

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site*  
*National Museum of the Pacific War*

*Center for Pacific War Studies*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

*Interview with*

*Preston T. Holcomb*  
*Career navy, Retired CPO*  
*World War II and Korea*

**Interview with  
Preston T. Holcomb  
October 17, 2002**

**Mr. Winkler:** This is Dave Winkler. Today is 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 2002 and I'm interview Mr. Preston T. Holcomb. This interview is taking place here in the ballroom of the Nimitz Museum, in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for 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. Winkler:** Good afternoon Mr. Holcomb. Could you start out by talking about when and where were you born and could you talk a little bit about growing up at that location?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I was born in a small community in east Texas, Houston County. There was no name for this area...it was a farming community. My Mother and Father were living on a farm at that time and I grew up to the age seven at this location. Then we were situated in a small oil town...oil deposit became available and all the farmers went to the oil field where there was a job and I grew up then in a small town called Boling, Texas, went to High School there and joined the Navy from that area.

**Mr. Winkler:** You were born when?

**Mr. Holcomb :**I was born August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920.

**Mr. Winkler:** Any siblings in your family?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. I have a brother that's 92 and a sister that is 90.

**Mr. Winkler:** You're the young one.

**Mr. Holcomb:** I'm the young one.

**Mr. Winkler:** What lead you to join the Navy?

**Mr. Holcomb:** A group of boys from this small town walked and hitchhiked to Houston which was about 60 miles away. And went aboard the Houston, the cruiser Houston. They had open house and they had a piece in the paper and they said there was free food all day long. So we went to visit the ship and it looked to me like it was a good deal. Everybody was just sittin' around collect their payday, go ashore, have fun. I didn't know about working parties and things like that then. And we

were permitted to sign up when we went aboard and leave our desires if we would like to join the Navy or not. And 'course we were all looking forward to eating a big meal, and we wanted them to like us, so we said sure we wanted to join the Navy. And as a result the recruiting office at Houston got in touch with each of us and out of the five boys that were aboard the Houston that day, four joined the Navy and saw action during World War II.

**Mr. Winkler:** This was during the depression of course, so I guess there were not many other opportunities out there?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The small town that I came from had a filling station, a grocery store and one time a movie that they showed movies on Buck Rogers and a lot of Tom Mix movies on the weekend. And after several breaks of the film...and they closed that and there wasn't anything in the area to provide a career. So the Navy provided that career opportunity, and I was very pleased to join the Navy and I was very pleased I was accepted.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay. Could you talk about swearing in and the induction ceremony?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. I went with the other three boys to be sworn in and lo and behold, the doctor discovered that I was flatfooted. And at that time the Navy would not take flatfooted people. I don't know why. But that's the way it was. And he said well, you're finished. Go across the hallway and join the Army. I didn't particularly want to join the Army. The Navy then received about six dollars more per month than the same rate in the Army. Very few people know that. At any rate, I wasn't enthused about going across. He said well, if you don't want to join the Army just go two doors down and there's the Marines. And I wasn't particularly enthused about the Marines. So I said well, is there some way that we can fix this flatfoot business. And there was a First Class Pharmacist Mate standing there. Bless his heart. I don't know why he took up for me. He said, oh Doctor, this old boy looks like he could make it flatfeet and all. So the doctor said okay. So that's how close I almost missed out on a Navy career. Just a word from the Pharmacist's Mate changed the doctor's mind.

**Mr. Winkler:** Now that date was what, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1938.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah

**Mr. Winkler:** Now once you have gone through the physical, I guess this is all in civies and such. Then are you put on a train or bus?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Put on a train to San Diego, California. Went to south unit, south unit of the training station was the boot in the boot camp. They really tore you up. Cut all your hair off, got up at 4:30 every morning and you marched all day and your old high top shoes wore blisters on your feet. And just before two weeks of south unit was over, I had blisters on both feet and they got infected. I went to the sick bay and the doctor said you are going to have to turn in and we will have to operate on your feet. Well that would mean I would miss my group going north to where they cut you some slack up there on north unit. But south unit, to go back to south unit, I was not prepared. The doctor again, another Pharmacist Mate said, we'll arrange it so you can go up with your group. So they sent someone down to bring my sea bag. That's what you had in those days, a sea bag and a hammock, to the north unit and I continued my training there until we were out. It was a three month program, at boot camp.

**Mr. Winkler:** Some of the daily aspects...could you walk me through a typical day at boot camp?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. There was the training...of course the military training, marching, and that sort of activity. But there was also a lot of survivors training, and different aspects of being a sailor in the Navy. You were issued a blue book...a blue sailors book that you obtained knowledge of knots...all the different knots...and I believe there's twenty-eight different Navy knots you have to learn to become Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class. There were several activities beyond the military aspect of it, but you won pennants as a company you won pennants. And you wanted to win...I believe there were nine pennants in all and you wanted to win all nine before you got out of boot camp. If you didn't you were pretty dumb. The last day of boot camp we won all nine, but we never won 'em up until that time. Which several other aspects of Navy life was given us there at training.

**Mr. Winkler:** One of the things about boot camp is your meeting people from different parts of the country for the first time. How did that expose you?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, we were in with a group from Chicago....geez...you must be from Chi...they talked funny. They did not agree with a bunch of guys out of Texas. And we had trouble communicating. We had trouble living together. We had trouble feeding one another. We had a lot of discussion and activity about our different parts of the country and how wonderful our section was and how lousy theirs must be. So it was a learning process and I really learned there that these

guys didn't please me at all and I found out that I didn't please them. And I was determined then to make whatever adjustments were necessary to get along with my shipmates. And that was a big learning experience.

**Mr. Winkler:** Can you elaborate on something that made it difficult to get along with them?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The language was a big factor. They came from a city and the city life is certainly different from a farm boy's life. And so we had to make several adjustments and some of those adjustments came very hard after some very heated discussions and a few knots on our heads.

**Mr. Winkler:** During your time at boot camp at San Diego did they allow you out of the gate? When was the first time they allowed you out on liberty?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We were permitted liberty after...you weren't permitted to hardly live in south unit, but in north unit you were permitted four hours of liberty. Different groups were permitted four hours of liberty on Saturday and again on Sunday four hours. And I don't recall the time frame, but if you behaved yourself and you were making the boot camp requirements you were permitted to go ashore at noon and you didn't have to be back until midnight. And that was later on...I don't remember the exact time.

**Mr. Winkler:** Now you had your company. Was there a chief in charge?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Sure.

**Mr. Winkler:** Do you have any recollections of that chief?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. It was a good chief. In south unit you had a drill instructor, a real tough guy. But this was good training, it was meant to be tough. Because they didn't want you to stick around if you couldn't take it. And in south unit a drill instructor controlled your day...every minute of everyday. And in north unit your company went under the command of a Chief Petty Officer, usually two Chiefs, sometimes even three. Somebody would be in training for that. And at that environment the command changed radically. A wonderful Chief, good man.

**Mr. Winkler:** Would you talk a little bit about graduation?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. We were permitted ten days leave after boot camp, and we all had a big going away party. They just let you run free that day. You could do almost anything you wanted to.

**Mr. Winkler:** Did you have passing in review ceremony?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, that was done early in the morning and around noon the companies broke and you were allowed to do almost anything. The next morning you boarded a

bus if you were going home. Boarded a bus and went home for ten days. And then you were assigned your next duty station.

**Mr. Winkler:** Did you go home?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yes.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay, so it's my understanding is you went back to Texas and it took six days to get back and forth, and you had four days in Texas.

**Mr. Holcomb:** And then I reported to my duty station which was PBY Squadron at North Island just over the bay there from San Diego. And the fleet of Catalinas at that time were observation planes...you may have known that during the Midway battle the Catalina PBY picked up the Jap fleet and gave us an opportunity to move quickly to a favorable position.

**Mr. Winkler:** Going back to a little bit. How did you find out you had orders to go to this sea plane squadron?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Each of us was notified of our next duty station and actually a list came out and it was posted on the bulletin board, and you knew where you were going to go.

**Mr. Winkler:** Did you put in a wish list?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. I just let 'em... I figured they knew what I ought to do.

**Mr. Winkler:** Talking about...where was the PBY Squadron based at?

**Mr. Holcomb:** North Island, California.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay. Could you take me to your reporting aboard the squadron?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I reported aboard and they had several you would strike for a rate. And being a striker you would go first into practical training and then later on if you did well there, you would go to school. And again, I didn't know what I wanted to do so after I reported in, there was a First Class Boatswain Mate that was in charge...at that time the Catalina PBY didn't have retractable landing gear. The landing gear was after the PBY would be put into the water. They would take the landing wheels off of it and it would go do whatever it was going to do and when it came back a group of sailors would put these very heavy wheels back onto the Catalina and then they would tow it up on the ramp. But one of the Boatswain Mates that was in charge there said, we need a radioman, why don't you strike for radio. And I said well okay...that sounds good. But I had no idea at all what a radioman was to do. But during that period of time an aviator...you could swap an aviators time after he got a certain number of hours...I think it was four flying hours, he could swap with me...who didn't do anything aboard the PBY when it was flying.

