

National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

**Interview with Robert D. Jackson
May 31, 2004**

Tape Number 1167

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This is Joe Litzelfelner. Today is May 31, year 2004. I am interviewing Mr. Robert Jackson. This interview is taking place at the Bush Gallery at the National Museum of the Pacific War. This interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks & Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Bob, where and when were you born?

Mr. Jackson: I was born in Mounds, Oklahoma, in 1923.

Mr. Litzelfelner: And who were your parents?

Mr. Jackson: My parents were Robert and Margaret Jackson.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Jackson: I have no brothers or sisters.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Only child.

Mr. Jackson: I was spoiled.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where did you go to school?

Mr. Jackson: I graduated from Allen Military Academy in Bryan, Texas in '44.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where were you then on December 7, 1941?

Mr. Jackson: I was at school, and I left probably sixty days later and joined the Navy.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How old were you when you joined the Navy?

Mr. Jackson: I was eighteen.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You had graduated from high school?

Mr. Jackson: Yes, I graduated from high school, and two weeks later, I joined the Navy. I tried to...it was a long story. I tried to join the Navy, and they wouldn't take me. So I went back to Corpus Christi, and applied for immediate induction, and they sent me to San Antone to a center there, and asked me what I wanted, and I said, "I want the Navy." And they said, "Well, you can go to O.C.S. being as you have this military training." I said, "I know, but they taught me enough that

I don't want the Army, I want the Navy." So they put me in the Navy, and there I went. But I'd had three years of R.O.T.C. training at school.

Mr. Litzelfelner: I see. Well, now what year was this?

Mr. Jackson: It was '42.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So it would have been in the summer then of 1942. Well, now, where did you go then after you signed up?

Mr. Jackson: Well, I had one year of college that I went ahead and finished. And then I went to San Diego, California, and signed up for boot camp out there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How many weeks were you in boot camp?

Mr. Jackson: I didn't do much in boot camp. I'd had all the military training and everything, and the only thing I had to do in boot camp was take my shots. And they made me a sergeant-at-arms of the barracks while boot camp was going on. And all I took was shots and then I was gone. I went from there to Vallejo, California, and went aboard the Salt Lake City for transport to Honolulu. I wasn't assigned to the ship, but on the way over there I asked around, and they had openings on the ship, so I had my transfer over from the separation center or whatever it was in Honolulu to be assigned to this ship. So I never did get off of it once I got on. I was on it for nearly three years.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now where is Vallejo, California?

Mr. Jackson: It's across the bay from San Francisco.

Mr. Litzelfelner: At that time, you were a seaman?

Mr. Jackson: Yeah, I was a Seaman First Class. After we got to Honolulu, I was assigned to the ship. They assigned me to a five inch gun. It was a first loader. And I had never seen one in my life. But anyway, about maybe five days out of Honolulu, we were going toward the Solomon Islands. We had an air attack. And after that air attack, I said, "This is not for me, can I go below to the engine room? I'm a mechanic, I know that kind of stuff – that's where I belong." So they assigned me to M division in the engine room. Those five inch guns are a little bit rough to be initiated there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: It's kind of noisy I guess, too.

Mr. Jackson: Oh, mercy! It was bad!

Mr. Litzelfelner: I guess that was the first time you had ever been to sea, when you left Vallejo to go to Honolulu?

Mr. Jackson: Yes, that was it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you have any trouble getting seasick?

Mr. Jackson: The first day out I was a little sick, but after that it didn't bother me, not at all.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now when you got to Honolulu, you came into Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Jackson: We came into Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How long did you stay there before you left to go toward the Solomon Islands?

Mr. Jackson: Maybe one week. They were moving a lot of sailors from San Francisco – Mare Island – to Honolulu, to be assigned to different ships. I felt lucky that I more or less had a choice. I asked to be on this ship, and they assigned me to it. I was on it for thirty-three months.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How did you like working in the engine room?

Mr. Jackson: Oh, it was fine to me. Only thing that ever really bothered me down there was the air attack. You could hear the five inch guns shooting, that was fine. The 40 millimeters would start shooting, and said, "Whoa." When the 20 millimeters were shooting, they were close! You knew they were getting close. You said, "Man, do something!" We shot twenty-seven planes while I was on the ship. We bombarded and covered landings on thirty-four islands. And we sank five Japanese ships. That was our record on there. Tokyo Rose used to talk about us, and they called it the One Ship Fleet. We covered lots of country down there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you all like to listen to Tokyo Rose?

