

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR
(Nimitz Museum)

CENTER FOR PACIFIC WAR STUDIES
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
DARRELL NELSON
U. S. NAVY

ORAL HISTORY
DARRELL NELSON

This is Kathleen Wright. Today is Saturday, December 8th, 2001. I'm interviewing Darrell Nelson. This interview is taking place at Bethany Lutheran Church in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center of the Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Mr. Nelson will be beginning the interview here. Mr. Nelson, where were you born?

MR. NELSON: I was born in a small town in western Oklahoma, Lanora. It no longer exists.

MS. WRIGHT: And your date of birth?

MR. NELSON: 12/25/20.

MS. WRIGHT: And so you spent your childhood in Oklahoma?

MR. NELSON: I grew up in western Oklahoma and then high school in Oklahoma City.

MS. WRIGHT: When did you go into the military?

MR. NELSON: December of 1940.

MS. WRIGHT: And you were in the navy?

MR. NELSON: Yes.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you go in right out of high school, or did you work awhile?

MR. NELSON: No, a year and a half of university college until I ran out of money. And then no job and no prospect of getting one, so it looked like it was the triple Cs, if you're familiar with those CCCs, or the military or be a bum, and I chose the military. Fortunately, I wound up with the navy.

MS. WRIGHT: How did you decide on the navy?

MR. NELSON: I had an acquaintance, he wasn't a close friend, he was an acquaintance that was in the navy and he seemed to like it so I thought, well I'll give it a go.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you enlist while you were in Oklahoma?

MR. NELSON: Yes, I did, Oklahoma City but reserves went to Dallas, Texas, where we

were sworn in and processed and then to San Diego to naval training station.

MS. WRIGHT: And then from San Diego, were you sent to....

MR. NELSON: I went directly aboard the PHELPS destroyer.

MS. WRIGHT: And you went right then to Pearl Harbor?

MR. NELSON: No, I don't know, it was a long time ago, but I guess the ship stayed in San Diego for a couple of weeks or so and then went to Pearl, and we operated out of Pearl?

MS. WRIGHT: How long was your training in San Diego?

MR. NELSON: Ours was a five-week course and then they sent me to radio school right after boot camp.

MS. WRIGHT: Right there in San Diego. So you were a radio man?

MR. NELSON: Yes. I was only in the navy six years but the training I got was most responsible for the career I had after I got out of the navy. I was originally with the CAA and then the FAA and I was an air traffic controller.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, that was good training then. Definitely better than being a bum. You were at Pearl Harbor for almost a year or about a year before the attack.?

MR. NELSON: About six months.

MS. WRIGHT: Was that considered kinda light duty at the time?

MR. NELSON: Well, training is a duty and strange, but it was interesting. It was a very good ship and that is all I can say. It was a super ship.

MS. WRIGHT: How many men are on a destroyer?

MR. NELSON: Well, we were a squadron leader, the PHELPS was a squadron leader, and it had a few more than most destroyers. We had about 280 before the war and after that they reached a complement of another 50 people or so after Pearl Harbor.

MS. WRIGHT: So did you get out on the maneuvers ever so often and that sort of thing?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh, we were on maneuvers until after Pearl and after that it really wasn't maneuvers it was for real.

MS. WRIGHT: On Pearl Harbor day, where were you that morning?

MR. NELSON: I had just showered and shaved getting ready to go ashore in my whites.

I'm on my bunk and I just want to go ashore when general quarters sounded and I put my dungarees back on and went to battle stations and I didn't see my whites until we came back in a couple of weeks or so later.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you realize that it was truly an attack when you heard...

MR. NELSON: Not when they sounded general quarters, but as soon as I got up on topside going to my battle station, I did because they were shooting.

MS. WRIGHT: Had other ships already been hit and there was already smoke, etc?

MR. NELSON: Well, I don't remember if there was smoke at that time. There was shortly after because we were tied up right off North Island a little ways around the corner from battleship row, so it was almost immediately black smoke and all that. But I don't recall as soon as I got up topside whether I saw the smoke or not.

MS. WRIGHT: Could you see the planes?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh, their planes came by, and one of 'em came back and I could see the pilot.

MS. WRIGHT: I've heard that they were just that close you could just about see the teeth in their mouth.

