

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

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Stanley D. Woody
February 28, 2002

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(USN World War II - Japanese POW)**

This is Eddie Graham. I will be interviewing Stanley D. Woody. We are in Houston, Texas at the Hilton Inn. We are recording this information for the National Museum of the Pacific War.

Mr. Graham: Mr. Woody, when were you born?

Mr. Woody: March 10, 1922.

Mr. Graham: Where were you born?

Mr. Woody: Bridgeport, Alabama.

Mr. Graham: Where did you go to school?

Mr. Woody: Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Mr. Graham: Was that for high school?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Where were you and what were you doing on December 7th, 1941?

Mr. Woody: I was onboard the USS Houston, anchored in the Phillippines.

Mr. Graham: What were you doing at the time?

Mr. Woody: We were expecting the war to start. We were just laying at anchor, waiting for Admiral Glassford to come out of China and come aboard.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back a little further. What were the names of your parents?

Mr. Woody: James Woody and Betty Woody.

Mr. Graham: Your wife?

Mr. Woody: Mary Lou Woody.

Mr. Graham: Do you have any children?

Mr. Woody: Yes, I have five. Betty Woody, Stanley Woody, Roger Woody, Kenneth Woody, and Linda Woody.

Mr. Graham: Let's start off with how you came to join the Navy. What were those circumstances?

Mr. Woody: I went to the Recruiting Office about six months before the Germans invaded Poland. The recruiters said they were not taking anybody at that time, but they would take my name and call when I was needed. I went back home, and about six months later the Germans invaded Poland, so they sent me a notice to report to the recruiting station.

Mr. Graham: Where did you train?

Mr. Woody: I trained in Norfolk, Virginia.

Mr. Graham: How long did you train?

Mr. Woody: Twelve weeks.

Mr. Graham: Where did you go from there?

Mr. Woody: From Norfolk they shipped us out to San Diego, California. We were awaiting orders to go to various ships. While we were waiting at San Diego we worked on the destroyers that they were giving to England for Lend/Lease. That was to keep us busy until we were assigned to a ship. They assigned me to the USS New Orleans. I rode a destroyer from San Diego to Pearl Harbor and then went aboard the USS New Orleans. I was there about two weeks and the Houston came in from the States. It had been in the States for Yard overhaul. They were on the way out to China. They didn't have a full crew, so they sent a message out to the fleet

requesting volunteers to go aboard the Houston. I volunteered and was selected. I was on the Houston from Pearl Harbor to the Philippines.

Mr. Graham: Up to that time had you received any special training?

Mr. Woody: Only Boot Camp and rifle training. The gunnery training we received aboard ship.

Mr. Graham: While you were in Boot Camp did you have anything special happen to you?

Mr. Woody: It was more or less where I received the discipline that I needed.

Mr. Graham: Tell us what happened after you got aboard the Houston.

Mr. Woody: Like I said, we sailed from Pearl Harbor. I was put in Deck Force Division where we chipped paint and painted, scrubbed decks. We had Battle Station Drills every day. Our gunnery practice was dummy 5" anti-aircraft guns. We drilled on that every day.

Mr. Graham: Tell us what happened right on up to the beginning when you found out that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Woody: First, we were in Cavite Navy Yard doing an overhaul. That was outside of Manila. It is a Navy Shipyard. We had the ship torn apart doing normal overhaul. Admiral Hart told the Captain of the ship that we had to get the ship ready to go to sea in 48 hours. We did it.

Mr. Graham: What was the reason that you had to get it ready in 48 hours?

Mr. Woody: They didn't pass that information down to us. Back then, you didn't ask questions, you just did it. Through the crew members, what they called "scuttlebutt", there were rumors of what we were going to do. That

is the only information I was getting. We knew something was “up” but we didn’t know exactly what. We went out to Iloilo and we were anchored out there. We knew something was coming up, but we didn’t know what.

Mr. Graham: Tell us what happened then.

Mr. Woody: We anchored there and woke up one morning and they said that the Japs had attacked Pearl Harbor. That was it.

Mr. Graham: Did it change your situation?

Mr. Woody: Oh yes. You could see that the spirit was different with the crew. They were ready to go. We knew what we had to do. I didn’t see any fear in anybody. We knew that we had to battle the Japanese. That was it.

Mr. Graham: What were the next assignments of your ship?

