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Interview with
ROBERT M. HOWE
U. S. NAVY
USS HELENA
LONE STAR LEGACY

ORAL HISTORY
ROBERT M. HOWE
LONE STAR LEGACY

Today is October the 21st, year 2000, I am William G. Cox. I'm representing the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, and we'll be doing an oral history today with Mr. Robert Howe. He is from San Antonio. He is a Navy veteran and was on the USS HELENA. I think the Navy designation was CL-50. Mr. Howe was in four surface battles and has written a book giving his experiences. So without further ado, we'll go ahead and begin our oral history. How are you today Mr. Howe?

MR. HOWE: Fine, thank you. A little sad but I'm fine, thank you. I'll let you make a little correction; there was three major surface battles that the HELENA was in before she was sunk. I'll recap those and we'll go over them later, but we was in a battle in October of '42. It was actually Columbus Day. We were in the battle of Espiritu.Santos The next month on the twelfth and thirteenth of November we were in the battle of Guadalcanal. In July, 1943, we were in the battle of Culio Gulf in which the HELENA was sunk by enemy destroyers. Well, I'll just go back now. I was born in San Antonio; my name is Robert Howe. My father was an engineer for Southern Pacific; he was Harry Howe and my mother's name was Audrey Howe. I met my wife, who this story of my life in the Navy is closely related to everything that took place with me both from the beginning, when we were fourteen and went through high school together and intended to marry sometime after we got out of high school, but at that time jobs were pretty hard to

come by. I had worked at different jobs and hadn't really had anything permanent enough to get married on. My wife, at that time my girlfriend, was working at Kelly Air Force Base, but when war broke out on the 7th of December, it changed all of our plans considerably. We discussed getting married and I volunteered to go into the Navy on the 8th of December, but because of the number of people and because I had to go from San Antonio to Houston for a physical to be sworn into the Navy, there was some time delay in there. And we discussed getting married and she didn't really want me to leave. But we couldn't come to an agreement to getting married, so I went ahead and joined the service. I was sworn in on the 14th of January, 1942, was sent to boot camp in San Diego for a very short period of time. It's hard to believe that I went in on the 14th of January and was in the 53rd Company in San Diego. So there was quite a few people going into the Navy at that time. Our boot camp lasted three weeks, long enough to give us some shots and some clothes, and then I went to welding school in San Francisco stationed on Treasure Island. During this period of time, one of the hardest things I had was being away from Marie because we had gone together for almost 5 years and I missed her tremendously. And I would call her quite often and ask her to come to California and we'd get married. I'd left her my car, which was a '36 Plymouth convertible with a rumble seat. I think I paid three hundred dollars for it. I called her from a USO dance one night which probably late April of '42, and I'd always asked her to come out there so we could get married which I never really dreamed that she would. But one night I was at a USO dance, and Marie and I had danced together all through high school and I was really down. I called her on the phone and I said, "Why don't you come out here and let's get married?" She said, "I've sold your car, I've got tickets. I'm on my way out there to get

married.” So I wound up getting married before I even knew it, but it was the happiest day of my life. We did get married on May the 9th, 1942. We had one of those great big weddings. I think, after I had our apartment ready, five hours left. We found a judge and I asked him what it would cost, and he said, “Well, whatever you want to give me.” So I said, “I’ve got five dollars, I’ll split it with you.” I don’t think he thought I was serious, but I was. He finally gave me my two dollars and fifty cents which we immediately went on our honeymoon , went to a USO dance in Oakland. We were there around the first part of June, I went back to Treasure Island one morning, and they said, “You’re shipping out.” I said, “Well, I’ve gotta call my wife. She’s there by herself.” She was only eighteen years old and never been out of Texas in her life. So I insisted that I call her and they insisted I wasn’t calling nobody. There was a war going on and we were going fifty miles to Mare Island, which everybody knew where I was and they wouldn’t let me tell her. I went aboard the USS HELEN in Mare Island. I frantically looked for a telephone or some way to communicate with her, without success. But the Navy had lots of ideas like put your blues in a trash can and carry it off the ship and get behind a building and change clothes. And that really made me nervous because you could be shot for going AWOL. I’d been in the mess hall where they’d had a lot of prisoners, young guys that’d get caught leaving or something, so I was kind of a little nervous about that. But one of the things, I put in for a leave and it never showed up. One of the sailors told me, “You’ve got your ID card?” I said, “Yes” and he said “That’s all you need to get off the ship.” I said, “Okay.” I got my blues on, took my ID card and went to the apartment. It was empty. I had a note on the table that says, “I’m leaving on the twelve o’clock train.” I had been gone three days, and so I frantically ran down to the corner drug store where

