



## *U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

Interview of **HORST BOETTGE, CREWMAN OF *HORST WESSEL***

Conducted by **DR. WILLIAM THIESEN, LANT AREA HISTORIAN**

January 24, 2007  
Portsmouth, Virginia

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**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. I'm going to indicate where we are, who we are, why we're here, that sort of thing --

**BOETTGE:** Okay.

**INTERVIEWER:** -- just so that everybody knows this is legitimate.

This is Bill Thiesen, William Thiesen, with Atlantic Area. I'm the LANTAREA Historian, and we're here in Portsmouth, Virginia, on the 24th of January at 10:15 a.m. in the morning. And if you would, please, if you would just give us your name, spell your name, where you are living currently, that sort of thing.

**BOETTGE:** My name is Horst Boettge. It is spelled H-o-r-s-t; last name, B as in boy, o-e-t-t-g-e. That's pronounced "Boettge." I'm living presently in Clinton, South Carolina, with my wife. We are retired. Both of us are retired. Originally --

**INTERVIEWER:** I'm going to go down this list. We don't necessarily have to go by all the questions, but I'll ask at least the first one, and we can get started if you want to go along some of these. So, if you could tell us where you're from originally, about your family and early years growing up in Germany, that would be great.

**BOETTGE:** Yes. I was born in 1930 in Halle, Germany, which is in Saxony. I grew up, attended school in Halle, and in 1940, I joined the German Youth Organization called Jungvolk. It was a compulsory situation; you had to join them. And in my seventh or eighth year of elementary school, I got interested in nautical history and also subsequently in becoming a navigator.

So that is earlier years, and in 1943, since I'm interested in nautical history and also becoming a navigator, I joined earlier the Hitler Youth and specifically not the regular Hitler Youth but the Marine Hitler Youth, and I got some basic training there already.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. Now, what got you interested in things that are maritime? I'm not sure where you're from originally, but is it on the shoreline at all?

**BOETTGE:** No, not even near the water. But I was reading and reading and reading, and particularly one book made me very interested. And it was a German raider in World War II -- I'm sorry -- World War I, and it was a sailing ship called -- that ship was called the *Sea Devil* or, in German, *Seeteufel*, and it was commanded by Felix Graf Luckner. And I ate that book from front to back and the other way around, and that got me into it because it's really -- I don't know if there was a Gypsy in our family, but I always wanted to go away someplace else.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** That's basically -- that's what we got there.

**INTERVIEWER:** I see. Okay. So did you have any sort of preparation or training before you went on board with the organization or with -- before you went on board the Horst Wessel?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, very, very basic, and mostly, it was indoctrination of the political scene, so really not very much, maybe a little bit knot tying but, you know -- anyone familiar with the Hitler Youth, he probably knows what it was all about. It was just plainly indoctrination of a young mind.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. Okay, sure. I guess I should point out for anybody that's listening that may not know that the vessel that we're talking about or about to talk about, the Horst Wessel, is now the Tall Ship Eagle which is the vessel used for summer cruises for the Coast Guard Academy. So the events and things that we'll be talking about in our future questions have to do with what life was like on board the Wessel during World War II, during Mr. Boettge's time that was on board and what happened afterwards.

So could you tell us a little bit about what it was like when you first started on board the Wessel?

**BOETTGE:** Yes. The first vessel actually where I went for four weeks of basic training was called the *Admiral von Reuter*, which also was a sailing vessel, but it was sitting in the mud and never moved anywhere. It was just for training for people, for young people like us. And after that, I would say about six or eight

weeks later, I had another training, four weeks training on the then-*Horst Wessel* because now -- as was said, the *Eagle*.

What I recall mostly was we did very, very little, really, training, what I was looking forward to. I wanted to become a navigator, what I said before. It was more geared to education there to become a member of the Navy. That was pre-training. That was more like marlinspike training, Morse code, flag signals, chart reading, things like this, what we got besides the political, should I say, brainwashing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm.

**BOETTGE:** Let's call it "brainwashing," what we had. We didn't realize it then, but it was.

But the first one, what I really never forget, was when it was rise and shine in the morning. It was around 6 a.m. First thing, before anything else, up in the riggings, down on the other side with the foremast, then the main mast, up in the rigging, down again. Many times we didn't have the time to even put shoes on, so we had to do it in socks. It was just a strict training.

**INTERVIEWER:** You did all of the masts, one side, then the other?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, two masts.

**INTERVIEWER:** Two masts?

**BOETTGE:** Two masts, the fore and the main.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay.

**BOETTGE:** That's where we went up. That was the first thing in the morning, what we had to do. And believe it or not, I was scared like -- let me call a spade, a spade here -- like hell --

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Right.

**BOETTGE:** -- going up there the first couple of times. Then you got used to it.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** So that was my first taste on the ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** That was the first day?

**BOETTGE:** On the very first day. And that went on the whole four weeks. On the *Horst Wessel* later, it wasn't quite that often, but we had to do it very often. And I don't remember anymore, if we really set sails or -- and doused the sails or afterward. We were just sitting in port. We never went out. Let's not forget it was 1943 and 1944. Okay. So --

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** And that's the basics, what I had then.

**INTERVIEWER:** Which port was the vessel tied up in? Was that on the Baltic?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, on the Baltic Sea. I forgot now, was it in Kiel or in Trebbin. I really don't remember anymore.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** I was in two ports, and it was tied up. As a matter of fact, the *Horst Wessel* was, for a short period of time -- was a command ship for -- I forgot what it was. I looked it up on the Internet, by the way, and the command ship for an admiral of the German Navy, but, you know, you couldn't get far or fast with the *Wessel*.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** So that was, I believe, after my four weeks. So that is basically what we had to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** And that was on this first vessel that you mentioned?

**BOETTGE:** That was actually on both of them.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, okay.

**BOETTGE:** It was just a little bit more advanced what we had on the *Horst Wessel*.

**INTERVIEWER:** I see.

**BOETTGE:** And then, naturally, one thing besides the climbing in the rigging at 6:30 in the morning --

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** -- was the daily ritual of taking the holystone and scrub the decks.

