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***Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas***

***Interview with Charles Séhe
USS Nevada***

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This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 8th of December, 2001. I am interviewing Mr. Charles Séhe. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, and is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Metzler: First, Charles, let me thank you for taking the time to come and spend with us and give us some more background information on what occurred on December the 7th. Let me start by asking you to tell us when and where you were born, who your parents were, and where you lived.

Mr. Séhe: My name is Charles T. Séhe. I was born in Geneva, Illinois, Kane county, February 26, 1923. My parents were Mr. and Mrs. William Séhe of German origin, and I am what you call a Depression Era child. The reason that I did enlist in the Navy, it was Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1940, the enlistees were to have a full meal. My mother had to sign permission, because I was only 17 at the time. Upon completion of my basic training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station, I and the other members of my company went to a building. Each of us was carrying a mattress cover. Inside the building there was a petty officer, a long table, each recruit would set out his mattress cover on this table and the petty officer would put a stencil on it, he'd rub a black ink over it, and that would indicate to the recruit his station or the ship to which he was assigned. Arbitrarily, the company was divided in half. The first half of the 120 company, they had their mattress covers stenciled "Arizona." The recruit in front of me was the last one to get the Arizona stamp, because the petty officer put down the old stencil, picked up a new one, put that on my mattress cover and printed "USS Nevada." I missed being assigned to the USS Arizona by one mattress cover. Upon graduation we were shipped out to Bremerton, Washington where ships were waiting for the recruits. I went aboard the Nevada. It was early February, 1941. After we reached Bremerton, the Nevada set sail for the Hawaiian Islands, of course Pearl Harbor, and joined what was called Battle Division One; Battle Division One consisted of the USS Arizona, the Oklahoma, and the Nevada. The Arizona was the battle division flagship. The Pennsylvania was the flag ship of the complete fleet out there.

After a few months of at sea exercises, we'd come into port, then we'd go back out. Since I was only a seaman second, my job was to clean pots and pans in the scullery. One of the reasons I was in the scullery was that I was put on report. I'd washed a few pieces of clothing, but you were not supposed to leave them hang out on exposed decks, but I had put them by an air vent. The Master at Arms came by and he gave me five days working in the scullery. The Friday before December 7th; December 5th, I went aboard the Arizona to see my home town friend, Charles Leroy Thompson. He suggested, why don't we go out Saturday night and live it up. It only cost us a dollar. I told him I can't, I got to be in the scullery Sunday morning. He said, "No, we can do it. You can sleep over." I said, "I can't, then I'd really be on report." So I declined. And he said, "Loan me a dollar. I'll pay you back Monday." I said, "Sure." But, Monday never came for him. December 7th.

At the time of the attack Sunday morning, we'd just finished eating about 7:30. I was a member of the Fifth Division. The Fifth Division was the deck division that manned the five-inch 51 surface guns, the so-called casemented guns. The main batteries were 14-inch turreted mounts. The Sixth Division, which was our neighboring division, was the antiaircraft division. They manned the 5-inch 25 guns: five on each side, port and starboard sides. At the time of the attack, we'd just finished breakfast about 7:30, so I went to the enlisted men's after head, there were about six of us there, and I picked up the Sunday paper, the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, and I was looking at "Orphan Annie." I heard the whistling, a loud noise, and "All hands, man your battle stations. General Quarters. We're under attack." I got up, and I had to remember what they told me when I first got on the ship. Movement throughout the ship requires two things in your mind. Up starboard and forward, down port and aft. So that everyone can move in sequence, and some people forgot that. My battle station was the search lights on the mainmast, and obviously the search lights weren't being used, it was daylight. So I had a choice to make, either climb the ladder and help out somewhere. So I chose the ladder, which others did. Already the bombing had started. We heard this noise, a terrific noise, and that was the one torpedo that the Nevada got. My friend was in casement port four. His name was R.H. Kirby, seaman first class. Years later he said, "Charles, I saw that torpedo coming right at me." The ship shuddered. Then we got more bomb hits.

