

The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Robert Clark

May 11, 2001

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This is Vivian Bloomfield we are at the Museum of the Pacific War, The Admiral Nimitz Museum, this is May 11, 2001, and I am interviewing Robert Clark, and he is a member of the SACO group and they are here for a convention and he has agreed to help us and to give us some of his recollections of his service with the U.S. military.

Mr. Clark: This is Robert Clark. I was born in Kansas, western Kansas, grew up in the town of Colby. I went to California in 1940 and that is where I joined the Navy. Trained in San Diego. The reason I went to California is because in Colby, Kansas, there wasn't much work at the time and I was a dairy kid, so there wasn't a heck of a lot I knew and when I got to California I couldn't find a job, so I joined the Navy. That is why I went in the Navy. Training at San Diego was cut short because of the urgency of staffing the Navy and so our full training program was not whatever the number of weeks it was supposed to be. From San Diego training I went to a destroyer, rode down to San Pedro. I went aboard the USS Saratoga to go to Hawaii to go aboard the USS Tennessee. The trip to Hawaii on the Saratoga was a fascinating thing because from Kansas I didn't know much about the ocean. There were 2,000 men sent at one time to go to Hawaii and we slept and lived on the hangar deck. When we got there then we went by small boats over to our respective stations. Mine was the USS Tennessee. I went aboard the Tennessee

some time late in 1940 and the ship stayed in Hawaii for a few months and then went back to Long Beach, California. In the process I made friends with another guy off of the Nevada and we went to a family that lived there and they took us in as kinfolk almost. Fed us and talked to us and let us enjoy being at home. Our ship went back to Hawaii and I guess we roamed around out there for quite a while at various places, various cruises, and in late 1941 the whole battle fleet went on a training cruise. We all went out to fire the weapons and do the maneuvers necessary as battle fleet. So I had been assigned to the #1 turret 14" guns and that is where my station was. When we fired the gun I was in the turret. When we went back we were firing at tow targets and towed airplane targets, so we fired all weapons and when we got back to Hawaii, started back, we went as a fleet surrounded by an aircraft carrier or two and a bunch of destroyers and all of a sudden all those destroyers and aircraft carriers went away. The battle fleet went on in to Honolulu, Pearl Harbor. That was late in the week, probably Friday, but I don't recall the day, and on Saturday we had a big ceremony and the Captain awarded us E's for excellence on our use of weapons. When the Captain awarded the E's to the division officers he said "I hope you fire this well against the Japanese." The date the Captain talked to us about the E's and firing at the Japanese was December 6, 1941.

Ms. Bloomfield: And of course that was the day prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Clark: So the next morning we got attacked. My breakfast was over and it was

Sunday and I didn't have to do anything in particular so I went into the turret and laid down on a shell deck bench and was reading a book when the attack came. It didn't take but a minute to know what it was. And pretty quick the announcement was "man your battle stations, this is not a drill." So the turret crew all got together in the turret, of course, and the officers would tell us when they needed somebody out on the deck and we would go out to do whatever they wanted done. One time it was to throw the cables off that connected the USS West Virginia to us, to the Tennessee. The Tennessee was up against the docking keys on Ford Island so it was not hit by torpedoes, but the West Virginia was on the water side of the Tennessee and was hit by torpedoes and began to sink and it began to pull us over. So we threw off the cables from the bits and in the process we were out there on the topside and here came a flight of Japanese and none of us knew that. Somebody said over the loudspeaker, "Clear the weather deck, clear the weather deck. Attack is coming in." So we all hauled our back-sides over underneath the turrets. Another time I was sent out to remove the burning tarpaulins that had been spread for shade and the 5" guns when they fired had ejected their casings, and the casings set those things on fire. I was sent out, tied up with a marine to get fire hoses to come up and blow the oil, the burning oil that was between us and the West Virginia, hose it off so that it would not burn the ship. We took the hose up there and apparently we ran so hard we jerked off the supply end piece and the old Bosan who was up there telling us what to do was not very happy. At about the same time the man in charge of the ship got the

engines going and that drove the oil away from our ship, drove it back toward the Arizona. Well, there we were, the Arizona was sunk behind us, blown up, the West Virginia was sunk alongside us, and the Oklahoma was turned over in front of us and the Maryland was tied up by the Oklahoma and she got under way. She was alright.

Ms. Bloomfield: And the name of your ship was?