**INTERVIEWER:** Every day?

**BOETTGE:** Every day. Now, the training personnel, if I recall it right, was all personnel from the Navy. If you look on that CD, what I gave you, there's a good picture on it, in it, which shows crew -- not crew members, us. I don't want to say cadets. We were not cadets. We just were lower than the lows, and there is a Navy enlisted officer watching people doing marlinspike, tying knots, and things like this, a nice picture, and the original of that picture is now on the *Eagle*.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, okay.

**BOETTGE:** And that training, what I received there, was very, very helpful when I later on got into three months training in the merchant marine school. It was three months. They couldn't have more time for us to get us on the ships. I was then -- when that happened, I was 14. I graduated out of -- put eight years education span in Germany. I did it there, and that's where I left house already, house and home or my family.

**INTERVIEWER:** How old were you then?

**BOETTGE:** Fourteen.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay.

**BOETTGE:** That was 1944. It was early 1944, I entered the merchant marines school. It was between Bremen and Bremerhaven on the Weser River, and there we had real good training as far -- [inaudible], what we had over there, more geared toward the merchant marine, like bridge work -- anyway, all that basic what you get probably prior to becoming a cadet anyplace else but the basic information, and it was on land. This was not on a ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Do you have any other questions as far as the *Eagle* is concerned or the *Horst Wessel*? I don't want to go away from it first.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure. So you had four weeks on this one --

**BOETTGE:** At the *Admiral von Reuter*, yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. And then you had six or eight weeks on the *Horst Wessel*.

**BOETTGE:** No, no, no. Another four weeks.

**INTERVIEWER:** Another four weeks, okay.

**BOETTGE:** About four weeks, yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then after that, you had another three months?

**BOETTGE:** That's three months.

**INTERVIEWER:** Training for the merchant marine?

**BOETTGE:** Training for the merchant marine, which was now strictly for merchant marine training. We had to -- you know, simulated bridge work. Let's not forget, I was -- or us, the whole class was at the bottom of the totem pole. There was not such a way that we could even see the staterooms. As a matter of fact, on the *Horst Wessel* and the *Eagle*, I never seen the stateroom.

**INTERVIEWER:** Really?

**BOETTGE:** That was just before the masts.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** And another one I want to mention, you know, there was no safety, no safety gear getting up in the rigs.

**INTERVIEWER:** Like today.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. It was always one hand for the ship and one hand for yourself.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** And, you know, I forget the name for the platform, the first platform when you go up the riggings.

**INTERVIEWER:** They call it "tops," I think, here, but I'm not sure what you'd call it there.

**BOETTGE:** I never could find the proper translation for it.

Anyway, so there was a 45-degree angle outward where you had to go over and over. Now, that one hand, what was for you, somebody -- if you wanted to pry that loose, they'd probably have to use a crowbar. That's -- I wanted to add, that's what I wanted to mention.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you recall anybody ever getting hurt because --

**BOETTGE:** No. Not any eight weeks.

**INTERVIEWER:** Because you were there for -- yeah. Everybody was just holding on for dear life, I guess.

**BOETTGE:** Yes, you held on for dear life. We did not -- I don't believe we ever worked the sails. But nevertheless --

**INTERVIEWER:** Huh. Well, there are some questions here that are specific to the *Horst Wessel* and to your time that you were on board. Do you want to look at those for a few minutes before moving on?

**BOETTGE:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Well, can you mention how thorough or tough the training was on board the tall ship when you were there?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, it was very thorough, what we were trained to do, and it just was pounding in our heads, you know, like Morse code. At this time, there was no -- there was still communication between ships, especially between the Navy, by breaker.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Or --

**INTERVIEWER:** Flags, semaphore.

**BOETTGE:** Semaphore, right, communication. That we had to learn, and I know still some of the --

**INTERVIEWER:** Really?

**BOETTGE:** Not much. But I still, some of the signals. That was day in day out. Chart reading, signal and lead line. We were static. We were sitting there, but, still, we had to pretend what we had to do, you know, lead line on a moving vessel forward and then let it go in, and that's what we had to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you had to pretend that the vessel was actually moving at times --

**BOETTGE:** That's correct.

**INTERVIEWER:** -- when it wasn't because of the security problems during that.

**BOETTGE:** Well, we couldn't go out anymore.

**INTERVIEWER:** Precisely.

**BOETTGE:** So that's -- in essence, that's about it.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was a typical day like? You said you rose at 6 a.m., and then you got started.

**BOETTGE:** Six a.m. Then we had --

**INTERVIEWER:** When would you go to bed, and what would happen in between?

**BOETTGE:** And -- you know, the end of the day was around -- I would say around 1800, and then was chow or in between, food. Food was basic but not bad, bad at all. So that's one thing I remember. Sometimes it was better than typical hospital food. We were fed pretty well.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then did you have a strict regimented day where you do chart reading a certain time?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, the classes were scheduled what it was. And anyway, it was very -- it was basic but thorough. We had to have tests afterwards, and after the four weeks, there was a written test, what we had to do on both ships.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** On both vessels.

**INTERVIEWER:** Both vessels.

**BOETTGE:** Right.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was it physically demanding? I mean you did the masts in the morning.

**BOETTGE:** Only getting up in the rigging. Otherwise, yes, we had also exercise. I almost forgot that, exercise, and that was strenuous. And so that's about a typical day, you know, between the classes. There was not much time. There was no shore leave, so to say. All the four weeks was on the ship, or I would say there was nothing to see anyway around there. And whatever was there, it was too far to walk.



**INTERVIEWER:** Sure. And you slept in bunks or hammocks?

**BOETTGE:** No, hammocks. All hammocks. There was a little training to get in and out without falling out.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Was all hammocks in either case, on the tall ships.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Later on in the merchant marine, we had bunks. Okay. And the question was here climbing in the rigs. There was no -- okay, up you go.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** You know -- okay. We were all told be safe. Yes, but it was up to yourself how to do it, okay, how to get there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Really.

