mother say anything in German except when she got mad, especially at my dad. So that's why I think they might have been obscenities, but I'm not sure of that. [laughter] As I say, my parents both were potters and I graduated from high school in 1940. I took a course in analytical chemistry. And I got a job in a steel mill as an analytical chemist. That's what I did until the war started. See the war started in December '41 and my friend and I, we decided in April and May that we were going to enlist. We both wanted to join the Marine Corps as most young guys did. We went to Pittsburgh to the recruiting office and signed up and filled out all the papers and they sent us across the hall to the doctors. They had a place there. They examined us and my friend had something the matter with—one of his feet was different. In other words it

didn't have—it wasn't exactly the same, so they wouldn't take him. And I'd already signed up. And I said, "Well, I'm not going to go if he's not going to go." And they said, "You've got to go, you've already signed up." And I said, "Well, I can change that real quick." I just picked the papers up off the guys desk and I tore them up. I said, "Because my friend and I came here together and we want to be together as long as we can." So that's how I got into the Coast Guard. There was a Coast Guard recruiting station right across from the Marine Corps. We went in there and both of us passed the physical. So we went together in the Coast Guard. We were never together at all after we enlisted. We were told, "You guys are going to be together." In fact I went to Curtis Bay in Baltimore and he went to somewhere in New York. Up in the city of New York there was a Coast Guard station up there along the docks somewhere.

E Barbery: I know you said it before, but how did you get from—you were in Baltimore then, to Chincoteague?

R Smith: I went to Curtis Bay boot camp. I was there until, I guess, the middle of February. They I got transferred to Norfolk. That was all in the Fifth Naval District. When I got moving anywhere I always went somewhere in the Fifth Naval District. After I got transferred from Baltimore I went to Portsmouth, which is right across the river from Norfolk. There was a rather large Coast Guard base there. It was primarily a port security base. During WWII there was just ships from all countries coming into Norfolk because it was probably the second if not maybe the largest port on the East Coast. So it was a very busy place and our job was to make sure nobody did any harm to these ships or that there wasn't anybody on the ships that was going to come ashore and do any harm to the base. I was only there for about six weeks and I go pretty discouraged and asked for a transfer. They gave be a chit to go to school but they thought they would stop me by saying, "We'll send you to combat medical school, medic school." But I said, "I don't care about that, I just want to get the heck out of here, you know." So that's how I got—I went to school in New London, Connecticut. Graduated the first of July. I've already told you how I got to Chincoteague from there.

E Barbery: If you could say it again though since we got the camera...

R Smith: I spent, I think a total of about three and a half months in New London at the school. When we graduated, we all had to go back to our original Naval District, which was the Fifth. There were two other fellas beside me that were tied to the Fifth Naval District, so the three of us were sent together to Norfolk, which was the headquarters of the Fifth Naval District and also the Coast Guard. So we went to the Coast Guard Office to be assigned and the gentleman, I believe he was a Chief Petty Officer, he had three places for us. One was Ocracoke, one was Elizabeth City, and the other one was Chincoteague. The other two guys; one of them was from Minnesota and the other was from Maine and I was from Ohio. I'd never heard of any one of the three of them either. It just seemed like these other two guys just had something against Chincoteague and they said, "I don't know, I'll go anywhere, Don't send me to that place. That sounds pretty weird." [laughs] Of course I was always a sort of a carefree guy at that time. So I said, "I don't care where you send me. I'll go to Chincoteague." After we got all signed up the guy who did the recruiting came to me. He says, "Well you got the best of the deal by far. I know because I'm from Chincoteague." I can't remember his name now. In fact he went to school with my wife. His name has slipped me. Lewis is his last name I think. But I cannot remember his first name. After Nellie and I met and married we had occasion to be in his and his wife's company many times.

E Barbery: When we talked on the phone you told me about when you came to Chincoteague for the first time.