MR. NELSON: We were tied up ????. there was five of us tied up alongside of the DOBBIN, which is a tender, and they were getting all of our service ???, steam in the water and everything and doing an overhaul on our barge. And so we weren't ready to get underway for about an hour. The closest we got to being damaged was that there was a near miss and there was two killed on the DOBBIN, and they had some other injuries but we had no fatalities ???

MS. WRIGHT: You're saying a near miss, was that by a torpedo or a bomb?

MR. NELSON: No, it was a bomb, a dive bomber. Several other planes by this time and they had five destroyers and so they put up a real lot of anti-aircraft fire. So there was only a couple of planes outside of the one that dropped that one came close. Most of the rest of them started in our direction after they'd probably dropped their bombs over at the battleship grove they headed our way and we opened fire and they lit off, they didn't come close.

MS. WRIGHT: Where was your battle station?

MR. NELSON: I was radio 1, and I was a messenger.

MS. WRIGHT: Tell us what that entails?

MR. NELSON: I was what they call a ??? before your rig, but I assigned a radio and my job as messenger was when we get a message to deliver it to hand care to whichever, generally it was an officer, but generally to whoever it was to get it. And this day was sorta odd. I've lost since then, ???but we got the message that said, "The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. This is no drill." and I took ??? on that and they sent for all the officers ??? If you can imagine a Seaman 2nd carrying this around and the gunnery officers are getting their guns to fire, the engineering officers trying to get the engines fired up, and the Japanese are dropping bombs and flying by. No one knows what's going on and I'm taking this message to try to get them to sign it.

MS. WRIGHT: Pardon me, sir. Could you sign this? you were trying to do your job weren't you? Did they do it?

MR. NELSON: Most of them did, but a couple of 'em were too busy. Come back later or go away or something and I did.

MS. WRIGHT: I was wondering did they come back later and try to do it or having you do something else after that didn't work out.

MR. NELSON: I don't recall but I probably eventually took it back to them after it was over with. Since you've heard, of course, the expression ??? to new castle.

MS. WRIGHT: No, I don't think so, but new castle being a coal...

MR. NELSON: Newcastle is coal mines.

MS. WRIGHT: It was probably pretty intense trying to find all these people with all that going on, too.

MR. NELSON: No, we knew where they were.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you have time to be afraid during all that?

MR. NELSON: Well, I guess I was afraid then but I really hadn't been scared since. And I politic a little a bit. You know I hear all my people talking about being afraid to fly, being afraid to do this, and at my age I haven't got too many years and I'll be damned if I'm gonna let some yahoo screw it up. I'm gonna do what I wanna do and they may get me, but they're not going to kill me.

MS. WRIGHT: Absolutely. Before December 7th and you were on the ship, you r sleeping quarters were just the bunks with the enlisted men?.

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh. We had different areas. Different divisions had different sleeping areas.

MS. WRIGHT: When you heard the alarm sound to get to your station, how long did it take you?

MR. NELSON: Oh, not very long. On the general quarters alarms battle stations, general quarters also referred to as battle stations, when that sounded, you didn't mess around. You got there as quick as you could.

MS. WRIGHT: Were you all involved in helping to save people after their ships were sinking, or that sort of thing?

MR. NELSON: In Pearl Harbor, we got out of Pearl. All of the ships that could leave, got out and got under way 'cause then you weren't a sitting duck. Our ship wasn't involved in that part at Pearl Harbor.

MS. WRIGHT: So this same day you were able to get out of Pearl Harbor?

MR. NELSON: We got out after the second attack of the second wave. The movie said there was two waves, as I recalled I think there was three. Anyway, it lasted about three hours, and we were there about an hour before we got under way. We got out before it was over completely.

MS. WRIGHT: And where did you go out in the Pacific?

MR. NELSON: We went out of Pearl and we followed the cruiser ST. LOUIS right ahead of us, and we joined up with the ST. LOUIS and another destroyer, and I'm not but I believe it was the BLUE, and then later, we joined up some other ships.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you stay in the general area of Hawaii?

MR. NELSON: Well, we got outside of it, of course, out a ways. When we came back in, we came back into Pearl.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, you're fortunate that none of your shipmates were killed. Did you still stay in touch with some of 'em?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh. On the PHELPS, it's called "The Shipmates", and Harold, the other gentleman that I was with, was primarily responsible for founding it and he has been

our president for the USS PHELPS shipmates. And we're a pretty tight organization. We keep in contact with Bone, and one of the others has got computers do the computing bit and corresponding and have a reunion each two years and put out a quarterly newsletter that's fantastic. It's a slick publication. Harold and company put out.

