

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR
(Nimitz Museum)

CENTER FOR PACIFIC WAR STUDIES
Fredericksburg, TX 78624

Interview with

PAUL P. BARBEE
U.S. NAVY
USS STEALHEAD

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

PAUL P. BARBEE

This is Eddie Graham. Today is April 4, 2004, and I am interviewing Mr. Paul Barbee.

This interview is taking place in the Nimitz Hotel in the back office in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War Center for War Studies for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay, first tell us, Mr. Barbee, when and where were you born?

MR. BARBEE: Born in Houston, Texas, February 11, 1926.

MR. GRAHAM: And what were your parents' names?

MR. BARBEE: My father was Andrew Jackson Barbee and my mother was Dolly Lucille Hambrick Barbee.

MR. GRAHAM: And where were they born?

MR. BARBEE: In Houston, Texas.

MR. GRAHAM: Do you have any brothers and sisters and, if so, what is their name and age?

MR. BARBEE: I have one brother. He's Andrew Jackson Barbee III and he is 76.

MR. GRAHAM: Where did you go to school?

MR. BARBEE: I went to school in Houston at Breckinridge Elementary School, John Marshall Junior High School, and Jefferson Davis High School. Later, after I got back out of the war, I went to Allen Military Academy, where I finished up a couple of high

school credits to get my high school diploma, which I got in June of 1948. I started to Texas A&M in June of 1948 in the summer session, during this time I also took some college courses at Allen Academy Junior College. I continued back to Texas A&M after I finished graduating at Allen Academy Junior College in May, 1950.

MR. GRAHAM: Where and when did you join the military?

MR. BARBEE: I was sworn into the U.S. Navy February 22, 1944 in Houston, Texas.

MR. GRAHAM: Why did you choose the Navy?

MR. BARBEE: Well ,I chose the Navy because one of my high school friends by the name of Norwood "Bill" Hollis, who was about a year or two older than I, had gone into the Navy. He came back to Jeff Davis High School on Navy leave and talked to some of us football players. He told us what a great duty it was to serve in the Navy and especially the submarine branch, which he was serving in, and because of that when I joined the service, after leaving high school in February 1944, I joined the Navy and volunteered for submarine duty.

MR. GRAHAM: Where were you and what were you doing December 7, 1941?

MR. BARBEE: December 7, 1941, I was still in high school. I was a paper carrier in Houston and on Sunday morning December 7, 1941, I happened to be selling extras on the street corner about the attack on Pearl Harbor.

MR. GRAHAM: The newspapers did have the news of the attack?

MR. BARBEE: Yes.

MR. GRAHAM: Where did you start basic training?

MR. BARBEE: I did my basic training in San Diego, California, they rushed us through pretty fast. I went through boot camp in about five or six weeks.

MR. GRAHAM: Where was your first assignment after finishing boot?

MR. BARBEE: I had volunteered for submarine duty and we were called in for a gathering there at boot camp in San Diego. We were told that some of the men whose names were going to be called out would be going to various schools and some of us would be turned loose to go home on leave for about ten to eleven days. Those that went home on leave, most of them, could expect to be shipped out immediately when they got back. They called my name out and I got to go out on leave. A lot of my friends, there were five of us from Jeff Davis High School, joined the Navy and went through boot camp together. All us of volunteered for submarine duty. When I got back they had already been shipped out on carriers and destroyers and different things. In March or April of 1944, I was told that I would be going to submarine school.

MR. GRAHAM: What was the name of the first sub?

MR. BARBEE: The only sub I served on was the U.S.S. STEELHEAD 280.

MR. GRAHAM: How long was your submarine training before you actually were assigned to a sub?