While this is all going on, the officer of the deck was Ensign Joseph Taussig. His family line goes way back in Naval history. He had the premonition that there was a need to keep the boilers lit, so between 2000 and 2400, which is 12 o'clock the night before, he had two boilers lit and on standby. In order to get underweigh, as I was told later, you need at least 300 pounds of pressure, steam pressure, to even start moving, but not moving fast. With these two on standby they already had 60 pounds and they were like a teapot that stands on the stove, you can keep it warm, it's ready to boil, the same principle. He was also the senior officer of the antiaircraft guns. At this time, this was about five minutes to eight, we had to find someone to take command. The only senior officer aboard the Nevada was Lt. Commander Francis Thomas. All the other senior officers were ashore. So he had to make the decisions, he assumed command. The Officer of the Deck was Ensign Taussig. He remains Officer of the Deck, holds the title, as long as the ship is tied and still. Once it's on the move the Officer of the Deck changes his responsibility. So Lt. Commander Thomas got help from Chief Quartermaster Sedberry. Meanwhile, up at the fo'c's'le they were getting hit with the bombs. Chief Boatswain Hill—I think you may already know, Chief Boatswain Hill won the medal of honor. His responsibility was to get the lines undone so we could get underweigh. He did that, and came back, and then the bomb hit again in the fo'c's'le and he was blown overboard.

Sedberry and Thomas now prepared to get the ship underweigh, so Ensign Taussig went to the sky control aft to direct the antiaircraft batteries. As the Nevada slowly moved away from its mooring in order to get away from the surface burning oil, the Arizona blew up, scattering hot flaming metallic debris and torn bodies onto the Nevada's fo'c's'le. Launches were coming along side from the Detroit cruiser, picking up sailors,

burned and covered with the heavy thick crude oil. So we got underweigh, the best we could for the wounded. Down in the dynamo room was Machinist Ross. Several times he went down to the room to make sure we had enough power generated to get the Nevada going. He passed out momentarily for he had a rough time down there because of gasses forming. The torpedo hole was at about frame 40 from us. We would have sunk if we had kept on going.

That's when the second wave started their bombing. As our ship entered the channel. dive bombers and high-level bombers dropped their bombs, killing many of our crew who were working the portside casement guns and the anti-aircraft guns on the boat deck. Getting back to where I was, out on the boat deck the word was passed that anyone who was not manning guns or ammunition boxes should turn to on the fires. Fires were all over the ship. So I said, "Hell, I'll help to put out the first around the gun mounts." As soon as we'd put out one fire, you'd look over there, and another would burst out again. When these dive bombers came over, you could see them, one went this way, then swooped down, another went the other way. It was just like a crossfire over the ship. And some of the batteries were now being hand operated, because of power failure in the gun directors.

This moment, to me, is where Taussig should have gotten the Medal of Honor. He coordinated all necessary information to the gun crews by shouting as loud as he could to the gun crews below. Bombs struck the open signal bridge, the navigational bridge, and the chart room. We got six hits, some say eight, even ten, bombs, but at least six. The fifth one exploded deeply into spaces just behind the Captain's cabin, downward into the laundry room around the smokestack. It didn't go further because of the thick armor plate deck. The same thing happened in the fo'c's'le area. A bomb would penetrate the upper decks where there would be only a thin half-inch steel layer, so you could see where the bomb went through. The holes were about 12 inches in diameter. You could see where the bomb went, and one could count the number of the damn things. When the bomb hit the Captain's cabin, I was told, later, the shrapnel flew upward toward the starboard director, piercing many structures around, destroying all electrical power, and that's where shrapnel ripped into Ensign Taussig's body. I didn't know what had hit him, but later they said a big chunk of shrapnel hit him in the thigh. He refused to leave his station. All the while, the surrounding air was filled with brown smoke from the exploding bombs and from our own anti-aircraft gun batteries. The raging fires added to the dense stifling air that hung over our ship.