MS. WRIGHT: What is Harold's last name?

MR. NELSON: P l a c e t t e. And he's giving an interview, too.

MS. WRIGHT: Where is he living now?

MR. NELSON: He lives in Port Arthur, Texas.

MS. WRIGHT: You all are lots of miles apart.

MR. NELSON: Well, we keep in close contact quite a bit.

MS. WRIGHT: That's great. Maybe he can help influence you to coming to Texas, too.

MR. NELSON: Well, not really, but I was trying to come down here anyway and when I found out he was coming, it made it more...

MS. WRIGHT: More special, wasn't it? Have you met some of the other shipmates here?

MR. NELSON: The only one other that I know of, two others that were here that I know of and I've seen those, but there wasn't as many as I had hoped there would be. Our next reunion is this next year, we had one last year in Salt Lake and next year it is at Myrtle Beach. And that will probably be our last big get together.

MS. WRIGHT: Getting harder to travel, getting on up in years now. It's just wonderful that you've maintained those friendships. That's such a time, you probably didn't use the word 'bonding' back then it's so popular now, but really to go through the experiences you go through for that many weeks, months, years together, you do form those relationships.

MR. NELSON: See, the ship was decommissioned in 1945, so all of us as far as that shipmates was concerned were already gone. I had been transferred off of there before then. So that was 1945 and Harold and his group started "Shipmates" in 1969. I didn't join up with them until 1989. Harold had wrote me a letter and said that he got my name. Some shipmate had seen it on a list of Pearl Harbor survivors and my address. He wrote

that this organization had been started and he'd like to have us join up and after 20 years find out where we were or something. I wrote back and said, well, I was glad he found me, I didn't know I had been lost but after 20 years I was glad he found me. It's really a fine group.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you have good commanding officers when you were there on the ship?

MR. NELSON: Yes, yes, we really did. The ship was commissioned from 1935 to 1945 and during that period, over twenty of the officers made admiral, and two of them Jumol? and Bansfield made CNO, Chief Naval Operations.

MS. WRIGHT: Then you really did have outstanding ...

MR. NELSON: We had some good officers.

MS. WRIGHT: Was it difficult getting out of the harbor with the ships still burning?

MR. NELSON: No, we didn't go right past them. We went out another way although there was some ships alongside that UTAH and I believe may be the RALIEGH, some had been sunken or laying over on their sides when we went by.

MS. WRIGHT: So you were over on this side? I have a little map here that I've kinda sketched here. But I have Battleship row here and the RALIEGH and UTAH here.

MR. NELSON: I left my glasses.

MS. WRIGHT: You have some on.

MR. NELSON: I have to have ????. Wait a minute. Okay, there is Port Island? And this is Battleship row. Okay, we were right around over here, and the BOBBIN, and I don't remember who was next to it, but the PHELPS was next to the outboard one, there was one ship outside the ???, I think it is the MONAHAN. I talked to Harold, we can't remember. We were not next to that one, we're next to the outboard ship.

MS. WRIGHT: The stuff on the board I had not even seen where the PHELPS would be, you had talked about early at the beginning, seeing, you know, the Battleship row being able to see 'em that close. It's amazing how many ships were in the harbor at the same time. Did you all go on shore while you were ???, or were you mainly on the ship or destroyer most of the time?

MR. NELSON: We stayed aboard ship. We went ashore for liberty but we didn't live

ashore.

MS. WRIGHT: You didn't live ashore? You lived on the boat? How often did you get liberty?

MR. NELSON: I don't recall. I guess every three days. When we came back to Mare Island, there was some refitting and while we were there we got liberty every three days.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you have a girlfriend then, were you married or still single?

MR. NELSON: I was single and I didn't have a girlfriend.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, I wondered if you had a girlfriend back home and how often you stayed in touch

or how often did you stay in touch with your family? Were they still in Oklahoma?

MR. NELSON: Yes.

MS. WRIGHT: Was it difficult to stay in touch with them?

MR. NELSON: Well, not too because we got mail at sea. My problem was I was not a very good letter writer, so my parents weren't too happy with me about that.