we drank sodas quite often, and found she caught a taxi this morning. Well, I went to the depot in San Francisco, she wasn't there. I went to the ferry to Oakland, because you could catch a train in Oakland. She was getting ready to get on the ferry, and I fortunately managed to get her baggage back. They didn't want to let me have it, because she'd already checked it in. We spent the night together and then I managed to put her on the train, and say goodbye properly. It was a sad parting. We left San Francisco in July of '42. We escorted transports and we wound up in Guadalcanal on the 10th of August, 1942. That was three days after they landed at Guadalcanal. Our first major battle, the first activity I'd seen was when the Wasp was sunk was the first time. We were just patrolling around and a Japanese submarine torpedoed the carrier Wasp. The next engagement we had, we did some bombarding in Guadalcanal, but we were sent up to Guadalcanal one night and waited for the Japanese to come in, which turned out to be the battle of Espirita Santos which was on the twelfth of October, 1942. We waited for the Japanese to get within about four thousand yards of us before we opened fire. We were so close that when the fire started you could actually see the Japanese aboard the other ships. It was the first time that I'd really seen anything that scared me, and I came from a young hero to somebody that decided that this really wasn't where I wanted to be anymore. And I found out shortly thereafter, when the ship in front of us which was the Boise blew up, you know you could get killed out here without any problem. So after that it became a different kind of war. Our next battle was the battle of Guadalcanal. We went into the battle of Guadalcanal; the Japanese were there on an island that was called Saliron and was a big mountain and the Japanese had two battleships and twenty-one ships, if my memory is right, something in that neighborhood. We had thirteen. They had

two battleships, the biggest thing we had was heavy cruisers with eight-inch guns and they had fourteen-inch guns. They split their fleet around Solomon Islands and came in on two sides and then we went up the middle. We went right up the middle between the two Japanese fleets. One of the Japanese ships on our port side turned on the search lights, and it is my recollection that everybody in the line must have fired on this ship because it went down with the search lights on. And after that, the SAN FRANCISCO and the PORTLAND and some of the destroyers turned and took on the ships on the port side and we kept going relatively straight and took on the ones on the starboard side. Within a few minutes, I don't think anybody really knew where anybody was anymore. It was just try to find a target and shoot and hope it is the enemy and not your own. They were dropping star shells around, and every once in awhile you'd see somebody that you recognized and the type of ship. We were hit six times that night, I didn't know it at the time, I don't know how we got out of there with that. We probably came out with one other destroyer and we came out with the least damage of the thirteen ships. We left that morning. The ATLANTA was sunk with Admiral Scott, and the SAN FRANCISCO lost Admiral Callahan and almost everybody topside. When we left the next morning we wound up with about six ships out of the thirteen still able to get out of there. We were in line during the battle, and I noticed in front of us that there was a battleship, and I talked to the gunner, gunner Second Class, Cole, and I said, "Look we've got a battleship in here." And about that time somebody dropped a big star shell over the top of it and we could see Japanese all over it. My gun position had an air duct out of the radar shack and had a porthole right above us and the bridge and the navigator. I can still hear him, he said "That's not the SAN FRANCISCO, which I guess that's what we were trying to find out,

and we did an immediate about face. We did not fire a shot. I would not be here telling you this story if we would have tried to take on the battleship with fourteen-inch guns to our six-inch guns. We would've never lasted for very long. The next thing that I would like to remember is the JUNEAU had been hit with a torpedo during the battle of Guadalcanal. We were leaving the next morning, must have been around ten a.m., and one of the seaman on our guns saw this torpedo and we all jumped up and watched it. It went across our fantail and across the bow of the SAN FRANCISCO, so there was three guns on the bridge. We ran around to see where the torpedo was going and it hit the JUNEAU. Well, there was a big cloud of smoke, and when the smoke cleared, we looked to see what was going be left and what was happening. There was nothing left, the water was slick, there was no ship there anymore. I had some friends that had field glasses and were on lookout, and they couldn't see anybody either. There has been some controversy in the past, Sunday morning quarterbacking things over what should have been done. Captain Hoover left. We had only five ships and none of the destroyers were capable of taking on submarines and nobody knew at that time there was only one. Later on when historians write about it, they say there was only one. Well, we didn't know that. Captain Hoover was relieved of his command because he didn't stay. However, I've thought about it a lot and written some articles about it. If he would have stayed and lost one of the ships, he would have been really in trouble. So I think he made the proper decision when he left although a lot of people look back. There was ten people got off of the JUNEAU. They say it was estimated some hundred people might have been blown off, but from our position and the direction we were in, we could not see anybody. We wouldn't know, I'm not sure we'd been smart if we'd left. People in our town, realizing that a few

people are not worth one ship, I know that if you're not one of those people quite a bit different story. But we all knew that if you wound up in jeopardy and you got lost at sea and it's very difficult to find somebody. I saw a pilot fall off an airplane one time. We saw him fall off the airplane and we looked for him for three hours before we ever found him. So it's very difficult to see anybody in the water, the swells are large and there was a lot of debris in the water. That was probably the most devastating thing I ever saw when the JUNEAU blew up. That's when the five Sullivan brothers were killed. We must have lost about seven hundred people in one blast, a very, very emotional time for a lot of people whenever they saw that happen. You never really thought what would happen to you if you got hit with a torpedo, but after that you never really knew what might take place. We moved up from Guadalcanal, finally secured Guadalcanal, and started moving up the chain of Solomon Islands. Then we started bombarding up around Coolie Gulf and the Marines landed at New Georgia. We bombarded around the first of July and then we left there that night and we headed back to New Hebrides for refueling and ammunition. And when we got in the middle of Guadalcanal or between Guadalcanal and Tulagia and all of the signal flags started running up, we knew something was going on. We looked at the signal flags, the directions, I couldn't read many of them. I knew the direction and I knew that we were turning around. We headed back for Coolie Gulf and we caught the Japanese landing troops up there. Coolie Gulf was a kind of horseshoe bay type of deal and you got in there with a little difficulty. We blocked the entrance of the thing and opened fire, I think about 1:50 in the morning. We opened fire and fired I think around a thousand rounds of ammunition that night, six-inch ammunition, I don't know how much five-inch. We got hit by a Japanese destroyer through his torpedoes at the entrance, and