Mr. Clark: The Tennessee. We kept firing off and on all thru the day, way after the Japanese were gone, but we didn't know that because if an airplane came over we shot at it. Somebody shot at it. My ship didn't shoot anything except some anti-aircraft guns and probably machine guns but I didn't know about it. We got hit by two different bombs, one on Turret #2, the center gun right above our turret, the top was hit and blew great big chunk out of it and #3 Turret on the after part of the ship was hit in the middle, middle of the top, and it killed I think three men in Turret #3. Other than that I don't know of any others killed, some machine gun fire maybe, I don't doubt, but other than that I don't know of any other. There was a lot of smoke around Pearl Harbor because some of the docks, the ships and the docks had been hit and the airfields next to Ford Island had been hit and, of course, the Arizona was still on fire for a long time. Some of our crew, a coxswain in our crew was out on a journey with a 50 foot motor launch and he was doing something when the fight started, and he ended picking up sailors from various ships that had jumped overboard, and when the firing was over and the fighting was over when he came back to the ship they sent him out to pick up the bodies. One of the

duties the sailors inside the ship had to do was clean off the burnt paint in the officers' quarters because that was back by where Arizona was burning and it burnt the paint off the inside of their quarters, and it was kind of a tough situation for some of the rest of us because we didn't get to take showers because the water was used to wash officers' quarters down, but that was just mere passing. Took a shower in a bucket. When all of this was done and we stood very close watches for however long we were there and in order to get lose we had to blow the concrete keys that were next to Ford Island that we had tied up to because the West Virginia had jammed us back into those keys. So they spread netscargo and that over the side of the ship and blew up the keys with dynamite and I'm not sure just when we left, but there was the Maryland, and probably the Pennsylvania. Three ships, Tennessee, the Pennsylvania, and Maryland started back for the United States with destroyer escorts. As we left Pearl Harbor the escorting destroyers were tossing out depth charges just in case there were submarines waiting out there for somebody to come out. But nothing like that happened. Made a lot of noise and scared some of us inside the ship, but we got out and I was at sea on Christmas, so I can't tell just when it was I left, but I was a sea on Christmas and we got into Bremerton Naval Yard.

Ms. Bloomfield: Is that in California?

Mr. Clark: That's in Washington, State of Washington. There they had to replace guns on turrets 1 and 2 and turret 3's top. All were old guns, and they replaced some of the 14" ammunition because it was also old. Probably from the

beginning of the ship. And we stayed there until it was time to do the Coral Sea Battle. The Coral Sea Battle was beginning to form up and they sent the battle fleet down into the South Pacific as a back-up in case the Japanese won. The battle fleet got as far south as Christmas Island or Easter Island, one or the other. I know it is way down there and we saw no action, saw nothing but ourselves, and went back after we were at sea 29 days. Went back to San Francisco and they did some more work on the ship, and then we went out to the Battle of Midway, for the Battle of Midway. We were back-up again. Went up towards Alaska. The Battle Fleet, and it was foggy, couldn't see much. Two of our planes went out, scout planes, from our battleship, and we lost them. Disappeared.

Ms. Bloomfield: Were you, since you had left the Pacific area and went up to the Alaskan area, had they given you supplies, had they equipped you with the Arctic weather supplies, or you all just went directly from the Pacific?

Mr. Clark: We did not get any change of anything that I was aware of that affected me.

Ms. Bloomfield: So you didn't have Arctic weather gear clothes or any of that sort of thing?

Mr. Clark: No. Sailors had peacoat which is kind of a short overcoat. But we lined the decks and watched for those lost planes to see what happened and then we went back to Bremerton. We went to Bremerton and our ship was to be overhauled. They were going to put double bottoms on the sides of the ships so that if we were hit by a torpedo it would blow up an extra wall of steel before it got to the ship and that was a long, long job. They took us off the

ship and put us in the barracks. And that is where I ran into my wife. She was out playing with the other sailors. (Laughter) And we met in August of '42, got married in November of '42, and on the last day of '42 I caught the train to go to Washington, D.C. because I had signed up for SACO. The reason I signed up was my buddy aboard ship told me about "Hey, they got a duty schedule here, a roster for signing up for long, distance, and hazardous duty." Unknown long distance and hazardous duty. "So why don't you sign up," he said, "I have." So, I knew my ship would leave Bremerton regardless of whether I stayed on or went with long distance hazardous duty. So I signed up. They took me because I was over 21 and my friend, Red, was not. Red was killed in the Battle of the Phillipines They didn't take him. So I went to Washington, D. C., for training for Chinese soldiers that we were going to train for weapons, hand-to-hand fighting, explosives, even mortars, don't forget I'm a gunnersmate. But, I was also a sailor. And we learned quite a bit, and we trained in I think the station was in Virginia. The way we got there, I had been told to get an apartment, get a room in town and after a while I was supposed to have a civilian suit, hide my Navy clothes, to get ready for this training I was to stand on such-and-such a corner in Washington, D. C. An Army vehicle would come by and I had a password to give when they stopped and they would take me to this training camp.

Ms. Bloomfield: Had they increased your pay or how did you live in Washington, D. C. on just a basic sailor's pay? Had they changed your rank when you went there.

Mr. Clark: Well no, I didn't get any more money. I got my marriage and quarters

allowance for Betty, but that didn't help me any.

Ms. Bloomfield: And she had stayed in Washington State?

Mr. Clark: She had stayed in Bremerton, yes. She got a job. Anyway, I went down to the corner where I was supposed to wait for this pickup, and there was another civilian down half a block away and I could see him nervous as an alley cat walking back and forth scratching himself and the Army vehicle pulled up near us and the guy leaned out the door and said "Hey you guys supposed to go with me?"

