

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

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

***Interview with Rhollie Nix
USS Cebu
U. S. Navy***

Interview With Rhollie Nix

This is Joe Litzelfelner. Today is October sixteenth, 2003. I am interviewing Mr. Rhollie Nix. This interview is taking place at the Bush Gallery of the National Museum of the Pacific War. 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. Litzelfelner: Rhollie, where and when were you born?

Mr. Nix: I was born in San Antonio, July the twenty-first, 1925. *San Antonio, Texas.*

Mr. Litzelfelner: You didn't have to come far to get up here. Do you still live in San Antonio?

Mr. Nix: Still live in San Antonio.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What was the name of your parents?

Mr. Nix: Arson Nix and Annie Laura Nix.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were they born in the United States too?

Mr. Nix: They were both born here.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where and when did you enlist in the Navy?

Mr. Nix: I was drafted. I was working at Kelly Field when I got my draft notice.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where were you working?

Mr. Nix: I was working at Kelly Field. I got my draft notice and I went in, I'm not quite sure what date it was that I went in, it's been too long.

Mr. Litzelfelner: And how old were you when you went in?

Mr. Nix: I was eighteen.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You were eighteen. Had you graduated from college at that time?

Mr. Nix: No.

Mr. Litzelfelner: I mean, high school?

Mr. Nix: No, I hadn't.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What were you doing on December seventh, 1941?

Mr. Nix: I was working with my dad at an alignment shop downtown, Nix Alignment Service.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Oh, your father owned an alignment shop?

Mr. Nix: Yeah.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What year was it when you enlisted in the Navy.

Mr. Nix: I guess it was forty-three.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Forty-three. And where did you go to boot camp then, after you enlisted?

Mr. Nix: San Diego.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How long was the boot camp?

Mr. Nix: Six weeks, I don't know. I stayed there and then I went to three schools after boot camp.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Was there anything in boot camp that sticks in your memory as worth recalling?

Mr. Nix: Well, I remember when we were out on parade, two P-38s collided, it was over the landing field, and we all ran for cover.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Wow. Did anybody get hurt?

Mr. Nix: Nobody got hurt, no.

Mr. Litzelfelner: After your graduated from boot camp then, what school did you go to?

Mr. Nix: Well, I went to welding school because I'd been teaching welding at Kelly, so I went to welding school and then I went to metallurgic school, and then I went to diving school. Graduated from diving school, they told us the top two could pick the ship they wanted. So I picked one on the East Coast so I could go by the house, and I caught it at Norfolk, Virginia.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well now, where were these schools that you went to?

Mr. Nix: They were in San Diego.

Mr. Litzelfelner: They were all in San Diego, the welding school and the diving school and the metallurgic school? At the Naval Training Center in San Diego?

Mr. Nix: Yeah.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So you picked, you were able to pick what ship you wanted to go to? And which ship did you go to?

Mr. Nix: The *USS Cebu*.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Oh, the *Cebu* was on the East Coast.

Mr. Nix: A buddy diver of mine, he picked the same ship, so we were together.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now, what was your rating then, when you reported to the *Cebu*.

Mr. Nix: When I reported to the *Cebu*, I was, I guess I was still a seaman, probably.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What was your duty then, when you got on the *Cebu*?

Mr. Nix: Well, I was a diver, but I didn't do anything until we got to where the islands were. I was trained to weld and cut and make repairs on ships underwater if they got hit or anything. But when I got overseas, the LSTs, when they'd make the landings, they'd tear up their back propellers on the coral reefs, and they'd be out of luck coming back, they'd have to come all the way back to the States to get them changed. They asked me if I could go down, me and this other diver, and maybe change one of them. It was about thirty feet down. So we went down. We still had those old hard hat diving suits. We finally got one of them off with a sledge hammer and a pulley that we made that I remember kinda using one at the shop. I said, "There's gotta be a better way to do this." So we tried dynamite cord.