we caught one in the bow which blew the whole bow of the HELENA off between number one and number two turret, and we went dead in the water. Then we caught two more mid ship and it broke the HELENA into three pieces, actually. She went down in a big v shape. Naturally, being a well trained sailor, my life raft was on number one turret, so at two o'clock in the morning, we made our way to number one turret which wasn't there. We went back, could have walked a little farther back and I could have swam, but we didn't. We went over the side up there close to number two turret which was a pretty good drop to the water. We had a life raft alongside the ship but we never could get it away from the thing. So this friend of mine who was on the gun with me. I told him, "We'd better leave and get away from the ship 'cause it's sinking." So he said, "I can't swim." I said, "That's okay, we're gone." We left and we got with some other life rafts, we never got aboard. After we were in the water for two or three hours I guess, there was a destroyer coming close. They had been fightin' and been firing over our heads and shells had been hittin' in the water around us. We didn't really know whether it was ours or Japanese. So they finally decided they'd signal and see whether it was ours or Japanese. It turned out to be ours, but before we could get to it, they turned around and started off in another direction and started fightin' again. I guess about six or seven or eight o'clock in the morning the destroyer came back, and this time it was light enough where you could see. I didn't wait this time to see whether anybody else was gonna, and I started swimming. I got within about twenty or thirty from the side of the destroyer when one of the sailors aboard said, "You'd better hurry, we're leaving. Japanese airplanes are coming in." So I'd been in the water for about six or seven hours and had a big old kapok life jacket but I think I walked on water until I got to the side of that ship. When I

grabbed the net beside the ship it was already underway. It took everything and a little help from the good Lord, I think, to get out of the water. But I managed to get up the net and follow the railing on the side and when I was on the deck they were already firing at the Japanese airplanes. But I did manage to get aboard. Of the three rafts, I was probably one of the few that got off the rafts. I know the captain was on a raft and they wound up getting ashore and staying overnight and got picked up the next day. So I was one of the last ones to get picked up that morning. Most of the rest of them stayed. We had about, I guess four hundred men, between one-hundred and fifty wound up over night and about two hundred and fifty more wound up on another island and were there for about a week before they managed to rescue them. And all these islands were Japanese held, so they would have gotten caught. The two hundred and fifty actually had Australians Coast watchers and the natives actually hid them from the Japanese. And then they got picked up about six days later. That pretty much wraps up my time and we wound up back on New Hebrides and finally got board a transport back to the States where I wound up in a hospital at Norfolk, Virginia, and a medical discharge. So my career in the Navy ended the last day of December, 1943.

MR. COX: How long were you in the hospital?

MR. HOWE: I was in the hospital in New Caledonia just a short period of time. I had developed asthma which I had when I was real young. After the ship was sunk, we stayed in diesel oil all the time and I don't know whether that had anything to do with it or not. I tried to stay out of the hospital because I wanted to come back to the States, but I got so sick I couldn't work on a working party and they forced me to go into the hospital. And when I came back overseas and I was actually assigned to the USS HOUSTON in

Norfolk. But I continued to have a lot of problem with my asthma. I was really trying to get taken care of, have medication so that I could breathe and still go, but they decided they didn't want me anymore. In the last battle, the night before we got sunk, I guess it was probably the worst night that I ever spent. I didn't know that we were going to get sunk. On the way up there we met our third battle. We'd been up there lots of times, but I got so nervous that night looking out in a pitch black and knowing that out there shortly that we were going, as I said, we had the radar air duct and we could hear 'em when they picked up the ships they'd start reporting to the bridge, so many ships so many thousand yards and keep going. And we were right above the number three turret and you could hear them load and start lining up and everything. And I got so nervous and shaking so bad I had to actually sit down on the deck, I could not stand up. My knees just went out from under me. The minute the, it's still strange, it always worried me because I knew I was really gettin' nervous when we would go into combat. And I wasn't sure how I would react if something did happen, however, the minute they fired the guns everything went right, I didn't have any problem. I was up and our ammunition locker door on our twenty was open, and when the six-inch started turning aft, the sparks and stuff from the fire was flying and going back into our ammunition room. This other boy, Denny, Douglas Denny, and I tried to shut the hatch. It was a big old iron hatch that had dog ears on the thing. We were getting fire on our ammunition, and we were afraid it was going to catch fire in there. And so every time we would try to get this thing almost closed, they'd fire again and bang us and knock us around. I really got banged up more than I did with my asthma, but I never did tell anybody except I did spend the night on the ??? in the thing because I was bruised up so bad I couldn't hardly lay on the deck.

MR. COX: So your assignment on the fire control was actually 20 millimeters?

MR. HOWE: Twenty millimeter. Yeh, but we had an ammunition room errand and he was in charge of, I was assistant gunner and then we had a loader and then we had a man in the ammunition room and reloaded the 20mm cartridges. Actually we kept it open because we needed access to it if we were going to fire, however, we didn't fire in surface battles at all. But when we started firing it was just an idea of trying to keep the fire out of there with the 20mm ammunition, and it just became impossible. We never did get it closed.

MR. COX: In any of those battles, did the Japanese aircraft get involved in 'em?

