

U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office Oral History Program

Interviewee: Radioman First Class Glen Boles, USCGR
World War II Coast Guard Veteran



Interviewer: Commander Joe Hester, USCG

Date of Interview: 27 November 2005

Place: Dr. Glen Boles' Office in Manhattan, New York

The following oral history interview was provided to the Coast Guard Historian's Office through the courtesy of Commander Joe Hester and RM1c Dr. Glen Boles. Commander Hester grew up knowing Dr. Boles as a neighbor and friend but only recently learned that his neighbor had served in the Coast Guard during World War II. As the Commander asked his friend questions about his service, he learned that Dr. Boles, who was an actor in Hollywood and on Broadway prior to the war, joined the Coast Guard after the attack on Pearl Harbor. After receiving his basic training in Manhattan he was sent to Atlantic City for specialized training as a radio operator and was then ordered to a radio monitoring station in Brazil. This little-known operation was designed to intercept Nazi radio communications to South America -- an operation we in the Historian's Office had never heard of. Commander Hester recognized immediately

the importance of getting his friend's oral history and took it upon himself to research the questions he would ask and then took the time to record Dr. Boles' oral history for posterity.

The Historian's Office would like to thank Dr. Boles for taking the time to give future generations a look into what life was like in the Coast Guard during World War II. Our thanks to Commander Hester too for conducting the interview and providing us with a copy. It is only through such efforts that Coast Guard history is preserved for future generations and we are grateful for their efforts. Thank you both gentlemen!

Scott T. Price, Assistant Coast Guard Historian
Editor (2006)

Q: Hello, its Sunday, 27 November 2005. I am Commander Joe Hester and I am here with Dr. Glen Boles who served in the Coast Guard during World War II. Glen, can you tell me where you were born and when you were born?

Dr. Boles: I was born in Hollywood.

Q: Hollywood, Los Angeles?

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: In Hollywood, California?

Dr. Boles: Yes, and became an actor. I would sneak out of the house and be watching them making movie pictures down on Sunset Boulevard where our house was. It was a place called Vermont and Sunset Boulevard ran into Vermont and it was a dirt road in those days.

Q: Wow! [Chuckle]

Dr. Boles: And just oil on the surface. But they were doing a picture where they had a saloon and had a bunch of horses; they were riding up . . . about eight horses riding up and went "Arrgggh" and started standing up on their hind legs, you know, and the Director saw me gaping at it – and I was an eight year old kid at that time – and he said, "Hey, you want to make some money?" I said, "You know I do", and he said, "When those horses are coming down Sunset Boulevard, just before they get to the saloon run across right in front of them and they'll all go up in the air when you're ready." I said, "I'll do it, I'll do it!" [Laughter] And that was the first money I made; five bucks for just



running across the street and I said, "This is for me." So, I've been a moneymaker ever since [laughter].

Q: That's fascinating. What year were you born?

Dr. Boles: I was born in 1913.

Q: Okay.

Dr. Boles: And born in Loma Linda, the hospital there. And so after that incident in the movies I learned how to get jobs on my own. My mother never was on the set in my life, neither stage nor screen, and so I found out that there was a thing called Central Casting and I started getting parts, and one of the pictures that I can show you was called "*The Road to Ruin*".

Q: [Laughter].

Dr. Boles: Oh my, and it was done by a wonderful woman, Dorothy Davenport. She did the picture because her husband, Wally Reed, had been taking drugs and died on a motorcycle and so she wanted to do a picture about the kind of life that we were going through. America was changing at that time. Women were using the long cigarette holders, you remember?

Q: Yes.

Dr. Boles: And bobbing their hair and pulling their skirts up and doing Black Bottom and this kind of thing; all that was happening at that time. So I joined the ranks and did movies at that time.

Q: Well that's wonderful.

Dr. Boles: After that I did a lot of pictures. One was with Jacky Coocen, "*Johnny Get Your Haircut*", "*All Quiet on the Western Front*", "*Moon over Broadway*", "*The Quitter*", "*10 Dollar Raise*" with Edward Horton, "*Flirtation Walk*" and finally "*Babbitt*" with Guy Kibbie and Aline MacMahon.