Mr. Woody: After Pearl Harbor was attacked, Admiral Hart or Admiral Glassford assembled all of the ships at Java. All of the ships left the Phillippines. The only ships that couldn’t get out of Manila were the ones that had to stay there for some reason.

Mr. Graham: What happened after that?

Mr. Woody: After the attack on Pearl Harbor we were on the gun watches all of the time. We weren’t at Condition One. For Condition One everybody would be at their battle stations. We stayed at Condition Two most of the time because we really had not gotten into the battle with the Japanese. They were moving south. I think the Japanese Fleet came from Formosa so it took them three months to get down to our area. That is when they were taking Singapore. I think they had already taken French Indochina.

They were working their way down to Java.

Mr. Graham: Where did you see your first action?

Mr. Woody: It was in the Celebes Sea when the Japanese bombers came over. They came over and started bombing us. They hit the Marblehead and knocked the steering gear out. She couldn't steer and then they made another run on us. They dropped a bomb that hit us and it knocked out the #3 Turret. From that point we only had two turrets to do battle.

Mr. Graham: What happened after this action?

Mr. Woody: We went into Surabaya and buried our dead in Java. There was no work down there to take care of the damaged turret.

Mr. Graham: Where did you go to get your ship repaired?

Mr. Woody: We didn't do repairs to it. We had to remain out there with only two turrets.

Mr. Graham: What was your next action?

Mr. Woody: After that we were more or less on convoy duty, convoying troop ships from Australia to Java and that area. We were doing convoy duty for about two months. The latter part of February is when we had the day battle with the Japanese and they destroyed some allied ships. In fact, I saw two destroyers that were broken in half by torpedoes.

Mr. Graham: Two ships – ours or theirs?

Mr. Woody: Ours and the Dutch. It was like a match stick; they just broke in two. When we were in battle and we only had two turrets, they were lobbing shells at us. They hit us a couple of times, but the shells didn't

explode. That continued all day. The Dutch Admiral was in charge of our fleet. He was on the Derata and the Japanese torpedoed and sunk that ship. I don't know who was in charge, but the allied ships that survived the battle dispersed to different areas. The Australian Cruiser Perth and the Houston dispersed together. We went to Batavia, Java, to take on fuel. While we were taking on fuel they asked the Dutch if there were any Japanese in the area. They told us that there weren't any Japanese in the area, so we got underway. That is when we were going through the Sunda Straits and we ran into a Japanese invasion party. What I'm telling you is what I heard. I'm not specific on these details.

Mr. Graham: Where was your battle station?

Mr. Woody: I was on a 5" anti-aircraft gun.

Mr. Graham: Did you operate much fire on that?

Mr. Woody: No, in the Celebes Sea is where the anti-aircraft guns came in. After that we didn't encounter any aircraft. The only time we fired was going through the Sunda Straits. The ships were approximately 200 yards from each other. Everybody was firing everything they had. The 50 caliber were knocking out the search lights. The 5" were just firing at will.

Mr. Graham: Tell us about your next action after you saw this Japanese fleet.

Mr. Woody: We were circling around in there sinking ships, and finally a torpedo hit our main engine room. It knocked out one engine room and that knocked our speed out. Surface craft were attacking the port side. It was about 30 minutes after the torpedo hit the engine room on the starboard side

that the ship started listing starboard. That is when they sounded “abandon ship.”

Mr. Graham: Describe some of that us. Describe not just what was happening to the ship, but to the crew. How were they getting off the ship, etc?

Mr. Woody: I wouldn't say it was chaos, but it was everybody for himself. We had practiced drills for abandon ship stations. Those went very well. In real action, it doesn't work that way. In a drill you could get to your station, but during battle, the route that you would take to your abandon ship station might be blown out and you would have to make other arrangements, or other routes to get to your station. Some people didn't get to their station because of damage to part of the ship. My Abandon Ship Station was only two or three on the port side. I got back there and found that the life raft was blown away. There was nobody there, so I jumped off the ship.

Mr. Graham: What happened after you jumped into the water?

Mr. Woody: I jumped into the water from the fantail of the ship and the water was covered with oil. I was trying to get out of the oil because I was afraid that it would catch on fire. I didn't know which way to go. I just swam away from the ship.

Mr. Graham: Then what happened?

Mr. Woody: I was in the water for 30 minutes and the Japs were still firing at each other. Our ship was sinking. We had them so mixed up that they sank a bunch of their own ships.