He could swap his time off with me and stay ashore, because he had his qualification for air time pay. See they got paid a little more if they flew at least four hours in a certain time frame. And so I became well-known as the guy to come to, to swap off with the guys who flew, so I just stayed in the air all the time. They fixed sandwiches for you when you leave in the morning, and you'd go out and you'd bomb the garbage barges on the way back in. The garbage barges go out from San Diego they dump the garbage and then they come back in. They are towing from three to six barges. And we had sandbags, ten pound sandbags. And the old Norton bomb sight, they would put that aboard in the morning when we would take off and the bombardier would adjust this and give us the signal when to throw the sandbag out, and that was my only duty. I would stand back in the big blister on the side of the ship and when he would signal me, I would throw the bomb out. And we would watch it, and sometimes we would hit the barge, but very seldom.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay. So I guess you were the designated sandbag thrower?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I was the designated bomb thrower.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay. Now back at the squadron, I guess you were assigned to a division and you had a chief officer. Could you talk a little about that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The structure was just like aboard ship. We had our division officer, under the division officer was the junior officers and then the chief, then the first class and the ranks on down. The airmen actually served in a different capacity than the regular Navy people. If I had pursued the radioman's profession, probably I would have moved out of the aircraft to aboard ship. As things happen, a China draft came up and I put in for that and went to China, so I didn't complete striking for radioman.

**Mr. Winkler:** Can you talk about this China trip? When did that come about?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well at that time the Navy would put out a list of duty stations all over the world and you could put in for it. And China sounded real good to me, sounded like I'd be able to see a lot of the world and see a different culture. So I put in for the China draft, but my division officer was very put out that I wanted to get out of his division, so he put me on mess cooking. I mess cooked for the last six months before the China draft left to go.

**Mr. Winkler:** So this was 1939 or so.

**Mr. Holcomb:** I went in in May and after boot camp it was in January or February.

**Mr. Winkler:** Mess cooking, basically your job was to....

**Mr. Holcomb:** Clean up mostly. Keep the floors mopped and wash dishes.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay...galley duty? So you received your orders to go to the Asiatic Fleet. Was that all it said on your orders or did you have a specific.....

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. We were ordered to the Asiatic Fleet which the headquarters was in Manila. A list of those that were coming out to the Asiatic Fleet was sent ahead. I went out on the Henderson, the old transport Henderson, USS Henderson. And the personnel would take your name and assign you to a ship or to a station. And I was assigned to the USS Tulsa in Hong Kong. And the Tulsa was a PG22, Patrol Gunboat, and it ran between Hong Kong, Amoy, Suatou, Koloong su, and then back to Hong Kong. We tended to primarily just to show Americas force. We tended the missionaries, we hauled toilet paper and that sort of thing.

**Mr. Winkler:**Just out of curiosity, how long did it take you to get across the Pacific. Did you Make a stop in Hawaii or anyplace else?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh we stopped in Pearl, and that was in March, April of '39. They were pretty laid back in Pearl then. We stopped in Guam and Midway, saw the gooney birds. Made several stops, we did not go by Manila Bay then, we went to Shanghai, and then from Shanghai to Hong Kong. And meanwhile I had received orders, and when we got to Hong Kong, I left the Henderson and went aboard the Tulsa.

**Mr. Winkler:** And how big a crew? Can you describe the size?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The Tulsa was made and assigned the name Tulsa, which was a cruiser's name, and they later took away the name Tulsa and gave it to a cruiser. But the Tulsa was made as a patrol gun boat with a very shallow draft for the shallow waters that it would be into in the rivers of China, and that shallow draft saved our neck one time. The Japs set all of their torpedoes at about fourteen feet...12 to 14 feet....and we received a spread of torpedoes, but they had it set at approximately 12 to 14 feet and we drew 9 feet.  
And they went zoop....right under us.

**Mr. Winkler:** From 1939 through the war, you're on board the Tulsa. How big a crew?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It was primarily made to furnish a landing force of Marines, but they had taken the Marines off the year before I got there in 1938. And there were no Marines aboard there then. Approximately 120 men for the crew.

**Mr. Winkler:** And what...about a dozen officers?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Uh huh, about that.



**Mr. Winkler:** What were your specific duties?

**Mr. Holcomb:** My duties when I first went aboard was...I was assigned to the deck force and I performed on the deck force for a while. But I really wanted to be in the engineering department, the machinery...the part that propelled the ship through the water, gave me a good deal of interest. And eventually I struck for an engineering rate and I was assigned to the fire room and was...I intended to be in the engine room, the machinist mate part, but the war started and you were frozen wherever you were, and I was in the fire room when the war came.

**Mr. Winkler:** Did you have good leadership, good chief division officer?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes, our chief was a story in itself. He couldn't read or write and so when he made Chief, Admiral Yarnell, who was the Chief of the Asiatic fleet, he was aboard a ship up in Shanghai, so they let Garwich, John Dog Garwich was his handle. He went up there and Admiral Yarnell interviewed him like we're doing. He talked to him about his rate and what he knew and what he didn't know and he was first class then. So when he got through he said well, Chief, here's your hat. He had bought a Chief's hat, and he gave it to him. In the annals of any Navy history you can never find anything like that before or since. It was an unusual occurrence. It was a very unusual.

**Mr. Winkler:** Although he couldn't read...

**Mr. Holcomb:** He was a good man.

**Mr. Winkler:** That's what I was about to follow up. Now tell me about your shipmates.

**Mr. Holcomb:** The Asiatic Fleet were a little flakey but essentially good people, good men. When the war started we were assigned eventually some pretty rough stuff. And the Asiatic Fleet had the position of holding the Japanese fleet, which was a far superior Navy as much as we could. And in the process practically the whole fleet got sunk, but my ship fortunately did not. We did hold them back. I don't know how much. I don't have any real feel for that. But the Asiatic Fleet answered the call and did quite well.

**Mr. Winkler:** Before the war though you were making these port calls in China. We were talking before about being exposed to these people from Chicago. Now you're being exposed with people from a different continent. What were some of your impressions?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I like the Chinese. They were wonderful people. Intelligent. They accept their lot in life whatever it is real well. I liked the Chinese and I liked China as a

whole. I became enamored with it. I thought maybe after I retired I might go back there. But of course that never happened. I liked the Chinese. Very good people.

**Mr. Winkler:** Of course during that time there is a war going on between Japan and China and the United States, obviously you're showing the flag. What was the attitude of the crew about the possibilities of war.

**Mr. Holcomb:** We knew that eventually we would fight the Japanese. And I can't help but believe the President and all the other people that would be involved in the decision making process also knew that the Japs would eventually want us out of that area, because they needed the oil that came from the Netherland East Indies. And other areas, Borneo and so forth. And they couldn't have it unless they got rid of American presence in the Asiatic Fleet.

**Mr. Winkler:** Now you're home ported I guess in Hong Kong.?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Hong Kong.

**Mr. Winkler:** Which was a British...

**Mr. Holcomb:** British Crown Colony.

**Mr. Winkler:** So did you deal with the Brits a lot?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. China at that time... you had separate entities, autonomous entities. The British Fleet, the American Fleet, German Fleet, China was not...they had the war lords and the problems with that sorta thing and they did not have a central government. And so everybody just moved in and took over their part. Whatever they wanted.

**Mr. Winkler:** One question before we get on to the war, is you're staying in touch with your folks back home?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. The China Clipper I have several letters that I'm going to give to the Nimitz Museum of the China Clipper that would bring the mail out and it would only be four or five days old, which was just like a telephone call almost. The China Clipper was a beautiful ship. I don't know if everybody knows, it was a seaplane, four motored prop seaplane. And it would come in to Hong Kong and move up to the dock at Hong Kong where the ferries all came in. And I went over there several times to see that ship. It was a marvelous plane. My correspondence had previously been about a month, it took about a month to get a letter from the states and the same time back.

We thought that might start the war, although it didn't seem to resonate in the United States. The President at the time had different problems and so they paid I don't know...three or four million dollars.

**Audience:** You mentioned the Tulsa being a gun boat? What type of actual guns?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We had three 4" guns, no anti-aircraft at all. In fact, that was it. We had no anti-submarine depth charges, but we had three 4" guns that were manually operated. By the time you got the gun around you'd be sunk.

**Audience:** Did you have any machine guns of any kind?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. Did not. We had two 40-pounders, and I'm not sure what that means. We had two 40-pounders and we used those to acknowledge Admirals as they would come and go.

**Mr. Winkler:** Saluting guns.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, saluting equipment. And we ran out of shells and so we had a Japanese Admiral that was going to go by, so instead of firing the 40-pounders, we had a hatch on the bow of the ship, and we raised the hatch and slammed it. And while a guy stood there by the 40-pounder with a hand full of flour and would throw it in the air. And we saluted that Admiral slamming the hatch.

**Audience:** At this time frame you weren't involved in that geography, in a rescue or anything like that I don't guess.

**Audience:** What was the time frame. What year?

**Mr. Holcomb:** In '39, '40 and in '41 we left China and went to Manila. That's where we were when the war started.

**Audience:** What month in '41 did you leave?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Hmm...the war started the 8<sup>th</sup> there, they are over the date line. I think in June we left China...in June. We went to rifle range and target practice and then we were on mine patrol between Corregidor and Mar Vilas Bay when the war started. And that would be about right. I've forgotten really. But it was March, April, May, June, somewhere along in there.