But Hollywood was no longer for me. I had seen Brando and Orson Wells. I know that if I really wanted to be an actor I needed Broadway. So I walked out of my contract with Warner Brothers and headed for New York. There I found what I wanted, - training. My first Play was the "*Ragged Edge*", a play about the Depression. Second: "*You Can't Take It With You*" and then Langston Hughes' masterpiece "*Mulatto*", a story about a boy born white to a plantation owner and his black house-keeper. The boy is sent north to a college and returns home demanding his rights to the plantation. The father is furious, fights between the two catapult into a murderous rage, and the boy kills his father. The play ends with the boy being killed and hung by a white gang.

Q: Were you on stage here when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor? Do you recall where you were when that happened?

Dr. Boles: I'm trying to think at that time. I was in, yes, just about that time I was doing: *"You Can't Take It With You"*.

Q: So how did you come about to be in the Coast Guard?

Dr. Boles: Well, I was living here in New York, and the war broke out, and I just wanted to experience being in the Service so I volunteered, and I was put in a job down somewhere in lower Manhattan at a Coast Guard base where I typed merchandise coming in; uniforms and all that kind of thing.

Q: You were a clerk of some kind?

Dr. Boles: Huh?

Q: You were a clerk at that point; you were just clerking and typing up merchandise?

Dr. Boles: Yes, typing up this stuff and I couldn't stand it because the routine was so boring and so awful and I wanted some action. So I asked for a release from that and to go . . . I didn't care where I went but I said I wanted to be in something interesting and so they said, "Well we have interesting training in intercept work and so we can educate you along that line", and I said, "I'm for it".

Q: So this was radio intercept work that they were talking about?

Dr. Boles: Yes, and so we went through the normal stages of Boot Camp and all that.

Q: Where was your Boot Camp, do you recall?

Dr. Boles: Yes, in Manhattan. But then when that was over we went to Long Island and I was stationed on the north side of Long Island, called "Watch Hill", and we were in touch with the station that was over in Fire Island, and we would do messages back and forth from where we were then and then came the opportunity to go to Brazil. They asked me if I wanted to go and said I'd get additional training in Atlantic City. I finished my training in Atlantic City, which I loved. I'd never been to Atlantic City and they put us up there for, oh, a long time. It was about three months. I forget how long but we learned all the intercept stuff and how to receive messages and what to do with them and how to process them. Then they sent us off to Brazil.

The trip down to Brazil [chuckle] was, in those days, horrible. The ship was a small banana boat and we were all stacked up in three layers and day after day it took us three weeks of going down just to reach Brazil.

Q: Terrible conditions.

Dr. Boles: A long time.

Q: Yes.

Dr. Boles: But once we were there, it was heaven. In Recife, Brazil we had about 20 Coast Guardsmen and the Navy had about 30 that were working in a different way than the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard was for ships out at sea and any moving enemy people in, not in Brazil particularly but in Argentina and south of Brazil.

Q: Would that have been Uruguay?

Dr. Boles: No, Uruguay is over here. Yes, Uruguay was one too but the other one was the biggest.

Q: Well there's Argentina, Peru, Chile. South of Brazil; there was a lot of enemy traffic coming in there?

Dr. Boles: Argentina.

Q: Argentina.

Dr. Boles: Argentina.

Q: Okay.

Dr. Boles: And Argentina was friends with Germany and a lot of Germans came down to Argentina and we would intercept also their field units that they had down there. We'd get their messages and a lot of them. We would receive the message and it was a tiny signal underneath bigger signals that were on the airwaves and would be coded. Then we would send our message that we got in code up to America and they would find out where they were and get the information back to our moving units, and it was a wonderful, very effective and very successful operation. We got every one of the land units and we got every one of the ones on the boats in the Caribbean that were getting messages back to Germany.

Q: Wow, fascinating.

Dr. Boles: So it was exciting.

Q: So did you actually crack the codes there?

Dr. Boles: No, they were in code and we'd send it [the intercepted message] up to America.

Q: Send it to the states.