MR. HOWE: All the battles we were in on the surface battles were night battles, and there was no aircraft involved. We did wind up in some aircraft battles around Guadalcanal. Some torpedo planes came in, but one of them crashed into the SAN FRANCISCO. We were very fortunate, we never got hit by anything. We avoided aircraft as much as possible. One time we stayed on watch for three days and they fed us on the gun because we were under an alert for aircraft. We managed to hide; we would run into one rain squall and another. The only time was that one engagement there in Guadalcanal where the torpedo planes came in. I think it was twelve of 'em and they came in over Tulagi and dropped torpedoes and everything. The only ship that I knew of that got hit was the SAN FRANCISCO and not by torpedo. One of the aircraft crashed into it. We avoided aircraft as much as possible. I thought we were going to have a problem one night. When we came back from Cooli Gulf we had an airplane trail us, and he was dropping flares and stayed out of gun range all that time. We did have one other incidence. We were back over Guadalcanal one time and we'd been up bombarding and

we were kinda lounging around. We used our life jackets for pillows and slept on our guns most of the time. I never had a bunk so I slept on there. The only time we went below deck was to go to the head or go to eat. We did mostly four on and four off, and when you relieve somebody and you have general quarters in the morning and half hour before sunset, you're there all the time anyway. So we just mostly stayed there all that time. We were watching and I looked up overhead and I told this friend of mine, "Look, we've got air cover." We only had two carriers left at this time and that was the ENTERPRISE and the SARATOGA. So they never took 'em out. The SARATOGA stayed in New Caledonia and the ENTERPRISE stayed in New Hebrides. But they always told us when we went up there we had air cover, so I mentioned, "We do have air coverage, there's six airplanes up there." About that time they peeled off and started dive bombing. We didn't get hit but an Australian cruiser got hit. That was kind of a real surprise one, quick bomb and out of there type of thing.

MR. COX: Well, you've pretty well described the living conditions. You did indicate that you did occasionally have time off to go eat. Could you describe the food that you had?

MR. HOWE: Well, I never could get accustomed to green scrambled eggs. Powdered eggs all turn out green for some reason or another and it was kinda hard. It tasted a lot like eggs but they never looked much like eggs. I never cared much for their mutton I said we stood watch for three days straight. What we got to eat was mutton sandwiches and they were pretty dry. One of the things I remember more than anything else. Captain Hoover was a great captain. He came aboard ship, I think he kept us afloat. He was in the battle of Guadalcanal, he fired the aft guns, the forward guns, and then he'd shut 'em

all down. And I think that's why we only got hit six times because Captain Hoover was a great, great skipper. The only thing that I could say about Captain Hoover was when we started eating good, we had ice cream and the best food we had in a long time, we knew we were going into trouble somewhere. We were going up there in enemy territory. I worked Air Force Intelligence after I got out of school, but I think back on it, if you'd been a good intelligence officer you could have told where we were going by what we were eating.

MR. COX: When you were in training, earlier you mentioned going to welding school, was there multiple training schools that you went to to be qualified for a light cruiser?

MR. HOWE: I went to welding school because I had done some welding. I mentioned that boot camp was pretty fast. They had an application if you had any occupations or something and I wrote down "welding", and I wound up in welding school. Fifty of us were in welding school and fifty of us wound up on the HELENA. And fifty of us lined up on the deck and they said, "We don't need welders, where do you want to go?" Then I chose anti-aircraft for some reason and I really can't tell you exactly why. We had one of the boys in school, a good friend of mine, that wound up in a repair division as a Yeoman and actually none of us of this welding school ever, I think it was a commitment they were trying to figure out what to do with people while they assigned them. There was so many people going in. The HELENA was hit in Pearl Harbor and had a torpedo and came back to Mare Island for repairs, and that's when I went aboard it. Fortunately, we got radar, new five-inch, and twenty mms and we got to forty mms which was the newest equipment. We were one of the few ships that had radar in our earlier battles. And almost all of 'em, Guadalcanal, ???, we were the only ship that had radar.

MR. COX: When you left San Francisco going to the war zone, did you sail straight through or did you make stops at various places?

MR. HOWE: We went close enough to Hawaii where they told me the mountains over there was Hawaii. No, we kept going. We were escorting six transports and we dropped them in Samoa. We got close enough to see the coconut trees and not the pretty girls but we could see the coconut trees. We never went ashore. We left there and joined the fleet somewhere after that. Probably one of the things that I might mention was going across the equator, quite an experience. Most of us were pollywogs, had never been across, and when you cross you're a shellback and before you get there you're a pollywog. Most of us out of the eight hundred or so, probably about two hundred shellbacks, so it was quite a bit of activity, but it's a big thing. It had to kinda come back a little during the war, I guess, but we had men dressed in warm clothing and with a couple of beer bottles watching for King Neptune for several days before we got to the equator. We still stood our watches. I was kinda late before I wound up going through the rigmarole that you went through to get to be a shellback. It started off with a belt line which didn't have any belts in it, had everything else there was and absolutely you're not supposed to run. You didn't have to worry about that 'cause your feet never touch the deck. It was somebody hittin' you with something--they had sacks filled with sand and boards and a few other things that they lifted you down the deck. And the next thing I remember was the royal baby, and it was absolutely necessary for you to kiss the royal baby, big fat ??? had a diaper on it and you had to kiss him on the belly but you didn't dare touch him. They had guys standing by with these electric prods and they're pokin' you and you're trying not to touch this royal baby. He's very delicate, you know. I managed to get by that, and then