MS. WRIGHT: After Pearl Harbor, did you do better with the letter writing and write them a quick note that you were okay?

MR. NELSON: They had, what did they call those? A form thing that was sent out all it said was we're okay. Yes, I did write some but I was never a good correspondent to them. Now I am much better.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you miss anything in particular when you were in the military? Was there something that you really missed?

MR. NELSON: No, not really. I really enjoyed my time on the PHELPS. After the PHELPS, I was on three other ships and I didn't enjoy that as much.

MS. WRIGHT: Was that because of the personnel or where you were?

MR. NELSON: On the PHELPS, it was a smaller complement. You got to know people and the ships after that, particularly the next two, were very large ships with big complements, and I just didn't find that closeness. But then the last ship I was on was a minesweeper, and I had six months left on my enlistment and four mine sweeps and a mine layer is supposed to take the same time as ???, and they got as far as Guam and decided that wasn't such a good idea because they was afraid they'd loosen to the ??? so we

turned around and brought 'em back to moth balls.

MS. WRIGHT: Were you in the Pacific?

MR. NELSON: The whole time.

MS. WRIGHT: What other three ships were you on?

MR. NELSON: I was on, after the PHELPS, I was the PREMONT which was an APA.

MS. WRIGHT: I don't know what APA...

MR. NELSON: It's a troop carrier. Actually I was assigned to Admiral Blandes flag, he was an amphibious commander. And we were on the PREMONT for two outfits, the PALEAU and the MINNEAPOLIS. And then the flag transferred to the ESSEX, and we did Iwo Jima and Okinawa and they were big complements.

MS. WRIGHT: Are you still radio?

MR. NELSON: Yes. I was still radio.

MS. WRIGHT: Having you what you did on the south side then as experience?

MR. NELSON: No, not really. I had a little bit because we had more. The ESSEX was billed as a command ship and we had 70 operating positions in radio 1, where on the PHELPS we had 4 operating positions, radio 2 was only manned during battle stations. That was a one man operator.

MS. WRIGHT: Would that be for like sending out SOS or those kinds of things? Radio 2?

MR. NELSON: No, radio 2 didn't go into operation unless we lost radio 1, an emergency radio.

MS. WRIGHT: Some of this is new to me but I love learning about it though. I think on Pearl Harbor day, it was sunny that day, wasn't it?

MR. NELSON: Yes, it was a nice day.

MS. WRIGHT: And you say you were getting to sign your...

MR. NELSON: To go ashore.

MS. WRIGHT: So you were going to leave at least for the day.

MR. NELSON: Go to shore, go to church, and go to the beach with pretty girls.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you go to the USO show that they had had that night? I heard that they had a big band show the night before

MR. NELSON: No, I did not.

MS. WRIGHT: I think maybe that was on the ??? that they had ???. Was your destroyer going to be one of the ones that was inspected then the following day.

MR. NELSON: No, not that I know of. I'm pretty sure it wasn't because our squadron leader and captain ??? were ashore because they were having change of command ceremonies the night before. We were getting a different squadron leader and they had gone ashore. Actually our senior officer aboard was the engineering officer, and he's the one that got us underway. He took command of the ship and got us underway. The captain and the executive officer and squadron commander and some of his people were all ashore.

MS. WRIGHT: You know, I've often wondered and you may or may not know the answer, but the timing how the Japanese, is it just coincidence that that sort of thing was going on, or did they really have the intelligence that they knew that change in command would be going on?

MR. NELSON: No, it wasn't because of change of command on ours at that level would not be a major thing to be concerned about.

MS. WRIGHT: I've often wondered if they knew that people would be out of pocket.

MR. NELSON: Well, they picked a day that would be, I'm sure of that.

MS. WRIGHT: Other than trying to run around and find officers to sign that, were there other instances during the time you were on the PHELPS that stand out in your memory as being very humorous or that you found funny?