**BOETTGE:** You have to try and do it all. Let's not forget that training was basically for -- as I said before, for the Navy, and they didn't have any sailing vessels anymore. So it was more geared to power vessels.

**INTERVIEWER:** So, when you went up in the rigging at 6 a.m. in the morning, did you actually go out on the yardarms, or you just kind of went off the ratlines?

**BOETTGE:** No, we did not go -- just up the ratlines and down the other side.

**INTERVIEWER:** Down again, sure. That was exercising.

**BOETTGE:** Oh, it was. And then in between, we had other exercising, running, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** On board the ship?

**BOETTGE:** Well, that was off on the grounds. Okay. And then pushups, if you did some [inaudible] -- typical Navy stuff. You know, the more we talk about it, it comes back. Let's not forget it's 60 -- yeah, 65 years or more. Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure. Sure. Yeah. Well, that's good.

**BOETTGE:** Now, the lessons, what I learned there, were very, very helpful with discipline and teamwork, later on in my short career in the merchant marine. Well, I don't know. Basically, that is about it as for the square riggers are concerned.

**INTERVIEWER:** What about watch standing or drills or anything of that nature?

**BOETTGE:** Watch standing, yes. We had watch standing, but this was a quiet rural area where we were tied up.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Except for *the Horst Wessel*. There was more security on the gangway, you know, having watch standing, but, again, we were not outside. It just was like what is done here with the *Eagle* now when I visited the *Eagle* in either case up in [inaudible] Charleston, where there always was a guard on the gangway. So --

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Was there security just because of the wartime or because they didn't want people getting off or --

**BOETTGE:** You know, it's just strictly for keeping people out, but no one came. All -- you know, they had other headaches to think about, the population, then to travel.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** Let's not forget, 1943-1944.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, for sure.

**BOETTGE:** So, I speak loud enough here?

**INTERVIEWER:** Yes, as loud as -- yeah, you're doing fine.

**BOETTGE:** Okay.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, absolutely.

**BOETTGE:** All right. Okay. Where are we? No. 10.

**INTERVIEWER:** I'm up to -- oh. "What were the lessons learned and rules for climbing that were passed on to improve safety?" It sounded like you kind of covered that, but go ahead.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. We had -- we had that covered before, but the safety was stressed verbally. Safety lines or climbing rigs, no. As I said before, one hand for you, one went for the ship and that was about it. Yes. We were told, "Be careful. We want you to help in the war effort."

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** That said laying in a hospital or we did already before.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** No, that was -- this was about it. Again, as I said, the training was geared toward the Navy and to vessels that time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. Well, when you were climbing the ratlines, for example, was everybody required to have footwear on or not, or did it matter?

**BOETTGE:** If you had it, fine. You didn't have time or you got too late out of the hammock, you know, you got in your socks up there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** You curled your toes around the ratlines, and it was cold. But after you got down there the last time, you were not that cold anymore. And again, at 14 years, you take some -- you take something what I couldn't do now anymore for sure. When I was visiting the *Eagle*, I always looked up these ratlines. I said, "My God, how did you do it?"

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, when you're 14, like you said --

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. Okay.

**INTERVIEWER:** -- you're immortal.

How many students were in your class, and was it the same number in each vessel that you were in?

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. I would say we had about 40, and they were cut into -- not squadrons. Well, how would you say --

**INTERVIEWER:** Squads or platoons or --

**BOETTGE:** Platoon. Let's call it "platoon." Yeah, whatever the Navy terminology is. I forget the name. Yes.

We were -- so it was different classes for other people, though. One platoon had signaling; the other, chart reading. Oh, by the way, I forgot it. We also had some sexton work.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, really?

**BOETTGE:** Just --

**INTERVIEWER:** The basic.

**BOETTGE:** Basic side which was all land. Just to know how to handle the sexton properly.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** We didn't go as far as using a nautical almanac. That came later when we had the -- in the merchant marine. That's another story what happened there. So that's a totally different training. Not like going static in a school, you got trained and educated in your line of work, what you wanted to do, deck or engine.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm.

**BOETTGE:** You had to -- in one vessel where I was, the first one in the merchant marine, it was a -- the first officer was only the captain. The first officer -- it was a small coastal vessel.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** 350 tons, if I remember right, so it was, and with a diesel engine in it, and when the wind was high, we even hoisted a sail. But that's ahead. That's not -- we are not there yet.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure. Let's see. What would you say -- there's a question 13, but I'm going to ask it right now. While you're on board the vessel, was there a really memorable experience that stands out in your mind from your experience on board the vessel?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, yes. Yeah, three of them.

**INTERVIEWER:** Three, good. Do you want to take them chronologically?

**BOETTGE:** It was all wartime experience. It didn't -- I never -- it never gets out of my mind.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** One of them was bringing ammunition, ordnance, up through the eastern front. That was on the larger vessel later on. Let's start the other one.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** On the 350-ton, on the coastal vessel, we also went to Sweden to pick up lumber.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was the name of the vessel?

**BOETTGE:** *Geheimraut Koenigs* [ph]. It was a small vessel you know. We had only -- besides the captain, the first officer, we had two other crewmen, crew sailors and myself on the bottom of the totem pole. I had to do everything.

**INTERVIEWER:** And this was after *Horst Wessel*, after your merchant marine training?

**BOETTGE:** After the three months. Yes, yes. After.

**INTERVIEWER:** This was the first vessel, you actually served on.

**BOETTGE:** The merchant marine training was basically the same except for Morse code and signaling, what we had on the *Horst Wessel*, the square riggers.

**INTERVIEWER:** For the Navy?

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. However, we learned how to handle the merchant vessel. We got a simulation, bridge simulation and all that stuff there.

Anyway, my second voyage on that smaller vessel was up to Sweden, harbor, Goteborg, and we chuckling in -- there were big vessels left and right of all nations in the world. I've seen more from -- they flew the flags. Let's not forget, Sweden was neutral.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. That's right.