you had to meet King Neptune to make sure you didn't have any charges, fortunately I didn't. If you got any charges you could start all over again. Some of the rabble rousers created quite a scene about me having some problems with shellbacks and stuff that had gone through the belt line more than once. But then you went to the royal barber. You know we had been out of boot camp and had almost got hair by then. The royal barber cuts your hair in whatever direction he wanted to cut it. And then they had a guy with some paint brushes up there that painted spots on your head, so that you had different colors. The barber's chair was set up on a big tank and when they got through with you, they'd dump you over into the tank. The object was to come up from underneath that water and yell holler "I'm a shellback." Well, about the time the time I got there, it was full of hair. Every time you opened your mouth, they'd shove you back under. Just before you drowned, they'd let you go long enough where you could holler you're a shellback. One of the things I saved, and I still have, was my shellback card. The only thing I got off the HELENA with was the clothes I had on and my wallet and my shellback card was in my wallet. And I have lots of pictures of 'em in my office and they're all coated around the edge. Fortunately the edges of 'em, we were in diesel fuel all that time, coated with diesel fuel. I still have my shellback card and I might carry it if I ever go across the equator again.

MR. COX: You told me earlier about getting married just after you went into the Navy before you shipped overseas. When you came back, when was the first time you saw your wife?

MR. HOWE: I told you I left my books with the ????. I have a picture on the front of my book. I met my wife at the train station in San Antonio and I have a picture, and a lot of

people tell me it reminds them of the "Life Magazine" picture of the sailor and the nurse. It's somewhat similar to the way my wife and I are pictured when I met her back in the train station. It was a wonderful thing to get back together.

MR. HOWE: How old were you at that time? And how old was your wife?

MR. COX: My wife was three months younger than. My birthday is in April of '23 and hers is in July of '23. Let's see, '43, I was twenty and my wife was twenty, too, cause I came back in October. We were both twenty when I came back. She was eighteen when we married and I was nineteen by a little bit.

MR. COX: How many children do you have?

MR. HOWE: I have two children, my two boys. And I have four grandchildren, three girls and a boy, and I have just about a three-weeks old great grandson.

MR. COX: They all live in San Antonio?

MR. HOWE: No. One of my sons lives in San Antonio and the other son lives in Houston. My son in San Antonio is an attorney and the one in Houston is an environmental engineer. My oldest granddaughter lives in Dallas, and my granddaughter that just had my great grandson is married to a lieutenant in the Marines. He's going to pilot school in Pensacola. I think he said he starts in March, and so they'll be living in Pensacola. And the other two, my other son's daughter is a teacher over in Bastrop and she's living with her brother who is a senior at the University of Texas. He gets out in May.

MR. COX: Do you think at some time that you might like to, since you have a close relative that's going to be a pilot of some type, do you think he'll give you a trip around sometime?

MR. HOWE: I'll tell you a little story about flying. When we were on New Hebrides after the ship was sunk, I always thought I wanted to fly back over Guadalcanal. So we had B24's flying bombing missions and everything, and since I was a gunner I volunteered to fly back over there with them. Well, I had my date set and everything, we were just waiting' trying to get back to the States, a little story about that, too. I made third class gunner's mate on the first of July, and on the fifth of July we were sunk. And my third class went down with the ship. It didn't really make much difference to me at the time, but when we got to New Hebrides they said all the third class and above are going back to the States; all first class seaman and below have to stay overseas and be reassigned. I looked for the gunnery officer to see if I couldn't get him to confirm my third class but he was on another island, and I wound up seaman first. Any way, I was going to tell you I volunteered to fly and right before my time to fly, one came back and crashed and tore up palm trees all over that island. And I chickened out, my luck might run out. I never did fly. I would love to go back over there. As a matter of fact, I always wanted to take my wife back over there but my wife did not care anything about airplanes or ships. I know the Nimitz Museum had a ship go back over there several years ago, was gonna go back to the islands and everything, and I tried my best to get her to go. She wanted me to go, and I said I don't want to go over there by myself, I want to take you over there.

MR. COX: Have you had opportunities to meet with your other shipmates, say here at the Nimitz on any of the dedications ceremonies?

MR. HOWE: No, I do go to the HELENA reunions. The last one I went to was in Dallas about four years ago or two years ago, I guess. Because of my wife's illness I was not able to go last year, and I hope to be able to go to our next one which is going to be in

September of '01 in Las Vegas. That's a long time off but I hope I'm going to be able to attend that. The ship I was on, there were four HELENA'S. The first one was a gun boat, and our ship was the second, the 50. The 75 was a heavy cruiser which fought during the Korean war, and the present is a 725 which is a submarine. But most of the sailors now at the reunion were off the 75, Korean veterans. World War II veterans are getting scarce, they're going to a better land.

MR. COX: You were telling me when you got home and some of your experiences and your children. Perhaps now we might visit a little bit about some of your special friends of maybe even some of your shore activities. I am not clear exactly whether you had an opportunity for any shore leave or not.