Mr. Jackson: Oh, yeah, we listened to her. It was comical. The thing about it is, she knew the name of our ship, and where we were at. Nearly every time she was on, she said, "You escaped again, and you're over here now." I don't know where she got her information, but she had it pretty straight. Really did. But we always listened to her. It was kind of a game, I guess.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you have anything else to do for entertainment between times of bombarding an island or whatever?

Mr. Jackson: Well, sometimes we'd go into an island, and meet a supply ship, or a tanker for fuel. We'd go ashore to some of the islands and maybe have a ball game or something on the beach. But there wasn't a lot of entertainment going on. About two weeks ago, there was an article in our paper. It was talking about these islands in the Solomons that were sinking. And I read that thing, and got down there, and it said Bunafooti. Well, we were there at Bunafooti. (sp?) We took at fuel there, and we were there about a week. The chaplain brought some of the islanders aboard the ship, and he gave them t-shirts to put on because the women were all bare. I have pictures of them at home...they weren't south sea beauties! They were pretty bad.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were they a little overweight?

Mr. Jackson: They were overweight, and they were black, black, black. Fuzzy hair, they were just ugly looking. I sent those pictures home – my mother said she hoped I didn't bring home a war bride.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever cross the equator while you were out there?

Mr. Jackson: Probably after we left Honolulu going down there, we crossed it about five times. We were zigzagging back and forth down there on the way to Australia. We crossed it five times, but the first time we crossed it, there was no ceremonies because we were under air attack, so all of that...

Mr. Litzelfelner: So the shellbacks had to wait?

Mr. Jackson: They had to wait, and by the time we got clear of all that to where anything like that could go on, it was just forgotten.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So you never did.....?

Mr. Jackson: We got a certificate saying we had been across.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So you never got initiated.

Mr. Jackson: No, there was no initiation.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, you were lucky. Well, now, when your station where you worked was down in the engine room, would you come up on deck very often?

Mr. Jackson: Oh, yeah. We were on duty for about six hours, and the rest of the time you'd be off you could go on deck and lay under the gun turrets or just whatever you wanted to do. When we were under some kind of alert, we worked four on and

four off – four hours on and four hours off. For the last year or so I was on there I was on the lead throttle in the engine room. We had four engines. Forward engine room, after engine room, and one, two, three, four. I was on the lead throttle, and all of my commands came from the bridge to what speed, reverse, and all that. They did the steering, but as far as the speed, forward and backward, throttle man did that.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You're the one that answered whatever the commands were?

Mr. Jackson: When I'd get the alarm on the board there, showing one-third, or full speed, or reverse, or this or that, when mine moved, it automatically showed the other three throttles what to do. We had four engines, so we had four screws, and it was just sort of a chain of command. It was supposed to be together, you never knew one from the other that it was just pretty quick.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Was the Salt Lake City an old ship?

Mr. Jackson: Salt Lake City was back in 1923 I believe when it was commissioned. It was an old heavy cruiser.

Mr. Litzelfelner: So it was about 20 years old in the 1940's.

Mr. Jackson: It was one of the older ships. It had ten eight inch guns, and twenty two five inch guns, and had about eight quad mounts of forty millimeters, and then there were twenty millimeters stuck at every little hole they could stick one in. We shot lots of shells.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How would you get your ammunition?

Mr. Jackson: We'd meet ammunition ships. Or sometimes when we would pull into the northern part of the Philippines there, there was an ammunition place there we would take ammunition on. In fact, after we finished at Okinawa, our five inch gun barrels were completely worn out. When you would fire a shell, you could hear it just kind of whistling through the air turning flip-flops. So we left there and went to the Philippines and got new gun barrels. And this is getting on toward the end. And we left there going to northern Honshu. We ran into – it wasn't a hurricane, they call them a typhoon over there. We went about a hundred miles out of the way. We had us and two destroyer escorts with us. We went about a hundred miles out of the way to miss this typhoon, and we hit

it right in the middle! There was a time – well, for two days there, we didn't have any cooking. It was all eating apples, or just whatever like that. It was so rough, the galley couldn't operate at all. The two destroyers that were with us, half the time they were under water. You couldn't even see them.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did they make it?