**BOETTGE:** And these vessels got stuck during the war. They flew their ensigns, American ensign, British, and we are chuckling with our swastika flag in there. There was some booze and things like this, but that's -- we could live. We dipped our flags. They did too. Especially with the Swedish naval vessel, we had to do it then.

The first time, I dipped the flag to a Swedish naval vessel. Well, it was the first time I did that. I did it wrong. I didn't wait until he hoisted his flag again. As I went down, he pulled it back up again. They must have thought what an arrogant German there. Anyway, you know --

**INTERVIEWER:** So they were all interned vessels that were stuck there for the --

**BOETTGE:** Yeah, they were interned. They couldn't go out.

So, anyway, talk about indoctrination with the German Youth Organization, what we had to listen to, day in, day out. I had shore leave, and I went to a -- what would you call now a breakfast restaurant?

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Type -- and I got in a conversation, in German, with a gentleman sitting next to me. Here I was 14 years old. He was -- I don't know -- an old age of 35 or 40. I don't know. So we had a conversation, and we got in an argument.

**INTERVIEWER:** This was in Germany or --

**BOETTGE:** No, no, in Sweden.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, in Sweden. Oh, okay.

**BOETTGE:** His fiancé was a nurse in Hamburg. I don't know how they got separated or what it was. I don't know. But he told me that, and he spoke German. So we got in a conversation, and he said, well, the war with Germany is lost, you know. He was a traitor in my book at that time, you know, telling me in an argument, and so -- but this was the first time that I ever had --

**INTERVIEWER:** Heard that.

**BOETTGE:** -- experiencing other ideas or opinions, word of wisdom. Word of wisdom.

Believe it or not, after a little while, that made me start thinking.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** No matter how young I was. But that's one memorable experience.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** The other one was when I was in the larger vessel. Let's stay with that one here a bit.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** The first time I was out, it was a voyage from Bremen to Hamburg. You come out in the North Sea. I was seasick like a dog, and I was glad to be on land. And I started thinking what the heck are you doing here. Believe it or not, that was the first and the last time I was seasick.

**INTERVIEWER:** Huh.

**BOETTGE:** Never happened again.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, it was a small vessel, I guess.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. It was not to forget.

**INTERVIEWER:** How long did you serve on that particular one?

**BOETTGE:** That was about three months.

**INTERVIEWER:** That was in '44 still?

**BOETTGE:** Right. That was one of the two voyages actually what I had over there. It was from Bremen to Hamburg, drop something off, and then going up to Sweden, picking up lumber.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was that the one that hit the mine?

**BOETTGE:** No, no, no.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. That's a later one.

**BOETTGE:** We would have blown out of the water when that little one hit.

Anyway, so after three months -- oh, let me talk about a little bit the training, you know, continuing education, continuing education.

In the nautical training, trying to become a navigator, on that ship, it was the first officer, and off time, which was very little, it was training. You had to steer the ship, read the compass, know sexton work, you know, chart work, things like this. And then, however -- however short we were in port, in Germany, I had to go to a testing in a school for testing what I learned there. So that was the continuing education in that system at that time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** And that was on that one. And then I was contacted. I guess they run out of people to go out on larger ships. So I was assigned, and I agreed to make a choice. It was a 3,500-ton merchant vessel with four holds, two forward and two aft. And it was what you would have called here in the States, a liberty ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay.

**BOETTGE:** You know. Slam, bang together. It was a solid vessel, but, nevertheless, we had armament on it, ack-acks. What is it? 25-millimeter 4-barrel --

**INTERVIEWER:** Anti-aircraft guns or something like that. Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Anti-aircraft on the forecastle and one sinker gun at the bridge, port and starboard. And an 88, 88 gun --

**INTERVIEWER:** Eighty-eight millimeter.

**BOETTGE:** Eighty-eight millimeter gun, single. That was more geared -- it couldn't work as an anti-aircraft because the elevation off the bow was not high enough to do anything. It was probably used for maybe there comes a U-boat off the -- submarine.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** These guns were manned by Navy personnel on the ship. There again, the education was not done by the first officer. He was way above me. It was the third officer who had to do that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** And again, you had to steer. Me, again, at the bottom of the totem pole, there was galley duty, out in the lookout and not just on the bow. You go up in the crows nest, up in the mast, because, you know, lights, you couldn't run with full navigation lights there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** It was all -- you had to -- believe me, it was cold up there.

**INTERVIEWER:** I bet it was. Where did you go on board this --



**BOETTGE:** I was in Hamburg.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you sailed out of Hamburg to Sweden or --

**BOETTGE:** No, no. That vessel never was in a foreign port except our last voyage was to Finland. But that's another, you know --

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Then comes the second memorable event. We loaded ordnance. The whole ship was full. That's where I got scared.

**INTERVIEWER:** I bet.

**BOETTGE:** You know, what happens when it hits us? Well, I wouldn't have to worry anymore. I wouldn't sit here. We made it safely full back, but, in port -- and for the life of it, I cannot remember. It was either Lithuania, one of the ports in Lithuania, I believe it was.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm.

**BOETTGE:** We unloaded and an air raid, Russian air raid, you know, dive bombers.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** U.S. planes, not the old tack, tack, tack. It was modern planes who came there. And there, we were lucky. We got hit with a bomb, with a light bomb, but it was a dud. It went through two decks and came to rest at a bump, never flew out. So very careful, whoever it was, I wasn't -- overboard. That was -- and we couldn't -- there's no time to get off the ship, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And the ack-acks firing, you know. We, as a civilian crew, we weren't a Navy crew. Civilian crew, we had to reload the gun magazines.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** That's where I was -- I grew up in a hurry, let's put it this way.

**INTERVIEWER:** I'll bet.

**BOETTGE:** And that was my second one. The last one, let's wait until we get there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now, those experiences you mentioned, that was still in 1944?

**BOETTGE:** Forty-four, yes '44, late '44. The last voyage with that vessel was to Finland up in the -- I forget the sea where Sweden and Finland come together way up.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** And we picked up war material, trucks -- not trucks, but anything what we could get on board before the Red Army would get it, and we just made it out there before they came in.