**Audience:** Everybody has seen the movie *Sand Pebbles* and the movie seemed to imply that the whole...most of the Asiatic Fleet was manned by native Chinese and the Americans didn't do anything. From your perspective did you have Chinese crewmen?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes we did. The Chinese aboard handled all of the garbage, they handled all of the laundry, they handled all of the feeding process. I was mess cook aboard ship

for three months and had three tables. But I didn't do anything. I had the Chinese...and they would make the trip with us from Hong Kong to Amoy, Suatou and Koloong Su and back.

**Audience:** So you said you were a believer of foreign training at this time, but if the Chinese were doing everything...and I'm not trying to be funny...but just what did you actually have to do for the training?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, we did not, the Tulsa did not permit them in the engine room or the fire room or below decks. They were not to go below decks. And they didn't go below decks either.

**Mr. Winkler:** This is also at a time when we had a segregated Navy, so you probably had stewards on board as far as African-Americans?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, yeah. But in this case it was Filipinos.

**Mr. Winkler:** Okay, I see.

**Mr. Holcomb** We ran between Hong Kong, Amoy, Suatou, Koloong, and back. And in Suatou some of you may have heard, it's the only white porpoises in the world. And when we would go into the entrance to the harbor, these white schools of white porpoise would come out and meet the ship...porpoise all the way in. Beautiful white animals...just as white as snow. The only place in the world that they are.

**Audience:** You said the draft was only nine feet under the vessel. Was that awfully hard in the ocean.?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. It would roll like a tub. Yeah.

**Audience:** I am curious about the evacuation of the British and the Americans... probably didn't take place until Pearl Harbor?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No the British stayed in Hong Kong because that was a British colony. And we moved out...Admiral Hart was the commanding officer and he called all of the ships into the Philippines. All of the American ships he called into the Philippines, and all the British ships stayed essentially where they were in the Asiatic area.

**Audience:** What kind of mess equipment did you have?

**Mr. Holcomb:**They had extra heavy duty, thick plates, bowls and cups. The cups didn't have a handle on them. They were just very heavy duty ceramic china. And it was for a purpose because the ship rolling and that sorta thing and a lot of times you ...everything would fall off of the table. And during those times if you broke a

cup or you broke a bowl or you broke a plate, you had to pay for it. They'd dock your pay.

**Audience:** Did you ever use mess trays?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. They had the trays ...they would go through the scullery and they had the place for the plates and the cups and the bowls.

**Mr. Winkler:** We will stop.

### **Tape One – Side Two**

**Mr. Winkler:** Talk about December 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well we were on mine patrol between Corregidor and Mar Vilas Bay and ships that came in to the port of Manila and exited the port of Manila had to go through the mine field. And we would lead them through the mine field. Or in cases of small sailing craft, there was quite a lot of that there then...there were no danger of getting into the mine, so they would go through. But any large ship, merchant or Navy ship we would take them through the mine fields. And that's what we were doing. That was our duty when the war started on December the 8<sup>th</sup>, there. At 2:20 or so in the morning the Captain sounded General Quarters and announced that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and that henceforth we were at war. And the first thing we did was to get rid of all the fire hazards aboard ship. So they threw all of our mess tables, anything made out of wood and that sorta thing. So we prepared the following day we prepared for our first engagement.

**Mr. Winkler:** So on the 8<sup>th</sup> it self, was there any signs of the Japanese.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh no. Not on the 8<sup>th</sup>. There was no indication in Manila Bay anyway. The Japanese had been sending over some observations planes, but they were so high that we didn't have an opportunity to....and at that time they did not want to create an incident, so we didn't send any planes after them, but we knew they were there. We went in to the oil docks. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December there were a lot of ships fueling in preparation of leaving and we went into the oil docks, and while we were at the oil docks the Japanese bombed Cavite Navy Yard, which is the Asiatic Fleets Navy Yard, and in just 20minutes the Navy Yard was completely destroyed. And we fueled ships by that old bunker from tanks from way up in the hills, because they didn't have any pumps, it flowed naturally by gravity flow and they had those tanks spotted. They knew exactly where they were, they weren't going any where, and they just dropped the bombs on them

and it looked like the whole world was on fire with the oil rushing down that hillside on fire. They missed one. I don't know how...but they missed one big major storage tank. After the war there was some discussion about that and we think that they left that on purpose. But we thought...we were at the dock and we put over a damage control party and fought the fire, finished fueling the ship and helped several other ships fuel, keeping the fire back from the dock. We picked up several Filipinos that had been blown into the water. The bay was just bobbing with bodies. We knew we were at war.

**Mr. Winkler:** My next question...What were your emotion mindsets at this time.

**Mr. Holcomb:** My responsibility was to fuel the ship. And I fueled the ship. But other than that, I was below decks in the fire room all the time. So I didn't see a great deal of those emotional things that I mentioned the bodies. I did get to see that. But we weren't attacked by aircraft then. We were later on, but not then. And so I really don't have a great deal of thoughts on my emotions at that time, except that it was unreal. You just seemed like you were in sort of a trance or something. It wasn't really happening, but it was happening.

**Mr. Winkler:** What happened to the Tulsa then?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The Tulsa, the Ashville, the Lark, the Finch, the Tuda Wheeler several smaller ships formed a group and we left Manila Bay on the way going south with the rest of the fleet, the Houston, the Marble Head, the Boise had already left and were going south to Netherland East Indies. And we left Manila Bay on the 12<sup>th</sup> and we got into Balikpapan, Borneo on the 15<sup>th</sup> and then we didn't stay there very long because the Japs were bombing...they were using their carrier aircraft at that time and they were bombing ships going in and out of Balikpapan and so we went on to Java to Surabaya, Java and where we were...if we are running short on time, I want to tell this one thing.

**Mr. Winkler:** Go ahead.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Admiral Hart was commanding the fleet at that time. And they relieved Admiral Hart of his duties. And gave it to a Dutch Admiral, his name escapes me right now....Hollindorf I think it was...but at any rate. The Dutch were having a hard time defending Java and they wanted to defend Java at all costs. And so he needed to reinforce the Dutch Army. And so he ordered the Tulsa crew to go join the Dutch Army up in the hills of Java. And we decommissioned that ship and went up there. It's the only time in the history of the armed forces that a group of

Navy people had joined another Army. And they couldn't speak English and we couldn't speak Dutch, so you can imagine what kind of mess that was. But we went up in the hills and we defended air strips. The Japs were using paratroopers for the first time on Celebes Island down on the tail end of the Netherland East Indies. And they were afraid that they would use the paratroopers to seal off these small landing strips that we were using at that time. We had a few planes left, but not many. And what few we had they really needed to make them work. And so they used these air strips to strategically locate these...and also to refuel. So we guarded the air strips and what we did, they knew that the paratroopers would land in the rice patties, and there were a lot of rice patties around there. And what we did is we cut bamboo stalks about an inch in diameter, and then take a bolo knife and knock the end of it off and that would be razor sharp. And these would be eight or ten feet long and we would stick 'em down in the mud in the rice patties, so that if they came down on them a paratrooper would be gigged pretty good. So we stayed up there. But our planes were slowly being eliminated and ultimately we didn't have any planes. So they gave us a choice of going back to the ship and putting it back in commission and making a run for it, or joining the 131<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery which was on the way to Manila, Philippines when the war started, and they diverted them in there. And so they thought we could get those 131<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery guys and the Tulsa guys together and that would form a little more resistance for Java. But when they gave us the choice, we ran over 'em and got out of there and got back to the ship, put it in commission and went to Perth, Australia.

### **Tape Two – Side One**

**Mr. Daniel:** This is an oral history interview with Preston T. Holcomb, a CPO when he retired December 22, 1959, a World War II and Korean War veteran. The interviewer is myself, Dwight D. Daniel, a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War located in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today is November 8, 2002 and this interview is taking place at Mr. Holcomb's residence, 527 Sandera Verde, Manchaca, Texas, 78652. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies which is the archives for the preservation of historical information of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife. This is tape two, side A. This interview is taking place approximately two weeks after the original one. There is a two week lag between the original tape and this series of tapes. The

reason for this is that we are following up at Mr. Holcomb's residence, the original one was done in Fredericksburg. Also, I would like more normal procedures, I will ask very specific questions to start this tape off. The reason being, we had a number of people present at Mr. Holcomb's original interview and a lot of specific questions came up afterwards. We unfortunately did not capture the answers on tape. So as we start here it will be our specific questions.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now Preston, one thing you said five buddies went to join the Navy when you went to Houston. But only four of you actually....what happened to the fifth guy?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I don't know, but he didn't join the Navy. I'm sure that during the war he was in some military service, but I don't know what he did.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Your drill sergeant, was he a Marine or Navy when you went to boot?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Navy.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Questions for you since I was a mess officer, this is important to me. How was the food in the China station?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The food was great.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you eat local food, or did you have food brought in?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No most of it was brought in. Most of it was American. Vegetables, fruit and meat and stuff like that. To my knowledge the chief commissary steward did not buy anything ashore in the foreign countries.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Did Americans cook the food or did your Chinese cook the food?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The Chinese were assistants in all cases. Many efforts...they did the work, but were under the supervision.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now you used the term that a lot of us were not familiar with. You used the phrase, China draft when you first went to China. What was the China draft?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It was a group of men selected from the fleet and they called it a draft because essentially that's what it was. You could volunteer for it but if you didn't volunteer for it, some of the sailors would be drafted. The ultimate destination was China...so the China draft.

