

William F. “Bud” Liebenow Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 2/15/2005
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Biographical Note

William F. Liebenow was a United States Navy commander of the boat PT 157 from 1942 to 1944. This interview focuses on his time serving in the Solomon Islands, John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] ship being sunk, and his involvement in JFK’s 1960 presidential campaign, among other topics.

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William F. “Bud” Liebenow– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM “Bud” LIEBENOW

February 15, 2005
Edenton, North Carolina

By Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: I want to just go ahead and set these up by saying that I’m Vicki Daitch, and I’m talking with Bud Liebenow about his experiences in the Solomon Islands. And actually, if you don’t mind, what I’d like to do is sort of start out with just a little background on how you ended up in the Solomon Islands yourself.

LIEBENOW: Well, we went to.... First, I joined the Navy in 1941 and got accepted right after Pearl Harbor. Actually the 21st of December I got accepted, and I went to Notre Dame for indoctrination and then to Northwestern for midshipman training. Bulkeley [John Duncan Bulkeley] came to Northwestern and recruited people for PTs. We had a lot of volunteers. And got accepted and, of course, went to Melville, which is the PT Boat Training Center. And we went through boat handling and all kinds of exercises and training for the boats to learn how to operate them. Commander Kelly [Robert B. Kelly], who was then a lieutenant commander, was forming up a squadron. Kelly was the skipper of the boat that took MacArthur [Douglas MacArthur] to the Philippines. Bulkeley was the squadron commander and was on the boat to take MacArthur out of the Philippines.

Kelly was forming up a squadron in Melville, and I was accepted in Squadron 9 and given command of the *PT 157*. We loaded the 12--there were 12 boats in a PT squadron. We loaded those 12 boats up on two oil tankers, and took off for the South Pacific. Arriving, unloaded the boats at Nouméa, and then island-hopped over to Tulaghi, which was a PT base right off of Guadalcanal.

DAITCH: Around when was that?

LIEBENOW: Huh?

DAITCH: About when was that by the time you got to Tulaghi?

LIEBENOW: We got there.... We left the States in November of '42. And went down through the Panama Canal. Stayed off of Panama for about a month and then took off. So we got over there maybe December of '42. And our squadron started operating out of Tulaghi, of course, at first, around Guadalcanal. And then headed on up to the Russell Islands, then to.... I think the next stop was Rendova. At Rendova we established a base. Commander Kelly took--we'd lost two boats, the *PT-153*, I think, Stan Marshall's [Stanmore B. Marshall] boat.

DAITCH: Hmmm. I just spoke with him.

LIEBENOW: I think Stan has talked to you. And the *PT-160*. So Kelly took seven of our boats and headed up to the next island, which was Lerer Harbor off of New Georgia, and left behind three boats to break in the new squadrons that were coming in. In other words, Squadron 10 was following behind us. As we went up, they came up. And then Squadron 10 was commanded by Commander Warfield [Thomas G. Warfield]. Along with Squadron 10, the remnants of the training squadron at Melville, which was Squadron 2, joined us. And there were two boats in that squadron, the *105* and the *PT-109*, which was commanded by Jack Kennedy. This is where I ran into Jack again. We had run into each other at PT school and were acquainted.

DAITCH: Maybe, before you go on there, maybe this would be a good time to back up a minute and talk about PT school a little bit more and what that was like. I mean you guys were all young, college-age or just out of college.

LIEBENOW: Right. We were.... I think all the PT officers went through Melville. There were one or two that got assigned to PT boats that didn't go through Melville, but most of us went through Melville. And at Melville we were, we got up at five o'clock in the morning, we had P.E., physical exercise, ate breakfast, and then started classes. Between each class we got, I think, a five-minute break.

DAITCH: Oh....

LIEBENOW: We lived in Quonset huts. And I can't recall how many were in a Quonset hut, but it was probably, I think, maybe 20 guys. We had two lines of bunks down each side, and they were three feet apart; actually they were cots. And we trained in Narragansett Bay, took the boats out. PT boats only operate at night. And so most of our training was done at night. Of course, we started out in the daytime because a lot of us didn't know what a boat was. [Laughter] Some of us, a lot of people in PTs were experienced

sailors and Ivy League college graduates, which Jack was. Then we had Henry Cabot Lodge and a couple of Vanderbilts and a lot of people like that. And then there were other people like myself that were just from other schools.

DAITCH: Did you have any experience with boats before that?

LIEBENOW: The only experience I had.... Well, I was born and raised in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the Rappahannock River, close to the Potomac River. Of course we lived on the river. We had a, my father was in the lumber business, and we had a crabbing shore down on the Potomac that we used to go to every weekend. And my experience was mostly in rowboats and crabbing boats, and that's why I was favored, well, favored small boats. I didn't want to get on a big ship if I could help it. So I was happy to be accepted in PTs. And the training at Melville was very good. It saved us, I guess, so we knew what we were doing.

DAITCH: It was rigorous?

LIEBENOW: It was rigorous training. So anyway, we were in the Solomons now, back to that, and the *109* and the *105* had joined us. Our three boats were left behind to break the other squadron into the patrol areas. Kelly had left behind Brantingham [Henry J. Brantingham], who was the executive officer of Squadron 9, which was our squadron. He was in command of our three boats that were left. He was the senior officer. He left the *159*, the *157* and the *162*. Well, did you want to know what life in the, on the base at the PT bases?

DAITCH: Actually, yes, if you don't mind.

LIEBENOW: We would patrol at night. We very seldom went out in the daytime because of the Japanese air raids.

DAITCH: Now you were in--just to be clear about what was going on. The Japanese were on all of these islands, very close together, so you were in close proximity, right?

LIEBENOW: You know, our big ship navy had just about been destroyed at Pearl Harbor, the battle wagons and a lot of cruisers. So PT boats were kind of something that they could manufacture quickly and get them out to the war zones to harass the Jap fleet as much as possible. Our job was to try to stop the Japanese from evacuating and re-arming. Like when they started retreating off Guadalcanal, they tried to take our troops out, they tried to reinforce them. And our job was to try to harass them all we could and torpedo what ships we could as an 80-foot boat against, usually we were against destroyers or cruisers, big ships.

DAITCH: How effective was that?

LIEBENOW: Which made the odds pretty much against us. But anyway....

DAITCH: Was it effective? I mean were you able to feel like you were accomplishing something?

LIEBENOW: Well, they have figures on how much shipping the PT boats actually sank. My own personal experience, we got a Jap destroyer off of Rendova. This was before the *109* came out there. Actually this was in July, I think. And, of course, Kelly was credited with a cruiser. Well, he and Bulkeley were on the boat the night they got a cruiser. But that was off Philippines earlier when they took MacArthur. And we fought Japanese personnel barges and gunboats. In a fight with the Japanese, a group of Japanese gunboats, we lost our radioman. He was shot and killed, and we buried him at sea. We had no doctor. We had no chaplain. Our two pharmacist's mates took care of our wounded, and we buried our own dead at sea.

So anyway, when we got to Rendova, of course, Warfield was in command of all the PT's in that area. Apparently they got the word that the Japanese were coming down to reinforce New Georgia, which was an island right across from Rendova. The marines had gone into New Georgia and taken over the airfield. A Japanese.... According to the Australian Coast Watchers, who were Australians posted in the islands. They lived out there by themselves, they lived off of the land, and the natives helped them. They watched to report what was going on, saw movements of the Jap fleets. So anyway, this particular night they got the word that there were four Japanese destroyers moving down The Slot, which was an area of water between the islands. We called it The Slot. And so Warfield set out. At that time he had 15 boats, a complete Squadron 10, our three boats, and a couple of, well, of course, Kennedy and the *105*. So anyway, they set Brantingham as the senior officer other than Warfield. Warfield stayed on the beach, unlike Kelly. Kelly was always the lead boat in our squadron. When we went out, Kelly went out.

DAITCH: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

LIEBENOW: I think good. Anyway, section.... The boats went out in sections. Our section had four boats: Brantingham in the *PT-159* because the *159* had radar. I was in the *157* next to Brantingham. J. R. Lowery[?] was in the *162* next to us, and Jack Kennedy was in the *109* behind Lowery.

DAITCH: Now is this like a staggered or straight line.

LIEBENOW: In an echelon, which is staggered; that's the way they went.

DAITCH: Staggered. Okay.

LIEBENOW: And supposedly station-keeping in the middle of the night is tough. And to go off on the side a minute.... When we were first dropped at Nouméa, we took our squadron island-hopping at night. We had.... Kelly was in the lead boat and had the charts of the area. The rest of us had no charts. We were to follow him, and it's

pitch black at night. We were selected to be the last boat at Kelly's orders, "You keep every one of these PT boats in line." Of course, we traveled in echelons, like this, kind of a V-shape. We were the last boat supposedly to keep them in line. We had been traveling the first night. Everything went great. The second night we refueled at our next island. The second night we'd had no sleep whatsoever. Anyway, we were going along the second night. I went down below in the chart room and put my head on the thing and went sound asleep, just like that. The first thing I knew, or the next thing I knew.... We were supposed to have radio silence. The radio is in the chart room. I'm laying there like that sound asleep, and the radioman was sitting there.