We backed off the _____ cam about a half an inch, the nut, and then we wrapped that with dynamite cord and took it up to our battery on our diving rig and connect it to the battery and then pop it off. It just popped off so we could get hold of it. Then we'd just screw a plug that was in the prop and there were hooks underneath all these ships, put the chain foil to that hook, bring it up off the shaft. Our diving rig had another chain foil coming to it, we would hook it on it, it would start floating, we'd loosen it, we'd walk that prop right out from under, then they'd walk another back under and we'd put another right back on.

Mr. Litzelfelner: And you didn't do any damage for reinstalling a new screw on there?

- Mr. Nix:** No. In fact, we had them to disconnect the shaft from the engine so it wouldn't damage the engine, the dynamite blast. Knock a lot of barnacles off the ship, but that's about all it did. But it would loosen up the prop so we could get it off.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** Now, how would you set off that charge?
- Mr. Nix:** With the battery we had up topside.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** So you'd come back up to the surface and you wouldn't be under water when that . . .
- Mr. Nix:** No. It'd be too dangerous.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** How would that hard hat diving work? You put on a diving suit and there was hoses to it?
- Mr. Nix:** One air hose, one life line, one telephone.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** So you could talk, then?
- Mr. Nix:** Yes. To topside. So we finally got rid of those, they were so cumbersome. We made a diving mask out of a gas mask, and had air going into it. Made us a belt with some lead on it to come down to the mask, and we just used that and a bathing suit. It was so much easier.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** But you still had somebody up above pumping air to you?
- Mr. Nix:** Yes, pumping, we had an air compressor. And a tender, one of the divers on it, watching after us. In case anything happened. The main thing was, it kept those LSTs from coming all the way back to Pearl Harbor, which was about ten thousand miles to change a prop, at about two knots with a lot of vibration, which would have set off any submarines, would have picked them up and blew them out of the water, they could only make two knots. So that was such an important thing, to change those props. I thought it ought to be known that that was done. I don't know of anybody else out there that was doing anything like that. When I was in Okinawa we had fourteen ships lined up to change the props on, and each LST had three props.
- Mr. Litzelfelner:** Do you think any of the other repairs ships were doing that same kind of work you were doing?
- Mr. Nix:** Not very many, but it was being done. We were the ones that started doing it. The hard way.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, that must have kept you busy.

Mr. Nix: We got to where we could change one in one hour, change the prop, a six-foot prop, in one hour.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You say the props were six feet? I didn't realize they were that big.

Mr. Nix: I wondered how we did all that, but we did. I don't know why all these ships had these hooks in the water underneath 'em, kind of a "U" and that's what we hooked to to raise the prop off of the shaft.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What kind of landing craft were these that you would change the props?

Mr. Nix: LSTs. They'd make their landings, they were the ones that had the doors that would open to let the tanks out, and their props would be hitting on the coral, just tearing them up.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now the LST was a fairly good sized ship, wasn't it?

Mr. Nix: Yes. It would land tanks and men.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were there other landing craft that were smaller than an LST?

Mr. Nix: Yeah, the LCVPs, they called them. The LCVPs had a little front door that opened.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Would they have the same problem with the props?

Mr. Nix: No, they were smaller, and they would just go right up on the beach. I think they had their props up high enough where they'd clear the beach, because that's what they were made for, to land on the beach.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now those LSTs, they just had one screw?

Mr. Nix: They just went up, hit the beach, opened the door. If it was shallow, that's when they'd catch the back props.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did they have two, two props, or one?

Mr. Nix: Three, they had three props. And our ship was a repair ship, so they could repair most of those props and we could get 'em and put 'em back on.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You could reinstall them.

Mr. Nix: We had an exchange going. We had a huge heat oven and everything.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Your friend also was a diver doing this? Is he at the reunion today?

Mr. Nix: No. He got killed. I was doing the daytime diving, and he wanted to do nights, 'cause they fed you good at night. And he said, "Let me take the night shift." But he was coming through the harbor on our diving rig, and our officer was on there, the driver, and an LST was coming through there. Naturally, there was no lights, and they hit us broadside and knocked him off and, like a nut, he did not learn to swim when he was in boot camp. I used to get after him all the time. He said, "Nah, forget about that." But he died, he drowned that night.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How did that accident happen again?