MR. BARBEE: Well, actually, I had no training. I was transferred from San Diego after being held there for a brief period in what they called "Sub Ad," meaning, "Submarine Administration." They brought us to Mare Island, California, where we were all grouped

together on the island. After staying there for a day or two, there were several hundred of us who were told volunteers were needed for certain assignments. There was a group of us guys that all decided to stay together and we volunteered thinking that we were going to be shipped out on a sub right away. They had us pack our gear and get on a bus where we were taken to Hunter's Point in San Francisco from Mare Island. We still stayed in "Sub-Ad." Our duty was to clean up the barracks, and take care of the place. We were all assigned different duties at Hunter's Point. However I got to play on the Navy Base basketball team and had duty in the pool hall, that was extra duty. Thinking back on it now, it turned out to be a great duty, but it wasn't what I wanted. We were all ready to go to sea on a submarine. Now I have a very interesting thing I think I can attribute my life to while I was there. There was a Lieutenant by the name of Lt. Stout and he was in charge of our group personnel there. We were all kind of sick of it because we wanted to get on a sub and go to war. From time to time submarine officers who had vacancies on their subs would seek out volunteers who wanted to volunteer for certain assignments. There was a young man on a sub, the U.S.S SCAMP (SS-277) , that I had gone to high school with named C.O. "Charles" Landes, EM3. Charles was an electrician on board the SCAMP and he told me that they had a vacancy and that I could get on the SCAMP with him. I thought that was great, so I went to volunteer to get on the SCAMP. There were a couple of other openings. Again, several of my buddies that were trying to stick together, three of us, so we went to Lt. Stout and said we'd like to get on the SCAMP. We had already gone down and been interviewed. They accepted us and all we had to

do was get permission from our Commanding Officer to be able to board and ship out. I wanted to be an electrician on a submarine and Charles was part of the electrical crew, a 3rd class electrician. As a matter of fact, Charles had just come back from Houston on his last visitation or leave. He went to see my mother and told her not to worry about me, I would be going on the SCAMP with him. He promised her he would take care of me. When the SCAMP was ready to ship out they notified the three of us to get permission to leave and transfer our papers to the boat. So we had a meeting there with Lt. Stout. Lt. Stout told us, " Look, you kids have got the best duty in the world. You'll never get a better duty than what you've got right here." We pleaded with him, "We wanted to go on a sub, we can get on the SCAMP!" He said, "I'm not going to let you go. I'm turning you down." We were highly miffed about that. He wouldn't let us go. The SCAMP took off and about a month later or less, he called us back in. The SCAMP had been lost at sea along with all eighty-four hands. Today's "Tolling of the Bell", during the memorial service, remembered the eighty four (84) who were lost. Charlie was among the crew. When Charlie's mother got the telegram she came to see my mother right away because she thought I was lost there too. I wasn't very good about writing home to my mother, so when she got the news about Charles she just knew I had been lost at sea like him. When I wrote her, she was elated and quite surprised that I was still alive. I really attributed my life at that point to Lt. Stout. I have never ever forgotten him.

MR. GRAHAM: Have you seen him since?

MR. BARBEE: Yes after that. Of course, he eventually did let us go. To continue the story, about two months later, the STEELHEAD was also docked at Hunter's Point,

it also was involved in a work over. The conning tower had caught fire and was destroyed, so they literally had to rebuild all the conning tower. The same situation came up again where they were looking for a crew because a lot of the crew on it previously felt the STEELHEAD was a doomed sub. The news got out to people like our group in the sub administration, that the steelhead was taking volunteers. This time, again we went before Lt. Stout, and he said, "Look I thought you guys had learned your lesson but, I'm going to let you go this time. If you insist on going, I'm going to let you go!" He released us and we went aboard, all of us, on the STEELHEAD. So that was around January, 45', the SCAMP had gone down in November 44'. I never saw LT. Stout again, but I never forgot him.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me stop you just a moment. You said you had had some sub training, but not much.

MR. BARBEE: The training we had was at Mare Island, California, a training facility for submarine personnel. We didn't get to go to the New London training school where most submarine sailors went for their training. Mare Island's training facility was limited. Some had a chance to go into a pressurized water compartment and that sort of thing. I didn't even go through that. The training was cut so short, some had emergency escape training, coming up through a water tower, but some of us didn't even get to do that. Our training was virtually nil. I went on the STEELHEAD as a Seaman 1st class, I was a "striker" electrician. After we left San Francisco we went directly to Pearl Harbor.