MR. HOWE: When we arrived at the New Hebrides, the first thing we heard there was that there was cannibals, head hunters on the island. So it didn't make it a very attractive place to go. There was nothing there. The beaches were jungle was right down to the water. We did go to a little village where we stopped. We did get off but that was a little dirt-street place with little wooden shops alongside. I think if my memory is right, it was on the other side of the New Hebrides harbor where we spent most of the time. All of the people there spoke French, so we didn't communicate real well, but we did manage to trade some coins. In my book I said they spoke French and I spoke Texan, and we did trade some coins. I had a coin that had, I don't know the date on it, I can't remember it but it was real old and it had Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's picture on it. It looked like a silver dollar, it's in my locker. I know right where it is if anybody's gonna dive in, I'll show 'em where to get to my locker. Then we moved from that side of the island to the other side where there was a deep harbor. That's where we loaded and unloaded

ammunition, stores and things at that island. After a period of time, we stayed at sea; one time for almost eight months we refueled at sea and everything. We never went back into New Hebrides. Then we started, after that we started going back in there, we never refueled in there but we re-supplied ammunition and took on stores. I tell this story about the kind of guy I am. I never really liked all hands workers parties. I was a gunner's mate and I was in charge of three 20mm guns. The minute they announced "All hands working party", being a seaman first class meant that I was included. Once you made petty officer you didn't have to do that. Well, I was seaman first. The minute they announced that, I grabbed my 20mm and off the mount and began tearing it all to pieces. I'd take every part of it out. I'd throw it on the deck and I'd sit there and I'd pile it into each compartment, and pretty soon the boatswain mate came up there. "You didn't hear all hands?" I said, "But we've got a war going on. I gotta take care of these guns." That came to be a real game with us, and I used to laugh because my boatswain mate, my gunner's mate was a second class and boatswain mate was second class, and they used to have a little tit tat over who had who rank. My boatswain mate was always arguing with my gunner's mate, and I'd sit there and laugh because I was still taking my gun apart. To kinda end that part of the story, after the ship was sunk he found me on the island there. He said, "You don't have a gun now, you get mess duty." So I wound up going to the mess hall. That didn't work out the way he thought it would because they didn't need me, and I wound up getting to eat with all the rest of 'em. They did finally build us a little recreation area over on the island, a couple of baseball diamonds. We'd go over there, you got two beers, but not much to do.

MR. COX: Do you remember the brand names of the beer?

MR. HOWE: It's California beer but I can't tell you. I remember it because I drank some out there. The people in San Francisco were very good to sailors when I was there. They were really, really nice to us.

MR. COX: Were there any USO shows or any type of entertainment?

MR. HOWE: No. We were lucky to have anything at that time. We were scratch and we didn't have it. If the Japanese had known what we had over at that time, they would have just come on down there and taken over. We couldn't have stopped 'em. Like I said, we had two carriers, and they had them in nets so we couldn't lose them. They would have taken 'em out if we'd had to. The most I saw at one time was about thirty and that was when the WASP got sunk. And after it got sunk, we stood up in what they call cruisers ???, and we operated with the SAN FRANCISCO. The first battle of the SAN FRANCISCO, HELENA, the BOISE and the SALT LAKE CITY, and maybe three or four destroyers, and we would hit and run. We'd go up at night, bombard and run, get out of there as fast as we could. That's why we didn't run into their aircraft like we were talking about because we never stayed. We had to get out of there. That was the only thing we'd had.

MR. COX: Now, there at New Hebrides, when you were in there fueling and stores, did they have an air base in there?

MR. HOWE: Not yet. They had one, like I said, after the ship was sunk they built one over there but I had not been back there since that time. But they did build us this place where we had a baseball diamond, and I remember I always loved to play baseball. My daddy was a big baseball player. I had played baseball every since I was big enough to walk. And I decided I wanted to play. It was enlisted men against officers. I really liked

to play first base, but they already had first base. The only thing they needed was catcher. So I wanted to play so bad I volunteered to be catcher. I tell the story as I remember it because I don't remember the score. I remember this great big guy was on third base and the play was at home. He kinda looked like one of those big fullbacks running; I weighed one hundred and twenty-eight pounds. I was six foot tall. I decided he wasn't gonna get in to home plate. Well, he was out and I was out. He knocked me plumb out and I held on to the ball. I can still see him running down the third base line like a tank, looked like a rhinoceros. My other experience, when I got through with that I didn't get to drink my two beers, I didn't feel like it. The Australians had a ship in there at the time. We didn't operate with 'em too often, but they had a cruiser in there and they were going to have a track meet. And I ran a little track in Junior school and messed around, and I said well that's good. They wanted some guys off of our ship to run in track meet. I volunteered to run in track meet. I went over there and I'm looking around. I used to do a little high jumping, and I'm looking around for the kind of track meet I was used to, and they were talking about cross country through the jungle. Three miles they said. I'd been living on a 20mm almost a year which was about I guess about ten-foot diameter. Except when I went to eat or went to the head I hadn't walked any further than across that gun shield. Run three miles, you gotta be kiddin'! But I volunteered. So I said, "Alright, let's go!" And so I started. We went through the jungle where we jumped over things and ducked under things, half the trail out through the jungle. And I thought I was gonna die before I got half way through there, but I didn't know how to get back, so I kept running. When I finally came to the finish line I know I was dead. I made a comment in my book that if the Japanese didn't get me the Australians would. They said, "Well, you're the first American