Mr. Jackson: They both made it. But they were beat up.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How about sleeping in your bunk?

Mr. Jackson: Oh, man, when you laid in the bunk, you laid on your stomach, and put your arms around the sides to stay in the thing. It was pretty rough riding. In that typhoon there, the two destroyers with us, and then we heard – we didn't see it – but there was one of these converted carriers – they took a lot of these cargo ships and put decks on top to carry planes from one place to another. And one of those broke in half. But we just heard that, we never did see it. I can believe it, because it was a pretty rough sea. And we went from there on to northern Honshu. Time we got to northern Honshu, that's when it was all over. The war had ended by then.

Mr. Litzelfelner: They had already dropped the bomb?

Mr. Jackson: Yeah. When the bomb...I think it was probably from Saipan, because at the time we were at Saipan for thirty days anchored there. Because the air base had just opened, and they were using our radar equipment for the island until they got set up. It was just a new strip. And we stayed there thirty days. They were using our radar equipment. And we saw those planes come in from Japan that you could see holes through the wings, and it was pretty rough. I don't know how some of them made it back. There would just be pieces hanging on them when they came back. We stayed there thirty days.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did Salt Lake City ever get damaged by the Japanese?

Mr. Jackson: Yes. Yeah, we took five direct hits. They called it the Battle of Komandorski. It was up in the northern Honshu between Alaska and Japan. There was us and another heavy cruiser and eight destroyers. And we had attacked a Japanese fleet. But what we didn't see, they had four heavy cruisers and some destroyers

just the other side of these transports that we had come upon. And we took five direct hits, knocked us dead in the water.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were those bombs?

Mr. Jackson: No, artillery. Ship to ship. This was strictly ship to ship firing. It knocked our forward engine room completely out. Or the boilers. We went dead in the water until we could transfer over to the other fuel lines to get the boilers started again to get up steam.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Is that where you were, in the forward engine room?

Mr. Jackson: No, I was in the after engine room. No, and that water was so cold there, that fuel oil was like molasses. Just cold. We never lost a man down there, not a one. We lost two men on topside, but that was the only two men we lost after getting five direct hits. The only thing that saved us, there was a destroyer that was with us, he laid a smoke screen around us. And for some reason, the Jap fleet just pulled away and left. And left us sitting there, and the other heavy cruiser that was with us...we'd run up flags, "My Speed's Zero." And the admiral was on the other ship, and he'd run up flags, "God Bless You." And they left. (Laughter) It was a pretty bad feeling there for a little bit between us and that other ship. But the destroyer more or less saved us, and why the Jap fleet pulled off, I have no idea. We went from there back to Pearl Harbor on the one engine room, and got repaired there. And after that, we were never hit again. We came awful close at Okinawa. We had those Japanese suicide planes dive at us like they were coming down, and when they'd get down so far, there would be a bigger ship right next to us, and they'd peel off and go to it. We had them come awful close to the fantail, come across and hit the water just the other side of us.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were the guns pretty accurate shooting those kamikazes?

Mr. Jackson: They were fairly accurate. You know, it was point and train – we didn't have a lot of - we had fire control that could tell us about distances and this and that, but still, all your guns were hand controlled. You turned them with a crank, up and down, or sideways. And some of the gunners on there, once they saw

where that shell was going, they were pretty accurate. They'd come back and get right back on the target again.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Now how many planes did you say the Salt Lake City shot down?

Mr. Jackson: We shot down fifteen planes. Most of them were those two engine planes. They called them torpedo bombers. They called them "Betty's". And we had fifteen of those, and I believe it was seven ships that we sunk. But we were all the way from the Solomon Islands to Okinawa, we were bombarding. And after the war was over there, we acted as a transport there, moving Marines and people back to the States from wherever islands we would pick them up. But one of the most scary things that we had – we were coming into Portland, Oregon for Navy Day after the war was over. The Columbia River there and the ocean, there is a pretty big ridge there. We had a pilot come aboard. We pumped all the ballast out, we were sitting pretty high in the water. When we went over this reef, he got it crossways, and it laid that ship over forty-seven degrees. We had two planes on the well deck that we used for spotting planes when we were bombarding an island. They would fly up and tell us where we were hitting and all this and that. On the well deck where both of them set, it knocked the wings off of one of them, it laid over so far. And the water came through the passageways and into the engine rooms, and it just almost turned over right there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Were you in the engine room when that happened?