MR. GRAHAM: A seaman striker means you're training?

MR. BARBEE: Yes, I was a seaman 1st class and I was training to be a 3rd class electrician. So after we went to sea my job was an electrician striker. I was the low man on the totem pole among the electricians that served on the sub. The old submarines we had in those days, the diesel subs, were powered underwater by batteries. We had 152 forward, 152 aft, in what we called, the aft quarters and the forward quarters. The batteries, of course, were all down below. My job was to go down and take the gravity readings of the batteries to make sure they had water in them. Periodically I'd go down there in my shorts with no shoes on and just crawl around in there and take gravity readings on these various batteries to make sure they had proper water in them.

MR. GRAHAM: You say you crawled around. There wasn't very much space?

MR. BARBEE: That's right. It was the space of about to the top of this desk to the floor.

MR. GRAHAM: About two and a half feet.

MR. BARBEE: Two and a half feet. Sometimes when you would reach over to take a gravity reading on one of those batteries, if you touched anything metal at all, it would give you an electrical shock and sparks would fly out. You had to be very careful to not make contact with any of the metal. It wouldn't kill you, I don't guess, but it sure could give you a shock and make your teeth rattle. Another duty that I had on the sub that I think is worth telling people about is that I would always wake up the next crew. When my watch was ending I would wake up the crew assigned to the next shift and I would empty the "head" tank. Below the "head" was a storage tank. Located in this compartment between the after battery compartment below and the crews compartment above and the diesel engine compartment. We had a little spot in there with a little sink,

a little shower, and two commodes. It was a little room that had bulkhead doors on each side of the compartment area. Whenever I would go into that room I would always have to make sure that the lids on the commodes were shut down tight and then I had some air valves I would open. I'd pressure the utility tank up to whatever pressure needed to empty the tank in the sea. We'd always blow the tanks empty if at periscope for instance and so I'd put like a hundred plus pounds of air pressure in the tank. Once I got the pressure in the tank, I'd open the discharge valve to the sea, and blow the tanks dry. I blew the tanks at the end of every one of my shifts. It would not be uncommon that while you were doing this someone would be sitting on the commode so they knew to hold that flush handle down so nothing could come up. I never will forget one time I was doing this and Chief Williams was on the commode, the "head" as we called it, I was busy about my business getting the air in the tank and all this kind of stuff. When the tank was filled up with about a hundred and ten pounds of air pressure and I was just getting ready to blow it into the sea. For some reason or other, not thinking what I was doing, Chief Williams just forgot. He decided to flush about the time I put the air pressure in the tank. It blew everything out of the tank which was crap, urine, and everything else right out through the commode. It exploded like a high pressure water hose, all over the walls, it hit Chief Williams in the face, it was terrible. It was a very dangerous situation. Thank God, I had not opened the discharge valve to the sea. It may have allowed sea water to also come in. They sealed us off in the head because the after battery compartment was the compartment next to us and if it would have overflowed and got into those batteries it could have caused a major disaster on the

boat. Chief Williams and I were literally sealed off in the head together. On one side was the after battery compartment and on the other was the engineering room where our diesel engines were located. The space we were sealed off in, was just a little small compartment, smaller than this office we're sitting in.

We were standing in crap and water up to our knees in that compartment, it was really a mess. I finally got everything under control. I actually had to clean that place up in there by flushing everything back down the commodes. The chief left out of there spitting and sputtering. I stayed in there. Later the skipper called me and I had to give a full report of what happened. It was a very, very close call. We could have gotten that water in all the batteries, which could have caused all kinds of problems. We were right there off the coast of Japan. It was a real dangerous situation. I explained to the skipper what happened and, of course, he called Chief Williams and talked to him about it later. It was just pure and simple, "He just flat forgot what was going on". So that was a close call.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you a few more things. Don't you have to learn other peoples' duties as well as your own?