R Smith: That's what I was going to get to next. After we got all the papers and everything signed at Norfolk the guy gave us, each one, a bus ticket. I was the only one going north, so I used—at that time it was called the Red Star Lines I think, the bus company. They gave me a ticket to get on the bus. I got on the bus and went to the ferry at Cape Charles, crossed the ferry, came over to Cape Charles from Norfolk and started up route 13 to go towards Chincoteague. I said to the bus driver, "How far is it from here to Chincoteague?" He said, "Too far." And laughs. I thought, uh oh, I don't know what's going on here. We got up to about Painter and the bus broke down. I was the only one that had to be somewhere at a specific time. There were other service men on the bus but they were sort of like on liberty or leave. I said to the bus driver, "I've got to be in Chincoteague, Virginia by five o'clock." And he said, "Well, I can't move the bus. The bus is broke down and they're bringing another bus. But it's liable to be another two or three hours before they bring that bus." But he said, "I'll get your sea bag and you get out on the highway and there's a lot of chicken trucks that go up and down the road." And he said, "I'm sure one of those guys will stop for you and he can drop you off at T's Corner. Then you can call the Coast Guard from there and they'll come and pick you up." That's what I did. The very first chicken truck that came by, the guy stopped and I threw my sea bag in the back and we came to T's Corner. The guy said, "Well, this is the end of it. You're here." He said, "It's up to the Coast Guard to get you now." I called the Coast Guard. I had their number on my paper. I called Coast Guard office and a fellow answered phone. I said, "Well, I've been transferred to Chincoteague and I'm out at T's Corner." He said, "Well, we'll have someone out there very shortly." I waited and waited and waited. Finally here come an old truck, pickup truck, with USCG on the side of it. It looked like it had re-enlisted it. I got, threw my sea bag in the back of the truck and got in with him. We were riding along. I said, "What's this place like? What's Chincoteague like?" He said, "Oh, you'll like it. It's a nice little town. The people are nice. There's a lot of things to do there. You'll really like it." I said, "Oh, that's sounds good." We came across the overhead bridge and come down on the main street. It was about by that time, about 10 o'clock at night. And I looked up one side and looked down the other and all I could see was street lights with hoods on because during the war they hooded the street lights so they shined right down. I couldn't see a soul. There was not a soul out on the street. I heard this in the distance, I heard this jukebox playing. And I never forget, it was playing 'Good Night Irene'. Never forget it as long as I live. I thought, well this is good night Richard. [laughter] After I stood there for a while the fellow was sort of waiting to see what I was going to do. I said, "Well I'm a pharmacist's mate and I'm supposed to go—is there a hospital here on the island?" He says, "No, there's an infirmary but there's no hospital. I don't think you can get down there tonight. All the guys have gone home and they won't be back till tomorrow to take you down there. But if you go into the Russell Hotel they'll let you spend the night in there, then the Coast Guard will pay them and then will pick up tomorrow morning and take you out to the infirmary." I said, "Okay." So I went in and I had a dinner. The Russell Hotel had a restaurant in there at that time. So I went in and had some dinner. Of course I was beat tired from driving, traveling all the way from Connecticut all the way down to Norfolk and back up. I went to bed and went to sleep right away. I woke up. It was 9:30 in the morning. I said, "God, I'm in trouble right off the bat." I was used to pretty strict regulations. I had never been in a real relaxing environment in the Coast Guard. I said, "My God I'll probably start out here right in the brig." The guy had given me the infirmary's number, so I called the infirmary and the guy said, "Yeah, we'll be in the ambulance and pick you up in about 10 minutes. So, here comes the ambulance down and took me out to the infirmary. It was a beautiful, beautiful place. It was a sin that that place burned down because it

had been built as a fishing deal. It had two big sea going fishing boats there like they had in Ocean City. They had two of them there which belonged to the Coast Guard now because the Coast Guard had taken charge of them. I'm sure for a certain amount of money.

E Barbery: Do you remember what the infirmary was called there? We've heard about Camp Fletcher. Was it part of Camp Fletcher or was that—I was confused.

R Smith: No. Camp Fletcher was Army.

E Barbery: That's right. And you were Coast Guard.

R Smith: There was an outpost right across from the infirmary. I think the infirmary was built by a group of men from Philadelphia or Washington or somewhere in Baltimore. It was built for a specific reason; to come to Chincoteague and go fishing and stay there for a week. It was a lovely place, I mean; they had a big living room with a giant fireplace in there. There were bedrooms they turned into sick rooms, I mean, for in-patients like it was in a hospital. There were living quarters on the end, but nobody—the doctor was entitled to stay there because when the Coast Guard took it over it was designated a officer country. We weren't supposed to stay there but it was a really lovely place. Every once in a while we'd take a night and one of us would got back there and spend the night.

E Barbery: Where was it located?

R Smith: It was located on the north end of the building.

E Barbery: Where was the building itself located? I just want to make sure I understand where exactly...

R Smith: Well the building was located where the campground is now. You go all the way up through—you go all the way down to, almost to the inlet on Chincoteague. And there's a street that goes down that way. It used to be called Chicken City. You went right straight down there and you'd go right to the channel. This place was built right on the channel. The boats would come in there and they'd go right—there was a slip there and they'd come in the slip and back out and go right out the channel and go out to sea.

E Barbery: So if you're on Maddox and you're turning on Chicken City and you're turning left or right? You're coming on the island...

R Smith: You're coming on the island and you turn right on Main Street. Go all the way up to—at that time it was the end of the residences. I can't remember the name of that road but you turned left down there. You could keep going straight and you could go down to the inlet. If you turned left here you could go right down—there was probably three or four chicken houses down there. I think that's why they called it Chicken City Road. The infirmary was right at the end of it.

E Barbery: We don't know much about the infirmary, all of it, because some of the other interviews we've done people have talked about Camp Fletcher. Do you remember anything about Camp Fletcher?

R Smith: No, I really had no association with them. They were pretty—I don't know, I very seldom saw a soldier when I was making a living here. I very seldom saw a soldier. They were a very out of the way bunch of guys I thought, you know, because I don't know much about them. The only thing I know is that Camp Fletcher is named after a fellow on Chincoteague that was in the Coast Guard. He was on the US Cutter Campbell [USCGC Campbell]. And it think the Campbell got torpedoed by a submarine and he was one of the fatalities. That's how Camp Fletcher got the name.

E Barbery: I have heard that. Did you ever hear any activity off the coast? I know some people I've talked to talked about German subs, German U-boats off the coast of CI.

