

Interview of ET1 Keith Williams, USCG

World War II Veteran
U.S. Coast Guard Operating Base, New London, CT

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28 November 2015
Beaverton, OR



***Keith Williams & Douglas Kroll
November, 2015***

Biographical Summary

Born in rural Hugo, Colorado on 22 November 1927, Keith Williams was the youngest of five children. The family relocated to Arlington, Washington when he was about two years of age. His father ran a cedar shingle mill. He grew up in Arlington, graduating from Arlington High School in 1945. He enlisted in the Coast Guard in Seattle a few months later, attending recruit training in Alameda, California. He later attended and graduated from Electronics Technician School at the Coast Guard Training Center in Groton, Connecticut. He spent the next three years

of his enlistment assigned to Coast Guard Operating Base, New London, Connecticut, where he was responsible for all the electronics on the lighthouses and the light ship between Rhode Island and the entrance to New York Harbor. During his Coast Guard service he married Marie Olson in 1946 and they had six children, three boys and three girls. That marriage ended in divorce in 1967. In 1994 he married his fourth wife, Valemnda Cassatt.

After his discharge from the Coast Guard in Seattle in 1948, he returned to Arlington, Washington where he went into the mill business with his father, making cedar siding. After two or three years he built and ran a plant to paint cedar shingles. He then went to work for the U.S. Navy's largest transmitting station in Arlington. He then spent fifteen years working at Tek Tronix in Beaverton, Oregon, leaving as Vice President of Marketing. After that he owned a wood processing plant in Clackamas, Oregon, making laminated wood beams. Twenty years later the plant was forced to close by the spotted owl protection ruling.

In his early retirement he developed the "E-Z Docker" device for boaters and manufactured and marketed them at boat shows. When the price of stainless steel increased he closed that down and fully retired. His wife, Valemnda, died in 2014. Since 2015 he has been residing in Beaverton Lodge, Beaverton, Oregon.

INTERVIEWER: Where and when were you born?

WILLIAMS: I was born in Hugo, Colorado in 1927.

INTERVIEWER: Would you briefly tell me about your childhood and how you came to join the Coast Guard?

WILLIAMS: I was born on a farm about ten miles west of Hugo, Colorado, but in 1929 the family moved from Hugo to Arlington, Washington. They were blown out by the big dust storm. I was very young, about two or younger when they moved.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

WILLIAMS: I had two older brothers, but one died shortly after birth, and two older sisters, one of which died quite young. I was the youngest.

INTERVIEWER: You grew up in Arlington and graduated from high school there?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I graduated from Arlington High School in 1945.

INTERVIEWER: How did you come to join the Coast Guard?

WILLIAMS: I've thought about that a long time. There were no Coast Guard units there, no recruiting station, nothing. I did have an older friend who was in the Coast Guard and that might have been the reason. I do remember doing a little bit of research on the services and the Coast Guard had better schools, other than the Navy, to get into. That worked out extremely well for me.

INTERVIEWER: Where was the recruiting office you went to?

WILLIAMS: Seattle, Washington.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go for recruit training?

WILLIAMS: I went to Alameda, California.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of training did you go through there?

WILLIAMS: At boot camp they made the effort to get you used to being in the service. It was mostly to get you used to the discipline of being handled in a large group. One of things I remember about the discipline for the guys who wouldn't go to sleep at night was that they would get everybody up, make us pack out sea bags, and put you out on the grinder [parade ground] 'til morning, then let you go back to bed, then get you back up because it was six o'clock in the morning by the time it all happened.

INTERVIEWER: How long was recruit training/boot camp?

WILLIAMS: Ten weeks.

INTERVIEWER: How was the food, the meals while you were there?

WILLIAMS: I was never anywhere with the Coast Guard where the food wasn't good.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of your company commander?

WILLIAMS: He was a bit of a "wild hair", but not bad.

INTERVIEWER: What was your assignment after boot camp? What determined the assignment? Did you volunteer or were you chosen?

WILLIAMS: While I was there I was very fortunate. I took a battery of tests and at some point they came to me and said that I would have my choice of schools. The school I picked was radar school, conducted by the Navy in San Diego. About two weeks before we completed the radar school the Navy walked into the classroom and told all the Coast Guardsmen to go downstairs and get on the bus. The bus took us over to the Coast Guard air station in San Diego. The bus let us off there and then left. A commander came out and asked us who we were. They didn't know what we were doing there. What evidently had happened was that the Coast Guard's contract with the Navy for that school ran out so that was as far as it went. From there I was shipped back to Alameda. When I got to Alameda I lucked out because I ran into a buddy I had met in boot camp who had some administrative experience. He found his way into one of the administrative offices. I went to see him and he asked what I was doing back at Alameda. He told me, "We just sent a contingent down to the Navy radar school this week." I told him what had happened to me. He came back the next day and he said to me "Where do you want to go?" I told him I wanted to go to the longest school he had. He said it was the electronics school in Groton [Connecticut]. He later came back and said to me, "Well, you got it!"

INTERVIEWER: What was Groton like?