MR: BARBEE: That's right. I had to learn to do, not only the work that I was to do but, I was also a lookout when we would surface. However, my main duty was an electrician striker. We did go through all kind of personnel training in every compartment for whatever emergency there might be. We had a number of different close calls that really brought out the best in a lot of us sailors. We were able to handle all emergencies that happened.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you now, when did you go aboard the sub? When did you get into the actual combat zone?

MR. BARBEE: I got assigned to the STEELHEAD sometime in late December near the first of January 45', and as I told you, the sub had been under repair before we left to go to Pearl Harbor April 16, 1945. We went from Hunter's Point to Pearl Harbor. Prior to leaving Hunter's Point, all we had done was take a few training trips around the bay, we had not been out on a deep dive until after we reached Pearl Harbor. It was probably mid April because I remember Roosevelt died, April 1945. We were out in San Francisco Bay when we got the news. We did a little patrol work around the bay just taking practicing maneuvering training and things like that.

MR. GRAHAM: When did you first see action?

MR. BARBEE: We went to Pearl Harbor and we took the sub out on several dives and we had some real close calls there, almost lost our boat and lives. We had gone into dry dock there to make sure we were in seaworthy shape to go on what would be the STEELHEAD's seventh patrol. We were almost wiped out on one of our dives while we were there. We took an estimated fifty-six degree down angle, completely out of control, on one training mission out of Pearl Harbor. We were just going out and doing dives and testing all the equipment. When we were making our first dive, we lost our hydraulic power and the Christmas tree lights in the control room, all at the same time. The Christmas tree lights on an electric panel showed the status of closed or open floor valves and the air vents. I was in the control room at that particular time. When you're submerging you're going full speed ahead. You put your bow planes in a down position

out and when you begin descent you open your flood valves and open the vents so that the water can come in the tanks and make the boat heavy. The water is coming in the tanks and the air in those tanks is being pushed out through the vents. When we were ready to level off at the desired depth, ordered by the skipper, we start blowing the water back out through the flood valves with air, close the air vents, maneuver, as ordered by the skipper from his location in the Conning Tower. That's how we'd also surface. We lost hydraulic power with our vents and floods both wide open and we were in a full speed ahead dive. Air was going right on through the tank and just going out through the vents. I was in the control room and I saw our depth gauge go down below four hundred feet. A lot of the crew said later, they thought we weren't going to make it. I will always attribute our lives to one little fellow, who was off duty at the time, he yelled out, "Change from hydraulic power to hand power!" We were able to pass the word through the compartment to close the vents by hand. We didn't have any hydraulic power and two torpedo men were able to get the vents closed in the forward torpedo room first, so when that happened, the air tanks were emptied, completely blowing the water back out. We moved from a straight down angle like that to an angle coming straight up. The surface craft crews, who saw us when we surfaced from doing maneuvers out there with some other subs and tenders, said we shot up out of the water like a rocket. We were going straight down one way, then we turned around straight up. That day, we had taken out some guests, some marines and their girlfriends that were heading back to the States from service over on the islands. They

were sure glad to get off the sub that day. We had a very close call. I'm told, this dive holds the record as the steepest dive any submarine ever had made and the crew was able to talk about it later.

MR. GRAHAM: Were there any crew members injured?

MR. BARBEE: Yes, there were some injured and at least one of them was taken off in a straight jacket. HE had been out on a lot of patrols and was very lucky to be alive. He thought that that was just about it for him and he cracked up. He had to be taken to the hospital, that was a very close call. We had a lot of other close calls, but you were talking about when I first saw duty, that was when I first saw duty. Of course, we didn't know we were in three thousand feet of water, our skipper told us that bit later when we surfaced. He got on the speaker phone and said, "Well again, I just want to say we have been very fortunate today. I am very fortunate to talk to you today because there must be some people on this sub that the good Lord is just not ready to take yet, and I just wanted to tell you I appreciate the work you all did in bringing us out of it." He made a nice little talk to us and I will never forget that. The thing about it was that after we got back, I've always wondered if we may have been sabotaged because we had been in Pearl Harbor getting ready for sea duty to take the sub on farther into the Pacific. They repaired the hydraulic system when we got back, of course, and we had to go back out the next day and test the boat for being seaworthy. I had to go down into the bilges and all around with a flash light to make sure none of the pipes did not leak or anything like that. I mean it was pretty shaky times down in the bilge room checking all that out after what we had just gone through. I didn't know how dangerous it was on a submarine until