Mr. Nix: Well, an LST was coming into the harbor and with no lights on, and our little ol' diving rig, it was an LCVP, and they didn't see us, they just broadside. And they knocked him off and the officer. The officer said, he came up and he hit the bottom of the ship, and he knew it was an LST, he knew he'd have three props to go by. He said, "I went down again, I said I'm coming up props or not." So he came up, he said that just as he came up he felt the swishing of the water but the props had just went over him. Saved his life, or he'd of been dead. It was a crazy thing.

But he should have learned how to swim. But he was such a guy, had a personality that was so good, he could get by with anything.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did someone else start helping you then, after he died?

Mr. Nix: No, I didn't have anybody else helping me then. I was by myself.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did the *Cebu* ever get attacked by any Japanese airplanes or submarines or anything?

Mr. Nix: No. We had an ammunition ship blow up next to us, that killed five men on our ship. One man got killed, he was just standing next to me. I'd just given him thirty dollars, he wanted a lot more than thirty dollars. He was going to go with me over the side to work, and then we heard this explosion or what it was. I just tried to find what was happening, 'cause metal was coming everywhere. And I fell down on the deck and started crawling. The next day they said they picked him up, his head got blown off. He was standing as close as you are. So that was close. But other than that.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever get injured during the war?

Mr. Nix: No. Rode out those two bad typhoons they had, that's about it.

Going to those gas masks and going down in a bathing suit, that's what solved it, made it go so much quicker. They weighed two hundred and ten pounds, your suit did. And manipulating that thing around and making sure you didn't get tangled up to where they couldn't get you up if anything happened. We were down one time and our engine on the diving rig quit running and we had to get air from the ship, and we put a tag on it, "Do not cut off divers," and somebody cut it off. So we came up quick.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You improvised by using a gas mask as a diving mask. You could attach them to your head so that they were watertight?

Mr. Nix: Yes.

Mr. Litzelfelner: They wouldn't leak water?

Mr. Nix: Yeah, they leaked water right out the side of your cheek. And they'd flutter, and a little water would come in. We'd wait until it got up to our nose before we'd come up and dump it. But just a little bit would come in from that flutter with air going out. They worked great.

What I was proud of was that we were changing those props and saving those ships from coming all the way back to Pearl Harbor. Of course, we never got to use them again when we got to Okinawa, 'cause the war ended while we were at Okinawa, so they didn't have to use them.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now what was the reaction on the *Cebu* when they got the word that the war had ended?

Mr. Nix: Quite a celebration. We figured we were heading home. Of course, it took a long time.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What did the *Cebu* do then, after the war was over.

Mr. Nix: Well, from Okinawa we went into Japan after the war was over. We were the third ship to go into Osaka Bay. In fact, we had to have a Japanese pilot come out to take us in because they had mine fields all around the Japanese country, and he knew where they were at. Of course I didn't trust him, I was scared. I figured, that guy's gonna blow us up. But he guided us into the dock. We docked there for I don't know how long, then came back to Pearl Harbor and then I got off at Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You got off the *Cebu* at Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Nix: I was on for twenty-four months.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What was your rating at the time you got off the *Cebu*?

Mr. Nix: Second class petty officer. Diver technician. They paid us five dollars an hour or any fraction of an hour for under water, so that was good.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What, for every hour you were under water, or every fraction of an hour?

Mr. Nix: So if we had another fraction of an hour left, we'd get another five dollars.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What would you, like record your time on a log?

Mr. Nix: We had an officer up topside recording the time we were down. In fact, I met an officer the day before yesterday, and he said he was the one made out the checks. I said, "Did you give me all my diving time?"

Mr. Litzelfelner: Was he here at this reunion?

Mr. Nix: Yeah, he was at the reunion.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What did you do in Pearl Harbor then, after you got off of the *Cebu*?