I have to backup and tell you, while we were getting underweigh, the anti-aircraft guns already were firing because Aldopho Solar, BM First Class, had his gun crews on standby alert and practicing loading, even before eight o'clock. Wilson's crew also were on standby. At the time of the attack, live ammunition "ready" boxes were locked. Locks were broken and ammo was being distributed. So I said, "Hell, I'm joining them to help put out the fires around the gun crews." Ensign Taussig assumed the role of air defense officer because the senior gunnery officer was ashore. Ensign Taussig took starboard

battery; Ensign Taylor, the portside battery. (Lt. Commander Thomas was acting commanding officer.) Taussig and Taylor both were wounded by shrapnel when a bomb hit the Captain's cabin and gun director. Solar and Wilson kept their guns firing until they were killed. Howard Zerbe on gun six survived. I met him here at the Nimitz Luncheon. We talked a bit—he said, "Ah, it was bad." I said, "I'll send you a card from home or Pearl Harbor."

Another bomb hit the boat deck, and then went down into the galley. The reason I know all of this is because I, being a second class seaman, was retained aboard ship for cleaning up. Immediately, all personnel, highly rated and experienced sailors, were transferred to the other ships for immediate sea duty. Everything below the second deck was flooded. Only the main deck and a portion of the second deck were free of water.

Mr. Metzler: This was after the ship settled down in the mud?

Mr. Séhe: Yes, Nevada's bow was down low, aground, and water kept coming in through the torpedo hole. It settled down in the mud, and then later that evening work parties were formed from each division after the attack to look for more survivors, wounded, and dead before dark set in.

Mr. Metzler: It raised up a little bit?

Mr. Séhe: Later, the evening tide allowed tugs to push the ship out of the channel. Then they decided to push it out of the way. Yes, the decision was to keep the Nevada from sinking in the channel.

Mr. Metzler: Get out of the straits so they could . . .

Mr. Séhe: Allow other ships to leave for the harbor immediately for sea. The fires were still burning well into the night. All the surrounding metal fragments were still hot to the touch. Those damn fires burned around the clock. Fortunately, I wasn't injured.

Mr. Metzler: You were on cleanup duty.

Mr. Séhe: Yeah. What we did, we worked in the daytime. After putting out the larger fires, we tried to move all of the seriously wounded and put them on the open deck where they were put into launches that came by. Then after that we were instructed to do a little more thorough searching. I had to go into the casements where my shipmates had been. They gave us clean, new, specially-marked buckets to go back into the casements to pick up any fragmented body parts. I went into four and six, where my friend Kirby had been. He survived. He's still living in Tennessee. He was badly burned at the time. He's still taking pain pills. They didn't know much about burn treatment at that time. I visited him in the hospital. The burn patients had raised sheets over them. They wouldn't put the blankets directly on top of them, they had them draped over a loop, kinda like a

Conestoga wagon. Light bulbs in there for heat. And then they put moist gauzes on their bodies. But some made the mistake of letting the gauze dry too long, and when removed, the gauze bandages would tear the burned skin off.

We took these buckets, we went in there to find any human body parts; everything in those casements looked black, and it was so hot. The bomb that hit back of the navigation deck penetrated into four and six casements. The bomb that I told you went down by the smoke stack blew out the casement walls, the bulkheads of four and six. In those days it was rivets, it wasn't so much welding, these were rivets. The metal plates of the older ships were riveted, not welded. Flying rivets from blown-out bulkheads were like deadly missiles.

Mr. Metzler: They were like bullets.

Mr. Séhe: Yes! I came to the inboard side of the casement where the stack is, smokestack. Now, you can't have a steel bulkhead all around the smokestack because the workers have to get in and around the stack. They put up a half-inch thick oval sheeting cover, but they'd had to make it removable to check any hot gasses, steam, etc., coming from the boilers. So, whoever worked with the smokestack could go in to work on it. That's why the open end in the stack lining. To prevent guys touching that hot stack metal, they put up a cyclone fence around the stack. This fencing surrounded the stack in casements three and five on the starboard side, and casements four and six on the portside. Some guys' bodies were literally strained through the chain link fencing surrounding the huge casing for the smokestack. I recall finding torn arms, legs, heads, and body torsos, and broken bones, all unidentifiable because of their blackened, flash-burned condition. The tremendous concussions of the numerous explosions scattered those body fragments through the fencing throughout casements three, four, and five. Finding small, fragmented, torn body parts continued for days.