**INTERVIEWER:** Which port were you at? Helsinki or --

**BOETTGE:** No, no, no. It was way up --

**INTERVIEWER:** Turku?

**BOETTGE:** Kokkola, I believe it -- if I remember right, Kokkola.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. So that would be up between Sweden and Finland, up in there?

**BOETTGE:** Right, right.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, sure.

**BOETTGE:** Was not quite up there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** You know, but it wasn't far away from Murmansk either.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**BOETTGE:** But we made it back out again, and we made it back home to Hamburg. We -- port of call there, if you can call it that way, we didn't get off the ship up in Finland. It was in, loading, and out.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why was that, just security?

**BOETTGE:** Because of the Red Army coming closer and closer, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** There was no time, I guess.

**BOETTGE:** There was no time for it. As a matter of fact, on that big vessel, I had very, very little free time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** And we had watch standing. Now, I was a kid. Right. So the Navy sailors and the merchant sailors, they wanted to go ashore a little bit; you know, some houses of ill repute maybe. I don't know. I didn't know what to do with them. So I got my jacket, [inaudible], hand grenades, and a carbine. I had to stand watch for hours on end because I was on the bottom of the totem pole and there -- that's part -- it what was there, you know, besides galley work and peeling potatoes and things like this, but still, the training was there. There was always time in a German port for going to tests. Very strict educational system.

**INTERVIEWER:** So the people on the ship would force you to go get your --

**BOETTGE:** Well, no, it was -- if I don't want to fail a subject, I had to go there for the tests.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** So it's not that they forced -- the crew or the officers forced me, but that was the routine. I had to do that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Huh.

**BOETTGE:** Or any other person in training.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** So the -- let's say the experience would influence your life later on, here what the question is. Well, as I said before, on the tall ships -- in situations like this, it's teamwork. Again, you know, you just -- you just cannot do it alone, and you learn to work together. That's influenced me later on in my professional life here as plant manager. I cannot do everything myself. So I have to have a crew together to do the work. That was the majority of the items I learned, really.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Working together.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you maintain any relationships with any of the people that you served with on those vessels after the war was over?

**BOETTGE:** No, no, no. It was all too short and rush, rush. I can't remember anyone. When we come to the end you might understand why that happened. All right. So --

**INTERVIEWER:** What about question 12? Do you think that training -- obviously, as you mentioned, you didn't really have any training.

**BOETTGE:** Right.

**INTERVIEWER:** But being trained on a tall ship, generally, do you think that provided any benefits that you wouldn't ordinarily have on another type of vessel?

**BOETTGE:** Well, the only thing, what I could think of, is really -- since we were not out -- I was thinking how was it. I mean, what did those people went through. Then later on, I talked to crew members on the merchant ships who went through experience, older ones, you know. But they told me -- that got me started to think about it -- what a rough life, and you better shape up or ship out. That's -- I had to learn. It boils down again to teamwork, altogether.

If I would have been out on a voyage on a square, I probably would have more understanding about that, but, otherwise, just listening to people what they had to say. It's not just -- sometimes, it wasn't that -- it's how it sails. Some of them was telling me that the voyage, what they had, foreign lands, and that drove me nuts. I couldn't get there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Well, just a quick question. Do you know when it was that the Horst Wessel last sailed before it was --

**BOETTGE:** No.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was it during the war or before the war?

**BOETTGE:** I believe still during the war.

**INTERVIEWER:** It's still during the war.

**BOETTGE:** They had, but not -- they didn't go anyplace.

**INTERVIEWER:** The Baltic probably.

**BOETTGE:** Just the Baltics, if I read it right on the Internet, where I followed most of her life.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure. Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And so she was transferred from Kiel to another port and then back to -- so she had to go out but not very much.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** So that's all that I know about that. It might be disappointing for the captain here, but that's all what I recall.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Most of the later days, I picked it up on the Internet. There's a lot of it in there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** Type in "Segelschlachtschiff Horst Vessel," and you get a bunch.

**INTERVIEWER:** A lot of hits.

**BOETTGE:** In Google.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Sure. Oh, absolutely.

Were you being paid when you were a student, or was it strictly voluntary?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, yes. Basic. It was very little. You know, the same here in the '40s. Yes, we got paid.

**INTERVIEWER:** So minimal would have been paid.

**BOETTGE:** It was just literally spending money because everything else got covered, lodging, and I'm sure -- and food was covered. So it was more spending money.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Later on, on the ship, yes, I got my regular -- what is the lowest rate?

**INTERVIEWER:** I'm not sure what it would be on a merchant ship, but whatever it was, it was pretty low. Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah, it was the lowest rate. Okay. And I don't know anymore either.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. How was the esprit de corps or the morale on some of the ships you served on? Was it high, or people were dissatisfied?

**BOETTGE:** Generally, it was a high morale, you know, the crews, because of -- well, we were there, we had to do a job. There's no time to second-guess stuff. That's what I remember.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** And it's really -- except one person that I mentioned, it's an oiler of the engine room on that larger ship. I asked him -- I saw him once on the deck -- what that tattoo was on this one.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. His arm.

**BOETTGE:** And he told me a concentration camp, but he was not in there political. He wouldn't have gotten out. He was there as a --

**INTERVIEWER:** A political prisoner?

**BOETTGE:** No, no. Not political, it was just as a criminal.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, a criminal.

**BOETTGE:** So for kind of an offense --

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, I understand.

**BOETTGE:** -- that he wound up here. And then they needed people. Right. He was probably in the merchant marine before. So he got assigned to a ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And he was working in the engine room as an oiler, and he told me about it, and that was in early '45. It was January. It couldn't be later than 10th of February. We couldn't do that later.

He told me about concentration camp, and at that time, I never heard anything about it. That was the first time, but him coming out of there couldn't have been too bad, my thinking at that time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure. I understand.