MR. NELSON: At Pearl Harbor, no, but after that, yes. When we did Attui, that's an island clear out at the end of the chain off of Alaska, Bering Sea has got probably as bad weather as in place in the world. And we were up there, and we formed line of departure for the ships when they landed in ??? Bay, and then we were assigned anti-submarine patrol off the island for several days. And one of the few nice days I had, it was sunny and the sea was calm and no wind and all that good stuff, and ??? battle station was at that time of day and four of us to handle a little penny-ante poker game back there. The rumor was we had two big transmitters here, two receivers and an operating desk here, and we had about a four-foot square of room, and four of us in there with penny-ante poker game

and they had for a poker table was the insert that goes into a typewriter desk and the typewriter sets on that. That was our poker table. And the Japanese had sent over some twin bombers from the Koreans, and I guess they picked us, because our silhouette looked like a bigger ship, we looked like the biggest one in the area and they picked on us and came by and dropped their torpedoes and strafed and general quarters started about the same time the ??? anti-aircraft ??? all started about the same time and of course when it went off everybody jumped made a pass at the money and left to go to their battle stations. I was there, and when it was over with, I cleaned up and put things back together I found 27 cents on the floor. And that's the biggest pile I made all day. But none of the torpedoes, there was torpedoes passed under us but they were set too deep for compression detonators, and their magnetic detonator didn't go, but they exploded when they hit the island. Our casualty, if you will, a tracer went through in radio 1, and like I said, it was a nice day and I had an ??? by the name of Salidosky?, secretary of the gunnery bureau, and the tracer went through the side of his ship through the back of that receiver and to the bottom of it and it ??? out between the bottom of the receiver and the desk top and hit him in the chest. It was so near spent, it didn't break the skin but it was a tracer and it blistered him. That was our total casualties.

MS. WRIGHT: Were you in any other engagements during your time in the war out by the Marianas?

MR. NELSON: Yeh, we were on the PHELPS, I was on Mammoth. Of course, the most memorable for me was Coral Sea, where we lost the LEXINGTON, aircraft carrier. It was referred to by people "Lady Lex", a beautiful ship. We lost her there, and of course Midway was most memorable but the PHELPS was in nine operations that I was aboard. And I got transferred off to two others PELEAU in the Mariannas and she got hit from shore batteries at Saipan. There was only one fatality and several injured and the captain, skipper on that while was still tied up and doing some repair on it, he was still firing at the shore batteries.

MS. WRIGHT: When you were transferred, was there a reason you were transferred or that's just the way it was done then?

MR. NELSON: Well, I was promoted to radio 1st, and they had too many first class

radiomen on it, so somebody had to go and I was picked. It wasn't for anything I had done bad. They didn't catch me in anything.

MS. WRIGHT: Was rotation part of the thing?

MR. NELSON: Well, they did try with all the new ships coming on and so many new people, they transferred some of the more experienced operators and other specialties, too, not just radiomen to other ships to give them more experience. I made the mistake of being promoted to 1st class and off I went.

MS. WRIGHT: Off you went. Well, that means you were doing a good job then. Did you stay in touch with your shipmates from the PHELPS even while you were on the other, after you were transferred? How did you keep up with what was going on with the PHELPS?

MR. NELSON: Well, we'd see them once in awhile and I'd know when she was damaged and then after that she left the area. They took her to the east coast and did a major repair job on her. I didn't keep in contact with her then after she was damaged I sorta lost contact until Harold found me.

MS. WRIGHT: Good for Harold. Did you ever have any contact with any POWs?

MR. NELSON: No, you mean Japanese POWs?

MS. WRIGHT: Yes.

MR. NELSON: In the Aleutians, we transported one POW from Attui to Adak. He almost had the run of the ship before we got to Adak.

MS. WRIGHT: What did you find most difficult during the war years?

MR. NELSON: I actually don't recall anything that was real difficult. I was doing my job, I liked what I was doing. I didn't like some of the things that the ship had me assigned in, but I never really felt like I was in real danger. I was comfortable being aboard it.

MS. WRIGHT: You just answered the question I was going to ask you, if you had felt that way. And you were never wounded or had to be involved with any of that? That's just wonderful in itself. I'm glad you didn't have to go through any of that.

MR. NELSON: Somebody once said was I ever shot at and I said, "Well, not individually." ??? We had some interesting escorted some American ships. In fact we

were the ship when the LEXINGTON was mortally wounded, if you will, and it was getting dark and they didn't want the Japanese to find us, so the rest of the task force left, and we were designated to stay back and we were the ????. We torpedoed her until she sank..

MS. WRIGHT: I'll bet that was kinda emotionally difficult.

MR. NELSON: Yeh, it was. When she was badly damaged and they abandoned ship, all of the ships in our area, particularly the destroyers, we launched boats and picked up all the survivors, all of 'em. She was burning. It got dark and we couldn't see the ship, all we could see was the fire. And we torpedoed it the fire went out.