After awhile we did a double check. Then as night came, all of us left the ship by means of the launches to eat, and shower, and we slept in the Admiral Bloch Arena (rings of seats). We slept in the rows under the seats where they had showers, blankets, pillows and lights. And then in the morning we would go back and check in daylight hours and work around. But we still couldn't go below the second deck because everything was flooded. And then they had an inspection, the yard personnel, the big shots, Navy personnel. Why was the Nevada worth saving? They made the decisions. Some said no. Some said yes. And I'm damn glad they said yes.

They went to work on it, but first they had to get rid of the water. The only way to do that was to pump out the water, so they put a patch on it; they called it the one million dollar patch. Once that patch was attached—that was the only hole. Then there was a near miss but the buckled plate was watertight. The held. February 12th they raised the Nevada. And, then, the dangerous part came. Not for me, but for the divers, the electricians, the welders, the specialized workers. Because there were noxious, poisonous gasses down

below, it was hazardous for anyone without proper equipment to descend into those lower decks.

Mr. Metzler: What kind of gasses?

Mr. Séhe: Oh, they had hydrogen sulfide, they had sulfuric acid. But that's what they had to watch for. They only could worked down there a few minutes at a time. February 12th, that date I remember. A crane came out to our ship and you could just hear that sucking sound as it pulled the Nevada out of the mud. . Then, we went into temporary repair. Then we had to clean it up, the decks. Then they said, well, we're only going to keep about—this was unknown to me. It ended up with about 300 of us, 300 that they retained. I had heard some feedback. Those that went out to sea, some of them, they got sunk again, that's a double whammy!

And then we got to Bremerton, Washington, and they told us—oh, wait, I'm sorry. Back up. February, every man received a post card to send home, they said, say what you want to say. I am well, OK, don't worry. And you signed your name to it. My mother didn't say anything when she saw me, just stared. I had a 20 day leave—the reason they gave us a leave was they were going to remodel the whole ship. They tore everything apart, updated it. Instead of the 5 inch-25 single, we had the twin mount 5 inch-38, we had the 20 mm. and 40 mm. guns. I became a radar operator. Twenty mm. gun captain.

Mr. Metzler: So you had radar.

Mr. Séhe: We did, yes. They didn't have it down in Guadalcanal when they started encountering the Japanese ships at night.

Mr. Metzler: When you were in Pearl Harbor, did you have a lot of correspondence home with the family? Did you write lots of letters, get any letters, or did most of the guys, or what?

Mr. Séhe: I sent my older sister souvenir stuff—scarf, hula doll, etc..

Mr. Metzler: The hula dolls and stuff?

Mr. Séhe: For one dollar—you know, I told you, Charles Thompson on the Arizona wanted to borrow a dollar? You know why it is only one dollar?

Mr. Metzler: No.

Mr. Séhe: From Pearl Harbor to Honolulu bus fare was twenty cents, one way. You got eighty cents left. Go over, now you got to make a decision. Beer is ten cents, you can have four beers, you got forty cents left, you got to save twenty cents to get back in the bus, so you drink four beers. You got twenty cents left now, so you can buy a hamburger and fries, or you can go to the movies for twenty-five cents.

Let's go back, at the time of the attack when Ensign Joseph Taussig, Jr., left as the officer of the deck and assumed the responsibilities of the antiaircraft battery. His sky control mount would regulate the positions to indicate where the planes were coming from; although he was injured, he still refused to leave, and he violently resisted the care that was wanted to give him by his control group. So they forced him, and then the corpsmen came and they actually forced him and tied him down on a stretcher, but they couldn't get him down the ladder as one usually did, because the bomb that hit the Captain's cabin destroyed the ladder, and they had to lower him to the boat deck on the stretcher. And this is why, while this is going on, Ensign Taussig was wounded because of a bomb, the same bomb that hit the Captain's cabin, and Ensign Taussig was injured by shrapnel, and badly burned by the one that hit the boat deck. And that's the one that killed Adolph Solar, who was operating his own antiaircraft gun. So I think Ensign Joseph Taussig, Jr., should have gotten the Medal of Honor. Many of us feel that. But you can not choose those things.