Dr. Boles: And they would crack the code and then tell the Navy people what to do.

Q: That was the teamwork between everybody . . .

Dr. Boles: That's right.

Q: . . . and your job was to catch that message and find it out there.

Dr. Boles: Yes [chuckle].

Q: How fascinating!

Dr. Boles: And then the Navy had stations in Brazil; all the way down the coast in Brazil so that they could get any of the messages that were coming back to them.

Q: Fascinating.

Dr. Boles: Yes, real cooperative work that somebody with a lot of understanding who really understood what it would mean to get those messages.

Q: I imagine.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: Now how many of you, more or less, were serving down there do you think; how many Coast Guardsmen?

Dr. Boles: I know exactly, 20.

Q: Really?

Dr. Boles: Twenty of us, yes.

Q: Really?

Dr. Boles: And we didn't lose anybody. We didn't lose anyone. The worst thing we lost people by [was] smoking [chuckle]. We were in a one big room and cigarettes were so God-damn cheap; they were only five cents a pack for the cigarettes, so everybody smoked until the place became an absolute den of smoke. I finally ran out of the place one day. I couldn't breathe anymore [chuckle]. I ran out of there and that was the last time I ever had a cigarette in my life [laughter]. That was horrible and I mean that. That can kill you [laughter], not the war but the cigarettes that could kill you!

Q: Here you are 92 years of age. I'm glad you quit.

Dr. Boles: Yes, I'm glad I quit too [laughter].

Q: Okay, so there are 20 of you. Who was in charge, do you recall, or what rank?

Dr. Boles: I can't think of the name of who was in charge but we didn't have anybody who was making it hard for us. In other words we all knew . . . it was a cooperative thing. We all knew exactly what our jobs were. We cared about the job and we did the job and it worked, and we were very proud of it. So we had real pride in our group of 20.

Q: That's excellent. How long were you down in Brazil?

Dr. Boles: Two years.

Q: That's fascinating.

Dr. Boles: And we had a great time.

When we had leave they would give us free plane rides down to Rio. And wait until you hear this; nobody but me would go. I said, "Come on, it's free", and they were scared. They were scared to leave the security of the place where we were at and take a trip down to Rio and I couldn't understand, because me, I had come from California on my own. I left my contract at Warner Brothers and walked out of it without even telling them. I just didn't like people telling me what to do [chuckle]. And so there we were on our leave time and they would sit in their bunks and sit on the side of bed and smoke [laughter].

I went to Rio and had a ball. One of the trips that I can remember always, it was so great, I went on a train on one of my leaves and went to the end of the line so I saw the natives at the end of the line selling things in the market and whatnot, and so I saw the Brazilian life of the natives, which they were friendly and all they cared about was getting some money for what they were selling. But I loved it and I had a ball. So I did that tour three times straight to the end of the train line and that was scary but fun.

But our other thing was wonderful. We had a – let's see, I forget what they called it now – anyway a house on the beach where Servicemen could go on their time off, and so I played the piano. So in no time I was doing all the records in the camp, which I'd get from New York because I love music, and I did that in the camp and the . . . what did they call the places that are . . . ?

Q: The barracks?

Dr. Boles: No, it had a name.

Q: Mess Hall?

Dr. Boles: No, this is a thing that is done by . . . remember performers would give a performance for the Servicemen?

Q: Oh, the USO shows.

Dr. Boles: Yes, USO. This was a USO unit down there, not a show but the house and they had a piano and so I'd teach the guys how to play the piano. They all wanted to know how to play the piano so I had fun teaching the piano to a lot of the guys.

Q: That's fascinating.

Dr. Boles: And it was fun. So you see, I had a ball. And the biggest thing of all of course, when the war was finally over in '45 I just couldn't wait to use the GI Bill and get to school because it was a free education. I could never even think of getting a college education before. On the GI Bill I went up to Columbia and I did my undergraduate work and my graduate work at Columbia until I got a PhD.

Q: So you came right back here to New York City, went to Columbia University on the GI Bill and worked your way all the way up to a Doctorate?

Dr. Boles: That's right.

Q: That's fantastic.