The next thing I knew Kelly was screaming in the radio, "Liebenow! God! Where are you?" I, of course, woke up and said, "Coming into position, Commander." And I ran up topside. Of course, with night blindness I couldn't see anything. They had the executive officer at the wheel, and I asked them where the other boats were? And he says, "I don't know." And so I never went below unless I left actually Welford West up topside because Welford was an experienced sailor. He had sailed out of Norfolk on fishing boats and all that stuff, and most of the guys on the boat were not sailors. I mean they got in the Navy, and they were reserves like myself. And anyway, I went around, and West was leaning up on the forecastle. And I said, "West, where the Blank Blank are those other boats?" He said, "They're right up there, I think." He said, "They're over on the starboard bow. But they're going away."

So immediately I went back and turned the wheel over to where he had pointed out and put all the engines ahead full. We were sneaking along to keep our wakes down so the aircraft wouldn't find us. Anyway, we went along for a minute. And all the time Kelly was screaming over the radio. Sam Corey[?] was our radioman, and he came up topside and said, "Skipper, the commander wants to know where we are." And I said, "What did you tell him?" And he said, "I told him we were coming into position." And he said, "I'll bet he's given that radar operator hell because he can't pick us up." Anyway, after what seemed like hours, I guess it was a few minutes, we saw the trails of the other boats, the fluorescent trails of all the wakes. So we pulled into position.

DAITCH: Was that the only way to know if you were in the right position? Was it just by the wakes?

LIEBENOW: Yes. That's the way you could tell from any distance at all. You know it's black. It's totally black at night. Anyway, after my little meeting with Commander Kelly the next morning, where I got reamed at about [Inaudible], I thought he was going to hit me. But anyway....

DAITCH: Oh, gosh!

LIEBENOW: I thought surely I'd be relieved of command of the boat. But as it turned out, he finally shook his head because at that time he didn't have a whole lot of officers. In fact, when we first went out in the Pacific, I was the only officer aboard the *PT-157*. An executive officer had joined us later. There's a reason he didn't know who to go to on that boat to find out what was going on. And so he just got lost. So anyway,

after that, *PT-157* became the best station keeper in that whole outfit. We stayed on the lead boat. Usually where we operated we usually were the second boat to Kelly. Kelly was the lead boat. We always were right there behind him. That was our normal operating. Of course, he was gone, and we did the same thing with Brantingham. Now, when we went out in this section before, Brantingham had radar. And when he spotted the targets, which he assumed was the Japanese destroyers, he attacked. He went in to fire his torpedoes.

DAITCH: And he's in front, and you're behind him.

LIEBENOW: And we were right here behind him.

DAITCH: And there's one more boat and then *109*.

LIEBENOW: Yes.

DAITCH: Okay.

LIEBENOW: So we went in right behind Brantingham. He fired his four torpedoes. And we fired two. Because when he fired his last one, the tube caught fire. With the blast, of course, the Japanese saw us, and all four destroyers opened fire. We ran across in front of Brantingham and laid smoke; we had smoke generators. So we laid smoke so he could turn around. And he laid smoke for us, and we finally got out, and we were always right behind him. And when we got away, things calmed down. We went up the side of Brantingham for further orders. He was empty. He had no torpedoes left. We had two. So he said, "Go back to the patrol station because these guys will come back." He just ordered us to go back on our patrol station, our area between the islands where we were supposed to be. So we went back.

DAITCH: By yourself? Just your boat?

LIEBENOW: We went by ourselves. At this time Brantingham went back. He went back to base.

DAITCH: Because he didn't have anything to shoot with.

LIEBENOW: He didn't have any torpedoes. We had two left. We should have fired those two, but anyway.... In the meantime Lowery, who was supposed to be on station on us, had gotten lost, and Kennedy had followed him. So that initial attack, they weren't there. They had gotten lost. In about I'd say two hours or three hours later, we saw a flash on the horizon. And although we had orders to stay on patrol station, we didn't. We headed that way. We headed that way for one hour and didn't see anything else. So we thought we'd better get back. We went back to our patrol station. Whether that was the sinking of the *PT-109*, I did not know. But we did see a flash, and we thought somebody had gotten an engagement with the destroyers, and we thought we could get rid of our two torpedoes right then and get in it. But we didn't see anything. So we went back and continued

patrolling across our area. In the meantime one of the destroyers.... Well, Kennedy and Lowery found themselves right among the destroyers, apparently. Of course I wasn't there then; I don't know what happened, but only what Jack told me later. One of the destroyers rammed and cut the *PT-109* right in two. And of course the 100-octane gas, it exploded and burned. And maybe that's what we saw, but I don't know. It was only a flash we saw, so....

DAITCH: You know you think of a destroyer as huge. You know the question arises of why they didn't see them coming and get out of the way?

LIEBENOW: Well, that is--there's been books written about that. I've got seven, eight books in there that, you know, they questioned Kennedy's judgment and his alertness and all this stuff. And why they didn't stick with us. I can understand why they didn't stick with us because I got lost myself.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: So it's possible.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: It's kind of like a bunch of fighter planes going out and attacking bombers, and they all get mixed up in a big fight around, and then they head home. And whether they can join up with their squadrons or not, they either get back or they don't.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: Yes. So it's sort of like that. Except that it's pitch dark. And I can understand how Lowery could get lost. But Kennedy stayed on Lowery; that's what he was supposed to do. So I certainly don't criticize him for that. And the reason I think that the *109* could not get out of the way of the destroyer was because they had only one engine operating. Now a PT boat has three engines. In Squadron 9 we had mufflers on the engines, but they still made a noise. But if you wanted to really sneak in, you would possibly go with one engine. We wouldn't because Kelly would never let us. He'd say, "Keep all three engines on line because you might need them." Apparently the *109* thought they would just go ahead on one engine. Why, I don't know. But Jack Kennedy told me later that he'd never patrol on one engine. So apparently he had one engine going. But I don't know that because I wasn't there.

So anyway, of course when the 100-octane gasoline exploded and burned all around, Lowery took off, and he thought, well, they're gone. We'd lost a couple of boats before. So anyway, we were the last boat to get in that morning. Well, there's another thing. There were 15 boats out there. Apparently these were the only ones that got into any action at all. When we got back in the morning, when daylight came, we always headed for home. So we still had two torpedoes, but we didn't get a chance to fire them because we never saw the ships again. We got back in. The first time I knew that the *109* has been sunk was at the boat

captains' debriefing the next morning. And Lowery reported that the *PT-109* was lost and all hands were dead. He said, "They couldn't survive." The 100-octane gas burning.

DAITCH: Had you had any.... You'd lost boats before, but had you anything similar to that where there was kind of a fire?

LIEBENOW: No. There'd been a boat.... That's the only PT boat that's ever been rammed and sunk by a destroyer. The other boats were destroyed by gunfire. And actually one night we had 67 bullet holes and a big shell went right through the fo'c'sle [forecastle]. We had two engines knocked out. So we didn't sink. We got in and repaired the boat, and we were back on patrol the next week. But most boats were destroyed that way. Or they'd run on a reef. They'd be heading for or running away from Jap ships, and they'd run on a reef, and that's the end of them. So that is the only boat that I've heard of that, and that's one of the things that they say: Well, you know, a PT boat ought to be able, maneuverable enough so that you don't get run over by a destroyer. And that's what Monday morning quarterbacks are always talking about. But you get in there, and you're in action, and....

One night we were out with Kelly; there were only two boats out. And we ran into four destroyers. They were coming down to shell our base, actually. We ran into four destroyers, and we made torpedo runs on them. We got in so close that the torpedoes didn't have time to arm. Now, if you know anything about torpedoes, they are preset to run through the water a certain distance before they'll go off. Of course when we fired them out of the tubes, when they hit the water, if they were not set for a certain distance, they'd go off and blow you up.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: So they had a little propeller in the warhead of a torpedo. As it goes through the water, it climbs up some, the firing pin is up in the TNT, the dynamite. And when it gets up there, when the torpedo hits, why it'll explode; otherwise it won't. Anyway, we had our torpedoes set at about between 100 and 75 yards. And we get on a collision course with a destroyer and then fire, going at 28 knots because that's how fast a torpedo went. So we got among these destroyers so fast that we were just up alongside of them. So we had to turn back on. And in the meantime, of course, they....

DAITCH: They've spotted you.