**BOETTGE:** So that was an experience again. Food was good.

**INTERVIEWER:** On the ships?

**BOETTGE:** On the ship. We got good provisions all the time. Otherwise, you know, it might be a mutiny, what you get.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** Having hazard duty and, you know, then bad food on top of it? No. We were fed very well, and I can attest to that because I had to work in the galley many times.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. Well, it sounds like the quality of life, outside of the fact you had really long hours, was not too bad. It sounds --

**BOETTGE:** We had the regular watch standing for hours, which -- that trained me later for after the war for some shift work.

The liberty was not very much. Oh, yeah, okay, but especially in Hamburg, we always had to worry about air raids. You know, you could get very much. That's another story, air raids. I went through a couple of them there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, really?

**BOETTGE:** And they are not fun.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh, I'm sure.

**BOETTGE:** Okay. So that's what --

**INTERVIEWER:** So the officers and crew, generally, they treated you pretty well, even though you were on the lowest level of the pecking order?

**BOETTGE:** Yes, it was, but, you know, you were mostly ignored.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** As I said, I never made it to a stateroom. Yeah, I was on a voyage. You get on the helm, do some steering, training, and all that stuff, but, in officers quarters, no. It was before the mast, and that's about -- no, no. We were not treated badly. It's just -- let's call it this way. In Germany -- and it still is -- you talk about India, about the caste system. It's not just in India. It is there too.

**INTERVIEWER:** You mean in German naval and merchant marines or just Germany?

**BOETTGE:** Yes. But, also, on the level of education, a doctor like you would never step down to talk to me, believe it or not.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**BOETTGE:** It was always Herr Doktor, Herr Professor, Herr Captain. Well, okay, Captain. So that's fine in the hierarchy, but, in civilian life -- and I don't know. I'm too long out now of there. That time, it was really a caste system.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's interesting.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you have interaction with --

**BOETTGE:** Different races?

**INTERVIEWER:** It sounds like it was kind of an eye-opening experience when you were --

**BOETTGE:** Yes. The only thing other races, no. No other races, except that foreign individual in Sweden.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right.

**BOETTGE:** That's the only thing over there what I -- interaction I had.

**INTERVIEWER:** It sounds like you're on board the vessel most of the time in the ports, anyway.

**BOETTGE:** Yeah, right. Okay. That's correct. So that is --

**INTERVIEWER:** Let's see.

**BOETTGE:** All right. You're coming toward the end here.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. And I would like to ask you about how things were, you know, in '45. You had mentioned air raids and all that, and we can talk about that later, too, if you like, but these questions, these last questions are a little more specific. If you have anything further you would like to mention about relations between the crew on board the Horst Wessel that you haven't mentioned already?

**BOETTGE:** Yeah. No, this was not -- you know, it was just basic training, people who are in there, because we did not move.



**INTERVIEWER:** Right.

**BOETTGE:** There was -- commanding officer was on there. I don't remember what his rank was.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were the crew that were training the cadets or students, they were all Navy? Is that correct?

**BOETTGE:** They were all Navy personnel. And just, when you look at a picture on the CD, you'll see it. You can even see the rank on it, and I would have to look it up, what the rank is in the German Navy at that time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. Sure. How about 21? Any --

**BOETTGE:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** I guess you kind of covered that a little bit with this fellow in Sweden.

**BOETTGE:** Well, let me --

**INTERVIEWER:** And these are questions actually that I usually ask veterans of the Coast Guard too. So this is not specific to you, actually.

**BOETTGE:** Well, let me -- let me touch that a little bit. Again, the indoctrination what we had, there were enemies, may it be Americans, British or French or any other in war against us.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. That's right.

**BOETTGE:** And we didn't -- when we went up to Sweden, there was no nasty yelling or from any ship and not from us there. As a sailor -- now I'm thinking older now. As a sailor, we were really trained to do that. You have to have respect, kind of respect.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** But when I think back about the air raids, here they come again, these damn British or was it -- or the damn Americans.

**INTERVIEWER:** In Germany, right.

**BOETTGE:** And you know what carpet bombing is? I don't know if you never -- carpet bombing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Carpet bombing? I'm familiar with the term. Right. I've never obviously experienced it.

**BOETTGE:** There come the patch riders sending their signal devices down, the smoke bombs, so to speak, and the rest coming just one after the other, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb. And I got caught in that in Hamburg.

**INTERVIEWER:** Really.

**BOETTGE:** That was the biggest air raid I ever was in there. It went on for 45 or 60 minutes. One after the other, it came down. Let us not forget, Hamburg was an important port, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So they came down, they came down, they came down. I did not -- I got away from the ship, and they were all over the place, air raid shelters. I'm talking about big bunkers, concrete with multistory. Short of the blockbuster directly hitting it, nothing could harm them. I couldn't make it there.

I jumped into a ditch, you know. They probably repaired some water lines or whatever it was. There was a ditch, a little bit secured. The sides of it will not cave in. I just jumped in there, and I heard it left and right, it came down. Now, in that hole, a direct hit, yes, would have done it, but anything around it didn't. But there, I learned to hate those people up there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right.

**BOETTGE:** Doing that to us.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, yeah.

**BOETTGE:** And I got over that over time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** But that, in the beginning, it was really a bad experience.

**INTERVIEWER:** Absolutely.

**BOETTGE:** And I saw my first dead person after that happened. I got back onto the ship, and that's where we got, not a direct hit, but, of all things, whatever it was, that bomb hit between the ship and the pier, exploded. The gangway was blown away and ripped apart one person who just wanted to get off the ship. I saw him later on, and that was -- later on up in the eastern front, I saw more, but, anyway, that was an eye-opener for me.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**BOETTGE:** And never forget it.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So that one, that one -- you're almost coming to the end, really. And now we covered that, how we were feeling about the Allies.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. That was in early '45, those experiences.

**BOETTGE:** Right. It was January of '45. Yes, I remember when I left the ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** You mentioned -- just a quick digression, you mentioned the eastern front. Was that while you were still on board the ship or --

**BOETTGE:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, okay.

**BOETTGE:** Yes, yes, yes. We just delivered and took some back, maybe whatever it was, what we loaded. You take back.

**INTERVIEWER:** That was Lithuania or --

**BOETTGE:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. I understand.

**BOETTGE:** I mentioned that indirect hit, what we took. Well, it was fixed on a temporary basis. It was not very big, but then we couldn't go anyplace as a voyage or loading or doing anything. We were assigned to a shipyard at Bremerhaven to get out there, and that was the first week in February 1945.