Mr. Metzler: Are there any parts of your experience in the Pearl Harbor Attack that you want to go through now that you haven't mentioned yet? You talked about where you were, and what happened, you talked about the period afterwards, you talked about some of your associates and buddies. Were you able to see the damage on some of the other ships, for example. What was the condition around the harbor?

Mr. Séhe: You couldn't see anything, to be truthful. At the time, all there was from the California back down to the Tennessee and the Oklahoma and the Arizona, there were just huge columns of fire. This smoke—and it was damn hot. Blackish smoke. The entire harbor was filled with hot, choking, blackish-brown smoke from the exploding bombs and the antiaircraft fire from all our ships.

Mr. Metzler: One of the comments I've heard was that some of the damage to the Nevada was due to the explosion on the Arizona when she went down. Because she was pulling away just when the Arizona magazine blew up. What was your experience at that time?

Mr. Séhe: Dense, brownish-black hot smoke coming from the Arizona filled the entire harbor. The Arizona explosion—it blew a lot of us down. Metal fragments flew over our fo'c's'le and it killed some of our own crew. Now that I mentioned that . . . coming out to help were the men from turret number one, removing the dead and wounded and helping to get underweigh. I call them "turret rats" because they enter and leave the turret from an opening underneath the armored turret 1-1 mount. Those from turrets three and four helped put out the bridge fires and replaced the dead on the antiaircraft guns. some of these "heroes" are now deceased. What could they have done? I mean, they could only just sit there in the turrets. The big guns were useless against aircraft. As soon as the Arizona exploded, I repeat, everyone who was on the fo'c's'le, in that crew, got badly burned. A tragic thing happened, again, as we went to pass 1010 floating drydock, thinking we were "save" from further harm. A bomb hit a destroyer (the USS Shaw) tied there. The bow blew up, showering the Nevada with flaming metallic debris, wounding

some of our men. We saw it after they repaired the Shaw. It had a little stubby bow, but they got it underweigh.

All those men that were lost. Why, I don't know. I was just so damn lucky. But, why me?

Mr. Metzler: Why not.

Mr. Séhe: I picked up this one arm, the skin had come off. It had a tattoo on it. I'd known him, I didn't know it at the time, I put it in the bucket. I thought about that for a long time. It belonged to James Robert Bingham, Jr. And then the other body parts, I picked up this upper arm, it was scorched and blackened, it also had a tattoo on it. It could have been a friend of mine. But this one friend I knew, was reported missing. He was engaged to be married as soon as he got leave, I was to be his best man. I also knew a nice Marine, Private Orville King, he was one of the dead. I was fortunate. I had a lot of friends on there. I liked that ship, she was a very good ship. I miss those shipmates!

Mr. Metzler: Do you want to spend just a few minutes and recount what other things the Nevada did in the balance of the war because she went, as you were saying earlier, over to the Atlantic and then back to the Pacific. What was your experience during the rest of the war with the Nevada?

Mr. Séhe: We got to be a unified fighting machine, if you want to call it that. We were glued together. I like to think of it as the ship that wouldn't die. After Pearl Harbor after Bremerton, we got modernized with new weapons; then sharpened our skills in the San Juan Straits in the state of Washington, working out with 20 mm. machine guns, and also the radar. The radar was just coming out, and it showed ships. The practice was a towing vessel that was our target, we were supposed to hit the target. We sometimes did get a little mixed up. the starboard ship was supposed to be the ship, but it all depends on the angle, and sometimes we'd get a report back from the ship, "Get the hell off of us and get back on the target." I have to give the credit to the main battery. They were good, because they were excellent gun support for beach landings. That's what they used them for. You must keep in mind that those ships that were sunk out there, all but the Oklahoma and the Arizona, were returned. Their speed wasn't good, they weren't fast, they were 20 and a half knots at the most. The Nevada would do 19, especially making a tight turn. They didn't have any of that fast stuff that Halsey had later. See, the South Dakota was coming out, the Wisconsin, and the Massachusetts, North Dakota, no, South Dakota, Alabama . . .