LIEBENOW: They had us. And [we] turned back out of the there and then line up again and fired torpedoes. And the only way we got away that time we went right between two destroyers, and they were firing on us, and they started firing on themselves. They turned their guns on them, and they were firing on themselves. And we were able to get away and lie to. And they didn't fire a shot at our base. So we considered that mission was successful. You know I can understand how things like that happen. I think people that haven't been there certainly can't, they just can't understand how Jack Kennedy got hit by a destroyer, but I can see where it could happen.

So anyway, the *PT-109* crew--part of the boat was still afloat, the fo'c'sle part, the engine sank. They were able to cling to the side of the boat and get over to a small island. You know there were islands all around. Two of the crew didn't get over there. They were burned up and died in the explosion. So the natives, a couple of the natives, found the crew of the *109*. They took Jack Kennedy over to the Australian Coast Watcher, whose name was Evans [Arthur Reginald Evans]. And Evans had radio contact with Australia. So he radioed that they were safe, and the natives supplied them with what food they could and stuff like that. The only time.... I mean when I first heard of this was the coconut shell that Jack had inscribed a message: "11 safe. Natives know posit. JFK." The two natives paddled down to our base, and gave us a coconut shell which Commander Warfield took in there. And he called a meeting of the boat captains. And they hassled back and forth up there, the ranking officers, Warfield and Brantingham and Cluster [Alvin P. Closter], they were the three ranking officers. Well, Brantingham was in on that. And the rest of us, we sat back. And they started talking about what to do. They said: You know, this is probably a Japanese trick to get the boats out. They know where....

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: Anyway, they haggled around a while.

DAITCH: They thought it was a trick?

LIEBENOW: And then Warfield said, "I think we can risk one boat to go up there and get them." So guess whose boat? [Laughter] And I always said that the reason they picked the *157* was because we had the best crew and the best boat in the Pacific Ocean. But I went to a reunion of PT boaters one time I think back in '81, and one of my own crew was there. And he said, "Nah, that wasn't the reason." He said, "The reason was you were the most expendable." [Laughter] Maybe that was it. But anyway, we went up and picked them up. Let's see. We took the two natives to give us directions. And we took Brantingham and Cluster on board.

DAITCH: What was the other fellow's name?

LIEBENOW: Cluster.

DAITCH: Closter?

LIEBENOW: Yes. You would think Closter, but it's actually Cluster was his name, Al Cluster [Alvin P. Cluster]. Anyway, they were aboard, and we took two pharmacist's mates because they might have wounded men. We went up, and the natives led us to the Australian coast watcher's station where he was. They knew.... They took us there first. And Jack and two other natives rode him out in a canoe and met us. This was in the middle of the night. We fired recognition signals. And the story goes that Jack fired a gun that almost knocked him overboard. I don't know about those stories. But anyway, we signaled back and forth, and we just went up alongside, and Jack got aboard.

DAITCH: Was that not a little bit scary to fire a gun? I mean wouldn't that be heard by Japanese on the islands around or not?

LIEBENOW: They could have been. But I don't know exactly.... Well, there were guns firing all the time. So I guess it wouldn't make a lot of difference.

DAITCH: Wouldn't be anything unusual.

LIEBENOW: Oh, no. Anyway, he fired and...

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LIEBENOW: ...Jack got aboard and came down into the cockpit with the two natives, and we headed on over to the small island that the rest of the crew was on and pulled up there. They climbed aboard. We put a little boat, got the two wounded guys up. And headed on back to base. And we had quite a celebration going back. The pharmacist's mates handed out all the medical brandy. And the natives knew one song in English they could sing, "Jesus Loves Me," and they were singing that. And we headed back to Rendova, to the base. And you know all this time Jack had back trouble. He had back trouble back in Melville. People can criticize Jack Kennedy. But he.... If he had any political influence, which he had, he could have stayed in Melville, Rhode Island, as a boat instructor for the duration of the war. But he used all his influence to get out where the action was. And you have to admire him for that.

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

LIEBENOW: He didn't try to hide behind, you know.... His father was, of course, the ambassador at that time. And he could have stayed. But anyway....

DAITCH: Do you think he was trying to prove himself so that he...?

LIEBENOW: Well, actually at that time I never knew anybody that wasn't, that didn't want to get out there and kill Japanese. Whether it was the propaganda machine or the government made us want to get back at them, get revenge or whatever. But that was the consensus of people my age that I grew up with. Now I was quite a bit younger than most of the boat captains. I think Jack was about four years older than I. He would be what? 89 now, 90? I'm 85.

DAITCH: Yes, I think he was born in '17, maybe.

LIEBENOW: 'Seventeen, I was born in '20. So he's three years older. But anybody in that age group at that time seemed like they wanted to get out and fight the Japanese. So after we had gotten back to Rendova and carried them back to Tulaghi or Guadalcanal....

DAITCH: They must have been in terrible condition.

LIEBENOW: Well, two of them were pretty badly wounded. And Jack, of course, got another boat soon after that. I forget the number of the boat. But he continued on, oh, for a short while. He stayed out there. Then his back got to really acting up, so he was sent back home. In the meantime we had moved on up to the Treasury Islands, and I got orders back to Melville to report without delay. I'd been--it was just past my third Christmas away from home. It was January of 1944, January the 3rd I believe, I had top priority flight orders to report back to Melville. So I thought.... Kelly told me that Bulkeley was back in Melville. And I thought, well, Bulkeley's taken command of the PT school at Melville, and I've got orders to go back and report to Bulkeley. So I thought that was good. I was going back home, and I was going to be an instructor.

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

LIEBENOW: I went back to Melville, and Bulkeley says, "You're late." Well, I [Inaudible] flight orders. I got on the first plane. And I went down to Australia and got one of the China Clippers, those big planes. There were two people on there other than the crew. There was six in the crew. Anyway, we flew back, stopping at Guam and Hawaii. I couldn't get off the plane. Got to San Francisco and transferred to a land-based plane and flew across the country. And I had orders that were top priority, so I was able to divert my trip down to Portsmouth, Virginia, where Lucy was working in the naval hospital. And together we went back up to Melville. And we got a little room in a boardinghouse right outside the gate, and I reported in. And Bulkeley said, "You're late." And, you know, you didn't argue with Bulkeley. And you didn't argue with Kelly. You just said, "Yes, sir." Anyway, for two weeks I went through.... Instead of being an instructor, I was the instructee. I went through intensive training as a designated landing officer.

Then at the end of that time we took three boats, put them on an oil tanker, and headed across the North Atlantic. Five days out, we were in a convoy, and five days out the convoy was attacked by a German submarine. And the ammunition ship right off our bow was blown out of the water.

DAITCH: Oh, my gosh!

LIEBENOW: The convoy just continued on. I don't think any of those guys survived. We got to Greenock, Scotland, and unloaded the three boats. Beat our way down the Irish Sea around the southern tip of England up the Dart River to Dartmouth, where we joined a British PT squadron. Now Bulkeley was in command of the three boats. We had the *PT-199*, the *71*, and the *72*. I was a designated landing officer for those three boats. So anyway, they painted the boats a purplish pink like the British

boats because we'd joined a British squadron. And since I was designated landing officer, my first trips across the channel were on the British boats as on-the-job training sort of thing. These boats were in clandestine operations across the channel, this was before D-Day, to drop agents, spies to bring out people that were trying to get out, the French Underground, keep contact with them, bring out the American and British people that had to get back to England.

And so far.... I got over there the last part of January of 1944. And we continued to make those missions until June the 3rd we were ordered to repaint our boats battleship gray, which was the U.S. Navy color, and we rejoined the U.S. Navy down at Plymouth with the invasion fleet. And we listened to Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] speech of destiny. And took off across the channel. Since my duties as landing officer were no longer applicable, I was made skipper of the *PT-199*. And we were to be the escort vessel for the *U.S.S. Bayfield*, which was a communications ship from which the invasion was directed. They had radar antennas, radio antennas all over the boat. It was a communications ship. So we got across the channel. And then H minus four hours we were ordered to escort 12 rocket boats into the beach because we'd been along those beaches, you know, making landings all over before D-Day. So supposedly we knew where we were going.

Anyway, in those days they didn't have smart rockets. They just had something like bazookas or they shot off like Roman candles. Anyway, somebody had come up with the idea to put banks of rockets on these 12 landing craft. And they carried a coxswain to guide the boat and a machinist to run the engine. And we lined them up along the beach. Outside of Cherbourg there was a big German gun emplacement that had to be knocked out. And this was the way to do that. Got them lined up, and we carried a Marine officer with us who gave the signal to the 12 boats to fire the rockets which they fired all at once. And then things really started.... Of course the Germans started firing back. And very few of those rocket boats got out. Most of them were destroyed.