Mr. Jackson: I was in the engine room. Water came down though the vents. We didn't know what was going on. We knew it had turned, but nobody really realized how much until after it was over.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did someone sound a collision alarm?

Mr. Jackson: There wasn't a collision. It just...I don't even remember what they did. But I know I was in the engine room, and that through my air vent, the water just poured through that thing. After we went back to sea, to pick up another load down at Eniwetok, everybody could feel the motion of that ship. You know, we never felt anything coming in, in all the years we were out there. But after that thing turned over that far, everybody was conscious every time it would roll a

little bit, you would feel it. It took two or three days to get over it. It was quite an experience.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Those airplanes – how would they take off and land? How did you get them back on board the ship?

Mr. Jackson: We had a catapult on each side of the ship that they set on. Just sort of a short runway, probably wasn't over...I bet it wasn't seventy-five feet long. And they set on this, and they used a five inch powder bag like they used in the guns. It would fire that bag of powder and it would blast a chip off the end. The plane, though. (???) When they would come back in, we had a big crane that would turn out to the side, and you've seen this cargo netting like people climb up ships with this squared stuff. We had one of those that they would let over the side on this crane and drag in the water, and this plane would fly along and hit in the water, and taxi up, and there was a hook on the front of the pontoon of that plane, and it would catch on this slide and hold it. Then they'd drop a line down and pick it up, and set it back on the catapult.

Mr. Litzelfelner: They picked it up out of the water with a crane?

Mr. Jackson: Yeah.

Mr. Litzelfelner: It was a seaplane then?

Mr. Jackson: Yes, it couldn't land on land. It was strictly a seaplane.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Whenever you would go to battle stations, I guess your battle station was in the engine room, is that right?

Mr. Jackson: Well, if I was on duty. But if I wasn't, it was on fire control like fire department deal. We had a station we would go to that if there was a fire or something like that, we'd man the fire equipment. If you were on duty, you stayed at your throttle.

Mr. Litzelfelner: When the war ended, what was your rating then?

Mr. Jackson: I was a Machinist Mate Second Class.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever go ashore in Japan after the war was over?

Mr. Jackson: When the war was over, while they were signing the treaty on one side of the island, we came in on the other side of the island where they had a submarine base. We pulled in their channel, and set in that kind of a harbor that they had,

but nobody went ashore, except one boatload went over to an armory they had there. They picked up probably twelve hundred rifles, Japanese rifles, and I don't know how many hand guns they brought back, and they gave everybody on the ship one of these rifles.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Is that right? So you got a souvenir.

Mr. Jackson: We got a souvenir from them. But it was a submarine base that we went in. There weren't any big ships in there. It was a spooky thing going in to it, because it was in kind of a canyon. There were times when you weren't fifty yards from each side of the walls going in. It was pretty tight. But we never did get to go ashore in Japan.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where you went in there where that submarine base was, was there a city nearby there?

Mr. Jackson: There was a small town there. The people weren't too friendly with the group that did go ashore to pick up these guns. They didn't do anything, but you could tell they weren't too glad to see you be there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever get to Australia or New Zealand?

Mr. Jackson: Yeah. At the beginning of the war, we were at Australia. Just probably three days. Just more or less a refueling. Brisbane.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you get to go ashore?

Mr. Jackson: Went ashore at Brisbane. We didn't go ashore very much. One time we came back to Honolulu for some repairs, and the rest of the time we were just floating from island to island. Stayed at sea. But when I was on there, we were at sea thirty-five months. Sometimes we would run pretty short of supplies. Waiting for a ship to come by and re-do us. We would get down to where we would have coffee and beans for a few days. We did all right.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Most of the times, were the meals okay?

Mr. Jackson: Oh, yeah. The meals were pretty good. We had a big galley, had a bakery. They made fresh bread every day, cakes and stuff like that. It wasn't little round pies. They made pies in a big pan.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How many men were on the ship?

Mr. Jackson: We had thirteen hundred men on there during wartime.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you ever get to meet, or even see, any admirals or generals, or any dignitaries that ever came aboard that ship?

Mr. Jackson: No, we never did have any come aboard our ship. Our captain was the man. We were in part of Nimitz's Fifth Fleet down there.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you have the same commanding officer the whole war?