WILLIAMS: It was absolutely outstanding. All the instructors came from M.I.T. They were no-nonsense type of guys, but they were knowledgeable and good instructors. If you really put your head to it, you came out of that school with a really good background in electronics. They did everything but prepare you for what was in the fleet.

The school was put together with quad units down on each side of the hall. And usually they had an instructor that was available to you in that building. If you needed any help, you had somebody to go to. They did an excellent job. I heard at one time that the ratings on military schools went the Coast Guard [Groton] was first, the Navy was second, with Treasure Island in San Francisco. At the Navy it depended on whether you got their "A" school or "B" school. The "A" school taught you theory and the "B" school just taught you how to operate equipment. The Coast Guard had a full curriculum of theory, and that is really all it was. I know at Tek Tronix they would rather have you from Groton than any university, because you were better equipped to do what they were doing.

INTERVIEWER: How long was that electronics school?

WILLIAMS: Thirty-two weeks.

INTERVIEWER: While you were at Groton, what were the barracks like?

WILLIAMS: The barracks were four students to a room. You had two bunk beds and a table in the middle. They were good accommodations. At that point the Coast Guard had done nothing but build a couple of temporary buildings and the barracks was one of them.

INTERVIEWER: Did the classes meet in the estate for the temporary buildings?

WILLIAMS: The classes were in the temporary buildings.

INTERVIEWER: What about the mess hall?

WILLIAMS: It was another temporary building.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever get inside the big house of the estate?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I got hooked up with the chief who was working on the organ in the home's auditorium. I would go over there and work on the organ with him. It had a big pipe organ of its own that was out of repair. This chief had an interest in pipe organs and he worked his way into a position to take care of it. The grounds were lovely. The only thing the training center didn't have was a ball field or a football field or that kind of facility. If you had a horse, they probably could have stabled it for you. They converted the stable to a PX [exchange]. That duty was very good.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do for liberty while you were at Groton?

WILLIAMS: The weekends were most for study, but occasionally I would go to New York City.

INTERVIEWER: How were you treated by the people in New York?

WILLIAMS: Good. I can't remember the name of the hotel, but one of the hotels down by the train station had a loft that they converted to a barracks and as a service member you go spend the night there for five dollars. It was good, clean and in a good part of town.

INTERVIEWER: What was the relationship with the other services? In New York, or radar school?

WILLIAMS: The only place I encountered any conflict was at radar school. The Coast Guard students had a culture built up. The top ten spots in the class would always be held by Coast Guard students, every class. When you first arrived one of those Coast Guard students would get a hold of you and explain that to you. "You are not here to play fun and games. But continue our tradition of holding the top ten positions of every class coming out of this school." Now the Navy had an interesting pay back on this. They would get truckloads of fruit in the middle of the night and they would come and get the Coast Guard students to unload the truck and put that fruit into cold storage. The Coast Guard students found out how to quickly open the orange crates. You would just take a whole pallet and start it down the dock. The dock was about four feet high. You would get it going as fast as you could and then step aside and through the handle up on it and it would go over the edge and you would have oranges everywhere. (laughter) That was the only place there was any competitiveness.

In New London the Navy was dominant because of the submarine school they had, but I wasn't old enough to go to "Tiny's", which was the night spot they all went down to and they'd pretty soon be outside in the parking lot, fighting.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go after you graduated?

WILLIAMS: When I graduated, I graduated high enough in the class that I got a choice of assignments. However, the choices were only on the East Coast. I went to New York, on Staten Island, but I was just there a short while and then they sent me to New London [Connecticut] to the moorings [Fort Trumbull], which was the Operating Base. I spend three years there.

INTERVIEWER: What was your job at the Operating Base in New London?

WILLIAMS: I was an electronics technician. They had a chief [electronics technician] there, but for some reason they pulled him out of there and sent him to Boston to go on weather patrol. He was too nice of a guy. I don't know what he did to get that assignment. Boston duty for weather patrol was miserable. You pounded ice all the time in North Atlantic. He left about three months after I reported. I then became the office-in-charge of the electronics shop.

INTERVIEWER: Were you an ET2 or ET1 then?

WILLIAMS: I was an ET3 when the chief left, but while I was there, I made ET1.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do as the head of the shop?

WILLIAMS: I scheduled myself. (laughter) I took care of all the lighthouses from Rhode Island down on the Connecticut side to the entrance of New York harbor. All of them had just one radio. Great Gull [Light] also had a radio beacon station and Cornfield Lightship had a radio beacon. The radio beacons had the pressure on them. Everyone got excited if they weren't working. Mostly what I took care of were the radio beacons.

I think my good fortune turned out to be that I found a storage room at New London that had a bunch of old parts for a Wallace-Tierman Timer that ran a radio beacon station. It was a box with a long disc in it, a camber that would plunge and turn something on. They were on for three minutes and then off for a half an hour. It was the first three minutes of each hour and the 30th through 33rd minutes. The cambered wheel would turn once an hour. They usually worked O.K., but unfortunately that had a cork clutch. When the relay came out and stopped the cam, the motor continued to run. This clutch had some cork plates in it--it was next to impossible to get that clutch adjusted so that the relay could go in and then be able to pull itself back out. Of course, when it did that the station never got turned on.