We got back to the *Bayfield*. By this time it was daylight, and the big landing had started. The paratroopers were dropping behind the lines. The gliders were going in, which was a big mess-up; you've probably read what happened to most of them. Battleships, cruisers, and destroyers were going along the beach shelling. And one of our destroyers, the *U.S.S. Corey*, stayed along, hit a mine, and came under fire from the shore batteries. And we along with the *U.S.S. Fitch* rushed in to pick up survivors. We picked up something over 60.

DAITCH: Oh, in a PT boat?

LIEBENOW: Well, we had to abandon the dead because we didn't have room for them. And we also took in tow a boat that they'd gotten over the side, and they had that boat manned, but the engine had been knocked out. So we towed them and carried the wounded to a hospital ship and put the able-bodied back on a destroyer, the ones that were still able to climb up to the destroyer. Anyway, all that day, that whole day during the invasion, we mostly picked up people. And then for five days and nights we stayed along the invasion coast carrying high-ranking officers from ship to ship or from ship to shore. Eisenhower was one.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: Patton [George S. Patton] was one. These guys, we were acting as personnel barges or something. Which didn't make us very happy because we didn't figure we were fighting the war carrying around a bunch of gold braid. But for five days and night we stayed over there. And all this time we were supposed to be circling around the *Bayfield* to ward off German E-boat attacks which never came. So it didn't, it wasn't a factor. The only notable thing that I remember during carrying some of these officers, Eisenhower came aboard. We had the three boats in there. And he came aboard I think it was the 72 boat. We were all together. And a guy, a motor machinist named Armstrong [Charles R. Armstrong], who was bald-headed, he was an old guy, I think he was about 32. [Laughter] Anyway, he was a lot older than anybody else. And we called him Pappy. He came out of the engine room. He went up to Eisenhower, and stuck out his hand and said, "My name is Armstrong." And Eisenhower took his hand and said, "My name is Eisenhower." [Laughter] Which was funny.

Anyway we stayed over there for five days and nights. And then we got orders to go back up to Scotland, up to River Tummel or River Hamble and start out, the same kind of work we were doing with the French Underground, to do it with the Norwegians and the Danes, to make trips across. And even in June and July the North Sea is cold, and the worst thing we had to contend with was the weather. We never had any problems with German E-boats or air raids. All we did then was supply the Dane Underground with small arms and stuff like that.

DAITCH: I would think that that would be dangerous work.

LIEBENOW: Well, it wasn't. The dangerous part was over when, the dangerous part was landing on the French coast, the occupation. We had some pretty hairy missions. One time they sent us over there. You can turn that off if you want to. One time we went over there to pick up sand from the beaches where the landings were going to take place. Bulkeley was in command, and he said.... It's in his book. He said, "Some twits in London have decided to risk a PT boat to go over there and scrape up a bunch of sand!"

DAITCH: What for?

LIEBENOW: I never could understand why we did that. I think it was 20 years later I saw Bulkeley at a reunion. I swear I think it was 1981. Anyway, he said, "You know what?" We were talking. He said, "You know I found out why we got those sand samples. We thought we were collecting souvenirs for the high command in London, that they wanted sand so they could tell everybody they had, before D-Day, they had sand." Anyway, what they were doing was running compaction tests on the sand to see if it would hold heavy armament tanks going into the beaches.

DAITCH: Ooohhhh!

LIEBENOW: So it was a worthwhile mission.

DAITCH: Right. It would've been nice if you had known at the time. [Laughter]

LIEBENOW: Yes. Well, if we'd know it at the time and then captured, why it would've been....

DAITCH: Oh, I see.

LIEBENOW: See, when we went into those beaches we didn't know anything. I didn't even know, as a landing officer, I didn't even know where the boat was going. I had to stay down below with maybe whoever we were going to drop. But until we got over to the other side, we anchored the boat about 300 yards out, and two oarsmen and the landing officer acting as coxswain got in and steered the boat to the beach. Now to find out where we were going, the British were using what they called a QH navigation system, which anchored the boat within a yard of where it showed on the chart, and you could anchor that boat. Then the small boat put over; I wore a triangular patch on my back which was reflective to strobe ultraviolet light, or something. Anyway, they kept that on me as I went in and with radio told me to go right or left. And you'd roll right into that beach, pitch dark. The guy would be standing there.

DAITCH: Wow!

LIEBENOW: They'd dropped him off and that was it. And then you would row back, and it was all at one time. If you didn't get back in time, why the PT was supposed to leave you. And we had one night of that. We went in, and as we got into the beach, a German sentry was walking along the beach with a dog, police dog. And, you know, we could handle people. But dogs were something that you had to be very careful of because they would set off the alarm, as it were. And they could smell you, I guess. But anyway, the wind was blowing up. And we had to sit out there and wait 'til that guy got by. And of course he met another sentry. Anyway, we delayed. Finally they cleared the beach, and we went in and completed our mission. In that case we were dropping two Underground people off. And they went on up the beach. We went back. So we had missed our time thing. Bulkeley had beaten it into our head: "By God! If you don't get back, we're not going to be here." So we debated. We had three options. We could stay over there and go with the French Underground and hide until the next boat came.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Or we could be captured by the Germans. Or we could row back to England across the channel. Well, the two guys rowing the boat.... Well, I took a vote. They said, "We can row back."

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: I said, "Oh, okay. We'll try it." So we headed back out, and there was Bulkeley. [Laughter] Waiting for us.

DAITCH: Really....

LIEBENOW: That's the second worst reaming out that I had while I was in the Navy. But anyway, he had defied all the orders, and he would not leave anybody there. You know he.... You kind of thought he wouldn't, and he didn't.

DAITCH: Good man.

LIEBENOW: So I guess that's my story.

DAITCH: And you're sticking to it. [Laughter] Maybe you could tell me a little bit more about Jack Kennedy personally, just whatever....

LIEBENOW: Well, after.... We lost contact with Jack after we got back after the war. When he got in Congress, he wrote a letter to me and invited us up to Washington and all that. But we were living in Michigan at the time. And anyway, we kept minimal contact. And then all of a sudden he was running for president.

DAITCH: Were you shocked?

LIEBENOW: Well, I'd no idea. I was not a political person anyway. I was a Democrat, and my first vote was for Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and Harry Truman [Harry S. Truman]. But I wasn't political. Just, I voted. And I don't know whether my vote was even counted for Roosevelt because I was overseas at the time. And you know you voted, but whether it got there or not, nobody knows. But anyway, Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] called me when Jack started running for president. Robert Kennedy called.

DAITCH: Had you met him before?

LIEBENOW: Why, yes. I knew Robert.

DAITCH: Oh, you did? How did you know him?

LIEBENOW: I didn't know.... Well, Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] was just a little kid at that time. He was younger. But Robert and Jack were both.... I never knew Joseph [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] during the war. He was killed in an aircraft. But anyway....

DAITCH: Did you meet him when you were at Melville with Jack maybe? Did you know Robert from that long ago?

LIEBENOW: I knew Robert from Newport, Rhode Island. Well, Melville is right outside of Newport. And Robert came to Newport. I met him over there. We would go to Newport for liberty and stuff like that. Of course, Jack would go to New York for liberty. But anyway, Robert Kennedy called me in Michigan and said that Jack was running for president. And he was going to West Virginia. This was when he went to West Virginia. We had lived in West Virginia. I was working for the Chessie System, railroad, C&O Railroad. And anyway, they had a big shop in Huntington. And Robert said, "Could you go down to.... Would you meet us in Huntington and take us through the Huntington railroad shops?" And I said, "I'll see about it, see what I can do." We were living in Grand Rapids, which was Jerry Ford [Gerald R. Ford] country. Everybody in Grand Rapids was a Republican. Especially my boss.

DAITCH: Uh oh.

LIEBENOW: Anyway, I went to.... I thought, well, I could do that. I went to talk to my boss about getting off to go to Huntington. They said, "Why you want to go to Huntington?" So like a fool I told him.

DAITCH: Uh oh.

LIEBENOW: And he said, "The railroad is not into politics." Okay. So anyway I called Robert back and told him the story. They went to West Virginia, and they won West Virginia, which started him off. So anyway, later on Jack came to Michigan [Inaudible]. And we visited, you know, and I rode around in his car in a parade around Grand Rapids. And then he had rented a car in a train kind of like a Harry Truman whistle stop through Michigan. So I rode on their train, went up through Michigan.

DAITCH: What was like that?

LIEBENOW: Stopped and talked a little bit. Then all of a sudden he got elected.

DAITCH: What was it like to campaign with him? I mean just for your little piece of it?

LIEBENOW: Well, of course, when we were in Grand Rapids, they took pictures of us standing up there. And when we got out of there on the train, you know, he'd get in the back to make his speeches at different stops. And I'd just stand there with him. I didn't do anything.