R Smith: Yes. Whenever they would find anybody they would—first place they brought them was to the infirmary. It wasn't common, but it wasn't unusual. You got to remember that from Cape Charles out to Delaware, the inlet up in Delaware; there were Coast Guard stations all along the coast. There was Cape Charles, there was Paramour Beach, there was Hog Island, there was Wallops Island there was Assateague, there was Ocean City. Assateague, Pope's Island, Ocean City. Isle of Wight. I can't remember the name of the last one. It was where the big bridge goes over. Anyway, that was as far as we went. Some of them had dogs to use with patrol and some of them had horses that they used. Some of the longer space between the two they used horses instead of dogs. So they patrolled the beach 24/7. All the time they patrolled the beach. My time there I know of two cases where they—I don't think there was ever submarines sunk there, but there were two cases where an alien was trying to get ashore from a submarine. He was caught by the Coast Guard and the first place that they brought them was to the infirmary. When they brought them to the infirmary, first of course we gave him a physical exam to make sure they were okay didn't have anything stuck inside of them or anything like that, you know. Then we would just turn them over to the shore patrol and they would take them where ever, usually to Norfolk I expect. That only happened while I was there I think twice. There were times when it was the accidents like there was a minesweeper constantly out there. One time one of the fellas had a pretty bad accident and he lost his hand and they brought him into us and we just didn't have the equipment to do anything with him, so we took him to Norfolk too, to the Marine hospital in Norfolk.

E Barbery: What is a minesweeper? I don't think I'm familiar with that.

R Smith: A mine is something that they put in the water and it's got an anchor. It's a big explosive bomb. It's got prongs sticking out all over it. All you have to do is hit one of those prongs and it goes. If a cargo ship coming up and down the coast, if it happened to hit one of those mines they were gonners. So they had these minesweepers with great big arms out the sides. It's what they call a paravane. And the paravane had a real sharp end on it. They would just coast. And of course the mine had a cable down where it was anchored. And this paravane would clip that cable and the mine would pop up out of the water. And then they'd get away and they'd shoot it in the can and blow it up. That's what minesweepers were for. There were minesweepers up and down there probably until maybe April or May of '45.

E Barbery: What a dangerous job.

R Smith: Well they weren't really dangerous because, you know, of course your sonar could pick up the mines and most of the big ships, my ship had paravanes on it too when I was over in the South Pacific. And they did the same thing it would just catch the mine by the cable and sever the cable and then it would pop up to the surface. And you could see it. Somebody would take a rifle and shoot it and it would explode.

E Barbery: And the German U-boats, they would have left the mines there, is that what?

R Smith: Yeah. I guess so. They wouldn't have had anything to surface other than that I'm sure. It wasn't—they tried to keep that as quiet as they could because of the population. They didn't want to upset the population and make them think that there was a lot of danger. A lot of things happened off of that shore Chincoteaguers don't know anything about or didn't know anything about. And that was a good thing. It was such a necessary thing during the war because the German U-boats were; they were the cream of the German military. They were the cream, you know. They were sinking ships at will out there that were leaving Norfolk and New York and places like that. They just lay off shore there and waited for them. They were sinking a lot of ships. We only picked up the crew of one ship that had been torpedoed. They brought them in.

This was from Pope's Island. It's up in the north, I think, if you know, that's north of Chincoteague, Pope's Island. It was a small crew. There were only like eight or nine guys on there. Pope's Island picked them up and brought them in down to the infirmary. They were all okay.

E Barbary: That's good that they were okay. What was it day-to-day like to work in the infirmary? What kind...

R Smith: Well, the infirmary was—it was really a boon to Chincoteague because we never turned anybody away. We had sick call every morning at ten o'clock and then we had it again at two in the afternoon. We had a dental clinic there. We had an operating room. We had a laboratory. We had all the facilities there. A lot of the Chincoteague men who were fishermen, the Coast Guard would convince them to enlist in the Reserve and just be available in the event of anything happening. They would from time to time have to be on patrol. Nearly every man the owned a boat on Chincoteague joined the Reserves for the simple reason that he could get the benefits of being in the Coast Guard which was in that case was the infirmary. We delivered babies and we did appendectomies and tonsillectomies and all kinds of things there. If it hadn't of been there, people would have had to go all the way to Nassawadox to have that done. And practically go to Norfolk to get any dental work done. Either there or up in, I think there was maybe a dentist or two up in Pocomoke. If we had—in fact I worked in the dental clinic from time to time because we would alternate where we would be working. I know every time I worked in the dental clinic, we had appointments for the whole day like for a full week. Mostly young people. Mostly young people because I think due to the lack of dental facilities on the island a middle-aged person probably didn't have very many teeth left. You know if you got a tooth problem on Chincoteague at that time, pull it, you know, because there wasn't anybody there to drill a hole or fill it or anything like that. That's why it was so popular when we were there because people would take their kids down there, or they could go down there and get the dental work done. It was free, you know. It was a wonderful thing for Chincoteague and it was a tragedy that it burned down, because I think if it had stayed there until the war was over I'm sure somebody, the city or the county would have taken it over and made it a permanent facility. But for a long time after the war there was just one doctor on Chincoteague and that was about it, you know. I loved it. I almost became a Chincoteague native because the people were just—they were all so nice. I never run into anybody that was negative. One of the nicest things about Chincoteague, no negativity. There wasn't then.

L Ladas: How did the fire start?