MS. WRIGHT: How many survivors did you all rescue?

MR. NELSON: I don't recall. Several. Interesting thing that you got me. Several years later I got a letter from a feller by the name of Roggenhauser, and he wanted to know if I remembered him. He remembered me because he was one of the survivors off of the LEXINGTON. And when we picked him up and, of course, when they came off the LEXINGTON, the only thing they had was what they had on their back. So we outfitted them mostly, the best we could, you know, whoever had the what. and he said I'd given him a pair of shoes. Well, I remembered that I had given something. but I couldn't remember what it was. He remembered it was a pair of shoes. So we've kept in correspondence since then.

MS. WRIGHT: I thought you were going to say you were related or something.

MR. NELSON: No.

MS. WRIGHT: So were you close to Harold when you were on the PHELPS?

MR. NELSON: I was closest to two radiomen and one of 'em I've lost contact. Hhe was on a submarine and I don't know what happened to him but the other was Charlie Swift. Charlie passed away a number of years ago.

MS. WRIGHT: What was the other fellow's name?

MR. NELSON: Harry Brewer. We were pretty close.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you go through training together?

MR. NELSON: No, he was a radioman aboard ship and got acquainted and we made some liberties together, and then he transferred to submarines, and I lost contact with him.

MS. WRIGHT: Did people have to request to go to submarines or was that one of those things that was the luck of the draw?

MR. NELSON: No, submarine duty you requested. You didn't get assigned it, as far as I know you didn't get assigned it, people requested it. And that was not my kind of duty. I was fortunate in all of our battles stations out there, except for one time. I always managed to be where I could see what was going on, so I needed to be inside. When the guns started firing I did not mind that. I managed to have those kind of battle stations.

MS. WRIGHT: When you were in Pearl Harbor, did you see the ships go down, like the Arizona and....

MR. NELSON: Not on ??? but we did on the other side as we went out. You mentioned the UTAH and I think the REIDER was next to it. Those were being sunk as we went.

MS. WRIGHT: Was it difficult to see what all was going on because of the smoke?

MR. NELSON: You could see the smoke at that was it.

MS. WRIGHT: You were a little bit farther out. It still must have been a very intense day for you. So did you marry after the war?

MR. NELSON: Yes, I married, the first marriage didn't work. I had two children, great children. My wife and I didn't get along, there was some difficulties there. And then after I went to Alaska, I married the present wife ??? and she's still puttin' up with me.

MS. WRIGHT: Things happen, they just do.

MR. NELSON: I stayed close with the kids. I have two great, great grandchildren.

MS. WRIGHT: Did they know you were coming today?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh. My daughter and granddaughter went to Salt Lake City with me last year. And they planned to come back here. After I made the hotel reservations, they decided to come down. And I called and tried to get a room for them to stay at the hotel, and they didn't have any room. So they said they'd find another hotel and then said no. If we couldn't be around close together they'd pass, so they didn't come down. They plan to go to Myrtle Beach next year.

MS. WRIGHT: I'll bet you'll be writing them a letter.

MR. NELSON: Oh, wow. I'll send them an e-mail, quick and easy.

MS. WRIGHT: Where were you when the war was over? Were you still out in the

Pacific?

MR. NELSON: No, after Okinawa when I was on the ESSEX, we went back to San Diego Coronado duty station. We went to pick up a new ship for the Tokyo operation when it was over. So I was in San Diego.

MS. WRIGHT: So you were actually already in San Diego. So what was your reaction?

MR. NELSON: I was glad it was over with!

MS. WRIGHT: Jumping up and down and throwing your hat up and stuff. So did you decommission soon after the war was over? Did you have to stay in the navy a lot longer?

MR. NELSON: That was in '45. I was assigned to radio San Diego, radio station MTL and I was there for six months. I had a disagreement with the officer in charge, so that's when I was transferred to the ESSEX. We just didn't see eye to eye. It was no big deal.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you get out soon after the war was over?

MR. NELSON: I was discharged in December. I was on a six-year hitch and I did six years. On the ESSEX, ??? put it in moth balls and we picked up a radioman in Pearl Harbor going back for discharge. He came up and spent some time and talked and he was going back to a job that he had before. He was an aircraft communicator. Then the CAA was later the FAA. And I thought I'd give it a go. I didn't dislike the navy, I just thought I'd see what the other is right now. So I applied to the CAA, and I was discharged in December and I went to work for them in orientation class in Oklahoma City and I was in Anchorage in February. I was not unemployed very long.