DAITCH: What'd you talk about? It must have been interesting to see him after all those years.

LIEBENOW: Well, mostly we talked about the war a little bit. That's when he told me, "Lieb if I get the votes of everybody that claims to have been on your boat that night of the pick up, I'll win this election easy." And talked about family and all. In the parade down in Grand Rapids we were in an open car. And our daughter was

maybe ten or eleven years old. And she and Lucy were standing over there on the roadside. When we'd go by, Susan, that's our daughter, Susan ran out almost in front of the car. I don't know whether she was running out to see me or Jack. [Laughter] But anyway, they had it all there.

DAITCH: It must have been memorable for her.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Then we got on the train and went throughout the state.

DAITCH: Was he fun to be around?

LIEBENOW: Hmmm?

DAITCH: Was he fun to be around? I mean just as a guy, was he entertaining?

LIEBENOW: Oh, yes. Jack, well, he was a very personable person. And like at Rendova, the officers stayed ashore in tents during the daytime when they went on patrol. And we had some people that were anti-Catholic. Now you can imagine, you know, Jack Kennedy wasn't running for president, he wasn't running for anything. He was just one of us. But they used to ask him, pretty hard/hot arguments?

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: One guy was a born and bred, I don't know, Episcopalian or something. But they used to have some pretty hot discussions about religion.

DAITCH: Really! It's interesting. It seems irrelevant in the middle of a war.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Well, you had to talk about something.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: And of course Jack had come over later. See, we'd been over there for almost a year, I guess, when he joined us. And so everybody wanted to know what's the news from home, you know, what's going on? And of course he'd tell us everything, the night life in New York and stuff like that. [Laughter] Which made us happy. Another thing we did in the Pacific, just before patrol, just before nightfall, we'd tune our short-wave radios into Tokyo Rose. And have you heard of Tokyo Rose?

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Anyway, she'd come on in her sultry voice, and say, "Yankee go home. You're fighting and dying for a losing cause. And your wives and sweethearts are back home running around with 4F's and land-based sailors." But we always tuned in because then she would play songs from the Hit Parade. And she'd play, you

know, and for a minute we'd back at our senior prom or a fraternity party. Actually I think her propaganda worked in reverse.

DAITCH: Really?

LIEBENOW: Because, you know, everybody wanted to hear songs from the Hit Parade. Well, you don't know what the Hit Parade is, but it's....

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Well, on Saturday it used to come on the radio and play songs of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman and those people.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: And she'd play and sing songs and all like that. So....

DAITCH: Good entertainment.

LIEBENOW: Good entertainment, yes. So we'd listen to that, and that was.... Our mail caught up with us about every two or three months. Lucy used to write me every day, and we'd get v-mail. Instead of email, you got v-mail in those days. They'd photograph the mail so it was down in little envelopes so they'd carry a lot. And I used to arrange them all in order, trying to at least. But sometimes they brought bad news. My first cousin and I grew up together, and he was killed in North Africa. And my best friend was killed on Guadalcanal. Those kinds of things you heard of. A lot of people.... You almost didn't want to get too friendly with people because you didn't know when you'd never see them again. When I got my orders and told my crew, went down and told them goodbye, I shook hands with each one of them, and I said, "Don't worry. You're going to be right behind me. I'll see you all in Melville." I knew that was a lie because I knew I'd never see some of them again. And I never have. Anyway....

DAITCH: What happened to your crew when you left? Did they just get a new skipper, same boat?

LIEBENOW: Yes. But actually they did follow me home soon after, though.

DAITCH: Oh, good.

LIEBENOW: Because they'd served their time. But I never saw them in Melville because I was gone in two weeks; I'd gone to Europe. And I never saw any of them at all until after the war. Of course Welford and Jimmy Smith[?], there's very few of them; I think there's four of us still alive. But through Alyce Newberry [Alyce F. Newberry], we were able to get the address for a lot of them. I've kept in contact with those four that are still alive. And the *PT-109*, I mean the *199* in Europe, let's see, Jack Foley[?]

was still alive, but he's dead now. And the only one that's still living, that I know of, is Dempsey[?]. And I keep contact with him. Now they're dying off every minute, I guess. Because all of us are in our eighties now.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: I don't know how much longer most of us will be.

DAITCH: Yes. Well, it's good to get stories, I think, and hear what people did so that it's not lost. I mean people need to hear these things.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Somebody from the Library of Congress has interviewed me, and they did a pictorial.

DAITCH: Oh, good.

LIEBENOW: They supposedly put it up there. I don't know.

DAITCH: Yes. Oh, that's great. That's wonderful.

LIEBENOW: You know, they'd get stories. I don't know what'll happen.

DAITCH: Yes. Well, I think what'll happen is that historians will use them, you know, to try to put together things that happened and why they happened the way they did.

LIEBENOW: Yes. And they'll get a different story from everybody.

DAITCH: Well, yes, exactly. But that's what's fun about being an historian. You get all these different stories, and then you try to triangulate and put them together and get something close to what really happened.

LIEBENOW: Yes. [Pause]

DAITCH: I had read or heard somewhere that there were reporters on the *157* when you went to pick up Kennedy and his crew. Is that right?

LIEBENOW: A guy named Leif Erickson.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: If you can believe that. A guy named Leif Erickson was aboard. And let's see.... Whatever happened to that guy?

DAITCH: He was a reporter?

LIEBENOW: He was a reporter.

DAITCH: Was he just following the PT, the campaign in the Pacific or...?

LIEBENOW: We had reporters around a lot.

DAITCH: Really! I didn't know that.

LIEBENOW: Well, Bulkeley was famous because he'd carried MacArthur out of the Philippines.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: When we went to England actually, Bulkeley made maybe four or five missions with us. Then he had to be relieved because we were actually running OSS [Office of Strategic Services] boats, and the missions were secret. And he had so many reporters always after him for a story, that he finally left us. He took command of a destroyer, and then he took command of all PT boats in the Mediterranean and everywhere. But the real reason he left us was because of the publicity, couldn't stand it. That work then was not to be publicized. We, you know, they just did it....

DAITCH: Right. Well, and people could get killed, I guess, if they knew that this was happening on a routine basis. You would get caught by the enemy.

LIEBENOW: Oh, well, the British had lost a lot of guys that way. We didn't lose anybody during that operation, thank goodness.

DAITCH: Yes. I would imagine that would be a very, you'd be so vulnerable because you'd have to be by yourself.

LIEBENOW: Well, it was a different. It was a different type of war, you know, it was....

DAITCH: So what else did you...? I wanted to ask you a few more just personal, if you have any recollections about Kennedy. You were talking about those, you know, the talking at the base. Did you play cards or I don't know what?

LIEBENOW: Well, Jack was not a card player. We used to play a lot of cribbage.

[END SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

DAITCH: I do think that some of these details are helpful.

LIEBENOW: I get groggy. I hope I'm keeping straight on things. Oh, I don't know. Do you people know? Maybe I know. Maybe they do know. I saved some stuff from the hurricane.

DAITCH: Oh, good.

LIEBENOW: We lost a lot of stuff.

DAITCH: The pictures are important.

LIEBENOW: There's my crew.

DAITCH: Oh! Wow!

LIEBENOW: See the uniforms we wore?

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Isn't that something?

DAITCH: Wow! You know what, it's so hot over there.

LIEBENOW: And these missions in England, sometimes we wore full uniforms, sometimes we wore civilian clothes. Oh, here's the pictorial thing. This guy and Kennedy --this was reenacted in Chicago. But they flipped a coin to see which boat went to New Guinea and which boat went to the Solomons. And I don't know whether it's win or lose, but anyway Jack came to the Solomons on the flip of a coin.

DAITCH: Wow! How interesting.

LIEBENOW: Yes. And a lot of people say that if it hadn't been for the sinking of the *PT-109*, he'd have never made president.

DAITCH: Hmm.

LIEBENOW: Because they did use that. You know that was during the campaign. The Democrats really stressed that point. And, you know, you think of people like Bob Dole [Robert Joseph Dole] that's down in the water for about a week, you know, in a lifeboat, shot down.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: But this incident, though, it really played well with the public, I guess.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: But anyway, it was.... Here's our base at Rendova. Now see where we pulled the boats right up?

DAITCH: Oh, yes. Right up onto the ground just like a little....

LIEBENOW: Just pulled them right up to the beach.

DAITCH: On the shore, yes.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Oh, we got invited to the inauguration. We went and had big time. Red-carpet treatment.

DAITCH: Yes? Did you get to see...? He was probably busy with the inauguration. Did you get to speak to him at all?

LIEBENOW: Oh, yes. We went to the, let's see, the Shoreham Hotel ball, well banquet. There I was on the stage to meet him when he came in. He and Lyndon [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. And Lucy was back at the table, a thousand-dollar table. Anyway, we were guests, and we had a private train car to take us down there to Washington from Michigan.