Mr. Graham: How long were you in the water before you were rescued?

Mr. Woody: I think I was in the water for twenty hours. I swam ashore.

Mr. Graham: How many others went ashore with you?

Mr. Woody: I wasn't with a group. We were just spotted out in the water, maybe 10-20 feet apart. We actually didn't swim, the tide carried us in. We just dog-paddled all night and all day. There were ten of us that swam ashore together.

Mr. Graham: Then what happened?

Mr. Woody: That is when the Japs came down there and put the rifles on us. Just as we swam ashore.

Mr. Graham: This was what island?

Mr. Woody: Java.

Mr. Graham: Tell us what the Japs did after they captured you.

Mr. Woody: They put us into groups. They didn't do anything that day except to put us into groups. After they figured there wouldn't be any more survivors they interrogated the officers. They asked us our name and number. We gave them our name and serial number. That was all that we could give them. After that they took us up to the Serang jail, which was about 20 miles inland. We stayed up there six weeks. They put about 50 people in a space about the same size as this room.

Mr. Graham: Did they feed you, give you water, and take care of you?

Mr. Woody: They gave us two cups of rice a day, a dried plum, a dried fish, or something. The jail system there was deplorable. They had a barrel of

water there. They had a half of a barrel of water that you used for relieving yourself. That was right in the cell.

Mr. Graham: Did they physically mistreat anybody?

Mr. Woody: Not in there, but later on in the war they got to where they just wanted to beat on you all of the time.

Mr. Graham: Let's move forward from the jail in this particular town and tell us what happened then.

Mr. Woody: After the jail, they shipped us down to Batavia, Java. That is the city where we went into for fuel.

Mr. Graham: OK, what happened when you got there?

Mr. Woody: We were there for about two weeks. Just the Houston sailors were in there, and about two weeks later they brought the 131st Field Artillery in there to join us. They had a lot of food, so we ate pretty good for a while until that food ran out.

Mr. Graham: Did you receive pretty good medical treatment if anybody was hurt?

Mr. Woody: No, we didn't get any medical treatment.

Mr. Graham: At that time they were still not torturing you or anything like that?

Mr. Woody: Not yet.

Mr. Graham: OK, tell us what happened after this.

Mr. Woody: After about six weeks in Batavia, we would go down to the pier and they were looting Java. We would roll these big 50 gallon drums of oil, and they would take them all down there and they would put them on a ship to go to Japan. After six weeks of that they shipped us up to Singapore.

Mr. Graham: While you were in Batavia, you mentioned that there was looting of Java, did they put you on work details?

Mr. Woody: Yes, that is when we were moving the drums.

Mr. Graham: Oh, you were the one moving the oil drums. OK, what happened after you left there?

Mr. Woody: They shipped us up to Singapore. Living conditions were a little better up there, but the food was the same thing. The British were more or less in charge of everything.

Mr. Graham: Why were they in charge?

Mr. Woody: They had the senior officers.

Mr. Graham: How do you think that they handled the situation?

Mr. Woody: I think that they handled it pretty good.

Mr. Graham: How long were you at Singapore and what happened?

Mr. Woody: I think that we were there about six weeks. While we were in Singapore we were cutting down rubber trees. They were trying to make a farm out of it. We worked all day cutting down rubber trees. Then they took us by train from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Then they put us on another prison ship. Two prison ships left there and they had two steam engines on that one ship that would take them to Rangoon, Burma. They had Dutch prisoners on that ship. While enroute to Kuala Lumpur to Rangoon, Burma, two allied bombers came over and dropped bombs. They sank that one transport that had the engines on it. The people that were able to escape came onto our ship after we picked them up. They

were taking them up to put on the railroad that we were going to build. Instead of taking us to Rangoon, they took us to Mawlamyline, Burma. That is where we were off-loaded. We were all singing the song “On the Road to Mandalay.” We were put in these thatched barracks. When you slept in them you slept side by side of each other. You were just like cord wood. We worked a couple of months on starting to build that railway.

Mr. Graham: Did you have any problems living in such tight quarters? Did you have any problems with disease, germs, or anything like that?

Mr. Woody: It was coming on. People were getting sores, people were getting sick, malaria. It took a while for our immune system to break down and then we could not resist the diseases over there.

Mr. Graham: You were going to build a railway?

Mr. Woody: Yes, we were going to build a railway.