in and you get a six-pack of beer.” And here I was laying on the ground throwing up when they give me a six pack. We did go swimming off the side of the ship one time in the harbor there. I love to swim, so that’s before we had the park over there where we were swimming. We swam in our skivvies and got up there alongside the ship to dive off and I looked around and here’s these Marines sitting around with guns. What do they do? They just take care of any sharks that come around. I was in there for a few minutes trying to decide whether I trusted the sharks or the Marines. I went ahead and went swimming. The water was beautiful. We went down deep enough to where you could see underneath the ship. That was a few times, the only other time, we went into Sydney. One of our shafts was bent. We went into Sydney for twenty days. When we first got in there, they weren’t going to let anybody have liberty at all. We managed to go into dry dock and I think so many guys we had a whale boat running at liberty off the fan tail which was not authorized, but there was enough people going ashore that I think they finally decided they might as well start having liberty. We had a starboard and port liberty. I guess I got off in Australia about five or six times, but we usually just made all the bars and things like that and went around a little, wasn’t much you could do. We didn’t get off until six o’clock at night and everything was closed up. I do remember the Queen Mary came back from South Africa and brought a whole bunch of Australians, soldiers I guess they were, and the Germans had been dropping leaflets in Africa about how the Americans were over in Australia taking all their women and everything and here these guys came back. Fortunately they told us right away, “Don’t go anywhere by yourself. Don’t go into certain clubs because these guys are really unhappy about everything.” I never had any problem except one guy one time; I stopped in the latrine downtown somewhere. This

guy came in there and he wanted to beat up on me, and it looked to me like he had already been run through the meat grinder. He was bruised and banged and torn and everything and I finally talked to him long enough and he calmed down a little. There was not really much to see, we didn't get to go very far but it did release a little, that's the only place we ever went. We were in New Hebrides or at sea. Most of the time we just stayed at sea.

MR. COX: When you think back on your experiences during the war, do you think that those experiences affected your life, potentially may have damaged your lungs a little bit?

MR. HOWE: I think that I probably had a problem with my right ear. I never thought too much about it, but I think that last night, we normally fired at pretty close range, but that last night the number three turret on a six-inch mount was practically sittin' in our face. And I think the concussion had something to do with my problem with my right ear because that was the side we were gettin' on the thing. I have a little problem even to date when I do something like this or when I was writing in my book of having a hard time getting away from it again. It all came back. I only had one real time one time right after I come back. There was a thunderstorm and I was sleepin' with my wife, and I think I nearly scared her to death 'cause a thunderclap came and I jumped out of bed and I was gone. I didn't know where I was going but I was going. I had a hard time settling down after I came back. I did manage to eventually decide. I didn't know what to do when I came back. I didn't know what to do with myself, I was a gunner's mate and they didn't need many gunners around San Antonio. I had worked at Pearl Brewery for a short period of time when I was in high school, so I went back over there and went to work, and I never liked it all. I hated the job. I worked at a bottle shop. I washed bottles all day and I hated it. I wound up in the engine room but there were a couple of things.

Working there and I was drinking too much. I knew that. I had a hard time gettin' away from that. I decided after I had been there about a year that I wanted to go back to school. In my high school year, I had no prayer, there were seven of us and Daddy came up through the depression and I knew I couldn't. We never even talked about going to college. I knew nothing about college, but I decided I wanted to go to college. I wanted to go on the G. I. bill. When I talked to the guy about going to school, he said, "You can't go to college." He looked at my transcript from high school which was a probably a high D average. I told him, "Well, I think Uncle owes me that. I'm going." He was pretty close to right; it was not easy. I had to go back to high school to take algebra. I was twenty years old and all the fourteen year-olds in there were smarter than I was. But I went back and I went to San Antonio Junior College for a couple of years and then I went up to the University of Texas. I ran out of G. I. bill before I graduated. I lacked eight hours graduating, but I did get a good education. I think one of the greatest things the country has ever done is the G. I. bill. Guys like myself that had never gone to school, we'd never even given it a thought. The biggest mistake was I didn't know what I getting into. If I was going to be a mechanical engineer, I thought they worked on cars and things like that. But it was good, I wound up gettin' out of school. We had one boy. I think my wife had one dress and I had one pair of blue jeans when we ran out of G. I. bill, and I was making \$130.00 a month and thirty dollars of it went for rent. I went to work for a gas company for awhile and then my wife worked for Air Force Security service. She had been trying to get me to go to work for the government. And they were hiring people out of college and I finally decided I didn't particularly like what I was doing so I went to work for Air Force Intelligence and worked thirty years with the Air Force and retired in

1980.

MR. COX: What type were you looking at, the aerial photos?

MR. HOWE: No, I worked solely communications, we worked air force. My specific thing and all the stuff I'm talking about now is probably way, I worked everything. We worked for the top of your code work but I worked solely at communications. We watched Soviet aircraft movements. I worked mostly Soviet air defense and we watched the tracking of the aircraft. We had sights all over the country where they copied the traffic. Then we evaluated it and looked at what was going on and watched where they moved aircraft and what they may be up to, watched their redeployments of aircraft and also a lot of their capabilities with their fighters and when they would lock on and that type of thing.

MR. COX: Were you working as a civilian or actually...

MR. HOWE: Civilian.

MR. COX: Did you do all this in San Antonio?

MR. HOWE: Yeh. National Security Agency was our mother hen, I guess you'd say over the three services. But in '49, they decided they ought to move the Air Force part out of Washington because everything was up there, so they moved it. We were at Brooks Field when they first started and then we moved over where we were a tenant on Kelly Air Force base. Most of my work, my base was here in San Antonio, I did a lot of work in Washington. I spent a lot of time with the National Security Agency and in correspondence with them continuously. I did do a little work with the Canadians and the British, so we were kinda closely related with all three intelligence agencies.