**Mr. Daniel:** Makes sense. You said you volunteered. Can you tell why you volunteered?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. I was ashore in San Diego when I met a large group of my boot camp friends, and they ...most of them in that group had signed up for the China draft. It sounded great. I wanted to be a part of going to foreign countries and that sort of thing so I immediately ...after I returned to North Island, I applied for the draft.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, okay. How soon were you sent over?



**Mr. Holcomb:** It was approximately eight weeks...two months until everything was done and then a transport, which was the Henderson...USS Henderson, it and another transport named the Shellmont, USS Shellmont made the trips to the Asiatic Pacific area.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now this may be on the other tape, but we'll ask just in case. What route did you go?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Initially on our trip there we went by Pearl Harbor, Wake, Midway, Manila, and then Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Hong Kong where I was discharged from the Henderson to the USS Tulsa.

**Mr. Daniel:** What did you think of being a kid from the farm. What did you think about Pearl Harbor?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Pearl Harbor at that time...it occurred to me that it was a sleepy little village. There were an awful lot of pineapple farms, but I was not impressed, because I did not see the fleet there or any of that type of activity, which a couple of years later occurred. The Pearl Harbor attack.

**Mr. Daniel:** And this was what year was this, 1939?

**Mr. Holcomb:** 1939.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, okay. How long were you in Pearl?

**Mr. Holcomb:** As I recall, five days.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. So you got the chance to get off the ship.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** What about Wake Island?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Wake Island was ... there was no liberty there, we were tied up there. The gooney birds were there. You could go ashore just to get exercise, see the place, take pictures, that sorta thing. Wake Island was a very small island. And the installation for a military base, was small.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did the China Clipper stop while you were down there?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. The only time I saw the China Clipper was when it came into Hong Kong.

**Mr. Daniel:** What about Midway? Any kind of impressions about Midway?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, Midway, yeah I was impressed with Midway. And when the battle of Midway occurred, I remembered quite a bit about Midway. Midway had steam operated whale boats, 30' whale boats. They were the only steam powered units in the Navy that I know of. So I was interested in the engineering department so I went over to the 30' whale boats and took a good look at their boilers and

equipment that they used to power the boat through the water. It was small but a great plant.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now you were a fireman, right?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, I was not. While I was at North Island in PBY Squadron I had struck for radioman. And at the time I was in transit on the Henderson I was just a seaman.

**Mr. Daniel:** I was just curious. I understand as a fireman, going into the steam....

**Mr. Holcomb:** I didn't get into the fireman until about a year later, and you had to change from the deck force to the engineering group and that was hard to do then, because you had to take somebody's place.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh because the Navy was small?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, it was stable, we'll say that. The deck force group stayed stable, the engineering group stayed stable. If you were in the deck force and put in for the engineer, you had to wait 'til someone left the ship out of engineering or died.

**Mr. Daniel:** I didn't realize that.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes sir.

**Mr. Daniel:** So basically, how long did it take you?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It took over nine months after I put in for it. In fact, an odd thing happened that day. I went through my Practical Factors as a deck hand and took the exam for Coxswain, which was Third Class Boatswains Mate. And I passed and I made Coxswain, and I was promoted to Coxswain Third Class. Just as that was happening, and the promotions were being posted, an opening came up in the engineering department. So I could not transfer from deck to engineering with the same rate...I had made Third Class. I couldn't go below. I had to take a cut in pay, I had to take a reduction in rank. But I wanted to go, so I did that. The chief engineer aboard ship was named P. E. Shettenham. Wonderful fellow, and he rated me to fireman first, which is equivalent to Third Class as quickly as he could, I think three months later.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, that's not bad then. At the time did engineering people make more money than deck people?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** They were the same pay just probably rank. Now, again we are giving very specific questions here. When you went over, you went over in 1939. Had you heard of things like the rape of Nanking or the Japanese attacks on the Chinese.

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** What did you know about Japan and China. Anything?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Nothing. I was a young man and had a lot of interesting things, but the world affairs as far as Japan and China and their association and the war that was going on at that time, at the time I went over there it didn't effect me at all. I didn't care anything about it. But as time went on, I went into China and was able to see the foolishness of the China government and the warlords controlled the country.

**Mr. Daniel:** When did you feel the Japanese became the enemy of this country? Was it literally December 7<sup>th</sup>?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah. We were in Hong Kong, there was some indication that the Japanese were aggressive, that they had provided a terrible injustice on the Korean and China people. I began to think of them as they turned out to be...murderers, and without any sense of conscience.

**Mr. Daniel:** We'll pursue that more. But to getting to some specific questions we have to get caught up on.... When you were over the China station, were you ever short on any equipment?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. Not short equipment to cause our ship to function. And our ship was not basically a war ship intended to fight. It was just a show of authority of the American flag.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. If I remember correctly in our interview, you got into China what month in '39?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It would be March or April.

**Mr. Daniel:** And you left December of '41 or thereabouts?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh no. We left in May, 1941, we went to the Philippines for gunnery practice and exercises and stayed there. We were supposed to go back.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah, okay. Did you know when you were supposed to go back?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. Usually it was three months of gunnery practice and exercises with the Asiatic Fleet. And then you would go back to your station.

**Mr. Daniel:** What I would like to do now is go...I think these are specific questions that you want to add anything to the previous tape about during this era?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Not really.

**Mr. Daniel:** So what I plan to do now is leave the very specific questions and let's go talk some very generalities. You said in May of '41 you were in Hong Kong. That was so you could go back to the Philippines right?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Uh, huh.

**Mr. Daniel:** Tell me about the May to December time frame of '41.

**Mr. Holcomb:** We made the trip with the Asheville, a PG23, a ship like the *(not transcribed)*.

**Mr. Daniel:** PG is Patrol Gun Boat?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Patrol Gun Boat. And we went to Manila where we were assigned various duties.

Most of our duties was towing targets. We towed a very large target on a barge approximately a half a mile astern of the ship. While the Asiatic Fleet ships, the destroyers, the Polk, the Pillsbury and others would fire at the target. We had spotters aboard ship and we could tell if they hit and we would report to the firing ship that they had made a hit and approximately where it was.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did any rounds ever hit close to you guys?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. Several times.

**Mr. Daniel:** What was that like?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, the ammunition for target practice was fixed ammunition. That means it was just a plug...a lead ball.

**Mr. Daniel:** It wasn't high explosive.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh it had no explosives at all. All it was supposed to do was just penetrate that cloth target. And it had the same weight and characteristics of the other ammunition, but it was not a lethal explosive powder.

**Mr. Daniel:** During this time frame did the tempo of operations increase. I mean, did you all of a sudden start feeling war fever? Until December 8<sup>th</sup>, and I guess the Philippines...did you guys all of a sudden well March...eh, eh, eh, and then now by December we are really ready for war?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Perhaps that was true in the Ward Room. It might have been, I don't know. I felt ...as a ships company fireman in the fire rooms, I was more interested in liberty and that sorta thing and I didn't feel the oppression, I didn't feel the Japs closing in, or anything like that as a fireman aboard ship. As I recall, it didn't interest me at all. I just went about doing my work aboard ship, but as forming opinions on whether the Japanese were going to attack or not I never did. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor I certainly and quickly formed opinions. Because in two days I saw the Harbor in Manila filled with floating bodies.

**Mr. Daniel:** How did you ...let's talk about these two three days. First, how did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It was about three o'clock in the morning, general quarters sounded and we all went to our general quarters station after we were at our general quarters stations,

the Captain came on the PA system and he announced that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor...that they had damaged some of our ships. That wasn't quite telling the whole story. We were at a state of war and would be henceforth. We immediately prepared the ship for its action, and we had an awning that stretched over the ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** That was the sun awning?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. That was taken down. All of the wooden tables that we used to eat on were thrown overboard...they posed a fire hazard. Prepared the ship in all respects for action. The ship was not ....and it hadn't been prepared properly for action. We had fixed ammunition that I mentioned earlier for its gun. We had no anti-aircraft guns for defense. And certainly a ship couldn't fight very well without adequate guns for the occasion.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you went from rifle barrels to cannons to small arms with no anti-aircraft.... Now help me on this one, you are really a patrol boat really meant for rivers or lakes or.... Now you're in the Philippines which has big bays and lots of blue water. What was your wartime mission? Did the Captain, or whoever the commander of the boat say here's what we're going to do. How did you know what your mission was?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well the mission initially we were issued the orders to fight the Japanese every chance we had and to delay them. We knew we were outgunned. We knew that. They had ten ships to our one ship of the Asiatic Fleet. They had an air force, an affective air force. And unfortunately our general said that we wouldn't fly any of our air force until he gave the order. And McArthur let our...and I say this in all...I mean it... he let our air force set on the ground and they were destroyed. And no one knows to this day why. Unless it was just plain unadulterated stupidity. And I think that's what it was.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now when the Japanese attacked, where were you physically that day?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We had mine patrol between Corregidor and Mar Vilas Bay. And we ...the mines were laid out in such a manner, that any ships going in or out of the harbor had to come through the mine fields, and we would lead them through the mine fields.