after we made that dive. After that I was fully aware of what we were faced with. Then we went on to sea from there and actually got on location where we stopped at Guam. We did one last minute check over at Guam before we headed to our final destination off the coast of Japan. We were on rescue duty of pilots at the end of the war. The air force was told, when they were bombing and strafing Japan, (America was fully getting ready for an invasion at that particular time,) that if pilots had any difficulty with their planes, or had to bail out to do it at sea because submarines like ours were at different spots waiting to pick them up. We were out there to pick them up. That's what we were doing in July of 1945. We were able to pick up one pilot and save him. We had a couple of other situations where we were called to pick up pilots, but we could not save them because they were being blown too close to shore. We were shot at from the beach and enemy aircraft were in the area. The enemy knew our submarines were on location. To rescue downed pilots at sea, so they patrolled around any downed planes to attack any rescue submarines. I am sure we lost some of our subs in this manner. One time, we had a close call when we were going to rescue a group of pilots on a raft. The skipper told us about it on the speaker that we were going to try to get real close. We were on the surface and we had lookouts up there watching. This one plane slipped in on us and really got way too close for us to dive properly, he was coming in on us fast. I wasn't up on deck; I was down below. When we submerged, the skipper was up in the conning tower and the executive officer was down in the control room where I was when the lookouts came down. When they came off the deck, off the conning tower, and closed the hatch it didn't seal good enough. As we were going down, the water was flooding

into the control room through the conning tower where the skipper was along with two other fellows, the helmsman and lookout officer. There's another hatch from the conning tower, going down into the control room. With the conning tower control room hatch being closed, as ordered by the skipper, they were left alone up in the conning tower with it being flooded. The skipper had commanded the boat to emergency crash dive and we were in a dive position with the enemy plane coming in on us. The flooding water was still coming on into the control room. The executive officer in the control room made the reverse command that we resurface, changing from going straight into an emergency dive to an emergency coming up. They resealed the surface hatch in the conning tower after they surfaced enough to properly close the hatch, (had we not resurfaced to close the surface hatch the "skipper" and others may have drowned in the conning tower) then we crash dived again. We crash dived a second time, just after the plane dropped its bomb. We were told it was a five-hundred pound bomb that just almost hit us. It hit the water right beside us and it knocked everybody off their feet. We went out of control; we had a very, very close call. We were told later, that probably what happened, is the Japanese pilot, when he saw us starting down, probably had our number, and when he saw us come back up he probably inadvertently dropped the bomb. It might have saved our lives; we felt like he probably dropped it too soon, the bomb just barely missed us. Had we been going straight on down, he might have had our number and we may not have been down far enough. That was a very close call for us. We picked up a P-52 fighter pilot shortly after that and I helped bring him in

through the forward hatch above the torpedo room. He was soaking wet and relieved to be rescued. When he heard that crash dive "Claxton" horn go off. He got quite upset. He thought we were going to take him right back so he could get back to his base. He ended up serving with us for the rest of our patrol and by the time we got back to the base he was a seasoned submarine officer. He started doing lookout watches and officers' duties. His name was O'Mara, from St. Louis, Missouri. One day in Corpus Christi, Texas, around 1990, I was exchanging war stories with a friend of mine who happened to be a Veteran Army Air Force Squadron Commander in the Pacific over Japan in the summer of 1945. His name was James "Jim" O'Donohoe, a Geologist who I was doing business with at the time. I told him about our submarine picking up a pilot off the coast of Japan in the summer of 1945. He asked me if I remembered his name. I said yes. He asked me, was it O'Mara. I said yes. He said he circled around our submarine to report his safe rescue. What a coincidence after all these years, what a small world. Lt. O.E. O'Mara attended some of our submarine conventions and just as George Bush Sr. was picked up by submarine sailors, so was he. They were both very thankful to the WWII submarine organization.