MS. WRIGHT: Was your family still in Oklahoma?

MR. NELSON: Yes.

MS. WRIGHT: So you got to see them?

MR. NELSON: Yes, we have a family get together every year.

MS. WRIGHT: I guess they were thrilled to have you home. Did they do parades when you got back?

MR. NELSON: No. I guess I sorta missed that but it's no big deal.

MS. WRIGHT: You didn't feel like you missed something.

MR. NELSON: No, I really didn't. But I thought while I was taking a break there of another little incident that's sorta different. We were providing close-by support for some

of the troops in the South Pacific Islands, and we had a celebrated communication system. And they knew when we done it that mortar or some kind of difficult situation, they'd call us for coordinates for air support, and we had 10,000(?) and they'd walk us right down and they'd say, "up 50, down 50" ??? to get the target. Well, my battle station at that time I was on what they call "damage control" which meant you didn't do anything unless somethin' went wrong. Well, we found we had the flaps turned to radio 1, had twin ???, and ??? support on 'em and antennae lead-ins coming in are rigid copper, small copper tubes, and on one of the lead-ins they were mated to a stand-off insulator from the overhead and with a swing nut attachment. Well, the concussion on it made it ??? so the deal was to attach these. No big deal, except that they were in about four feet from the side of the ship and standin' up on the railing on this with the leg around the stanchion and reaching over and kinda mate these two things. About the time I'd get 'em mated, they'd fire up number 2 turret up there and they'd pile on my ??? and get cordite smoke in my eyes. Things would clear up and I'd try to get 'em again, and after three or four times on this, I eventually got them done and I'll bet that when they decommissioned that ship my fingerprints was still on that wing nut.

MS. WRIGHT: I was gonna say, you didn't drop something, did you? Oh, my goodness! That would be an unusual experience to happen. I assume those were kinda small, you had to attach 'em and then wrap 'em around and trying to keep your balance. That would be something I would remember, too. I thought of something while you were stepped out also, when you all were coming out of the harbor, was it difficult to get out? Was there stuff floating in the way?

MR. NELSON: No, later on some of 'em. I believe it was the FARRAGUT that was one of the many ships that got in the harbor and I believe it ???, but, no, we didn't have any trouble getting out.

MS. WRIGHT: Do you have any brothers and sisters? I didn't ask you at the beginning of the interview. And if so, were they in the military?

MR. NELSON: I had a sister that died when she was quite young. I had two other sisters older than I, they both passed away. I had a brother who was in the army in Europe and he is one of 'em, you know, where the military makes a cook out of a truck driver. He's

one of those people that they put him in a job that I think he was qualified for. He was a heavy equipment operator before and they made him a truck driver. But he passed away, too.

MS. WRIGHT: Did he survive the war?

MR. NELSON: Yes, he died a number of years ago. So I'm the only one left of that group. When you're the youngest of 'em and you're eighty-one years old, you can't expect 'em. One of my sisters just older than I was passed away past winter and my older sister, I always cooked with my older sister, passed away a year ago last summer.

MS. WRIGHT: Did your parents know you were going to enlist when you enlisted?

MR. NELSON: Yes. They weren't for it, but when I said ??? they ??? it.

MS. WRIGHT: Was the depression years, I know that was before the war, I guess you grew up through some of those times.

MR. NELSON: Well, the depression was still on. That's why I said there was no jobs. Western Oklahoma, I had a good time there. I really did. It was a small farming community and running water was a pump. Facilities were outside and the creek was a swimming hole. And all that good stuff. I had a pony.

MS. WRIGHT: Having grown up in Oklahoma and not surrounded by water, had you gotten into the ocean before you went into the navy?

MR. NELSON: No. My first view of the ocean was in San Diego.

MS. WRIGHT: That's a beautiful place to view it from.

MR. NELSON: Yes, it is a beautiful city. I haven't been back in a number of years.

MS. WRIGHT: So you spent most of your adult life in Alaska?

MR. NELSON: Uh huh.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you get attached to it when you out there by the Aleutians?