**Mr. Daniel:** You were like a pilot boat?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Uh huh.

**Mr. Daniel:** Could you see the attack from where you were? The attack on Manila?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yes. And on Corregidor. We went in to fuel. And if you will recall the citation,,we went in to fuel and ...at Canakow, and the Canakow oil docks were the only oil docks there for the military and they were fueling everything...all the civilian ships and everything, trying to get as many ships as they could out of the harbor, because the Japs...we knew they were going to come. At that time they hadn't bombed Manila or the military bases or the ships or anything. Everything has been happening elsewhere. So we went in to fuel, and while we were waiting in line, the Japs came over. They had two formations of sixteen bombers each. You could see 'em just as plain, you could see when they dropped their bombs. And the oil docks at Canakow were up in hills and the oil flowed down in a gravity flow away, into the ships. And when they bombed, they ...I think we had eight or nine large storage tanks in the hills. They got all but one but the one that they didn't get...and we don't know why...I think they purposely left that one intending to use it themselves. I didn't think of that then, it didn't matter. But I think now that's probably the reason. Anyway they left it intact. And so as the bombs burst and burst the tanks, the oil caught fire and was flowing down toward the fuel dock. And we were able ...and I was on the damage control party...and we were able to hold that back and keep the main valve free of fire, so that we could fuel. And ships kept fueling. The whole worlds on fire, but you just kept fueling as long as you could.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now that's....for the transcriber....Mr. Holcomb showed me his bronze star award. And this is part of the bronze star award...you protecting those valves. Did you lead a team?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. I became.....the work out of the situation I was at the main valve, and therefore was controlling the main valve and a lot of times that oil would set the wood dock on fire. What we did...the oil came down and this was a large wooden dock. And we took big pieces of pipe and other things and broke those boards loose from the dock.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you separated the dock from the land?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. And so the oil and the fire, as it came down, drained off of the docks. And we had some come out on the docks and some got over on the main dock, but we were able to control that. And that was basically one of the reasons we received the citation. We decided to do something and it turned out to be right. Then

course the oil stayed on top of the water and got under the dock and set the dock on fire, but that's all right and it took a lot of time to burn.

**Mr. Daniel:** And the valve was still protected. Did you have fire hoses and extinguishers?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, uh huh.

**Mr. Daniel:** Were they effective against that kind of oil?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, not really. Not that kind of fire.

**Mr. Daniel:** How long were you out there fighting that fire?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh, approximately 10:00 in the morning until it was almost dark. We went back aboard ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** When you left, was it pretty well protected?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, it's an interesting story. Our ship had moved out from the dock, into the bay. There was myself and a man by the name of Mathinus, two other sailors and we had three Filipino service people that worked there at the docks. So we ...that dock was also the dock that serviced the Canakow Hospital...Navy Hospital. And so a merchants ship Holda maru...a ship from Norway, had a motor whale boat in there and they had come over there to get some supplies from the hospital, and the motor whale boat was in a little area there, and so we were now trying to decide what to do. To go up in the hills and join the Army, we were trying to decide what to do. And so I noticed this motor whale boat there, and I motioned to the Coxswain.....

### **Tape two – side two**

I motioned to the Coxswain of that civilian motor whale boat, to take that group, me Mathinus and two other sailors and three Filipinos out to our ship. And the guy shook his head no, they weren't going to do that. But as a ...as being on that damage control party, I had a web belt that signified the authority, and I also had a forty-five pistol, but...I had no ammunition. But fortunately, that Coxswain didn't know I didn't have any ammunition. So I pulled the pistol out and I went through the motion of shucking a cartridge into the chamber. And I said yes we're going out to the ship. And he shook his head yes, we are going out to the ship. So we ...that two sailors from that Holda Maru and the ...I can't remember their names. At one time I did remember their names. And the four sailors and the three Filipinos, we went out to the ship and asked the Captain to take the Filipinos aboard. You have to get permission. The Captain could have refused.

He couldn't refuse me but he could have refused the others. The civilians, he could have refused the civilians. He agreed to take us all on. We went aboard ship ...I don't know what happened to the two merchant marine sailors, but the three Filipinos went aboard ship, they were taken into the Navy. And I found out later on that one of them stayed in the Navy and retired. And he was a bugler.

**Mr. Daniel:** Interesting. Let's talk about this time. You talked about your bronze star, and you also talked about the bodies floating in the water. How did that effect you?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well at the same time they bombed that oil dock they bombed Cavite. Cavite was our Navy Yard. And it was an old, old Navy Yard, with wooden buildings and ...it just burned. It was destroyed almost immediately and in addition there was estimated that day, that hour or so of the bombing of the Japanese, that three approximately three thousand civilian employees and Navy employees or Navy servicemen were killed and then as they were blown, due to the explosive nature, the fires got so bad it ran 'em out into the bay and died. And so that next morning the bay was just bobbing with bodies that had bloated and were floating, and going out with the tide. We left that day. We left with a convoy and started our trip south to the Netherland East Indies. We went from there to Balikpapan, Borneo, and Balikpapan, Borneo, to Surabaya and from Surabaya to Tjilatjap, Java. So we were moving south along with the rest of the Asiatic Fleet.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you became one member of the fleet, just getting out of the way? How did you feel leaving the Philippines?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It didn't matter to me.

**Mr. Daniel:** Just curious to see if you thought you were going to be attacked or not. Now just for my benefit ...probably one of the few people who know...there was an island in the bay called Ft. Drum, all concreted up with gun emplacements. Did you happen to see that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No Corregidor was the only island I was aware of.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay, now let's talk about you...now you've left the Philippines. What transpired after that? First thing did you have enough equipment on board, you're still on your patrol boat...with no anti-aircraft guns, 'cept your BAR whatever, were you short anything? Did the boat have everything you needed, had fuel...?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, after we fueled in Manila Bay there we had sufficient fuel for the immediate objective, which was to get out of there. And we moved and got to Surabaya and then into Tjilatjap where we fueled again. Tjilatjap had fueling oil



docks and we fueled there. As far as material and stores, we no...we ran short on everything, because our supply ships were trying to supply the ships that were going to do the fighting. That was the Houston, the Marble Head, the Boise and some of the others, and so we really didn't have anything. Then when we were taken off the ship and sent up with the Dutch, when we came back to the ship we didn't have any food. So the Captain sent the chief commissary steward and a working party ashore to buy food from the farmers and the people. They bought live chickens and cows and brought them back to the ship. We built a fence on the fantail and kept the cow or two in there and some chickens and goats, and the Chief Commissary steward and his cooks would kill a goat and butcher him. Rice, you could get rice which we did, beans and that was part of our menu for a long time. Because you couldn't get any fresh stuff, couldn't get any milk, couldn't get fruit, or potatoes for instance.

**Mr. Daniel:** Let's talk about that time frame. You said you went to Java, during this time frame. What did you do in Java?

**Mr. Holcomb:**We ran convoys. We went on that landing force.

**Mr. Daniel:** First we'll talk about convoys. See I'm used to destroyers and submarines. What did a patrol boat do in a convoy?

**Mr. Holcomb** Well we were just a show of force because at that time we did not have the modern guns and radar and fire control that a modern war ship would have. So we did do this. Our auxiliary gang built racks on the fan tail and down the side and we got the anti-submarine warfare bombs...depth charges....and put them in those racks. They didn't fire them out, but they just rolled off. And we would get up to our top speed which was seven knots and they would roll off one those depth charges and our fore plates in the fire room would just stack up like a deck of cards.

**Mr. Daniel:** I can understand that. You must have been right over the explosion.

**Mr. Holcomb:**But we did on three occasions had...at least they thought they had a submarine and they depth charged the submarine. But that was ... one of the things we did with the convoy.

**Mr. Daniel:** What did you convoy? Merchant Ships?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Small merchant ships.

**Mr. Daniel:** Inner island type ships. Where were they going?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well they were inner island commerce. The Celebes Islands were very important to the Japanese because of the oil. The Celebes Islands, Java. Java, unfortunately were sympathetic to the Japanese. We had to be very careful.

**Mr. Daniel:** While you were on convoy duty, did the Japanese ever attack any convoys?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. Those small convoys...and with a military ship that really wasn't important, the Japanese were more interested in the larger Houston type, and that sorta' thing. To my knowledge we were never attacked, except one time, but that was much later when we were in New Guinea. And a submarine fired a spread of torpedoes at us, but the Japanese set their torpedoes at 12 to 14 feet deep. And they went under my ship. My ship was 9 feet.