MR. GRAHAM: Is that what you did mostly for the remainder of the war?

MR. BARBEE: Yes. That was the seventh patrol of the STEELHEAD and when it ended we went back to Midway Island. We were at Midway when the big bomb was dropped. At Midway Island we were on what is known in submarine service as "rest leave." We did recuperation there after our last patrol of seventy-six days of which forty-three were actually spent in our assigned area off the coast of Japan. Our forces were planning an

invasion but that bomb changed all of that; however we stayed there until the war was over, through the signing awaiting orders. We went back to San Diego, California. Another thing interesting there that I want to tell about while at Midway Island, we had athletic competitions to keep us active. We had basketball, volleyball, and softball, those sort of things. They put on an athletic event there where the STEELHEAD, the BARB, and the SEAFOX competed against one another and the STEELHEAD won the event. We decommissioned the STEELHEAD in May, 1946 back at Mare Island, California. From San Diego they sent us back to Pearl Harbor on, January 1, 1946, for practice maneuvers. Most of the crew was still on the sub that had participated in these athletic events at Midway Island. Our names were put into a hat and they drew a name out of the hat. The name that was drawn would get to keep the plaque, which we won. My name was drawn out and I still have that plaque. It's a real cherished artifact that I want to keep. I have it on my office wall in Corpus. That's pretty much my story right there.

MR. GRAHAM: Let me ask you something, you've talked of your exciting adventures, to this day is there anything of all your experiences that you still think about more than any others, any particular experience?

MR. BARBEE: Well, I've thought about those events right there, but one of the things we did while we were there, some pretty close calls there too, we did surface battle one time on a bunch of what we call Japanese Sampans. There were four or five of them and we did surface battle with them. My job was standing below and passing

ammunition up to the deck for the five-inch guns we were firing on them. We were trying to stop them from bringing supplies and hauling supplies around. We were being strafed by some Japanese planes. We had to dive a couple of times in shallow water and we were so close that we were being fired upon by artillery from land. I never will forget hearing those shells go over us; you could hear them go right by us and that was pretty hairy. We had to submerge during that period of time because we were in a predicament that was real bad. They sent out a destroyer looking for us that dropped depth charges around. All of that happened over a several day period. I never will forget the sound of those depth charges going off in the distance, and when we were on the surface the sound of those missiles going over our heads and hitting the water.

After safely returning to San Diego, California from Midway, we returned to Pearl Harbor for practice maneuvers, in January, 1946. Since the war was now over, the crew did not like going back to do practice maneuvers and dives again. That was scary; we didn't want to do that anymore after we found out how dangerous it was. I sure didn't care about making any more dives, I'll tell you that. We were happy to get back to the states and decommission the sub. I also got my military discharge at Shoemaker, California on May 17, 1946.

MR. GRAHAM: You did have a very exciting adventure.

MR. BARBEE: For not very long, I volunteered in February '44 and got out May 17, '46.

MR. GRAHAM: Well you did have an exciting adventure even though you say it was for a short period of time, but there was a lot crammed into that short period of time.

MR. BARBEE: I hope I haven't talked too much. I'm sure I could have done a better job

of describing certain things.

MR. GRAHAM: No, you gave me some very interesting information and on behalf of the Nimitz Museum we really want to thank you for sharing your adventures with us because it will enrich our library I can assure you.

MR. BARBEE: Well good. Thank you very much.

Transcribed March 30, 2009, by Eunice Gary.

My special thank you to the National Museum of the Pacific War (Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas) and my great grandson Jonathan P. Barbee, Texas A&M student College Station, Texas, for helping put my story together.