Ms. Bloomfield: Real secretive huh at that point?

Mr. Clark: Really secret. And that is what we did, went to this training camp. We couldn't give our last names, or our ranks. We had on civilian clothes. They gave us khakis. And I was known as Bob, and the other guy was known as Jack, and people were known by nicknames. That was all. It was an interesting training. Trained me to go out with a compass in the woods. I come from Western Kansas. Anyway, that was the training in preparation to go to China. During this time, when I finished this training, I was allowed to have a leave. I got a seven day leave. Called Betty to meet me in Kansas and I went back to Colby, Kansas, from Washington, D. C, and she came from Bremerton, Washington, by train. She came into a town 30 miles away and I was in Colby, which is my home. My brother was there as a soldier and we didn't have gasoline to make the trip because of rationing. I was going to be driving my stepfather's car and he didn't have the gas, so we saw a man that we knew, a businessman, both knew downtown. My brother said, "Hey, you

know Bob's wife is coming into Oakley and we don't have the gasoline enough to get over there." He said, "Go get 'em." So we broke the law and got the gasoline. I guess we broke the law. We went over and picked up Betty and spent six days or something like that. I left going east and she left going west. And that was prior to, that must have been January or February, and then there was some more stuff that we had to do in Washington, D.C. getting ready and they said you are going to go on by train, you are going to go to San Diego. No, to Long Beach. So I called Betty and said if you can meet me at Long Beach at Mrs. Worship's and Mrs. Worship was the family that I had gotten to be friends with. She said it was alright. I didn't ask her if it was alright, till I got there, but Betty arrived in the evening by bus from Los Angeles, I guess, and we spent the night with Mrs. Worship and I went out the next morning by bus and got aboard a ship on the way to China.

Ms. Bloomfield: And what was the name of that ship?

Mr. Clark: USS Hermitage. It was a converted Italian luxury liner that had been captured by the United States.

Ms. Bloomfield: How did you remember the name of that?

Mr. Clark: Someone just told me since I've been here. I had forgotten.

Ms. Bloomfield: OK.

Mr. Clark: I met a guy that I didn't like when we were on the train we quarreled all the time, but they assigned us aboard that ship in the same crew. They put us in a deck division, gave us jobs, so we didn't have to ride as soldiers, and we were put in the same crew quarters. We got to playing cards together and

became good friends.

Ms. Bloomfield: Great.

Mr. Clark: The ship left San Pedro, Long Beach, headed for Australia and we were by ourselves, and we went a way south to New Zealand, past Christmas Island our there somewhere.

Ms. Bloomfield: And this was in March of '43?

Mr. Clark: Yes, March of '43. Went south of New Zealand, south far enough that it got cold and it was announced over the ship's speakers that we had gone farther south than any other American expeditionary force. We stopped in Wellington, New Zealand for about four days, and they let some of us off the ship. Some of us sailors. And one thing we saw was the taxis driven by charcoal burners. That is what they used for power. Then we left New Zealand and went, and I got a story about that but I don't think I'll put it in here, went to Australia and could go ashore in Melbourne. That is where we went a shore - Melbourne. That was also for a very short period. We had to cross the Tasmanian Sea between New Zealand and Australia, which is an interesting thing because I had always heard about the Tasmanian Sea. But, we left Australia, started for Bombay, India. We are still all by ourselves. And in the middle of the night, one night, lights came on, and the reason was that there was reported sighting of some kind at sea. The Captain said "turn on the lights and we'll find them." Well, that only lasted about 30 seconds and some officer turned them back off. So they didn't find us. While we were

aboard, one of the SACO men was a Major in the Army. There was a variety of us there besides just sailors, just soldiers. He fell in love with one of the Navy nurses who was being transported to India and they got married. The Captain married them and let them have his quarters for a 24 hour period. I understand that he had been the Captain of the Wyoming at one time and was a noted drunk. I don't know whether that is true or not. Don't know his name. That was the story though. Got to Bombay and I don't know what they did about quarters, I've forgotten what we did about quarters, whether we stayed aboard ship, or what, till the train was ready to go to Calcutta. But in order to go into the places where we were accustomed to treatment and conditions, the officers gave us officers' bars to wear on our shirt collars. Now that is the only way they would let us in there, but one of the bearers that served our drinks knew from our behavior, I presume, that we were sailors. And he said, "You can have this drink and then leave please." So we did. When we left Bombay on a train, it was a civilian train, not a troop train. There were little brown circles on all of the depots in rows and I couldn't understand what the heck that was, so I got off the train when it stopped once and went over to the depot and the little brown circles was cow manure. The Indians made them into patties and put them, stuck them on the side of the wall to dry. When they are dried they use them for fuel. There was a lot of poverty. It was so obvious. We got into Calcutta and stayed in an apartment-type place that they had arranged for us. Right downtown. And, I'm about to run out of talking.

2 Appendixes
Additional information
from Mr. Robert Clark
regarding war experiences

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