**Mr. Daniel:** Well I don't think they were expecting a patrol boat.

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. And it looked like it was a more important ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** You lucked out. You also mentioned you did some land action. Help me on that. You are a Navy guy. How did you get into this landing?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh. Admiral Hart was commander of the Asiatic Fleet, and they had a menagerie of a mixture of Australian ship, American ships, Dutch ships, in this Navy. And Admiral Hart... literally when Admiral Hart took over it was very difficult, due to the language, it was difficult to the different kinds of ships, and communications was practically non existent. It was a very poor operation to stand against an organized Navy like the Japanese. So Admiral Hart was relieved of his duties as commander and sent back to the states. And a Dutch Admiral took over...Holendorf...and he upon a request decided that the Tulsa was not a fighting ship. And he was right about that. And so he decided that the men off of that ship would be more useful helping to defend the landing strips where our few remaining aircraft could take off from Surabaya, fly down to Celebes, drop their bombs, because the Japs were landing in Celebes, drop their bombs and come back. But they couldn't get all the way back to Surabaya. They'd have to land on one of those strips and fuel, and then go on back. So our duty was...our job was... to protect that strip so that the aircraft could continue their work. Actually the Japs were using paratroopers for the first time in Celebes and we knew that if they dropped their paratroopers it would be right in those rice patties. So we cut bamboo poles and sharpened 'em and stuck them up in the mud in the rice patties. That's about all we did. We had two engagements while we were there. One village was supposed to be harboring the Japanese, and also Japanese

sympathizers. They were supposed to have a radio and were telling the Japanese everything that happened...the aircraft that we're flying over, the ships that were coming in and out...and so forth. Our job was to get over there and wipe out this radio station. And it was a village. And most of the villages were built with those huts up on stilts about four to six feet high. We marched all night, we set up a perimeter around the village, and then the next morning our captain, said don't fire until you get the word. So then they thought well it's time to load and lock...that's when you put in live ammunition and get ready. And old Hoot Richardson, the guy that had the only gun of any size...a 37mm...about this big around...

**Mr. Daniel:** This is the little field piece, right?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yep. It was on wheels. And so when you open the breach, the powder man, the guy that loaded the shell, he's supposed to run his hand over that firing piece to make sure the plunger is in. He didn't do that, and actually the firing plunger is out. Okay...he shoved that shell...the shell was as big around as that and twice as long, really. He shoved it in there and closed the breach and blam... Well everybody thought that's the signal to start shooting. They leveled that little ole village. Them damn little ole huts were crashing down. But they knew we were coming and they had abandoned.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now who was in your force, just everybody? I mean...Navy, Army?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. All Navy.

**Mr. Daniel:** Were they all Americans or what?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yeah. Just the guys off of the Tulsa. Now we were with the Dutch detachment, but we did not operate with them. That is, everything we did we did as a Navy group. But it became apparent that our aircraft, old and dilapidated, had no spare parts, and they didn't have any use for us. So they said you can go back to the ship if you want to. So we did.

**Mr. Daniel:** As I came in, you showed me your plaques on the wall. You want to tell us about that?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yeah well...we were...it was a drill. We didn't know it was a drill, but we set up a perimeter in the jungle next to the beach. That meant that we were defending an area...I had a browning automatic rifle and that didn't have...it was a big gun and it was heavy, and it didn't have a bayonet. But they passed the word to all of the men who had rifles, to fix bayonets. So one fellow by the name of Joustie, big old

tall sailor boy, he couldn't get that bayonet angled up correctly to push it down on to the barrel where it would snap into place. So he asked me to help him and in the process of trying to help him install that bayonet, I cut my arm.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now you said you got sent back to a corpsman? Was it on board ship or was....?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No, no. It was a corpsman with the landing force.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did he sew your arm up?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yep.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh. You can still see that. *(this is the interviewer. He's got about a three inch scar that's not too visible. But it was a serious slice.)*

Now if I remember correctly you were not married during this time?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you're talking about Mom and Dad. Did they write you and you write them?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yeah...with the VJ mail.

**Mr. Daniel:** What were their feelings at this time?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Of course, they were concerned like all parents at that time that had military men in the war zone. They were concerned and I ...but I received mail fairly often, I don't know how often it was. But at that time I wasn't married and it was just me and I didn't worry about it much.

**Mr. Daniel:** I can understand that. Food and ammunition...the important stuff. Was the mail censored at that time?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yep. Oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you get mail from home that had the black splotches in there?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. But they could, and they did if there was something that appeared...but I don't know if any of my mail was censored. But we were told basically what was taboo and what not to put in the letters and we didn't do that.

**Mr. Daniel:** Where did you go to after the ground force incidents?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Well, the Commander of the fleet recalled the landing force. And we went back aboard ship, and that's when the chief commissary steward and group went out and bought food to last. Then shortly after that we left Tjilatjap, Java for Australia, where the Asheville, our sister ship...the Asheville got sunk with all hands. One survivor off that ship and he died in a prison camp. The day after we left, the Asheville sunk. They had a bearing problem, the main bearing. We were making 7 1/2 to nine knots. And they could only make 4, so they fell behind. And they were picked off.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you see it happen?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. They were forty miles from us.

**Mr. Daniel:** And without any aircraft guns, it was almost like a target. When did you hear about the Asheville going down, almost immediately?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yes. Yes they broke radio silence. They weren't supposed to but they did. The broke radio silence and they said that we are sinking fast, and we need assistance.

**Mr. Daniel:** And you couldn't go back 'cause you were under orders? And also at nine knots it wouldn't make any difference anyway. When you got to Australia...help me out on this...what did you do when you first got to Australia?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Oh Freemantle, Australia, was a good port, and there were so many native ladies. And it was a wonderful time. We survived the Asiatic fiasco and there we were amongst all these pretty girls, and lots of good food and that sorta' thing.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you were eating on the local economy then?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yeah. And then we left Freemantle, went around the lower end of Australia to Sydney. And when we got to Sydney they had decided after the Pearl Harbor thing, that we needed every ship that we had that was floating. So they made plans to modernize the Tulsa. And they did. We went into Sydney, into the dry docks and went into the Navy yard. They put on sonar, which was for submarines, they installed at that time the best radar. It looked like bedsprings up on the main mast. They put three 3" rapid fire guns on board and of course with the live ammunition. And we had four quad mounts of 20mm anti aircraft. That was a big, big improvement. And I think later on I've got in my history of the Tulsa, that up in New Guinea later on, we shot down three Japanese planes with those 20mm.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now that had to add a lot of weight to that ship. Did it cut the speed down?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No, not materially. No we had a tremendous engineering plant, wonderful plant. But it would just turn so fast. But it was over built.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now this was about mid 1942 when this occurred...the rebuild?

**Mr. Holcomb:**It started in mid '42. I'd say it went into the winter of '42. And then in the summer we joined the defense of New Guinea. See the Japs had come down to Lea and Salamau and they were moving into Australia. And then we had the carrier battle of Coral Sea.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now when they were doing the rebuild, were you on board ship or when it went into dry dock and the whole crew...

**Mr. Holcomb:**No the crew moved off. And we had other duties. I fired what was called a donkey boiler on the pier to furnish steam to the ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** Where did you stay all this time, quarters on land?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Yeah

**Mr. Daniel:** And you said you were in the defense, were you on the perimeters or were you just doing like you said the donkey boilers and things like that?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. There was no action in Australia. None. They were trying to move in. They were establishing bases in New Guinea in preparation of moving down. But defense of New Guinea stopped all that.

**Mr. Daniel:** During this time were you a unit, meaning that you were you a one ship unit or were you like farmed out to a whole bunch of different groups?

**Mr. Holcomb:**Well we operated independently. I don't recall us operating with other ships in an attack or anything like that. We operated independently. We were for instance, we served as a supply ship and a repair ship for the torpedo boats. And then we ...one of the torpedo boats broke down one time and we went out there and towed them in and it was PT109, with the Lt. JG Kennedy, was the skipper.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you see Kennedy?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. Not that I recall.

**Mr. Daniel:** Let's talk about....did you have one CO during most of this?

**Mr. Holcomb:**No. We changed ...William B. Porter was our skipper when we were overhauled, and modernized and stayed as our skipper for quite a while. But when the war started our skipper was a fellow by the name of Baker...then a commander by the name of Allen took over. And I don't remember.

*Addendum to Mr. Holcomb's experiences:*

**Mr. Holcomb:**While serving on the U.S.S. Tulsa during the years 1942 and 1943, I served as a member of a commando force formed and trained to make landings on islands north of Australia, and destroy Japanese radio Stations serving to report American and allied force air and sea movements.

**Tape three – side one**

*(Interview already in progress)*

**Mr. Holcomb:** We ran on to a coral reef and lost cooling water...you have to have cooling water. And the cooling water we could light off again and we got out of there. We took the crew off of that motor torpedo boat and just at daylight we ..... And the Japs were going out on their morning run for the bombing range, but they had other targets and I guess they thought that we weren't worth fooling with.

**Mr. Daniel:** They had to see you I assume?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah. Oh gosh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. So we're almost to the end of '43. Now let's go back to some observations and feelings. In 1942, or the early part this, America had a bad time in the Pacific and we lost lots of islands. Did you hear about those islands, like the losing of Wake Island?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Uh huh.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh you did know about it. Were there official communication on it or did you just hear it through scuttlebutt?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh no. We had gotten news casts, we ran our own newspaper.

**Mr. Daniel:** You mean your ship paper?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. And that paper was a direct duplicate of the armed forces paper. We just ran the same thing, but they ran it honestly, and when we lost, we lost.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, okay. During this time, supplies...were you getting supplies like normal?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. That improved tremendously in late '42, '43 and mid '43 or late '43 we had a control of the sea lanes out there, so supplies was no problem.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Food was coming from Australia?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Some of it.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. You're buying local or....?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No the Navy bought and then distributed.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah, okay. So you actually had fresh food then?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Uh huh.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah cool. 'Cause one of my friends had powdered eggs.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, we did too.