Mr. Jackson: No, they changed captains of the ship just about once a year. I can remember three at least. And some of them were just real fine people, and some of them were crazy. When I say crazy, this one, we got a submarine alert, and this may have been the thing to do. But he wouldn't leave the area. He'd head straight to that submarine, wherever it was at. We'd make a straight bead right at it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How was he going to sink the submarine?

Mr. Jackson: Only thing he could do... Well, we had depth charges if we missed it, if we didn't hit it, we had depth charges we dropped off the back. But at the same time, the destroyers we had with us, they'd pick up the submarine, they had the equipment for that, they'd drop charges. But we always felt kind of funny that he'd just head straight for it. But I have seen one day we had a submarine alert like that, and I was standing topside, and you could see a wake of a torpedo go by. If we had been broadside, it would have hit us. But he was going straight at it, and it went down alongside the ship. His name was Busby. At Iwo Jima, he got so uptight about bombarding and covering that landing, we were on shore, we ran aground. Ran the ship up on a reef. We were farther in than a couple of the L.S.T's. When we went back – I was on the engine room that day, on the main throttle – and they ran up emergency astern. And man, you just spun those wheels close and open, and that ship just jumped backward, and when it did, there was an L.S.T. sitting to the side of us, and we knocked the door off of it going by. In a week there, we like to have lost one of our airplanes that was spotting on the island for us. He ran out of gas down at the end of the island where the volcano was. And he ran out of gas and landed there. Well, he radioed back, and we made a circle around there to come in and pick him up. Well, he was close enough to the beach that when we went in and picked him up, fifty caliber machine gun bullets were hitting the side of the ship. Now,

that's getting in pretty close for a big ship like that. But we picked him up, and nobody was hurt. Little paint knocked up, but that's about it. There were good times and bad times.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Would the ship be shooting back at these people?

Mr. Jackson: No, we weren't shooting. It was probably just a machine gun nest up there on the side of that volcano. He just started firing at the ship. But we didn't have any action at all against them. We'd been around on the other side bombarding day and night, but when we went to pick that plane up, we weren't firing at nobody. We got in close enough for fifty caliber to reach the ship. We weren't too far off shore.

Mr. Litzelfelner: The water must have been deep enough right there.

Mr. Jackson: The water wasn't a problem. We just pulled in there to pick that plane up, and we got a little too close to the shore.

Mr. Litzelfelner: When you got a new commanding officer, would there be a ceremony, or something?

Mr. Jackson: No, very seldom. There wasn't anything. Some people didn't ever know it. He'd come aboard – the new guy would just show up. No ceremony or anything, just change of command, and that was it.

Mr. Litzelfelner: How did the men get along that were in the crew?

Mr. Jackson: They got along good. Not hardly any problems among the men. Like we had twelve or thirteen hundred on there, and the people at the far end of the ship, you probably didn't even know them by name. You more or less in your division, or what you were doing. The fire control personnel, you stayed in your area. Gunners did the same thing. You knew people beside, but you didn't actually really know them. Even though they weren't very far from you.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Bob, how long did you stay in the Navy?

Mr. Jackson: Well, just as soon as the war was over, I got out. I didn't want to stay. The week before we took the ship down to the atomic bomb test, I got off. And I knew I had a good job whenever I got home. I wasn't worried about that.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Where was that that you got off? Was that San Diego?

Mr. Jackson: No, I got off at Long Beach, California. They had a separation center there, and a Navy yard. I got off there, and a friend of mine from Dallas, and they gave us mustering out pay, and transportation and all that. We packed our ditty bag and went out on the highway and hitchhiked back to Texas.

Mr. Litzelfelner: You lived in Goliad. Bob, can you think of any other experiences that would be good to get down on this tape before we secure?

Mr. Jackson: No, I probably talked too much.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Glad you did.

Mr. Jackson: There were times that you felt pretty low down, and scared, and everything else. And there were good times. We had good times aboard ship and we had bad times.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Did you get mail?

Mr. Jackson: Yeah, we got mail fairly regular. It would fly in to different islands. We'd send a boat in to the island to pick up the mail. It usually came probably every sixty or ninety days, we'd get a load of mail in. It was all right. Like I say, we had good times and bad times.

Mr. Litzelfelner: Well, Bob, I want to thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

Mr. Jackson: Appreciate it.

PROOF

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