Mr. Graham: What was the name of it?

Mr. Woody: We did 10 kilometers of the railway; digging through the hills, making a pass, or filling in a gully, building a bridge, etc. Whatever needed to be done in that 10 kilometers, you had to build. This was all with pick a shovel. We made a bed for the railway. After that they marched us 20 kilometers to the next station that we started on.

Mr. Graham: How long did it take you to do this 10 kilometers?

Mr. Woody: About two months. As you got up more in the jungle it was harder to work and you had to hack away the jungle. They couldn't get the materials up there. What materials they did have it was monsoon season

there. You would shovel one shovel of dirt, pile it there and the water would wash it away. It was doing things over and over.

Mr. Graham: Do you know where this railway was going from and to?

Mr. Woody: No. I didn't.

Mr. Graham: How much longer did you work on this railroad?

Mr. Woody: We stayed there for 18 months.

Mr. Graham: Then what happened?

Mr. Woody: We didn't know that there were people at the other end down in Thailand. They were working toward us.

Mr. Graham: Did you all ever meet together finally?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Do you remember where it was at?

Mr. Woody: Actually the natives were the ones that were up in the jungles. We worked on the Bridge over the River Kwai.

Mr. Graham: Oh, you did work on that famous bridge?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: I understand that the British were the ones that designed the bridge?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Does that movie follow pretty close to what occurred?

Mr. Woody: A little bit.

Mr. Graham: Did the British and American officers more or less design the bridge and the Japanese stand aside and let them do it?

Mr. Woody: I don't know about that.

Mr. Graham: After you completed the railroad, then what happened?

Mr. Woody: They shipped us down to Saigon.

Mr. Graham: Over in French Indochina.

Mr. Woody: We made gun emplacements there, made barricades out of dirt to protect their planes. We loaded rice on ships down on the piers in Saigon. They were shipping the rice to Japan, Manila, etc.

Mr. Graham: How were your living conditions there as far as food, the barracks where you stayed?

Mr. Woody: The food was the same thing – never did increase the food.

Mr. Graham: How about your living conditions?

Mr. Woody: They were a little cleaner down there. There was a little more concrete and wood. Up in the jungles it was strictly made out of bamboo.

Mr. Graham: After Saigon, what came next?

Mr. Woody: In 1945 the Americans came in there. They sank a couple of ships, bombed the airport. That is all they did in that one day there. They put them out of commission. The Americans bombed the bridges from Hanoi down to Saigon. They sent us up the road to build the bridges back that had been bombed. We would just about complete one and they would come back over the next day and they would bomb it and knock it out again. We were doing the same thing over and over.

Mr. Graham: How long did you do this?

Mr. Woody: We did that for one year.

Mr. Graham: What happened after that?

Mr. Woody: The war was over in August of '45.

Mr. Graham: Tell us something about how you were rescued. Who rescued you?

Mr. Woody: We knew how the war was coming along because we had Chinese with us. We had guys who could speak French. When on a working party you would be close to a Frenchman and you wouldn't converse back and forth, but the Frenchman would say something about the war. Our guy could understand French. He wouldn't say anything until we got back to the camp so there wouldn't be any Japs around, and then this guy would tell us what was going on. The Chinamen that were on the working party with us would say something in Chinese, and when we got back to the camp they would tell us what had been said. So we knew about the bombing that was going on. The Japs themselves would say that the Americans were bombing them. They would give us the news that they were getting bombed.

Mr. Graham: Were they afraid of the B-29?

Mr. Woody: Yes. Evidently they getting reports of the destruction that the B-29's were doing to Japan.

Mr. Graham: Were they especially afraid of the B-29?

Mr. Woody: Yes. Evidently they were getting reports of the destruction that the B-29's were doing to Japan.

Mr. Graham: How did the realization that the Japanese were losing the war change the relationship between you and them?

Mr. Woody: It happened so suddenly. We were living in these barracks on the

docks, and they moved us into some nice barracks that the French Army used to have. The living conditions were really 100% better than they had been. We couldn't understand why. We figured that they were putting us in better living conditions in the event that someone came in to inspect.

Mr. Graham: They thought they were trying to fool the other people.

Mr. Woody: I guess. They would think, "Look how nice they've been living." They wouldn't think that we had been living as we had been.

Mr. Graham: What else happened?