**Mr. Daniel:** The bane of civilization...powdered eggs. Okay...so it's now the end of '43. Have you served with most of the same crew? Was there a rotation on the ship?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Not much. The ship crew stayed fairly stable at that time. But it became...the fleet needed experienced men. We were bringing a lot of recruits into the Navy

and we needed to mix that with experienced men. So my ship wasn't considered all that important so they took off quite a lot of ours ...because we were at that point very experienced. And engagements and we made rates, at that time I was First Class and so they took men off of that type of ship, sent them back to the states to put new ships in commission.

**Mr. Daniel:** How did the guys feel about that? Were they happy to go back state-side, they didn't want to leave the crew? That's the way it is?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Basically you didn't have a lot of feelings. You just obeyed orders. That's my opinion. I obeyed orders. I didn't give it much thought one way or the other. I wanted...of course it was nice to come back to the states and see your family and everything. But I didn't worry about it.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay, okay. Okay we are at the ...you say at this time you are losing a lot of your crew members. Were you considered to be rotated back because of your experience?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. I would assume so. I honestly...I'm not aware ...I think that it came, part of it was experience, I had a First Class rate, and I had served in the war zone all that time and so they needed me to go then to a new ship and serve as an experienced Petty Officer to lead the new men. And that's my concept. And I think that's true.

**Mr. Daniel:** That's probably true. When did you leave the Tulsa then, about this time?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I left it in (*Interviewer says he's looking at his ship's history now.*) She was launched the Tinsman. I went to the new ship destroyer at 5/89 at Bethlehem Hingham Ship Yard and it was launched the 21<sup>st</sup> of December, 1943, but that's launching now. And it was commissioned the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1944. So I came back to the states in early 1944, and went to that ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** You said Bethlehem Steel, was that Baltimore?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No. Bethlehem Hingham, Hingham Shipyard, Hingham, Massachusetts.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you actually did get stateside then during the war?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Uh huh. Yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Were you ...did you get a chance to go see your folks?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah, okay. So you got your 30 day furlough?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, sure did.

**Mr. Daniel:** What did you do for your 30 days?



**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh gosh, I don't know.

**Mr. Daniel:** It went by too fast right?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, it went by very fast.

**Mr. Daniel:** Just go see the folks and hang out.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, the small town that I came from and visited with everybody. Generally a good time.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now I'm assuming during this time frame, not that you aren't a high priority individual but only airplanes were high priority. I assume you rode the railroads?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah, buses and railroad.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. When you came back to the Pacific...ship?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** What ship did you come back on?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I came back on the ...I don't know. I've forgotten.

**Mr. Daniel:** So typical you came back by ship by way of Pearl and something like that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It was a transport. Gosh, I can't remember....It doesn't matter. To the port of Bremerton, Washington.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah, so you landed in Bremerton. Ah ha. And from Bremerton you went home?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. Went and visited the little town that I came from.

**Mr. Daniel:** What were the trains like during then?

**Mr. Holcomb:** They were stripped.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, they were?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. The wooden seats stripped...they were open, you got dirt and dust and smoke and everything in there. I rode the train from Bremerton to Tucumcari, New Mexico and it jumped the track. So then they sent a bus out and we got on board the bus and I rode the bus on into Houston.

**Mr. Daniel:** How long did that take?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh I don't know, several days.

**Mr. Daniel:** That was obviously before the days of the interstate.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, several days.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah...the reason I asked about the railroads is you always see them in the movies of being really crowded and really stripped.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, it was.

**Mr. Daniel:** A lot of people on the trains?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, and I must say I have very fond memories. When we would stop in those little towns the town turned out. They were just wonderful people. They would overload you with cakes and pies and sandwiches and fried chicken and all kinds of handmade stuff....sweaters, gloves, socks.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you were not hungry on this train then?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** Alright, okay. Were they organized, or people just, you know.....

**Mr. Holcomb:** They were just organized...the USO.

**Mr. Daniel:** But you got tons of goodies?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** That's what matters. Ah, there was rationing stateside. Okay for fuel and everything else.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, rubber tires, gasoline, and so forth.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you know that? Was it in the newspapers?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well not until I got back to the states.

**Mr. Daniel:** Were your folks affected by the rationing?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, oh yeah. Sure. My Mother and Dad had a car and they had the ration sticker on the window and had a ration book and you could get one tire a year, I think.

**Mr. Daniel:** Wow. Where you are over there and you can get stuff whatever you want, whenever you want it? Okay, so you came back by way of home, spent your 30 days then I assume you went to Massachusetts?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I went to Hingham, Massachusetts to put this ship in commission and that's where I met my wife, Margaret Louise Dekota and we had a whirlwind relationship and we were married, and then we went on a honeymoon to Maine. Her sister and her husband were up there. And then the ship went on shakedown to Bermuda and then we went down through the Canal and back to the Pacific in time to make the landings at Leyte Gulf, when McArthur was returning.

**Mr. Daniel:** Let's get back to your wife again. How did you meet her?

**Mr. Holcomb:** The Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard had a social almost every night. But then on the weekends they had these big bands out there....one of the big bands was playing. I believe it was Benny Goodman. And so we ...I met her at one of those dances. And so she lived in Brockton a short distance over there and so she

invited me to come to visit her home in Brockton over the weekend, and I met her parents and sisters and brothers, so as time went by we decided to get married.

**Mr. Daniel:** So how long had you know each other by the time you got married?

**Mr. Holcomb:** About ...oh about a good six months.

**Mr. Daniel:** *(And for the transcriber, they are still married.)* Okay, so what did she actually do?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, all of the ladies, you know girls, she was just a young girl, they had work that they did in relation to the military. And she worked at Bose Shoe, making army boots.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah, okay. And true love? Now when you left her did you leave her still in Massachusetts?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yes. She stayed in Massachusetts and of course, by then she was pregnant. And with our oldest boy, so we were right in the middle of an engagement at Leyte Gulf, and one of the ships we had been working with that evening had been hit by Kamakazi and we were over there helping them make repairs. And the captain got on the PA system and he says I want to tell everybody that Chief Holcomb is a proud father.

**Mr. Daniel:** How did he hear about it?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well they had means of communication through the Red Cross.

**Mr. Daniel:** So did you know almost immediately?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah...oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** So what day was that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** It was April 9, 1945.

**Mr. Daniel:** So we are near your son's birthday. Cool. Okay. Did you get lots of letters from your wife?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** How'd she feel about being pregnant and having a child while you were over there? Is that just like normal businessmen?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Ah, Louise was a wonderful Navy wife. She never griped or complained.

**Mr. Daniel:** Cool. *(telephone ringing!)*

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay, we were talking about the first born, and you obviously knew. Did you get any pictures of him at the time?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah, and she sent a lot of little mementos and things.

**Mr. Daniel:** Ah. Did she write a lot? Okay was she one of these everyday or every other day?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No I don't think every day, but fairly often.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Let's talk about Leyte Gulf. Any remembrances of it?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah. We ...there was a lot of action there. The Japanese were making a determined effort to try to sink as many American ships and regain the offensive and that literally proved to be their demise. They brought into that area everything they had left, in the way of carriers, battleships and destroyers. We had a group of what was called, baby flat tops, small carriers, and the Japanese came through a pass and there before them was four of our baby carriers.

**Mr. Daniel:** Were you at that action?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. So they had picked one off, and they were getting ready to get all of them. And we were sent over there to make a smoke, and we did. There were three of us destroyers that made smoke that day. We went up and down in front of them. Actually, I never did put much faith in that smoke defense, but it worked. It literally worked. And the baby carriers on the most part, escaped.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did you draw a lot of fire doing that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Were you hit?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now the Japs had some fairly big battleships there. Were you anywhere near the big splashers?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. Those fourteen inch shells going through the air, you can see 'em. They look like an airplane. Some of the shells were in complete spiral, and some of them, that ring part on the end of the projectile came off and they tumbled. They tumbled through the air and made a big noise, made a noise like a train.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now I assume you were down there...now you were still fireman?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** So I assume you were down with the boilers. So you had no idea what...

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, I did not ....I saw very little action in any of these engagements.

**Mr. Daniel:** How did that make you feel? I mean, the fact that with stuff going on around you but you are down there with the boilers. Just like, do your job or did you even think it ?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, I didn't think about it.

**Mr. Daniel:** Job came first.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. Oh yeah. Actually the boiler is the heart of the ship. Without the boiler operating, nothing happens. Nothing. We don't fire guns, we don't do anything. Nothing happens.

**Mr. Daniel:** That's right. During when you got the new ship, did you ever have any problem with the boilers?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Was it a well made ship?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh yeah.

**Mr. Daniel:** Typical American craftsmen doing their work.

**Mr. Holcomb:** They did a good job. The boiler patterns, the boiler designs and everything were well established, so they really didn't have.....it wasn't new or experimental or anything like that.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you went to Leyte Gulf, then where did you go after that?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well we were in Leyte Gulf for quite a while and then some of those actions had Kamikazes. We were tied up to a tanker and Kamikaza planes came and went, and our marine pilots in fast Corsairs dropped them one by one. By then our pilots and planes were far superior to Japs.

### **Tape three – side two**

**Mr. Daniel:** When the tape ran out Preston we were talking about the Kamikaze attack when you were tied up to the tanker. Let's go over that.