R Smith: That's a story in itself too. It was on a Saturday night. Everybody on liberty from the infirmary would go to Pony Pines, or the Lollipop. Okay usually go to the Lollipop or the Pony Pines. I had the duty that night, so I wasn't in a position to go. One of the other pharmacists' mates said to me, he said, "Smitty, why don't you go to this. And you're married. Go pick Nettie up and go to the Pony Pines and enjoy." I said, "Well, I got the duty." He said, "I'll take care of that." So I said, "Okay." So I went and picked Nettie and we went over to the Pony Pines and had a few beers and danced and we went home. Of course I slept up at the Merritt house. This was on a Saturday night. The next morning a friend of Nettie's lived across the street come over and she said, "What are you doing here Smitty? The infirmary burned down last night. Didn't you know that?" And I said, "Oh my gosh, no, I had the duty." That's why I got transferred because I had the duty and I wasn't there. And that's really the reason I got transferred. How it got started, we had a kitchen there, a galley, great food. We had a cook and a helper. The cook, he lived in town. He and his wife came; he's from New York and they lived in town. But this helper was a young

guy. He was probably, maybe nineteen or so. He went on liberty that night and he came back drunk. He was laying in bed smoking a cigarette and the whole inside of the sleeping quarters was knotty pine. Right beside his bed there was one of the knots that had come out. He dropped his cigarette down in there in that hole. That's what started the fire. If I'd have known about it. If I'd have known it happened I could have gotten down there and I wouldn't have gotten into trouble. I didn't even try to get out of it. They came up from Norfolk to investigate. When they interviewed me I just said I had the duty.

E Barbery: Chincoteague's has had a long history of fires earlier that...

R Smith: I mentioned to you on the phone Nettie's uncle, Eb Jones, he was the big fireman down there in Chincoteague for years and years. He was—I think he was a commodore in the Coast Guard when he retired. He was really up there. He was in charge of all the communications up and down the beach. Telephone systems were all wires. There was no wireless stuff like we have today. It was all lined communication. With the wind and the storms and the weather it was pretty much a constant maintenance problem. He had a crew of—I bet he had a crew of about 50 guys because his area was all the way from Cape Charles all the way up to Indian River. I think about 10 or 12 Coast Guard stations in that area. He took care of that. Of course it came from the mainland to Chincoteague and went both ways from Chincoteague. It came across the causeway from Chincoteague.

E Barbery: I want to ask about how you met Nettie. I don't think you've said her last name. So what's her full name?

R Smith: Nettie Jean Merritt was her name. Her father was a waterman. She had two sisters and a brother. She was the youngest of the four children. I met Nettie at Pony Pines. Nettie was engaged to another man when I met her. It just struck me. They talk about instant love. It's like that. She walked in the door and I just thought, well, that's my girl. [break in video here] I get a little fogged up when I talk about it.

E Barbery: Well, we don't have to talk about her.

R Smith: Well I'll be alright. We were married 68 years. It's hard to get used to not having anybody like that around.

E Barbery: When did she pass away? Just a few years ago?

R Smith: Four years ago. [video resumes] Nettie came in with a group of girls and a couple of guys. I saw her and I said, "I'm going to dance with girl right now." And I went over—when everyone sat down I went over and I said, "Can I have the next dance with you." She looked at me a sort of squinted and said, "I don't think I ever seen you here before." I said, "Well you haven't because I've only been here since Friday." And this was on Saturday.

E Barbery: So you met her right away? [laughs]

R Smith: Yes. And she says, "Sure I'll dance with you the next dance." So we danced. She was with another group and we danced two or three times and struck it off great. The last time we danced she said, "Well I've got to leave. My friends are leaving." She says, "When will you be back over here?" I said, "I'll be back over here whenever you say." [laughter] She says, "Well, we usually come over here on Monday nights because it's not so crowded." I said, "Well I'll be here Monday night." I went over Monday night and it was thunderstorm. So she never showed up, naturally. I thought, well; I didn't realize what the transportation was like then, you know, because I hadn't been there but two or three days. And I said, "Well that was a sure hot line." I didn't think much of it. But then on Friday night I went over there and she was there. Soon as she saw me she came over and apologized and said, "I'm so sorry that I wasn't here Monday." She says, "But it was a thunderstorm and I just had no way to get here." And I said, "Well," And she

was with this same group of people. I said, "Well I'll forgive you under one condition." And she said, "What's that?" And I said, "If you let me take you home." And she said, "That's fine." So we left the Pines and walked from the Pines in town. You know where the cemetery is on the left—so you come into town on Church Street the cemetery is off to the left there. Sort of sets up on a little mound. When we got there we were talking and I said to her, I said, "Do you mind if I kiss you." And she said, "Yes I don't want to kiss anybody out here in the street." [laughter] "We'll lets go back there in the cemetery and I'll kiss you." We walked up in the cemetery and I kissed her. Then we walked back down on the road and that's what really, I guess, started the relationship. Because it was my situation at the infirmary—I had pretty well. We just had one duty guy at night because we didn't do any appointments or anything. I pretty well had most every night off. I used to walk every night from the infirmary Up the Neck to where Nettie lived with her parents. It's about three miles from—you know where the turntable is at the north end of the island?

E Barbery: What do you mean the turntable?