DAITCH: Yes? Wow!

LIEBENOW: See, when he got elected, it was the railroad trains that did it.

DAITCH: [Laughter] Right.

LIEBENOW: Anyway, we had quite a visit. And that's when I met, Lady Bird...

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: And Lucy was back at the table. It was like a thousand people. There was big ball.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: So he had the Secret Service go clear a path to allow for her to come up on the stage.

DAITCH: Is that right!

LIEBENOW: She got a kick out of that.

DAITCH: Oh, yes!

LIEBENOW: I guess my most memorable moment in the Navy was seeing Admiral Halsey [William “Bull” Halsey]. He came to our base, I met him on the plane. He rode on patrol.

DAITCH: Wow!

LIEBENOW: That was the admiral of the fleet coming down on a PT boat to take a ride.

DAITCH: Oh, yes. Much more exciting than Eisenhower. [Laughter]

LIEBENOW: Yes. This was our invitation. Then we went to the battleship *Missouri*, I mean the battleship *Massachusetts*. There’s Ted and Patrick [Patrick J. Kennedy]. We had red-carpet treatment up there. That was for the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the *109*. There’s the....

DAITCH: Oh, right.

LIEBENOW: It’s hard to see.

DAITCH: This is just a tiny little....

LIEBENOW: This is a slough because we were patrolling across, different boats in different areas.

DAITCH: And typically you would only go out in groups of three or four at a time?

LIEBENOW: Yes, sections.

DAITCH: In sections?

LIEBENOW: Sections of two, four boats. You see like some nights you’d have four boats down here and four boats up here, and one over here. You’d have them in different locations, different patrol areas, looking for the Japanese shipping. All the boats went out; they just went out in sections.

DAITCH: Now how would you, as dark as it was, how would you spot them?

LIEBENOW: Well, if you get close enough, you could see at night. Some of the boats had radar which was new at the time and very iffy. Usually the lead boat in the section would have radar, but not always. At that time in the war it was not very helpful. Now later on in the war, when we got [Inaudible] navigation, [Inaudible].

DAITCH: Now how did you communicate to the boats behind you? Did you use radios, or you had to be quiet?

LIEBENOW: That was another thing about the sinking of the *109*. We had radio silence. Because the Japanese would get on that frequency. We'd go out, and we'd start talking, and you'd say something, and they'd say, "Like hella you are."

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: They couldn't pronounce L's and that. They'd get on the frequencies, so most of the time we operated in silence.

DAITCH: That would be such a difficult task to keep several boats together and working on the same thing.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Mmmm hmmm.

DAITCH: That's amazing.

LIEBENOW: Especially when you're.... You liked it when it was pitch dark. The darker it was, the safer it was.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Well, let's see what else we've got.

DAITCH: What a great scrapbook.

LIEBENOW: This is one of the guys we picked up off the *U.S.S. Corey*, he's a guy off the *Corey*. [ringing of telephone] [Pause] When we went to the 50th anniversary, Zinser [Gerald E. Zinser], there was a machinist on the *PT-109*; he was the only living member of that crew that was left at that time, which was 1993. And he was there. He had a little [Inaudible], and he made one for me and one for him and one for the PT Museum which is in Battleship Cove.

DAITCH: Yes, I wondered if you knew any of the other crew members or had any contact with them.

LIEBENOW: You know I knew them during the time, at least talked to them. I never had any contact with any of them. At the inauguration the *109* crew that was left, had still survived, were.... They had a replica of the boat, and they paraded it down there. That was the coldest day...

DAITCH: I've heard it was awful.

LIEBENOW: Unbelievable, I'll tell you. Here's one of the letters I got that I saved.

DAITCH: Oh, right. What was he writing about when he sent you a letter like that?

LIEBENOW: Oh, personal stuff. Stuff you usually write in letters.

DAITCH: It's just kind of nice you guys were friendly.

LIEBENOW: All these people [Inaudible] saying [Inaudible] checked off there. That's Bing Crosby [Harry Lillis Crosby]. You ever hear of Bing Crosby?

DAITCH: Yes, yes. Handsome guy there.

LIEBENOW: These are all taken up there. That's my wife. This is Patrick. Patrick took quite a shine to Lucy.

DAITCH: Really?

LIEBENOW: Yes. He's quite a personable. He's a representative from Rhode Island. [Too soft to hear.] That's why [Inaudible] she went down. [Too soft to hear.] G.I. Joe.

DAITCH: Really?

LIEBENOW: Did you ever hear of Estes Kefauver [Carey Estes Kefauver]?

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

LIEBENOW: He made the nominating speech.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: Yes, he had the big speech. [Laughter]

DAITCH: I think your speech was better received, no?

LIEBENOW: No, no, no. No, no. See, over that rescue, we just took him off.

DAITCH: Were you really the only boat, or did a couple of other boats go with you?

LIEBENOW: We were supposed to have a boat go with us to give us radar coverage, which was John Battle's boat. John Battle [Too soft to hear.]. They got lost. Or we got lost. [Laughter] But anyway, we lost contact. I'll say this, we lost contact soon after we got there, [Inaudible].

DAITCH: So by the time you got there, you were by yourself.

LIEBENOW: We were the only boat that picked them up.

DAITCH: Was there plenty of room on that? I mean they're very big boats. Was there plenty of room on the boat?

LIEBENOW: Eighty feet. No, there's not very much on 80 feet. It could sleep 12 crew members. They had a little captain's quarters, and [Inaudible]. And then the crew sleeps up in the bow. And then they have a sort of a place where the engineer.... And they have a little galley and a stove. But we couldn't carry the food, so.... We ate mostly C rations. Mostly K rations.

DAITCH: Yes, Stan Marshall told me the food was pretty bad. The food situation was not good.

LIEBENOW: Stan was something else.

DAITCH: He's a jokester.

LIEBENOW: Let's see. Stan was always a little...

DAITCH: [Laughter] Right. Are those people in your crew?

LIEBENOW: Well, this one's a.... He was on another boat. He was an officer. And this was our chief cook.

DAITCH: Oh, the important guy.

LIEBENOW: Yes. This was our original crew. I've forgotten exactly.... There's where the....

DAITCH: A young guy.

LIEBENOW: Yes. We went through Notre Dame as seamen second [Inaudible].

DAITCH: You remind me of some actor in there, Matt Damon [Matthew Paige Damon] maybe.

LIEBENOW: Hmmm?

DAITCH: Yes, I think you remind me of Matt Damon, that young actor, young, handsome guy in the movies now. [Laughter]

LIEBENOW: Well, do you want one or two pictures?

DAITCH: Yes. Well, yes. I sort of wanted to.... I don't want to.... I want to be careful with your things because they're....

LIEBENOW: Well, you mean you'll send it back.

DAITCH: Yes. Well, I'm not even sure that I want to take them with me. But maybe we'll talk to the Library about having some copies made of a couple of things.

LIEBENOW: Well, you can go to the computer and, you know.... That's from the Internet.

DAITCH: Oh, it is!

LIEBENOW: Mmmm hmmm. And there's also, let's see. My picture is in the Navy Log. There's another picture of the *PT-157*. There's the *U.S.S. Corey* sinking.

DAITCH: Ooohhh....

LIEBENOW: We weren't supposed to take pictures, but one of my crew took that and sent it to me.

DAITCH: Wow! I wondered about that. I would've thought it would have been too crazy to even have a minute to take a picture.

LIEBENOW: We weren't supposed to.

DAITCH: Wow.

LIEBENOW: [Inaudible] taken off.

DAITCH: Yes. I should just jot down that number. It looks like it's in a sort of an official marine corps...

LIEBENOW: That's me right there.

DAITCH: Oh, yes, smack in the middle in shorts.

LIEBENOW: Now this.... He wasn't on that. He's not in that group. That's our squadron commander. That's R.B. Kelly.

DAITCH: Oh, yes.

LIEBENOW: He got in the picture because this was after we got our destroyer. Picture of the crew. Of course he got in on it.

DAITCH: That's right. Exactly. Well, when you do something exciting like getting a destroyer....

LIEBENOW: The Navy Log, in Washington, D.C., you know, they have a Navy museum. And I think you just log onto Navy Log and put in Liebenow, William.

DAITCH: Oh!

LIEBENOW: Well, there's four Liebenows you get. My brother was an air pilot during the war. My son is, he's marines, so he was in there. Anyway, if you put William F. My son is William Michael, M. But anyway, you can see that.

DAITCH: That's kind of a nice thing. Say, when you heard Kennedy was coming over and you saw him, were you pleased? Or did you think, Oh, no! When he was coming to the Solomons?

LIEBENOW: Oh, when he came to the Solomons, we were pleased to see anybody really that--because they reinforced us, you know.