**Mr. Holcomb:** There was a fairly large fire on the tanker, but we were able to get it out before it reached the fuel tanks. And then we broke off. We went with a group of ships and the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne. We put over the 131<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery a spit of an island just below the Canakow where the hospital was, and from there you could see Cavite in the background.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now were they on your ship?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. Some of them ...we had five ships and there were some of the 131<sup>st</sup> on each ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** They were the Texas boys?

**Mr. Holcomb:** So we put over...they made a landing and were moving inland toward Cavite. And at that time, the real threat was at night, a large number of Japanese Q-boats attacked the American ships. Armed with impact bombs, these small sinister craft

swarmed out of the darkness and attempted to ambush the Lough 586, that's a sister ship, as she patrolled not far from the Tinsman. The Tinsman provided illumination enabling Lough to foil the attack and sinking six of those small pesky boats. Now we also, that night we also sank some of them. Early in March, we left that area and we went to New Guinea, and after taking on stores at Highlandia, we returned to the Philippines. At that time the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And then the Japanese sued for peace, unconditional surrender.

**Mr. Daniel:** How did you hear about the atomic bomb?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We ...at that time we were getting daily news casts. And they said a huge bomb, they didn't say the atomic bomb, they said a huge bomb, had been dropped on Hiroshima. And then (*telephone*)

**Mr. Daniel:** We were talking about...you said a big bomb dropped. Is that the way they said...big bomb?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. They did not say the atomic bomb at the time. We were not aware there was such a thing. Then after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then the Japs did surrender unconditionally and the war was over. My ship was in an area five nautical miles from where I was when the war started.

**Mr. Daniel:** I thought that. It looks like you came full circle. Okay.

**Mr. Holcomb:** After several years and thousand and thousand of miles, and various activities, there I was, almost where I started. I stayed on the Tinsman another nine months or so and then I was transferred back to the states for rehabilitation. Because people that had as much time in the war zone as I had, were granted that privilege of getting back with 45 days leave and rehabilitation and so forth. So I left the ship, came back, met Louise in St. Louis and then we just picked up from there.

**Mr. Daniel:** Why St. Louis?

**Mr. Holcomb:** I don't know. See I landed on the west coast, and I was coming across, and she could come down from Boston and meet halfway.

**Mr. Daniel:** I'll ask you one final question and then you can kick me out. You chose to stay in the Navy. Why? To me I think that is so very honorable.

**Mr. Holcomb:** At that time when I joined in 1938, I didn't even consider attending college, because it was impossible. I didn't have the money or anything like that. So a job, any kind of a job or profession that you had, was real important. By then I had a wife and a kid. And I like the Navy, I always liked the Navy. There were

days when I would have left if I could have, but generally I liked my life in the Navy. And Louise was a wonderful Navy wife.

**Mr. Daniel:** Did she have any sway one way or the other?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well when it came time ...when I could retire, she wanted me **to retire.**

**Mr. Daniel:** That was 20 years later, but I mean after World War II did she say I really don't want you in the Navy?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh no. But when I could retire...I had plenty of time in with retirement privileges ....she expressed the opinion that she wished I would. Because they were long periods of time when I would be gone to Europe and the Mediterranean cruises, and the cold war was on and so forth.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Well Preston, I thank you very much. And I will probably come back one of these days and talk about the Korean War, if you'll let me.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Oh sure. Be glad...and we can finish up., and you've got that little log that I gave you.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Preston has decided we will continue up on this. And I have some questions. The atomic bomb...there's been a lot of second guessing now as to whether we should have dropped it. How was your feeling at this moment when the bomb dropped?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well at the moment the bomb dropped we were unaware that it was a powerful atomic bomb that it turned out to be. But as far as there being a question about whether we should or should not have dropped that bomb....there is no question in my mind that it saved at least one million American lives. Because I went into Japan after the war was over. I saw the tunnels in that shale and that rock that they had made. They had food in there, they were prepared for a hundred years of defending...and they would have. The Japanese were fanatic. You can't imagine their mind set on something like this. The amount of Japanese that were captured during the war were a pittance compared ...they would just fight to the last death. And I don't have any thought at all about there being a problem dropping that bomb. As far as I'm concerned, Harry Truman was an outstanding man to do that. And I suppose he knew at the time that there would be some repercussions, or some doubt in other peoples mind. But the Americans at home, the Americans here don't have any idea of what it's like to fight a war in the trenches or at sea or any other place. So it's very easy for these people to come up with the idea that we should not have dropped the bomb. Very easy. But if we had gone in to Japan

with troops to win the war, we would have lost, at least in my opinion, a million American men.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now when did you go into Japan?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We went in with the Missouri and I have the instruments of surrender out here.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you were in the bay then?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. We were in the bay and then later on we went to China, and we carried some troops ...the Chinese troops into China. We came back to Japan, I went on a five day leave there and went up in the hills to see the defense perimeters that they had set up. It would have been bloody. We would have been...

**Mr. Daniel:** Now I am assuming that when you went up, this is probably November time frame?

**Mr. Holcomb:** August was the end of the war, September the 2<sup>nd</sup> they signed. September, October, November, December. Oh it was cold, I'd say December.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. So you got there not the first so you could see what was happening. Okay, now in the years before the Korean War, you came back home, your wife's a good navy wife as we've talked numerous times, wife was...she said you should be in the Navy and you were happy to be in the Navy. Did you ...there were a lot of benefits at that time, like VA housing, you could get housing, you could go to college, why didn't you decide on.... Why the Navy vs. say going to college?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Well, I felt comfortable where I was, I felt comfortable in doing my job. I knew that I could do the work and I thought it was real important. My service time was one of the things that I'm most proud of, and so I never thought about getting out of the service until my retirement came.

**Mr. Daniel:** Okay. Okay. Okay. Right after the war did you get any pressure from the Navy to stay in?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh. Okay, so this was, I just want to stay in.

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, no. I wasn't pressured either way. Never felt any pressure.

**Mr. Daniel:** Any recollections...I mean, how much time did you spend with your wife before the Korean War. Those inter war years?

**Mr. Holcomb:** We went to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and I was down there for two and a half years. I had the foundry and the repair shop at Guantanamo Bay. And we lived on the base and so we had two and a half years together there. That's when Dennis was growing up. And then after I come back to the states, I went aboard a



ship at Key West and we were training sonar personnel. I was two, two and half years there and then I went aboard a destroyer, the 700, the Haynesworth. And that was the beginning of the Korean activity. We went out to Korea, we served as...we had three twin five inch mounts. We would go along the coast and the Marines would tell us where they wanted fire, and where they wanted the shells. We did fire support for a long time and we were a turbo electric ship and we went in, tied up to the dock and furnished electricity to a town in Korea...I can't think of the name of it. But anyway, we furnished electricity to the hospital, communications and stuff like that.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now, your write up, which we will attach, said you got to Korea in '53. Were you there any earlier?

**Mr. Holcomb:** No, I would have to go back through my books. I don't know. We ...the Korean War was an oddball type war anyway. It was slow in developing and it became...it was supposed to be a United Nations War, but it was an American War. So it was kinda slow and we didn't get into it right away. But we went out there and we had as you know, the accident, where we plowed into our sister ship the Ault, and we went into dry docks for seven months while we got a new bow put on the ship.

**Mr. Daniel:** And you were saying that was an anti-submarine warfare tactic. Right, but it was a US sub. It's not a Russian sub. I mean, it was not for real, it was an exercise.

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes, it was for real. Oh yeah. We would find Russian and Chinese submarines, and we would keep 'em down, until they had to come up. And when they would come up we would take their picture and that sorta' thing. We weren't trying to sink 'em, and I don't know why.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, okay. So the accident was not a training mission. It did not occur on a training mission. Okay, okay. (*and he is talking about when the Haynesworth collided with the USS Ault.*) Okay, anything else you want to talk about the Korean War?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. We went into Yokuska to get a new bow, and while we were there that gave me an opportunity to look at Japan, learn a little bit more about the culture, of the Japanese, and their city use, and their work habits and that sorta thing. They're excellent workers. They get into a job and they stay with it their whole lives. The work ethic is tops and they always get to their ship a half hour early and always stay thirty minutes late. Never leave early. And they are good

imitators, their ships and a lot of their technical upgrades came from America. They stole them. They're very treacherous, I say that with ...from knowing them quite well. They're very treacherous when they appear to be meek, there's a method to their meekness and so forth. They're not to be ...the male especially is not to be trusted.

**Mr. Daniel:** Now, have you been back to Japan since...?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yeah. I went back several times in my work as an ASME Code Inspector. See they got into atomic energy, building power plants, and boiling water power plants and the pressure vessel power plants. And they had to build them under the ASME code. So I would take a crew and go over there, and Louise went with me.

**Mr. Daniel:** So you actually have a lot of experience then with Japan?

**Mr. Holcomb:** Yes. In wartime and civilian. They're extremely honest as far as theft is concerned. They won't steal anything from you. That is a ...if anyone is proven to have stolen something, they are cursed for ever.

**Mr. Daniel:** Oh, okay. I'm just about worn out myself. I can't think of anything else. Well thank you again Preston.

Transcribed by

Evan and Virginia Roberts

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