MR. COX: So you saw the development of the scientific ability to handle knowledge and

things through that period of time, I'm sure.

MR. HOWE: We changed, and I guess it's completely different now, you could see a big change. At the time when I first started, we were really relying on volumes of material. We tried to keep track of the types of radars the Soviets had, the type of aircraft, the types of fighters they were using and their capabilities. In my particular interest, I was looking more at the air defense capabilities and what their capabilities were and what type of radars they were using and deploying and that's everything. So we got a lot of traffic. We had to identify stations based on their call signs and frequencies; then we had to go through this thing and identify who we were looking at and then try to put 'em into the particular systems. The Soviets had a tracking code that they used a number of systems seven digits and actually the first digits were their base square and the last three digits put it down to a finer particular position. So we watched our aircraft when we would go close to see what their reactions were when we were monitoring along the coast. I know we used to over fly Valdosta a lot and watch them scramble and see what was going on. I said, "All we're doing is training 'em." I'll never forget the first time, they pulled out all of the U-2 traffic; that was held separate. In that type of business, you have code words and you have different codes words for different types of material. And everybody wasn't entitled to everything, and the U-2 stuff was kept in a different category. A friend of mine, we got some traffic from a U-2, accidentally, and it was flying at 80,000 feet, and we'd never seen anything like that before. We studied this thing and studied it. The Soviets would use practice traffic but it would always be pretty straight line and you could usually separate it from the real stuff. And this looked real, and it was real. Fortunately, we finally destroyed it. It would have been bad if we...

MR. COX: You had not been briefed on that. It was still top secret.

MR. HOWE: We had it, but I didn't have the clearance. When we got into the photo reconnaissance, you had to have a special clearance for that. You had to have a special clearance for electro-optics and different things like that. You had special clearances to have handle different materials. This top secret was just the start. You had secret, top secret and code word separated the different the categories that you could handle.

MR. COX: How many years did you work at that?

MR. HOWE: About twenty-eight.

MR. COX: You've been retired how long?

MR. HOWE: Twenty years.

MR. COX: Have you enjoyed the retirement?

MR. HOWE: I loved it. My wife and I were very fortunate. We had a great time together in retirement. We were very fortunate to be able to travel and we took quite a few trips. We went all up the East coast, came back through Washington, D.C., and visited with a lot of my old friends that I had worked with in National Security Agency, came back down through Florida. Our first HELENA reunion we went to Helena, Montana, which they have a monument of the HELENA. The 50's bell is there. They took it off the ship because it was brass and they didn't want anything to shine. That's the only thing off the HELENA but it's there at Helena, Montana. Then we took our trailer on up to Prince Rupert and caught the Alaska ferry up to Juneau and spent the night in Juneau and came back. We traveled quite a bit. We have a beautiful place on the coast that I built after I retired. I have five acres on the water down there and I built this big house, my wife and I did.

MR. COX: Which coast?

MR. HOWE: Down the other side of Port Lavaca, down on the Matagorda Bay. We built it one pick-up load at a time. We had the posts set and after that we did everything together. We had our problems. I would never want to sit here and tell you that in fifty-eight years you don't have a few problems, but my wife and I always managed. I think I like George Strait's song that talks about the couple that has a quarrel but they always know how it's going to end. And I think that's the story of our life, too. We always knew how it was going to end. We may have lots of differences of opinion but we always knew how it would end.

MR. COX: You mentioned earlier you like baseball, and then you were traveling. During those travels did you get to see any of the major league baseball games?

MR. HOWE: No. I got to see an All-star game when I was in D.C. one time, and they were playing in Washington. The guy I was with was my boss, and he said I've got tickets to the all-star game. I said, "We're supposed to work tomorrow." He said, "I'm going to the all-star game." I said, "What am I going to do?" He said "I don't care." I decided I was going to the All-Star game, too. So I went out and waited in line and got to go to the ball park. That was way back a long time ago.

MR. COX: You've been more than generous with your time. I have one last question. Who's going to win the series?

MR. HOWE: New York.

MR. COX: New York. Has that been one of your favorite teams all this time?

MR. HOWE: No, the Astros are my favorite team only they kinda let me down this year. That's because my son takes me to the Astrodome, or did take me to the Astrodome. My

wife has been sick for two years. She had alzheimer's and leukemia, and we did pretty good with the alzheimer's until September of '98 when she got leukemia. After that they gave her two months to live, but we managed two years and a day. In that period of time, I spent every hour with her just about. I never left her. I took her everywhere with me and my neurologist told me that if you don't use it you use it. So I took her everywhere. We did everything up until the last three months, I guess, when we spent most of that in the hospital when the leukemia just finally got too much for her. She passed away on the second of September, after we'd been married for fifty-eight years and a little over four months. This time in 1937 was when we met, sixty-three years ago. A lot of people tell me that's a long time, but I want to tell you when you look back, it seems like it was only yesterday. It goes by fast.

MR. COX: Well, I want to just thank you on behalf of myself and also on behalf of the Nimitz Museum. It's just a wonderful experience you've had and I thank you again for sharing that with us.

MR. HOWE: It was my pleasure. I probably talked too much, but you can always edit that thing.

MR. COX: No, no. Thank you very much.

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