DAITCH: Right, right.

LIEBENOW: And they had news from home at least. Of course it took them quite a while to get over there. But at least they were the last person that we knew from home.

DAITCH: I wondered what you thought about his boating skills.

LIEBENOW: Well, all I know is that not one of his crew made any criticism of his boat handling or his being skipper of the boat. So, you know, they would know more than me or anybody else.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: Whether he was a good skipper or not. I never heard of any of them that had any criticism that I know of.

DAITCH: Yes, that says a lot. Was it normal, though, for enlisted people to be grumpy about their officers?

LIEBENOW: The thing is that on a PT boat, you have to be close to the crew. You just can't.... The old-time Navy officers were--during World War II a lot of the officers just didn't associate with the enlisted. But on a PT boat, at least, okay, we had a mess, a table in the crew's quarters were they ate. Then we had a special place that the officers ate. I always ate with the crew.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: My executive officer would not. He would sit there. So that was the difference. But I couldn't, for the life of me, see how he could be separate on an 80-foot boat. Really, all of them were nice guys. [Inaudible], a heck of a nice guy.

DAITCH: Yes. It isn't very nice on a boat. Well, and you're going through a lot together. It's very stressful. I would imagine you're just tense a lot, you work hard, and maybe play hard when you get a chance to play.

LIEBENOW: You got to depend on them, my gosh! As far as I know, Jack was like that. He treated the crew just like anybody. He was not a standoffish person. He was very friendly and outgoing. He was a democratic guy. [Laughter]

DAITCH: Yes, he was. I had heard that he was a little reserved or maybe even almost shy. And I wondered how he, you know, came across to people in the service.

LIEBENOW: I don't think he was shy. But who knows?

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: Some people might think it, but I don't see how. I don't see how you could think he was anything but friendly. Who knows? Some people might. But I don't see how, I don't see how you couldn't see him as friendly. Nope.

DAITCH: Well, I'm going to stop there for a moment.... [Pause] I was thinking about the experience that Kennedy had trying to keep his crew, you know, upbeat and so on. And one of the things that I seem to have read or heard somewhere is that he felt like he had to do something, and hence all the swimming out into the, I guess it was a small strait in the area. Do you remember talking about that with him, when you were talking about...?

LIEBENOW: That he felt like he had to contribute to the war effort? Or that he had to do something against the enemy?

DAITCH: That he had to do something while they were, after the *109* was hit. That he felt like he....

LIEBENOW: He felt responsible for the guys....

DAITCH: Yes, felt responsible, and that he needed to be actively, busily doing something. And so he was constantly out in the water and swimming and....

LIEBENOW: You got that thing on?

DAITCH: I do. Go ahead and say it.

LIEBENOW: Well, you know, the story is that Jack swam out every night looking for some of us on patrol so that they could get rescued. And actually Warfield had changed our patrol areas actually the next night after he was sunk. And so we didn't go back in that area. And so Jack swam out the way he thought the boats would be coming by so he could hail them and get picked up. But that was all changed because.... And as it happened, the new patrol areas, there wasn't any more Jap activity down there where Kennedy was. So I don't know why Warfield changed the patrol areas, but you went where you were told.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: So that's what we did. And Jack swam--a lot is made of his swimming. He had a lifejacket, you know, out in the water. The big risk was probably maybe sharks. I don't know. But I had no reason to doubt that he didn't swim out every night to see. Because, you know, he was on this island for like five days.

DAITCH: Yes. I just wondered if he had mentioned to you as another skipper about how it would feel. I wondered if he had chatted with you as from one skipper to another how it feels to be responsible for your crew and what you did.

LIEBENOW: Well, see, the thing, of course, when he became abroad, after we picked him up and he came down with me in the cockpit, I asked him, you know, "How in the world did you get hit by that destroyer?" He said, "Believe me, I swear I just don't know. I was there, and it just zoomed up and hit me." And I believe him. I believe.... And we kidded him. We kidded about that, that being the only PT boat in the history of the world that was ever rammed. But he took it good-naturedly. I actually believe that he was going along trying to follow Lowery, or trying to keep close to him. And supposedly Lowery was trying to keep close to us.

DAITCH: Did you ever talk to Lowery about it? Did he see anything other than just the fire?

LIEBENOW: Turn that thing off and, I'll tell you.

DAITCH: Oh, come on. Okay. [Pause] We were talking about how hard it can be in the Navy if you make a mistake and if your superiors are hard on you. Was Kennedy ever sort of.... I mean he lost his ship.

LIEBENOW: Right.

DAITCH: Or his boat. Was he ever chastised?

LIEBENOW: Not except by people that were not in the Navy. People wrote books, as you can read in those books. And I know during the campaign these people who were the very people who wrote some of these books, they interviewed me. They called up on the phone and used every trick to try to get me to say something that would be detrimental to Kennedy and his ability as a boat skipper. And I can't say anything like that. He was like the rest of us. We weren't so hot either. [Laughter] We just did the best we could. But it's funny how people will try to misconstrue your words and make you say something that you didn't. I don't think, well, all of those books were very kind to me personally. But they sure did rip into Kennedy.

DAITCH: Oh, yes.

LIEBENOW: You've heard of them? They lived in Florida right next-door to Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], I think.

DAITCH: Yes.

LIEBENOW: [Too soft to hear.] Ten times they'd call up and, you know, nit-pick little questions trying to get me to say something. [Inaudible]. I cannot say, and I don't see how anybody can say, that he was any more or any less of a PT boat skipper than any of us.

DAITCH: I've heard some people try to elevate Lenny Thom [Leonard J. Thom], who was his executive officer, and sort of elevate Lenny Thom to be detrimental to Kennedy.

LIEBENOW: I don't know how they could do that.

DAITCH: I think Kennedy and Thom were good friends. I mean they were....

LIEBENOW: Oh, yes, yes. They were. Oh, sure. I don't see where that story could.... Yeah, I could give stories, but.... People just make things out of nothing.

DAITCH: Well, if you're a politician, you're a target.

LIEBENOW: Well, that's true. That's true. That's true. And when Kennedy came in front in the campaign, they used everything they could to elevate Kennedy. And some people, well, read that article. Some people tried to blow the incident of the sinking of the [Inaudible] up into making Jack Kennedy a great hero. And other people tried to make it prove that he was a traitor. So you have the extremes. He never claimed to be a great hero. He was no different from any other PT officer. So I don't see how they got it....

DAITCH: I had read somewhere that he really didn't use it very much in his political career. He never mentioned it until he was running for president. And it was one of those things that he really needed to help him, you know.

LIEBENOW: Well, actually because of the criticism, he had to defend himself. People came out first about what a terrible tragedy it was for getting sunk. So they had to defend him. Of course you have to give credit to Robert Kennedy for using that.

DAITCH: Did you ever talk to Robert about it?

LIEBENOW: Oh, Robert Kennedy was smart as a whip. Oh, yes. You know he was running the campaign actually. We talked on the phone several times about the sinking, trying to get out of all the details of what happened.

DAITCH: I guess they wanted to be true about it. But they still needed to defend.

LIEBENOW: Oh, yes. [Inaudible] if I did anything, it was [Inaudible]. And after this came out in the papers at the time. Oh, the Grand Rapids paper published all this stuff about I rescued Kennedy; it was crap.

DAITCH: Really.

LIEBENOW: Anyway, I'd get phone calls and letters. Some people just hated Kennedy and wanted him dead.

DAITCH: Really! You got phone calls and letters from people?

LIEBENOW: Yeah, they blamed it on me.

DAITCH: You're kidding! [Laughter] That's pretty absurd.

LIEBENOW: Oh, it is. See, that's the way people are.

DAITCH: Wow.

LIEBENOW: Most of the people were very supportive. But you've got these, you know, at the time there was this anti-Catholic thing that was strong in this country. Religious fanatics and these Christian papers about the pope [Laughter] was going to run the country.

DAITCH: Oh, right. Wow. That's interesting. Speaking of all these people and your getting in the news, I was so fascinated by the fact that there was a reporter on the boat when you picked up Kennedy and his crew.

LIEBENOW: Well, the reason Leif Erickson was out there was Kelly was a fairly famous person because he was in the book, *They Were Expendable*, Kelly is the romantic lead because he was in love with the nurse that was captured by the

Japs and all this stuff. And Kelly was fairly famous. And of course Bulkeley was famous, but Bulkeley wasn't with me. I wasn't with him in the Pacific. He was down at New Guinea with his squad. I didn't get to be with him until Europe. But Leif Erickson had been sent up there by.... I think he was traveling with Admiral Halsey.

DAITCH: Now was he a military reporter? Or was he like a reporter reporter?

LIEBENOW: You want a glass of water?

DAITCH: No, I'll have....