R Smith: It's the end of the street. It's the end of Main Street. It just circles around there. They call it the turntable. That's where everybody used to go to neck. [laughter] The turntable was a famous place, because a lot of people; everybody on Chincoteague knows about the turntable. I could see her every night. Of course I could get to the Pony Pines. That's as far as I could get. She would get a ride [from] somebody coming in town and they would—they were friends of hers so they would take her over to the Pony Pines. I would meet here there. That's how our relationship started and it just progressed from there. Nettie's mother passed away in November. And we had already discussed getting married. She wanted to get married on New Year's Eve. We had already discussed that. I wouldn't make a difference to me. And her mother died about the middle of November and I said to her, I said, "I don't know whether we ought to go ahead and get married or not." And she said, "Well, you mind if we talk to my dad about that." And I said, "No." We sat down with Mr. Merritt and of course I had already asked him if it was all right with him if got married, you know. So we sit down. And Nettie said, "Pops." She said, "You know Smitty and I were planning to get married on New Year's Eve but, you know, Mom's just passed away and I don't know whether its right okay for us to get married that soon or not." So Mr. Merritt was a nice guy and he says, "Well, the war's on and nobody knows including Smitty where he will be three months from now or whatever. So if you two want to get married I don't see a thing in the world the matter with it." So I called my folks up in Ohio. And my sister and mother and father, the drove down from Ohio to be there for the wedding. We all drove back—I got ten days leave after the wedding and we all drove back up to Ohio and that's where we spent our honeymoon was up in Ohio. Then it was my automobile that they came down in and so when we got ready to come back to Chincoteague after my leave was up I talked to my parents and told them I'd really like to have a car down there. They said, "Well that's no problem. You go ahead take it. We'll get a car. So we drove back to Chincoteague in my old car. It was a '39 Dodge. We stayed—we spent the night. We only drove halfway but we spent the night in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in a hotel there. In the morning came back; drove down the next day. Started a 68-year relationship.

E Barbery: What did you parents think of Chincoteague?

R Smith: They were [laughs]. This is another story. There was a big oyster house on Chincoteague called Plitts, Plitts Oyster House.

E Barbery: How do you spell that?

R Smith: PLITTS, Plitts. They shipped oysters all over the country. They had a great big tractor trailer that made two or three trips a week out to Chicago with nothing but oysters in it. There was fella who drove the truck. I had gotten acquainted with him. When I told him where I was from he said, "Hell, I go through there every time I go to Chicago." And I said, "Well..." I gave him my parent's phone number and address. I said, "Well, you know, you have time, stop there. They'll treat you royally and be glad to see you and meet you." And so he did and they became friends. My dad went on one trip. On his way back from Chicago he picked my dad up and he came down to Chincoteague in this oyster truck. [laughter] He knew that he was going to be there for three or four days and the truck was going to go back up. So he way down here for three or four days. The oyster truck man had another trip to Chicago, so he went back home then. My mother came down on the train before we got married. When we told her we were going to get married she didn't waist any time getting down there to see what was going on.

E Barbery: Oh the trains are interesting too. So did it drop her off at Franklin City?

R Smith: No, Decatur. Decatur you know. I was a little teeny stop. I think it was Decatur it was called.

E Barbery: I might be. I just haven't heard of it before, but maybe.

R Smith: There was probably three or four taxis on Chincoteague and they would be over there waiting for the train because if everybody going to Chincoteague, that where they got off the train at. She rode—she had a long train ride. She went from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and from Philadelphia to Washington, DC. And from Washington DC to Fredericksburg, Virginia, and from Fredericksburg to Norfolk and then she had to catch the ferry from Norfolk, you know the Norfolk ferry back up to Cape Charles. And she got a bus from—she was wore out when she got there.

E Barbery: I should say so.

R Smith: That was before the days of flights. There were no commercial flights going on there I don't think.

E Barbery: And before the days of the causeway to, so it was all ferries.

R Smith: No, the causeway was there.

E Barbery: Oh it was there. Oh I got that mixed up.

R Smith: The causeway was built in about 1920 or a little earlier or a little later. Around 1920 I think. A little interesting story about Nettie's grandfather. His name—this is a really interesting thing because the Merritt name—all of Nettie's dad and his two brothers went by the name of Merritt, but their father swore up and down the name was Mallett. He got really upset because what happened they were—this was up in Green Run. It was an oyster time right on Assateague Bay. It was up around Ocean City. There was a little school house there and they had all gone to school as Merritt. And he told them their name wasn't Merritt it was Mallett. He said the reason that is, is because 'r's are written—in the old days 'r's were written as like an 'f' or you know, an 'l'. The old fashioned 'r' was like a big loop in it to make it look like an 'l'. So he said the name wasn't Mallett. It was Merritt because of that. Everyone that knows grandfather accepted that because he married a Merritt woman. My father's grandfather married a woman, Merritt. On the tombstones in the graveyard, his tombstone says Gilbert Mallett and her tombstone says Nancy Merritt, [laughter] wife of Gilbert Mallett. Gilbert Mallett, wife [husband] of Nancy Merritt. The interesting thing about the whole story is that during the Civil War there was a big family of farmers that lived on Assateague Island by the name of Scott. In the Civil War if you were drafted, if you could pay somebody and they would accept the pay to go for you that's what; you could do that. So Nettie's grandfather agreed to serve in the Union Army because Mr. Scott had

been drafted and he didn't want to go. He was a wealthy farmer. They used to do a lot of farming over there. So he paid—how much money he paid Nettie's grandfather I have no idea, but Nettie's grandfather went into the Union Army and he was captured. He spent a year and a half in Andersonville prison in Georgia.

E Barbery: Oh yes, I think you mentioned that to me. Do you know what his first name was?

R Smith: Gilbert.