Mr. Woody: After they dropped the first Atomic Bomb we heard about that. We woke up the next morning had been dropped and we didn't see any guards on the gates. We were wondering what was going on. We walked out to the gate and there weren't any guards. We walked around in downtown Saigon, and we didn't see any Japs there. They must have all gotten on a ship that night and sailed out of there – just like that!

Mr. Graham: What happened then?

Mr. Woody: Well, the only place that we could hang around was the barracks, but we also walked around in downtown Saigon. The French were nice to us.

Mr. Graham: Were you able to get better food?

Mr. Woody: We just ate the same food; the food that we had there in the camp. We didn't have arrangements to get anything until the Americans came in about a week later. They rented a hotel downtown. We all moved to the hotel in downtown Saigon.

Mr. Graham: How were the living conditions then?

Mr. Woody: It was almost like being back in the States. We were there about a week. There were English and Dutch in the same camp that we were in. I don't know what their governments did for them, but the Americans came to get the American prisoners and moved them to the hotel.

Mr. Graham: What happened after the hotel? I assume that after that you came on back to the States?

Mr. Woody: The Army flew into Saigon and they took us out in groups. They were using C-47's. I think the group that I came out with had 25 people in it. They flew us to Calcutta, India. I stayed there a month. They were sending the prisoners back on "space available" basis.

Mr. Graham: When you got to Calcutta, did the doctors examine you, check you out?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Were most of the people in pretty good shape?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: So, as far as you know, there were no serious beatings or torture, etc?

Mr. Woody: I didn't see any torture. I didn't see any serious beatings. They would just stand you at attention, slap you, kicked you, etc.

Mr. Graham: Tell us about your trip back to the States.

Mr. Woody: They flew us back from Calcutta to the Naval Hospital at Albany, New York. They kept us there for another month. We could go on Liberty, but we had to report the next morning and they would check our vital signs. I guess we fared pretty good.

Mr. Graham: So, grand total, how long were you a prisoner of war?

Mr. Woody: Three and a half years.

Mr. Graham: Approximately how much did you weigh before you became a POW?

Mr. Woody: One hundred fifty pounds.

Mr. Graham: When you were rescued?

Mr. Woody: Ninety-eight.

Mr. Graham: You didn't have any serious health complications?

Mr. Woody: I haven't. I had diseases when I was in there – malaria, dysentery, malnutrition.

Mr. Graham: How old are you now?

Mr. Woody: Seventy-nine years old.

Mr. Graham: You still feel pretty good?

Mr. Woody: Yes.

Mr. Graham: Then you were released from Albany Naval Hospital. Is that when you became a civilian?

Mr. Woody: No, I stayed in the Navy. My time wasn't up.

Mr. Graham: Where did you go after you were released?

Mr. Woody: Shore duty in Great Lakes, Illinois.

Mr. Graham: What did you do there?

Mr. Woody: Shore Patrol.

Mr. Graham: What was your rank then?

Mr. Woody: I was Chief.

Mr. Graham: Chief Petty Officer. What was your rank when you were rescued?

Mr. Woody: Seaman.

Mr. Graham: So you moved up pretty quick after being rescued. That's great. OK, you were a Chief Petty Officer, what was your rating?

Mr. Woody: Boatswain Mate.

Mr. Graham: After Great Lakes, what happened?

Mr. Woody: I went back to sea aboard a light cruiser, Fargo. I stayed in the Navy and retired from the Navy.

Mr. Graham: Let's go back over your whole picture of what happened to you. Can you remember any particular people that stick in your mind? It could have been Americans, could have been Dutch, could have been Japanese, etc. Are there any that you still think about?

Mr. Woody: One Englishman. I forgot his name. He called us "Yanks." We just talked. I've lost contact with him.

Mr. Graham: He had a outstanding personality?

Mr. Woody: Yes. People have a different attitude toward the English. They act sort of cocky. They think they are superior.

Mr. Graham: Let me ask you one other question. This whole time that you were on the Houston, you were captured, you were a prisoner and released, is there any one or two things that happened to you that you still think about?

Mr. Woody: No. It is all kind of smooth.

Mr. Graham: Is there anything that you want to say before we close this out?

Mr. Woody: I'm thankful that I'm here.

Mr. Graham: OK, Woody, well on behalf of the Nimitz Museum we want to thank you

for this. We really appreciate you spending this time and sharing your experiences with us.

Transcribed by:
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October 9, 2002