LIEBENOW: The guy wore khaki pants and khaki shirt that had no insignia. I don't know whether he was or not. I don't really know. We'd had some action, some battle with destroyers, and he was up there to cover that. And this thing happened while he was there, and they allowed him to go on the boat. Yes. And there was this Marine correspondent that wrote that other book. He came and wanted--he was a Marine correspondent. He wanted to ride on patrol boats, and Kelly would not let him. He thought it was too dangerous. But Stan Marshall's boat was on a reef. This was in the daytime that it was still on the reef. And so we wanted to destroy the equipment that was on it so it wouldn't be captured because the Japanese were shelling it. And so things were calm, and Kelly came aboard our boat and said, "You go out there and pull that boat off the reef or destroy it." And so this guy said, could he go on the trip? So Kelly let him go. And then he writes it up in a chapter, and Kelly wished he hadn't.

DAITCH: [Laughter] Yes.

LIEBENOW: Anyway, you know, the Japanese started shooting at us. And we got out of there and destroyed that boat, sunk it. This guy wrote it all up, and he devoted a whole chapter in his book about that incident.

DAITCH: That must have been really dangerous. I mean the Japanese already knew you were there and knew you were coming, knew where to shoot.

LIEBENOW: They tried to destroy the boat, too. You couldn't get it off the reef, it was stuck on there.

DAITCH: Yes, I think he.... I talked to him, and we talked about that incident. I think he blamed that on Kelly for getting his boat on the reef. [Laughter]

LIEBENOW: Oh, Stan didn't get along with Kelly.

DAITCH: No!

LIEBENOW: Stan did not like Kelly, and I don't know, it may have been vice versa. I don't know. I got along all right with Kelly. He was Navy all the way. And of course Stan and I were reserves. We didn't know anything about the Navy regulations or anything else when we first started.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: And Kelly was [Inaudible].

DAITCH: Oh, yes.

LIEBENOW: He played by the book. He was Navy [Inaudible].

DAITCH: I would think that would be hard to get used to, coming from a civilian background, to get used to that sort of rigid chain of command.

LIEBENOW: Oh, yes. And....

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

LIEBENOW: I was always out of uniform. For some reason I didn't have much time to shave or.... You had [Inaudible] that had these straps all over. I couldn't wear those things. So I'd pull them up real tight. The only time I got caught because I didn't have them on, he had me walking tours instead of going on liberty.

DAITCH: Ooohhh.

LIEBENOW: Finally, they had a swimming meet, they had races. And I was swimming, but I won a couple of the dashes and the diving. And after that I got liberty.

DAITCH: Really!

LIEBENOW: It's that funny? It was nothing to do with anything else, socks, shoes. But I guess he got to thinking: If he'd do something that's a little bit out of the ordinary, I'm going to give him liberty. Isn't that odd?

DAITCH: It is odd, but it's human nature, I think, yes.

LIEBENOW: We had.... We were going to move up from Tulaghi to the Russell Islands. Kelly came down and said, "Liebenow, I want you to go over to Guadalcanal and contact the Army Quartermaster Corps. And here's what we need." He

gave me a list of supplies that we needed, all kinds of things. And I said, "Okay." So we go across there, and how in the world am I going to get the Army, who's short of supplies anyway...? We get over there on the beach, and I ask an Army guy, I asked him where the head guy was who's in charge of supplies. And he led me to him. And here's one of the guys from Fredericksburg, Virginia, that lived one block from me, whom I'd grown up with and was my best friend in high school. [Laughter] He loaded that boat up with everything on the list.

DAITCH: Unbelievable!

LIEBENOW: And gave me three bottles of scotch whiskey. And he said, "These are for Kelly, Commander Kelly." So we went back with all the stuff....

DAITCH: I'll bet you were the most popular man around.

LIEBENOW: Kelly didn't even change expression. He said, "Very well...." Didn't even give me a drink.

DAITCH: Oh, well, you should have kept one. Do you remember.... I think that's an interesting point about you do something special, and you get noticed one way or the other.

LIEBENOW: Yes. Right.

DAITCH: Do you remember Kennedy ever distinguishing himself with any little thing like that?

LIEBENOW: No. Actually he distinguished himself and brought himself to attention by getting sunk. [Laughter] I don't know of anything like that. Because during training at Melville, I don't think anybody did anything there that was outstanding. [Laughter] All we did was try to stay out of the way of the ranking officers and instructors.

DAITCH: I heard that was difficult.

LIEBENOW: But I think back then we got liberty every weekend.

DAITCH: Good thing he knew how to dress.

LIEBENOW: He had a car, too.

DAITCH: Ahhh. Did you ever go with him?

LIEBENOW: I went once or twice just into Newport. For his big weekend [Inaudible]. At Newport Lucy asked a girlfriend, who was her tennis partner. Lucy was a tennis player, and she and Lucia Caltmon[?] played doubles. Anyway, Lucia was living in Newport, her father was an admiral in the Navy; she was living in Newport. And so she used to invite us to parties and stuff like that. And there were three social levels in Newport: There was Doris Duke's, the Vanderbilts and all, had those summer homes on the Cliff Walk. Then there was the Navy because the Naval War College was there; so there were high-ranking naval officers there. And then there was just the ordinary people. But it wasn't so bad at Melville, I guess. We had some good times, some bad times.

DAITCH: Sounds like you got to mingle a little bit.

LIEBENOW: Yes, we got liberty.

DAITCH: Were you already married then? Is that why Lucy was up there, or she was just there because you were there?

LIEBENOW: No, no. I wasn't married until October of 1942, after we got out of PT school. And we went to New York, Brooklyn, New York, Pier 19. And I got a three-day pass. And we went down to Portsmouth where Lucy was living. We got married in the Navy chapel at Portsmouth Naval Hospital. And went back to New York. We had a one-room, third-floor walk-up in Brooklyn on Tenth Avenue. It had a three-burner hotplate, and Lucy never left the room because she couldn't speak the language, Brooklynese. [Laughter] And we were there a month, and then we went overseas, and Lucy went home, back to Portsmouth.

DAITCH: Yes. Now what did you do after the war, when you got back from Europe?

LIEBENOW: After the war?

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

LIEBENOW: I went to work for the C&O Railroad, and we were started out. I got hired in Richmond, Virginia. Then we went to Huntington, West Virginia, then to Ashland, Kentucky. And then Grand Rapids where I spent most of my years.

DAITCH: What were you doing for them?

LIEBENOW: I was in environmental control and engineering. You know the railroad carries a lot of dangerous chemicals. And I started out in the test department, and I got to be the director of environmental engineering. We'd had derailments and spilled acids and chemicals and that sort of thing. And we'd try and get them cleaned up. I spent a lot of time testifying in court for the railroad.

DAITCH: Oh.

LIEBENOW: Because like if a farmer, say a farmer wanted to collect some money, he'd start a fire along the railroad track in one of his fields, and burn up his crops, and sue the railroad. Stuff like that.

DAITCH: Yes!?

LIEBENOW: One time we had a case in Pittsburgh. Two young kids were up on a cut where the railroad came through, you know, with rifles. And as the engineer went by, they shot him.

DAITCH: Aaahhh! You're kidding!

LIEBENOW: And the mother of the two boys--I mean the mother of the engineer; I think his mother or his wife, sued the railroad for not furnishing a safe place for her husband to work.

DAITCH: Oh, good grief!

LIEBENOW: And the two kids were there at the trial.

DAITCH: For heaven's sakes!

LIEBENOW: Instead of suing them, she.... Well, they didn't have any money, see. The railroad had money.

DAITCH: Yes, right. Exactly. Wow!

LIEBENOW: Anyway, we had to testify that we bought the locomotive from General Motors or General Electric. Just like the Viacom truck.

DAITCH: Right.

LIEBENOW: And anyway, I was at the trial. Those were the kinds of things you had to defend against.

DAITCH: How bizarre! So how come you moved down here? You were mostly up....

LIEBENOW: Well, Lucy was born in Key West, Florida, and I was born in Virginia, Fredericksburg. We met in college. She was a coed at Randolph-Macon Men's College in Ashland, Virginia, which was an all-men's school. But during the war her father was overseas. He was a Navy doctor, and it split up the family. And she was living at with an aunt in Ashland. And they allowed them to go to school as day students, and there were three girls there. That's where we met. We've been married for 62, 63 years.

DAITCH: That's great.

LIEBENOW: We got married in '42, so it's 62 years.

DAITCH: And she's still beautiful.

LIEBENOW: Tell her that. [Laughter]

DAITCH: Alright. I'm going to stop these. I think I have pestered you enough. Unless you have any last thoughts, any interesting...

LIEBENOW: I don't have any.

DAITCH: ...things you can think of about Kennedy.

LIEBENOW: Good Lord! I didn't know you were taping.

[END SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

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