Mr. Metzler: The North Carolina . . .

Mr. Séhe: Yeah. What I'm getting at, our (pre-war) ships were expendable. This is what they thought. I didn't know it at the time, they didn't tell me. But we were, the old battleships, were expendable. At the expense of the landings. The landings had to come through, regardless.

Mr. Metzler: So she was in support of Utah Beach, Normandy? And then what?

Mr. Séhe: And then we went to Cherbourg, it's an extension of it. The Germans had 15-inch gun emplacements at Cherbourg, we only had 14-inch, so they outranged us . The battleship Nevada was straddled 27 times. Twenty-seven times. And that's authenticated. Bang bang, bang bang. And one hit so damn close, about 100 yards out, water just, a huge water geyser went up. And this one guy looked at me, said "Let's get the hell away from here."

Mr. Metzler: This was from the shore batteries, the German shore batteries?

Mr. Séhe: Yes. And he said, hell, I'm getting out of here. It was amusing. Then after Cherbourg, we went down into the Mediterranean, Marseilles to Toulon. The main battery again, these guys, they were great. They'd fire 10, 12 miles inland. the Nevada, itself, was six to eight miles offshore.

Mr. Metzler: Was the French fleet still afloat?

Mr. Séhe: No. The Germans took the guns off the damn things and that's why we had to go down there. The Strasbourg, a French battleship. They'd redone everything. So we had to do that over again.

Getting back to Utah Beach, we had a spotter, an airplane spotter. He reported Panzer troops coming in. Not the ones that were Hitler's, but there were some coming in. These were 13 miles inland, from the beach. We were out about six miles, so they hit those suckers right in the middle. The Nevada said give us a coordination, and they gave us a coordination. The first ones knocked out the tanks, every one of them. Spotters yelled "Bull's eye" repeatedly.

Mr. Metzler: That's 19 miles. that's just about the total range of those big guns, about 20 miles. And then she went back to the Pacific, right?

Mr. Séhe: Iwo Jima. We got kamikaze, March 27th. Got hit on the starboard side, exactly the mirror image of where I was at on the port side. I got some shrapnel in the cheek. Not this cheek (face), the other cheek (below).

Mr. Metzler: Iwo. Then what.

Mr. Séhe: It was Okinawa.

Mr. Metzler: Oh, it was Okinawa. Sorry.

Mr. Séhe: Then the atom bomb came, August 14th. And then they said, well, your enlistment's about up, you'll go back to the States. Hell, I wanted to go to Japan.

As I look back on the war years that I went through, World War II, from 1941 to 1945, my ages were from 18 to 23. Five years, three and a half years of war. I enlisted when I was 17 years old, so actually what I had done, I had forfeited my teenage years, which you kids out there today, are so enjoying and don't even know what the hell it's all about. I don't know, I just wish that some of them at least, give an appreciation of their own youth. I can't get back my teenage years, but I learned a lot from it. And I do want to say one thing right now. I've been most fortunate. I still think that Steven—I had his name yesterday, now . . . Steven Ambrose, that was it, he mentioned that, I agree with that, I support that wholeheartedly.

The G.I. Bill turned a lot of things around for me, no question. Before the war, in August, I was working in a factory making kitchen cabinets. My job, I was really a big official, I used this tacky cloth to wipe off all surfaces of the drawers and the handle rods before they went into the spraying room. I didn't want to always buy lunches, so my mother, she bought me a lunch bucket. I worked there about five and a half months (June-November, after graduation). I thought I got to do something else, anyway, I had a reasonably good lunch, I gave her money to do that. I put my bucket up on the shelf back where I worked, while I'd be working there and the bucket would be gone. And pretty soon when the conveyor comes back and here's a white bucket. It's my bucket. What the hell, the one my mother gave me is blue.

Mr. Metzler: It got painted many times, huh.

Mr. Séhe: That's the only thing I enjoyed about that job.

Mr. Metzler: Charles, thanks for spending the time to pass on these recollections. I know it's not easy always. I appreciate your efforts, and it will be a valuable addition, so I'll sign off with that.

Transcribed by: Betty Paieda
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