Now, these dates I remember well. I don't know when we exactly left, but it had to be the 8th or the 9th of February. And so we get out. We just past Cook's Harbor, up in the North Sea, going over Bremerhaven to go to the shipyard.

I think -- well, it was very, very early in the morning. I would say 2 a.m., maybe 3 a.m. I was in my bunk, and we were required -- you should keep clothed in your -- stay in your bunk fully clothed, with your life vest as a pillow.

No, they couldn't tell me that. I just didn't feel like wearing my clothes. I undressed, and then, vroom, we hit a mine. It was not our own. You know, at that time of the war, there were these top mines from aircraft. They just mined all over the place.

**INTERVIEWER:** They would just deposit --

**BOETTGE:** It was a sound-activated device laying on the bottom.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And now our boop, boop, boop -- it goes over, and it comes up. It's a magnetic mine. We were demagnetized, but it didn't help. Vroom, the second hold, the second forward hold, it hit a big hole in it, and I was at the forecastle, at the front, on that same side, on the starboard side where it hit.

I woke up in a hurry and got out. It was relatively shallow water there, where we got hit. So we did not submerge totally. So the foredeck and the aft deck and the bridge was over water. So we had a chance to get off in the lifeboats or in life rafts what we had. So that's --

**INTERVIEWER:** So it sank to the seafloor --

**BOETTGE:** Bottom. It sat on the bottom.

**INTERVIEWER:** -- and just sat on the bottom.

**BOETTGE:** Right. This was our luck, and it was also luckily smooth water, not windy, but cold.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**BOETTGE:** Tenth of February. That, I never forget.

And by coincidence, that date is also my wife's birthday. I don't know what was an omen, that day.

So what happened then, we were shooting signals, you know -- what do you call? -- flares.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** But nothing came, but during daybreak, toward daybreak, which is late in February, especially up in the northern part of the world, you know, fishing trawlers came, two -- or one -- I forget. I believe it was just one, one fishing trawler. He took us in tow, the whole armada.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** And he towed us into Cooks Harbor. And the guys, the crew, I was sitting in there with just barely clothes. I had time to put on one sock on there, but the rest was shirt, pants, yes, but no jacket. So the guys on the crew -- remember the Navy guys or the gunners -- he gave me his jacket. So I got no hat, nothing, and it was cold. And I survived. The whole crew, as a matter of fact, no injuries.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**BOETTGE:** It was an empty hold, but the sinking didn't take very long, so no casualties. It was lucky.

And they towed us in shore, and if you have the majority of the crew -- I don't know about the officers. The majority of the crew, they get survivor's leave. But anybody was -- any ship was sunk and they got -- survived the sinking, they got survivor's leave, and that brought me back to my hometown.

And maybe this altogether, me thinking in terms of going into the merchant marine, possibly saved my life, even with all that stuff that was going on, because when I was home, American Army came already from one side. The Russians were still in Poland someplace there, but the American Army came already toward my hometown, and my paperwork, what they had, the official paperwork, I was in the merchant marine. I was not home, and no one knew, because they drafted about everyone who got in there, you know, from 12-year-olds to 75-, 80-year-olds. The Volkssturm, what they called it, you know, to defend the Fatherland.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And I never -- I saw them coming in. There was some -- I remember one thing. Just a Messerschmitt aircraft when I was home, outside my hometown. There was already American artillery shooting into the town. That Messerschmitt still came down and strafed that artillery post outside. So, but it didn't help much anymore.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, yeah.

**BOETTGE:** And we were in town -- my parents, they lived in a -- my father passed away already. My mother and my grandmother, they lived in an apartment house, and the shooting started and all that stuff. Down in the cellar, air raid cellar.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So relatively safe, relatively. Well -- and looked out of the small basement window, all that I saw was a big barrel with, you know, a big muzzle, coming in toward, down our street, and then there was a tank with a white star on it. And I said, well, I guess the war is over, at that time, you know. And from there on, knowing probably already what's going on, I changed my mind a little bit but not quite enough. And then we had to go after the war was over, which was in May, but for us, it was already over before that. It was now already March, April.

**INTERVIEWER:** So they came through in April --

**BOETTGE:** So it was -- for me, there was no way that I could go back. There was no more merchant marine, anyway, you know. It was all -- it got between a rock and a hard spot there, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Russians here, Americans here, and so it was over for me.

And then we had to -- we got reeducated by the occupation forces. We had to watch movies about concentration camps and that's where -- well, there still were people who did not -- we were too far away. I was too young, and so I -- and influenced by events. I was glad it was over.

And what we saw then, that was plain horrible, what we had to see, you know, about the films of the concentration camps and what was all -- that's where I really got -- no, that was not the right thing to do. I still had a little -- that training taught me also some decency, you know, what I went through there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Because if you'd seen -- I read it now again in the books. Submariners against submariners, when you read it, and, yeah, we sunk that submarine, or the British sunk one of ours, and they'll say, "Well, they were just poor devils in there like you and me. It could have been me instead of them."

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** That's what I learned: live and let's live. That really is. I've said a lot here now, without interruptions. So, if there is anything else, besides later on --

**INTERVIEWER:** So --

**BOETTGE:** That was when I left the ship.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. Right. No, that's fine.

**BOETTGE:** After the war ended, well, I tried to get in another trade. I tried about everything like --

**INTERVIEWER:** So you didn't pursue the merchant marine after the war ends?

**BOETTGE:** No, I think there was nothing.

**INTERVIEWER:** There was nothing to pursue?

**BOETTGE:** Later on, after things settled down, it was in '46 already. I went back up to Hamburg, but there was nothing.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you kind of tried, but there was nothing to do?