Mr. Nix: I caught a ship back to the States, a cruise ship, and got off at San Francisco. Caught a train back to Houston.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where were you discharged then?

Mr. Nix: Houston. Caught one of those travel bureau cars.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What kind of a car?

Mr. Nix: Travel bureau, they called them. I bought a bus ticket when they were paying me off, the bus didn't leave until about three that evening. We were discharged about ten that morning. So I went out the gate and the travel bureau person said "San Antonio in three and a half hours," and I said "Let me in." So I forgot about the bus ticket and came on in. Yeah, they were riding those travel bureau cars. They weren't supposed to be running them, they weren't really licensed. But that was big money for those guys, taking those servicemen all over the country.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What kind of a car was that?

Mr. Nix: This one was a Chevrolet convertible.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So it wasn't like a vehicle that would hold several people, it would just hold what a regular car would hold.

Mr. Nix: Yeah.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, are there any experiences that you had while you were on the *Cebu* that stick in your mind that you would like to describe?

Mr. Nix: I don't guess, maybe, we rode out the tide a ways when we were at *Pearl Harbor*. We were there when it hit, that's about it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now, when you weren't diving, would you work doing welding work on the ship?

Mr. Nix: Sometimes, but I didn't have much duty to do, because I was a diver, and they used to kid me, said "You're just on for the ride. Just taking a cruise." I wasn't attached to anything, any division or anything, to make me have to work. I stood some watches.

Mr. Litzelfelner: What was your battle station?

Mr. Nix: Twenty millimeter.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever have to go to battle stations very often?

Mr. Nix: Not very often, no.

Mr. Litzelfelner: One thing I was wondering, can you weld under water?

Mr. Nix: Oh yeah. We welded, we cut, we made all our stuff to weld. We had special torches. We made what we called an arc lance. We could cut a railroad tie in two, a railroad rail. We would take a regular electrode, and we'd set up three inch pipe, screw into it, and we had oxygen that would go through that pipe and we had it hooked up to four hundred amp Lincoln welder, and when we struck an arc we'd turn on the oxygen and it'd just blow a hole right through it, about that wide. But then we had a range of torches, we had to bail 'em, then we made, when you lit the torch it would create a bubble. And you'd actually be cutting inside that bubble. And when we were welding with a regular electrode going across making a bead, we took our rods and we had soaked them in acetone, and paraffin. And when we'd strike an arc, it would create a gas which would create a bubble, and we welded inside that bubble. And you could do that so it was clear of water, it didn't have any water around it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: And you might be what, twenty or thirty feet under water when you were doing that?

Mr. Nix: Yeah.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you have to come up real slow when you'd be working at thirty feet?

Mr. Nix: You had to come up at different times. I was put in a chamber one time, a decompression chamber, because I went down and they said "We gotta leave, you gotta get up fast." And I had to come up pretty fast. And they were going to put me in a decompression chamber but I didn't get in one until three days later, which I don't think done me any good.

Mr. Litzelfelner: It's too late then. Well, did they have a decompression chamber on the *Cebu*?

Mr. Nix: I had to go to another ship. They had one. I think that's why my legs hurt all my life. May not have been.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever notice any effects from that, coming up too fast?

Mr. Nix: No, I just had bag legs starting about middle age, I guess, they started hurting me. Still hurt me a lot. I had to come up fast, 'cause they were leaving. They had to get out of the harbor.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, Rhollie, thanks for participating in the Oral History Program for us.

Mr. Nix: I've always wanted this to be down in history, because I thought man, so many lives were saved because they didn't have to go back to the States or to Pearl Harbor, by changing those props right out there under water. It's hardly known that that was done.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, I'd never heard of it before.

Mr. Nix: The millions of dollars it probably saved them, besides men that would have gotten killed going back. We'd put them in operation in an hour's time, we'd have them running again. I just wanted that to be known. As far as I knew there was no record of it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, I'm glad you got this down on tape. Thank you.

Transcribed by: Betty Paieda
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