E Barbery: Gilbert. Oh I think you may have said it. And he was going by Merritt?

R Smith: No, he was going by Mallett.

E Barbery: He was going by Mallett, okay.

R Smith: He was the one that never would change. He said, "That school teacher doesn't know what she's talking about." [laughter]

E Barbery: So he was going Mallett. Wow.

R Smith: You know there's something I wanted to ask you too because there's a lot of things pertaining to what we've been talking about that I've given to my son. There's a picture of Nettie's grandfather. I've given that to my son. I can get it and get a copy made of it if it would be of any interest for you to have it, you know, I'd be glad to do that.

E Barbery: Yeah, we'd love to have a copy of it. We can make copies at the Museum too. So you don't have to worry about getting one made.

R Smith: There's quite a few things that I had already given my son pertaining to Nettie and I.

E Barbery: We would love to have copies of that. Do you have anything else to add about Nettie's family because we're on the topic first, I should ask?

R Smith: No, I don't think so.

E Barbery: It's very interesting, her family background though.

R Smith: Well I do too have a little I think about her sister, next to in age to her. She had a little restaurant called the Beehive or something or other.

E Barbery: On Chincoteague?

R Smith: Uh huh. It wasn't the Beehive. It was...

E Barbery: What was her sister's name?

R Smith: Lola.

E Barbery: Lola, oh, I've heard that. I've heard of the Lola Merritt. She probably changed her name when she got married.

R Smith: She married a Tipton. The Beehive I think it was called.

E Barbery: Do you remember where it was?

R Smith: It was on Main Street right across from where—almost across from where the drug store. It's still there I believe, because what happened, a guy came there from college as a pharmacist and he started to date Lola. And they got married and she closed up the Beehive and went to Mississippi with him. He was from Natchez, Mississippi. And his name was Ansell Tipton. Nettie worked there too, by the way. She was still in school, but she worked there in the evenings and on the weekends. They called Lola Big Bee and Nettie Little Bee. [laughter]

E Barbery: How cute. It must have been called the Beehive then. What happened when you were transferred after the infirmary burned. You're already been married to Nettie.

R Smith: I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop from the time that the fire happened until I did get transferred. Nettie's uncle Eb was pretty influential in the Coast Guard. By that time he was a captain I think or commander. I went to him and said, "I don't want to dodge anything but I just like to wait until our baby's born and then anybody wants that can do anything they want to then." I said, "I want to be here until after Nettie has her baby." He said, "Well Dick, he said I'll

tell you I'll do what I can." He said, "But didn't you, you know, a very serious thing." And he said, "I don't know whether I can do anything or not." So he said, "I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can see what I can do." About two weeks went by and he came up to the house one evening and he said, "I want to speak to you out in the yard." He didn't want to bother Nettie. So we went out in the yard and he said, "Dick, I have done everything I know. I've pulled every string I know. I've collected every debt that I know I can collect." And he said, "The best thing I can do is get you on a troop transport rather than something smaller." He said, "That's the best I can do." He said, "You know, I understand—you know the Coast Guard doesn't understand Chincoteague. I do. If it was my decision I would—what you did was perfectly plausible. I was illegal but anybody else in your position would have probably done the same thing had they just gotten married and all this stuff." And he said, "That was the only argument I could put up and it wasn't enough." So he said, "I just have to tell you that you're going to get some orders in the next few days." That was on a Tuesday. On Thursday I got the orders to report to the USS Randall in Norfolk, and report there within the next 48 hours. That was a bad time for Nettie and me too. I was a bad time for Nettie. She just fell all to pieces. And she wasn't that kind of a lady. She was a really strong girl, but being pregnant and nobody to really be with her and be by her side at the time. I was pretty rough for her. The Coast Guard truck picked me up and took me over to T's Corner and I caught a bus down to Norfolk. The ship was waiting there was a truck and they picked me up and took me to the ship. It was a good experience except—I got along with everybody. The pharmacists' mates that were on the ship—soon as I went on there they said that the crew's great, everybody's great. But stay away from the chief pharmacist's mate. He's a bitch. So I said, "Okay." I've always been a little bit belligerent against authority. I've never liked authority. That was a big mistake because he and I, right off the bat, we got off on the wrong foot. I think the climax of it all was we had an inspection and each one of us had an area in the sick bay that we were responsible for cleaning. My area was the outpatient clinic. The chief and captain of the ship came on the inspection. They went through the sick bay and never said anything until they got to the outpatient clinic. The skipper didn't say anything but the chief came to me and he said, "You left a bucket and a swab in that corner over there. Go get it and put it away." And I just said—it just came out of me, "If you want that damned broom moved you pick it up and move it yourself. [laughter] Well that was a bad start. I was on that ship for a year and a half and I don't think he and I passed two pleasant words in all the time we were on there. In fact—it's probably not a nice thing to tell you, but we were tied up in Suva in the Fiji Islands and there was a hotel restaurant by the name of the Melbourne. We went in there to have a few drinks, a couple of my friends and I, got talking to this big old barrel sergeant, big Army sergeant. He was bitching about his captain and I was crying the blues about my chief, and he said, "I tell you what I'll do. You give me five dollars and I'll beat the hell out of him." And I said, "You're kidding me." He said, "No I'm not." He said, "I know how you feel. I know exactly how you feel." So I says, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. You beat the hell out of him and I'll give you the five dollars, but I'm not going to give you five dollars beforehand." [laughs] Five bucks was a lot of money then. My monthly pay was like 66 bucks a month. And Nettie was getting 28 of that, her allotment. Anyhow it just so happened, here comes the chief strolling in the bar. This big old guy walked over and bumped him a couple of times. Of course the chief he was pretty impressed with himself and he said something back. And boy this sergeant he just beat the living hell out of the chief. It made me feel so good because every time he hit him I was hoping that I wish that was me. [laughter] And that's about the most trouble I got in. I did have to go in the brig for telling him, you know, if he wanted the bucket moved, move it himself. I had to go in