MR. NELSON: No. Aleutians is not a good advertisement for Alaska.

MS. WRIGHT: I know you described the weather.

MR. NELSON: It was. It's the most miserable weather in the country. Sometime you'd have fog

that you couldn't see out the ship's in formation.. And another time one of the storms and the waves would be higher than the top of the ship. Most tables had wooden tops on 'em

and you'd roll so much that your tray wouldn't stay there so everybody carried 'em out to keep ??? on the table top to keep the plate from sliding off while they was eatin'.

MS. WRIGHT: Oh, my goodness! Didn't have soup too often, I hope.

MR. NELSON: On the PHELPS we had soup, everything that was left over. I don't mean scraps but I mean from lunch and dinner, made soup for the night watches. And we always had soup and coffee. They never run out of coffee. If they run out of coffee they wouldn't have been able to operate.

MS. WRIGHT: Are you still a coffee drinker?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh.

MS. WRIGHT: So you got fed decent food while you were in the navy?

MR. NELSON: O, yeh. A time or two, we didn't have storage capacity for much fresh stuff, so we had the provisions. If we wanted the fresh stuff we had to go get it.

Generally the tanker got fueled at sea bigger ships cruisers and battleships and we'd get supplies from them. I think it said we had capacity for ten days of fresh stuff. Of course, there was always canned stuff. And only one time, and I'm not sure, it may have been after the Coral Sea battle, we ran out of provisions.

MS. WRIGHT: For how long?

MR. NELSON: Well, not completely, but it was beans for breakfast, beans for lunch and beans for dinner, that sort of thing. And the provision at New Caledonia, and I was talking to Harold last night and I thought we drew provisions from the HMS ???, and he said no it was another ship and I can't remember what he said it was but it was a British ??? that we got provisions from. I still think it was ???

MS. WRIGHT: That was in Australia then?

MR. NELSON: Yeh, it was in Australia.

MS. WRIGHT: HMS, that's English ship, I think.

MR. NELSON: It was an English ship, but I thought it was a ??? but he said no it was another British ship.

MS. WRIGHT: Help each other out whenever it's needed then. How long have you been retired now?

MR. NELSON: Of course that last few years I lived in Alaska, I was in the management

administrative end of the business. And in comptrollers, you know, there's three groups of people that don't like old comptrollers, and one of 'em is the supervisors, one of 'em is pilots, and the other is passengers. They don't like old comptrollers.

MS. WRIGHT: Did you get into Harold's ??? while you've been together this week? How long have you been here?

MR. NELSON: We didn't get here until Thursday. We had planned to come the day before, and then we didn't get the shuttle schedule in time. We come down to Mesa, Arizona, for about a month before we came over here. And the information had been sent to Alaska and ended up mailed back to us, so we changed. We had originally planned to come the 5th, but we didn't get into Mesa on the shuttle in time, so we changed it to the 6th. So Harold and I and his wife had dinner last night and his son and two of his daughters had dinner with us. He's got two good kids there ????

MS. WRIGHT: Did you all share some other memories?

MR. NELSON: Every time we get together, we do and the lies get bigger, you know, and more detailed every time. It's like on a reunion. You can hear the same stories with a little different twist on 'em about what happened.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, I'm sure it's a day you'll never forget.

MR. NELSON: I've been very fortunate to know the people.

MS. WRIGHT: I can tell when you're talking about the PHELPS that that is about the most special thing in your heart. A real special camaraderie to be with those people and feel the comfort level knowing they were there for you and you were there for them. Did any of those men that you trained with in San Diego, were they on the PHELPS?

MR. NELSON: No. I was the only radioman that went aboard.

MS. WRIGHT: I didn't ask this at the beginning. How did you choose to be trained as a radioman or did they just say you're gonna be a radioman?

MR. NELSON: Well, like I said, this acquaintance I knew while I was in was a radioman and he thought that was pretty neat ??? So that's why I selected the navy and why I asked to be a radioman. I really didn't know what I was asking for but he seemed to like it so I ????

MS. WRIGHT: Turned out to be a good choice.

MR. NELSON: It really did.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to share with me that I haven't asked you?

MR. NELSON: I'll probably at two o'clock in the morning probably think of something I should have told you.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, jot it down.

MR. NELSON: But I'm not gonna call you and tell you about it.

MS. WRIGHT: Thank you so much, Mr. Nelson.

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