I pondered that question, because when it happened at Great Gull [Lighthouse] I was put on a boat and taken there. Great Gull is essentially a rock. They referred to it as an island, but it was really just a big rock. Somebody had inspected that and told the boatswains mate on duty there that to repaint the [keeper's] house. For some reason they took a blow torch to peel the paint off and they burned the house down. During the period I was there they were rebuilding the house and remaking the station. What they had was a long temporary shed that sat right under the diaphone on the island. When I got out there I pondered the question of repairing the timer and decided to go back to my shop and rebuild it. I lucked out and I did, using the old parts I had found. Now the lieutenant that was in charge of the station [Operating Base] went to a meeting once a quarter and one of the things they reviewed was if you had a radio beacon in your area of responsibility, how well it worked. How it operated determined whether he got marked up or down. He was used to catching heck, but he came back the first time after I put one of my rebuilt timers in and said, "We got a perfect score this time! What happened?"

What had happened was that I rebuilt one and carried it with me. That allowed me to bring the broken one back to the shop, put it on the bench and rebuilt it. After a short while I could make these timers work again if I could just let them run for two or three days. I was recycling them through my shop. This made it possible for the beacons to run a whole month, or more, without stopping. The commanding officer was tickled to death.

As an ET one of things that happened to you was you didn't have the weather patrol to look at, you had the South Pacific on some miserable sand spit where they had a LORAN station. I realized after I had made first class electronics technician I was a candidate for that. The captain was so pleased with my radio beacon work that he called me in and told me that I didn't have to worry about being sent to a LORAN station, the rest of my enlistment would be spent there in New London station. I thanked him.

INTERVIEWER: Where was Cornfield Lightship?

WILLIAMS: It was off the mouth of the Connecticut River.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have anybody working for you in your shop?

WILLIAMS: I would have brand new ETs come, but they would spend about three weeks and then be transferred somewhere else. My duty there was very good. I really didn't have duty as I was on call for the radio beacons.

I volunteered to go on the boats. We had three 29-footers, we had an air-sea rescue 63-footer and we had an 83-footer. We had lots of boats and they were always thin on crew. I wanted to learn how to run a boat. There were four chiefs on the station, and they were always looking for a hole to hide in. I had a shop and I had a head and I could run a coffee pot. I had coffee for them every morning. As a result I got connected to a couple of the boatswain mates and told them what I would like to do. They said if I volunteered to be a crew, they would get me on one of their boats. And that happened. I did a lot of missions. Learned a lot about running a boat in bad weather, which is what I wanted to do and that was O.K.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live while you were stationed in New London?

WILLIAMS: The old administration building was a two-story building but had another floor because the dormers in the big, high roof. They cleaned that up, put a floor in it, and made a barracks out of it. That's where I lived. Up above that on the hill we had a nice chow hall and barracks. When the University of Connecticut took over that facility, they got to barracks. The only thing Coast Guard got out of it was the chow hall on the first floor. It was good duty and I learned how to pilot a boat.

I got good enough driving the boats that they allowed me to run a boat around the harbor. I never had [to] make a patrol or do a mission by myself. I kind of became the coxswain for all of the

dignitaries that wanted to look at the harbor. Right across from our moorings was Electric Boat where they built the submarines.

INTERVIEWER: In all your time in the Coast Guard did you ever serve with any minorities?

WILLIAMS: Only in my brief time at Staten Island where there were several black Coast Guardsmen there.

INTERVIEWER: When and where were you discharged?

WILLIAMS: As my enlistment was ending they sent me back to Seattle. I discharged on June 24, 1948.

INTERVIEWER: What is your best memory of your time in the Coast Guard?

WILLIAMS: I didn't have any bad years. I ran that little shop. I had a pick-up, a credit card for fuel, I scheduled my own in and out. I would go away for a week and I could hit four of five places. My years were all good years. I didn't have any bad years.

INTERVIEWER: How did your Coast Guard service contribute to your later careers and jobs?

WILLIAMS: As a result of that schooling, I worked at Boeing as a preflight inspector on the field after I was discharged from the Coast Guard. Many years later I worked for the Navy's world largest transmitter station that they build near Arlington. From there I went to work for Tectronics, which used to be at the other end of this property. Each of those jobs I got because of the electronics training I got at Groton. It had a very good reputation in the industry.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that you'd like to share that I didn't ask you about?

WILLIAMS: Some of the lighthouses still had Lighthouse Service people on duty. They were older men and those lighthouses were really well kept. The floors were shined. They were clean and they were very comfortable. We had four or five lighthouses still served by the old Light Service people.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything you would future generations to know about your time in the Coast Guard?

WILLIAMS: I would encourage all young people to serve for three years. At that age, they were very good about being a minor. Your I.D. card said minor on the back, and that kept you out of trouble. It's a great opportunity to learn how to be away from home and learn to entertain yourself and take care of yourself. I am a strong proponent of young people going into the service.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything I forgot to ask you?

WILLIAMS: No.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