there. I was in there—I was on bread and water for three days and then they put me on food after I was in there for about nine days. That was the only misconduct that I had in the three plus years I was in the Coast Guard. My ship was—it was a good ship and we had a good crew and it was just—outside of being away from home, it was not all that unpleasant. Probably the most interesting thing is how I got off of a troop transport as a combat medic. Well, we had part of the 3rd Marine division that we were carrying to Guam. We were about four days out of Guam and the chief surgeon on the ship, the head doctor, called for muster. He got all the pharmacist's mates together and said, "I've got to ask you a question." He said, "I want you to think about it before you give me an answer." He said, "The Marine Corps is short a lot of Corpsmen." Because at that time, at the early part of the war, the Corpsmen wore a helmet with two white circles on the front. On the side, one on the front with a Red Cross. The Japanese were doing target practice on it. So many pharmacists' mates were getting knocked out with head wounds you know. It was a perfect target. They were short of them. So they knew that Guam was going to be a pretty rough landing. So the doctor said, "The commanding officer of this Marine division that we have on this ship, he wants to know if anybody will volunteer. I'm here asking you, we need at least three volunteers. I you want to volunteer—I'm not going to choose anybody, but if you want to volunteer raise your hand." Well, you know, nobody raised their hand up. It was like everybody was stone blind. Everybody stood right there. So this chief came up to me, my friend the chief and he says, "Smith I don't like you and I'd like to get you off of this damned ship. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You volunteer for that and I'll see you get 30-days leave when you get back aboard." This was in May of '44. Nettie was—I'm sorry, July of '44 was when the invasion was. She was full-blown pregnant then. She wasn't doing very well at that time too. So I said to him, "I don't know whether to trust you or not, because you already said you don't like me and you know I hate your ass." [laughter] I didn't mean to say that. He said, "No, I'm serious. On my word." And I said, "Okay." So I volunteered. It was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life because I'm not a hero, but I'm not a coward. Medical corpsmen are a special breed of people. They got a lot—through the training and understanding that you're helping people, they got a reputation for being very good, you know, in combat. So they got all ready, got me combat boots and gear and everything. Got me all ready to go. You got off the ship on rope ladders down to the [?] boats. And I got down there and sit down on this [?] boat and the gunnery sergeant came up to me and he said, "Doc, you done this before?" I said, "No sir." He says, "I didn't think so because I can tell by your face, you've not done anything like this before because if you'd done this before you'd have a much more serious look on your face than you've got now." But he says, "I've only got two things to tell you. When you get on the beach, the first thing you want to do is find a dead officer and get his side arm because we we're allowed to carry a side arm. We weren't allowed to carry any weapons. He says, "You get on the beach and you find a dead officer. You ain't going to have any trouble doing that because if you see him with a side arm you know he's an officer. Enlisted men don't wear a side arm. And I said, "Okay, now what's the other one?" He said, "Well, when you get ashore you're going to have to go where you're needed. Nine out of ten times it's not going to be very easy because there's going to be a lot of activity. If you're going to try to take care of somebody who's been shot somebody was around pretty close that shot him. I he gets a chance he's going to shoot you too." And he said, "The best thing I could tell you to do is just start thinking about your wife or something. Don't think about that. It's hard to do, but if you think about that, you'll get along all right." That's what I did. Dropping all around me. I guess God was with me because I never even got a scratch. But I didn't know this until I got back on the ship. I was on the beach for nine days. So they secured

the beach and they sent me back to the ship. When I got back to the ship, that's the first time I had taken my helmet off. And there was three bullet creases right in the top to my helmet. I knew that God must have been with me that day. He must have been with me. That's where I got my Bronze Star from there.

E Barbery: I think you said at the very beginning but I just want to make sure what beach was that or what battle.

R Smith: Guam.

E Barbery: That was Guam. Wow, I cannot imagine.

R Smith: We had a captain Brock in the Marine Corps. It was the second day of the invasion and we had met a lot of resistance. Not much the first day, but a lot the second day. The Japanese had dug—not foxholes, but they dug holes. The Navy was off shore throwing 16 inch shells in all the time. They put a hole in the ground the size of this room, you know. So I heard somebody hollering, "Corpsman, corpsman, I need a corpsman." So I went over and there's this guy laying in there with another guy. So I went down and tried to take care of them. The other guy happened to be the captain's aide. He was done. I could see his heart beating. I knew there was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could do. The captain was lucky. He had a shot in the leg and in his left side. I could take care of him. I knew I had to do something for this kid, because he kept telling me, "I want my mom, where's my mom." I had to do something for him. So I went back to him and I had—we carried little individual morphines, like a little toothpaste. It was a little toothpaste and it had a cap on it. You pull it off and there was a needle. It was one dose. I filled him full of morphine. I knew that's what did him in. I just couldn't stand it. He was suffering something awful. He was really, really suffering. I told this Captain Brock, I said, "You know this boy is dying. He's dying a terrible death. I'm going to put him out of his misery." And he said, "Doc, you go ahead and do whatever you're gonna do." So I did. I must of give him 20-25 shots of morphine. I've never been sorry for it. Never will be sorry for it. Its things like that you can ever forget.