**BOETTGE:** There was nothing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, okay.

**BOETTGE:** I went back home and started a job here, a job here. My total education was totally interrupted. What the heck am I going to do now? So I was -- tried to start in -- what was it? -- sales. You have to be a BS artist to be in sales. So I started in the industry, started learning to arc weld in a railroad factory, what was then already we -- the Potsdam Agreement, you know, divided Germany at that time. The American army moved out. The Russians came in, in my hometown.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh.

**BOETTGE:** And I remember that day. I said, "What are you going to do now?" Well, I lived there maybe for another year and took off when it was still relatively easy to get out of East Germany.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** But even --

[Telephone ringing.]

**BOETTGE:** Is that yours?

**INTERVIEWER:** Actually, it's for the lieutenant.

**BOETTGE:** Okay.

Anyways, so I got trained as kind of an arc welder. It wasn't my taste either. So I got -- later on, after I left East Germany, went to West Germany in the steel mill, and then I learned a real trade as a tool maker. And that helped me when we came over to the States.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm.

**BOETTGE:** But, did I mention before a caste system?

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm.

**BOETTGE:** Me, without a college education at that time, there was no way that I could go up in management. So I didn't see any progress where I could go up in life. In 1948, I'm -- no, no, no. It was 1948 when I was learning a trade in -- I got almost, you know, too old for -- you know, 18 was okay, you learn a trade, right. I got that, too, in the steel mill, and -- but I couldn't go up, which I wanted to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So a friend of mine, they emigrated in '49. No. In the '50s. I'm getting my times mixed up. In the '50s. Emigrated to the United States, a friend I grew up with in my hometown, also went to school together.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh.

**BOETTGE:** So he emigrated, and they lived up in Minneapolis, but we stayed in communication by mail, and he said how nice it was here in the States. And my wife and I, we talked about it, let's go, let's do it.

I could not apply for immigration status because I was a citizen of Germany, I was not a displaced person, I was not kicked out of the country, out of other countries at least, but my wife was. She was born in Czechoslovakia.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh.

**BOETTGE:** But we met in West Germany. They were kicked out. So we applied for immigration visa.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** We sold every little bit, what we had. I forget. It might have been \$100, \$150, what we finally had in our pocket after everything was sold, what little what we had left.



So the family packed everything up, no furniture, just basic clothes and so on. We boarded a ship. It was a passenger vessel, the Hanseatic, and in 1959, we emigrated to the United States. We came over here, we put into port in New York on the 17th of June 1959, which is the date -- I'll also not forget: number one, we came over here; number two, it was uprising in East Germany, the 17th of June. I don't know why dates like this fall together for me.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So we came on land with exactly \$25 in our pockets altogether, the whole family, no job, no job. And part of that money -- because we had to spend what we sold, you know that \$150, what I said -- I say "dollars." It was Mark at that time. We almost went onto the ship broke, so to speak, because it was prepaid by the Lutheran Church who sponsored our emigration.

But, with a little bit of money I still had in my pocket, we played cards on the ship, not poker. I didn't know poker. It was Skat. It's a German card game. There was a bunch of Germans on that ship, either visiting or emigrating. So I won some money over there. So that had us a little bit more money than we actually had before when we came on land.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And this other item I would like to mention, friends we met in the town where my wife and I met, in that steel mill town, it was between Hannover and Brunswick, up in northern Germany.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay.

**BOETTGE:** And they emigrated before us, not the people I communicated with, the people we met there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** And she -- they greeted us on the ship or she greeted us, his wife. His wife greeted us, and she said, "Oh, God, you shouldn't have come over here. It's so bad here."

[Audio break.]

**INTERVIEWER:** We're back here, and we're just going to tie up some of the final comments there.

**BOETTGE:** Well, we had already. You know, we covered most of it already.

**INTERVIEWER:** We did, yeah. But anything that's memorable -- we haven't covered anything from your sailing or from your -- that you hadn't mentioned already?

**BOETTGE:** No. Really, that's about it.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. You feel like you covered all that was memorable?

**BOETTGE:** I could really go back in my memory bank real deep, and some of that gets mushy. So it's not -- I want to stay with the facts, rather than guessing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, I understand.

**BOETTGE:** So, here, it's -- oh, what she said. You want to go back. My wife --

**INTERVIEWER:** When you got off the vessel.

**BOETTGE:** My wife listens to that. She was ready to go back on the ship and go back. No, we didn't. I was stubborn. The two kids, my wife and I, we got picked up. The church got us an apartment, found us a job. The fridge was full of food. So we saw the other side.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** Four weeks later, you ask my wife, "You want to go back?" "No way," she said. Four weeks. So the difference of experience.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure, sure.

**BOETTGE:** I started then. It was hard, the language barrier. I didn't speak a word of English.

**INTERVIEWER:** Absolutely. Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Neither one of us, but that came. I started with the company as a machinist, worked myself up as a plant manager.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's great.

**BOETTGE:** I was in California, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, New York. So all this life experience -- what do you call that? The College of Hard Knocks?

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah, right.

**BOETTGE:** And then I attended community colleges and so on. So that's, you know, I got myself --

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** Now I'm retired. I retired in 1992. I was worried how are you going to live, where the money comes from, but it fell all in place. I got a nice pension from the company, Social Security. People say there is no security here. It is, if you think about it ahead. You save money, and, you know, then I get a couple of hundred dollars of my working life in Germany also from the Social Security.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**BOETTGE:** So, all in all, my wife and I, we are very happy here. This country is good. We learned the other side of the coin, which I didn't learn until I was 15, 16, 17.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uh-huh. That's interesting.

**BOETTGE:** And so I retired at 62 because I thought, well, you want to have a little bit of your life. So now I'm retired -- what is it? -- 62 -- at 62. It was in 1993, not 63. Sorry.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sure.

**BOETTGE:** So now it's already 13 years retired and still make it.

**INTERVIEWER:** You bet. You look great.

**BOETTGE:** Commander, that's about it, what I have. My life is all about it.

**INTERVIEWER:** That sounds great. I think that's probably all that I can think of at this point.

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**END OF INTERVIEW**