Dr. Boles: And so I bless my time in the Service. I felt I had gained so much by that because at Columbia I never even knew what Psychoanalysis was until I talked to one of the kids up there and he said he was in analyses, and I said, "What's that", and he told me about having Psychoanalyses. It was just new at that time.

Q: Right.

Dr. Boles: And I said, "This sounds like right up my ally". And so I went into therapy and I'd combined schoolwork with my own therapy and by the time I got out of Columbia I was seeing patients; the head people wanted me to see patients. And I started my therapy then and just think, I got a whole career out of the Service because I went to Columbia and met Margaret Mead and she became a good friend – I had classes with her - and my whole world was extended because of having this education.

Q: That's fascinating.

Dr. Boles: And so I became an Analyst and as you see I stuck with it and I've been an Analyst for over 50 years.

Q: That's wonderful.

Dr. Boles: And I still am. I mean I'm still an Analyst and this is my office.

Q: And all that began with you serving in the Coast Guard. I've got your discharge papers here dated November 1945.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: You were discharged as a Radioman First Class so in just a couple years' service you moved up pretty quickly.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: Wartime I suppose.

Dr. Boles: Wartime [chuckle].

Q: Well done, well done! So the school at Governor's Island would have been Radioman School I suspect.

Dr. Boles: Yes, it was.

Q: Okay, and then the intercept additional training, that was down at Atlantic City.

Dr. Boles: Yes, you've got it.

Q: Fascinating.

Dr. Boles: Exactly.

Q: That makes perfect sense.

Dr. Boles: Yes, that's what I did.

Q: An interesting time to be in.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: Now I see here there's a picture of a young man in uniform. That's a couple years ago.

Dr. Boles: [Laughter].

Q: Does this picture bring back any particular memories for you?

Dr. Boles: Yes, I look at the picture and I didn't think I was that young. I thought I was older than that when I went in.

Q: Well you would have been in your late 20s I suspect.

Dr. Boles: Yes, it was like late 20s.

Q: Yes, you're right.

Dr. Boles: [Laughter]. I grew up a lot.

Q: You sure did. Now when you were serving in Brazil, I mean was this a uniform job; was everybody there in uniform?

Dr. Boles: Yes, we wore Whities; white stuff all the time.

Q: I would imagine.

Now what was that like in the . . . well of course the air-conditioning was fine. You had the most modern of buildings, correct?

Dr. Boles: No, no no.

Q: [Laughter].

Dr. Boles: We lived practically in a tent [chuckle]. It was just a big warehouse building.

Q: Really?

Dr. Boles: Yes, and the thing that was wonderful about the location was we were hidden. It wasn't near the beach so that the enemy could see us. It was up a road and hidden.

And when we went on leave we would go to the downtown section of Recife and there we met the most wonderful girls because in the Brazilian training for girls, they had no - at that time. I don't know where it is now – but they had no support as a female to do any job whatsoever and so they would leave their families.

Q: [Chuckle].

Dr. Boles: They warmed up to people because they were people rebellious like me, I was, and didn't want to be told what to do by the parents and so they got away from their parents and were here in Recife with servicemen, lots of them, and we would eat dinner with them. We'd have parties and it was just a wonderful social life with these girls.

Q: Well it's like an adventure.

Dr. Boles: It was and they were wonderful. They were really caring, beautiful people.

Q: So what was the food like on base? I mean did they have a Navy cook for you or did you provide for yourself; how did that work?

Dr. Boles: It was very ordinary; very ordinary food, not interesting at all. I remember so often times that we would just . . . everything was like canned, you know nothing that was interesting, but in time we would eat the native food and the Brazilian food and have fun.

Q: So skip their Navy chow, skip the Coast Guard chow, get outside and get some real food.

Dr. Boles: Yes, get out and into town.

Q: That's wonderful.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: And so then when peace broke out, I mean finally when Germany surrendered you found yourself coming back to the states?

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: And pretty quickly processed out?

Dr. Boles: Oh, very easy, easy process out, and about the educational thing. I heard something about it before we left, after peace was declared. In Brazil, while I was still in the camp I heard that there was such a thing as the GI Bill where we could get education free.