E Barbery: I'm sure you can't. You can't do anything else. What can you do, yeah.

R Smith: I don't regret doing what I did. I still feel good about what I did, but it was the fact that I had to do it to a 20-year old kid that was crying for his mom. At that time I was only 21. I've never told that story before to anybody. I never have.

E Barbery: I'm very glad that you told it. It's part of the story.

R Smith: I was involved with the Okinawa invasion and it was a piece of cake to me. I guess maybe because I had to do such a thing I did. Okinawa for my outfit, the outfit I was with was no comparison to what it was on Guam because the Japanese had retreated all the way back four or five miles from the beach. When we went on the beach didn't hear a shot. There was a town about maybe a quarter of a mile from the beach. You went to that town there was no sign of a Jap. When we got in the jungle, whew, boy they were everywhere. They were everywhere. It was just—there were 66,000 Japanese soldiers on there. At the end there were 6,000 left. It was just, you know, mayhem is all it was. They had made their commitment. They were going to die for the emperor, you know. They would strap hand grenades to their body and give up. As soon as they got close enough to you they'd grab you and pull a pin on a hand grenade. You had to be so careful with that. They would pretend they would be hit. At nighttime, you know, you'd be there and you'd be down in a hole somewhere and you'd hear somebody, "Corpsman, corpsman, help me, corpsman." And the Japs were doing that. You didn't know. You had to do something, but you didn't know whether what is was going to be when you got there. The doctors told us if you hear that, you're going to have to ignore it. You're not going to be able to go there because its

like three to one that you're not going to come back. He said, "I know you boys are doing a fantastic job but, you know, we need you and you can't put yourself in jeopardy like that when it's almost a certain thing that you're going to be put out of it." That stuck with me a long time, wondering how many were real and how many were Japanese. They were full of stuff like that. They did all kinds of stuff like that.

[Camera battery change. Video stops.]

E Barbery: I'd like to come back with a fresh memory card because we haven't even covered when you came back to Chincoteague after and what happened there. And I'm sure that's interesting too.

Lattice: Your chief thing; did you ever get your 30-day leave.

R Smith: Oh no.

E Barbery: Oh no. He never gave it to you?

R Smith: When I asked him about it he said, "Two words. Tough shit."

Lattice: You told Nettie that you were going to be able to come home?

R Smith: It would have been no way. Nettie and I had not a lot of contact for a year and a half.

E Barbery: Letters.

R Smith: That's all I had was letters. She wrote me every day and I wrote her everyday. I would get mail in middle of June and it was all dated back in April and the early part of May. We were in [?] Australia and it was or wedding anniversary, it was New Year's Eve.

E Barbery: We'll just try to finish up whatever we can finish in five minutes. We'll come back another time or something it that's okay with you to do the second half. I don't want us to get too tired.

Lattice: How long was the invasion in Okinawa? I've forgotten that.

R Smith: I think possibly five weeks.

[video resumes]

E Barbery: You had just said about the letters. Some of them were dated—you would get them and they were dated a month ago.

R Smith: Sometimes two months. Sometimes I would go two months without any mail. And she would do the same thing. I didn't find this out until after I got back home. She would say, you know, she would get so depressed because, she said "Everything I did the first—soon as the mailman went by I went out to the mailbox to see if there was any mail. It was so heart wrenching not to have any mail." And then she said, "When there would be any there, the box would be full." She didn't have any way of knowing which one—was there any order until I found it out and I started numbering them so she could open them up in sequence, in the proper sequence. The doctor told me about that. He was—everything was censored—he said, "Don't try to put anything in there that you know is going to be censored because we'll get it. We've seen it all. We've seen it all from I met Pearl at the harbor." [laughter]

E Barbery: That's funny, Pearl at the harbor. So when it was censored—we have some of those documents at the museum. They're called like 'V-Mail' [Victory Mail]. Is that what it was?

R Smith: Yeah, that's right.

E Barbery: You had to write on those little pieces of paper or would they scan that in? How did that work?

R Smith: Well it was bigger than that. When they scanned it in it was in a smaller...

E Barbary: Okay. I didn't know about that. Do you know what that technology is called, what they did there?

R Smith: I don't know.

E Barbary: I don't know either.

R Smith: I don't know. That was a big problem. That was the biggest morale problem for everybody aboard ship, was mail. We had three guys get 'Dear John' letters from my ship. Two of them went bananas. We were in Melbourne [Australia] when two of them got their 'Dear John' letters. Had to take both of them off the ship. The other guy, he said, "I guess it's the best thing because I was gonna try to dump her when I we got back to [?]." [laughs] It didn't bother him that much. I think it might have hurt his ego a little bit that he didn't get to do it, you know.

[laughter]

E Barbary: Like I was saying, we'll have to do a part 2. But what year did you come back or is there anything else you want to share about being away?

R Smith: No. All I can think of. After I came back probably won't take near as long because there wasn't a whole lot of time involved in it. When I came back. I'll tell you that story when we come back. You'll enjoy it more. [laughter]