Q: Right.

Dr. Boles: And so my ears popped up and I said, "That's for me". And so in no time after I arrived back in New York, within weeks I was up at Columbia trying to get in there.

Q: That's magnificent, and you never decided to go back to your acting career?

Dr. Boles: It didn't mean anything to me anymore.

Q: How about that. Any particular successes that you can recall from your intercept days; any intercepts of the messages or was it all just coded; you hand it off, you knew you were doing good work but you didn't know much about it because it was all in code?

Dr. Boles: They never gave us back what we had given them.

Q: Wow!

Dr. Boles: We never heard.

Q: Did you receive any awards or medals for your service?

Dr. Boles: Yes, a little medal on a bar.

Q: Yes.

Dr. Boles: I used to have it around for special duties.

Q: Well we'll try to figure out what that was. Can you remember the name of your command; what was the name of the unit you were assigned too?

Dr. Boles: I don't remember.

Q: Okay, that's fine.

Dr. Boles: I just don't think it had one [laughter].

Q: Here's this place down in the jungle and everybody's, "Shhh, don't tell anybody".
[Laughter]

Dr. Boles: We didn't call ourselves anything.

Q: Well Glen, we've been neighbors all my life and I have lived in your home as your guest. Now we've eaten at each other's tables more times than I can remember and it was only recently that I realized your Coast Guard history.

Dr. Boles: Yes.

Q: And I just want to thank you for your service in my Service during the war. Thank you for what you did for our country.

Dr. Boles: Well I couldn't be more bewildered then with the education that was available to me because of the Coast Guard.

Q: Wonderful. Was there anything you'd like to have recorded for posterity?

Dr. Boles: Yes, I think that all the kids growing up today, they don't know what to do with themselves. You see in the old days they worked on farms and worked with the horses or in the fields and whatnot. They had something substantial to do. I think what is – and this I can assure you this comes from a lot of analyses with kids who don't know what to do with themselves – is in today's world the parents are so affluent, like your own kids, that they give them everything and there's nothing that they have to work for. And I think that when you are treated that way you are missing building blocks in your Psyche; in your inner most being, so you can't deal with problems in a realistic way that everything is, "Well, who do I see that's going to help me out of this or to tell me what to do?" You don't have that kind of problem solving that I had. I was making myself

and they can't do it today because they're already made and one of the guys I remember who had kids who worked for him - and he died and left no money for them at all - made the statement that, "I wouldn't rob them of the joy of making their own money", and so he didn't leave them anything. [Malcolm] Forbes, when he died.

Q: The name rings a bell.

Dr. Boles: That's what he did. So what I'm really concerned with is the kids need to go into Service so they'll have the experience of doing things that are creative in their own growth process in the jobs that they do, for instance your interview. The one thing you brought out in me was how great it is in forming your Psyche, the solidity of it by the kind of work that you do. For instance, your own going into the Service was for you and you grew up and found out your own power, but the kids today don't have that. They never have a chance to feel their own power, which is provided freely by joining the Service; joining the Coast Guard or joining whatever Service they want to go into and I think it's the only thing that's going to plug up the softness of kids not knowing what to do with themselves. And if they do that they don't have to feel powerful by doing bad things with guns and drugs and all these things that they fall into.

Q: I think that's some interesting insight especially given your 50 plus years of analyses. It comes from somebody who knows what they're talking about and I agree with you. It has certainly been wonderful.

Dr. Boles: You know from your own experience.

Q: I do.

Dr. Boles: If you hadn't gone into the Service you wouldn't know that the jobs don't give you the sense of power and solidity; it's the people depending on you as the Service does.

Q: That's right. I know my job counts and I know my work means something to somebody.

Dr. Boles: Absolutely and mostly to yourself. And I would like to add that even today I am benefiting from my years in the Service because I prefer to use the Veterans Hospital at 1st Avenue and 23rd Street in New York City, where I get the best treatment for any medical problems I may have. I am very grateful to the Service for all the benefits I have received.

Q: Well, thank you very much Dr. Glen Boles, it's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW