

National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

W. T. Appleton

United States Navy, USS *Smith*, Pacific War

Date of Interview: May 22, 2004

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Mr. Garcia: This is Michael Anthony Garcia. Today is May 22, 2004. I am interviewing Mr. Appleton. Could you introduce yourself for the tape, Mr. Appleton?

Mr. Appleton: I'm W. T. Appleton.

Mr. Garcia: What was your rank in the military?

Mr. Appleton: I was a seaman first class.

Mr. Garcia: What ship were you on?

Mr. Appleton: The USS *Smith*.

Mr. Garcia: This particular interview is taking place at the Menger Hotel inside of his room. 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 particular site.

Mr. Appleton, what we'd like to do is go ahead and conduct the interview by first starting off as to where you were born, names of your parents, and of course, where and when you did enlist.

Mr. Appleton: Say that again.

Mr. Garcia: Your name and where you were born.

Mr. Appleton: Okay. I'm W. T. Appleton. I was born at Clyde, Texas, in 1925. My parents' names, of course, was Appleton. We lived in the Depression era.

Mr. Garcia: What did your father do for a living?

Mr. Appleton: He was a farmer in Clyde, Texas.

Mr. Garcia: And your mother?

Mr. Appleton: She was a housewife.

Mr. Garcia: What was the education level of your parents?

Mr. Appleton: I don't believe they finished high school, either one of them. But they were still knowledgeable.

Mr. Garcia: Are there siblings?

Mr. Appleton: Yes. I believe there were eleven children of the Appleton bunch, but there's only four of us, my three sisters and myself.

Mr. Garcia: Let's talk about your early years as an adolescent and as a young man. What did you do? Where did you spend most of your time? Was there anything particular that you enjoyed as a young man growing up before the military?

Mr. Appleton: Before the military, I was a caddy for the golf course back in 1934.

Mr. Garcia: Do you remember the name of the golf course?

Mr. Appleton: Hobbs Country Club.

Mr. Garcia: Hobbs Country Club.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, in New Mexico. I enjoyed that and I have been with that all my life playing a little golf now and again. There were many things that happened to the Appletons during this period of time. During the Depression it was difficult but we survived. I had a little milk cow and I did all the chores that way. I had good friends which I'm going to see in the next few days that I grew up with. We all lived the same way. We'd get like twenty-five cents to caddy for nine holes and we'd go to town, Hobbs, with a quarter in our pocket. We could buy a hamburger for a nickel and a milkshake for a dime. So that left us ten cents to just blow, so to speak.

A lot of things happened before. My dad died when I was nine years old. So, that's why I had to take over as head of the household. I was the oldest. That's primarily the most of it. I could go into other little details. I remember my granddad came in to town. He was psyched to go to Carlsbad, New Mexico. I had purchased a little pig for fifty cents or a quarter and I raised that up to where it weighed two hundred-and something pounds and he came by and butchered it and made hamburger and all that good stuff, you know.

I could carry a sack in my hand after we made sausage, my granddad did.

And I got tired of sausage. So one day at school, I met a young man who was about the same age as I was and I noticed he had a paper sack just like I did. So, I asked him would he like to trade lunches. Well, he didn't much want to but he decided he would. I took his and he took mine. I went around the school and sat down at the corner. Boy, I thought he's going to have a ham sandwich or something in there. My, my. I opened it up and there were six hickory nuts and a hammer in there. (laughs) That's all there was. He got the best end of the deal. Anyway, there were a lot of things.

Mr. Garcia: Talk to me about school and as you were growing up. What was your highest education level?

Mr. Appleton: I was a sophomore in high school. That's as far as I got.

Mr. Garcia: The name of the high school, sir?

Mr. Appleton: Odessa Bronchos.

Mr. Garcia: How old were you when you finished as a sophomore, what age?

Mr. Appleton: How old?

Mr. Garcia: How old were you when you left school?

Mr. Appleton: I was right at sixteen.

Mr. Garcia: Right at sixteen.

Mr. Appleton: Yeah. From there that's when I went to the service.

Mr. Garcia: So you left high school as a result. When did you enter the military?

Mr. Appleton: When I was sixteen, right after Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Garcia: Okay, that's important. So you entered right after Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Appleton: Yes.

Mr. Garcia: On a personal note, right at sixteen years old and right after Pearl Harbor, what was your first recollection or what was the first thing that crossed your mind when that happened?

Mr. Appleton: I was in school that morning when I heard Roosevelt make his speech. He said "This will live in infamy," I believe. I decided right then I'd like to just go in and help. I didn't know what exactly I was getting into. But anyway, I

was sixteen years old when I went in, in the service.

Mr. Garcia: What made you join the Navy?

Mr. Appleton: I went to the Marine office first and they wouldn't take me. So I decided—I had hitchhiked from Odessa, Texas, down to Freer, Texas, and went to Houston, Texas, and I went in the Navy office and they would take me. So I got on the train; they put me on a train and I went all the way to San Diego for boot training. Then from there I went on an ammunition ship to Honolulu, Pearl Harbor. I went to there. That was in the early time of the war. That was like about April maybe, or May.

Mr. Garcia: Let's touch a little about your basic training. When you get into the Navy and you're going through basic training. There have been several movies and other people recalling that, what were some of your worst memories about your basic training?

Mr. Appleton: (laughs)

Mr. Garcia: I haven't asked you to remember them; I know you probably don't, but—

Mr. Appleton: I don't remember too much about how they were. I know we had to get up and do chores and we had to—they issued a gun to us and we had to run so far and then back. It really wasn't too much training to it, if you want to know. We'd go to bed early; get up early. They shaved your head and the whole bit, you know. That was about all the training I had for I was kind of tough, I mean, at the time.

Mr. Garcia: Sixteen years old.

Mr. Appleton: Yes.

Mr. Garcia: What were some of your fondest memories during that basic training?

Mr. Appleton: My fondest memories?

Mr. Garcia: Was it anything particular, maybe liberties that you had?

Mr. Appleton: I only had one liberty. I had enough money, I think I carried six cents or so with me, was all I had. I went to where they had slides, what do you call them? I went to that with another sailor and we got on that thing and it was just like a roller coaster, you know. In fact, that's what it was, I guess, a roller coaster. But that's all we did. Then just walk and that's it.

Mr. Garcia: Any of the people that you went to basic training with did they end up at your

particular ship?

Mr. Appleton: That's a strange thing. When they transferred me out of boot camp by myself away from all those other people, I went on the USS *Shasta* by myself at sixteen years old. And man, I was lost. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know what I was doing. It was terrible. I became very seasick. This ship was loaded with explosives and it had no protection at all. It managed to get to Honolulu and Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Garcia: What was the name of that ship again, sir?

Mr. Appleton: USS *Shasta*.

Mr. Garcia: The USS *Shasta*. Your position or your duties on the *Shasta*, what did that include?

Mr. Appleton: When I was so sick, I just stayed hid. (laughs) I might get up to go eat a little bit if I could, but other than that I'd go right back—they have these bunks on these ships that you lay on them and then they have a hook chain that goes up like this. The hooks—then you can go over and you can hook yourself in to where nobody will see you. And that's where I was at.

Mrs. Appleton: In a hammock

Mr. Appleton: In a hammock. (laughs) Kind of crazy for a young kid, you know.

Mr. Garcia: The living conditions on the *Shasta* were adequate, pretty adequate?

Mr. Appleton: I guess you could say that, but I was so sick for four or five days. We got to Pearl Harbor in six days, I think. I didn't have time to be looking around.

Mr. Garcia: How long did you stay on the *Shasta*?

Mr. Appleton: A week.

Mr. Garcia: A week? And from there you were transferred to?

Mr. Appleton: USS *Smith*.

Mr. Garcia: The USS *Smith*.

Mr. Appleton: Yes. It was a destroyer.

Mr. Garcia: What brought about that transfer or was it just something that normally happened?

Mr. Appleton: Well, at that time they usually put four or five or six men on another ship. They'd need a little more help. So that's how I got to the USS *Smith*. They put me on with five other boys. We were about the same age. Their names, all their last names, started with an "A." Mine was Appleton and Atherton and so forth. That's how we were put on the ship.

Mr. Garcia: True military fashion, just went down the row pretty much, right?

Mr. Appleton: Right.

Mr. Garcia: What were your duties on the *Smith*?

Mr. Appleton: I operated with the five-inch gun. I sometimes would sit on the seat or I could put shells in the chamber and powder. That was training that we did when we could shoot at sleeves. Like a plane would have a long rope and those sleeves would be pulled by this plane and we'd try to shoot it and shoot holes in it. Sometimes I think we got close to our own plane. But we were just shooting at those sleeves to get some training of what could develop later on down the road.

Mr. Garcia: Now that particular gun or weapon, was that a crew or was that just a single man?

Mr. Appleton: It was a crew. It was usually a crew.

Mr. Garcia: A crew of how many?

Mr. Appleton: Five.

Mr. Garcia: Five-man crew.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, a five-man crew on that five-inch.

Mr. Garcia: What kind of uniforms were you wearing at the time? Did they have a particular name or military number?

Mr. Appleton: Whites. What they called whites.

Mr. Garcia: What did that incorporate?

Mr. Appleton: Trousers, a jumper, and then you had a helmet, and the black shoes. That's about it.

Mr. Garcia: Did you all wear the life preservers, life vests?

Mr. Appleton: Yes, when we were out to sea, yes we did. We had life vests.

Mr. Garcia: Out in combat or in practical terms, did you actually wear those vests?

Mr. Appleton: Yes. Yes.

Mr. Garcia: Let's kind of switch gears here. Describe mealtime to us. What was a typical meal like on the ship, on the *Smith*?

Mr. Appleton: At breakfast or the evening meal either one, they would form a line. We would form a line and if you were lucky enough you could get up first or third or going back there were maybe a hundred or so on there and you had to get in line to eat. Then you had a tray and they would put the food on the tray. As you go through there would be two or three or four boys dishing out the food. You had a big long bench that we sat on. Then you had your buddy or some of your buddies sitting on that side. It was interesting just to eat, you know. A lot of beans and coffee, if you drank coffee at the time.

There was a boy missing the day I (?) that I thought about. Patrick was his name. He was the chief cook. He and I became friends, pretty good friends. We got to eat pretty good really. All of us did. I'm trying to think of what—it's hard to remember all that stuff, what we got to eat. I know one thing I've got to tell you. The chicken we ate was in a box and it was stamped 1917. (laughs)

Mr. Garcia: Oh, gosh. Okay.

Mr. Appleton: Those chickens were the toughest things you ever saw. It was still all right but when they cooked them, they were tough. I remember pulling on the meat trying—. (laughs) It was bad news there, yeah. I can't think of much else. That's the one thing that got me was that chicken.

Mr. Garcia: That's a big difference between strictly Army and Navy boys. Most of your meals were cooked on the ship.

Mr. Appleton: Right.

Mr. Garcia: Did you have a lot of fresh vegetables and fruit or was it pretty much all C-rats and K-rats?

Mr. Appleton: Pretty well all C-rations. Pretty well, yes.

Mr. Garcia: We're going to talk about some personal moments here and if you feel you need to stop, please do so. On the ship, you had some very close friends.

Mr. Appleton: Yes.

Mr. Garcia: Can you talk about a couple of your very close friends?

Mr. Appleton: I just left one of them down there a while ago. You know what? My mind just lets me forget things. After sixty years, it's hard to keep that on your brain.

Mr. Garcia: I understand.

Mr. Appleton: Who's your best buddies. Honey, what was that name of the boy that I told you that he came down from Minnesota and he met a brother?

Mrs. Appleton: I just can't think of his name.

Mr. Appleton: Hall. His name was Hall.

Mr. Garcia: For the persons listening to the tape, we are also in the company of Mr. Appleton's wife. First name, ma'am?

Mrs. Appleton: Louise.

Mr. Garcia: Louise Appleton. She's here in the interview room as well.

Mr. Garcia: Was he your best friend on the ship?

Mr. Appleton: He was one of the best, yes. Hall.

Mrs. Appleton: Otis.

Mr. Appleton: Otis England, he's down there. We were pretty close. He was my boss, so to speak. He had a rank ahead of me and so he could—

Mrs. Appleton: Hall was killed, wasn't he?

Mr. Appleton: Yes, Hall was killed. And I had another one and he was out of Houston. His mother had to watch—Well, I very seldom think of them. But anyway, the ones that I knew that were buddies, best buddies, were the two that were killed later on.

Mr. Garcia: When they were with you and on the ship, when you set sail or set for sea, can you kind of describe how that went or what was your first mission or what were your first duties?

Mr. Appleton: To leave, to go out on the water?

Mr. Garcia: Yes, sir. Go on patrol or first assignments.

Mr. Appleton: We first went out, the first thing we did, we started out for Midway Island. We had engine room problems. There was a problem with our engines. So they told us they relieved us from duty and we got to go back to Honolulu. So, we didn't go into the Midway battle. But we came close but we didn't. What else do you want me to tell? When we came back they got the engine room fixed and all and so forth. Then we still went to sea and we didn't go too far away from Pearl Harbor. We stayed close. Then the fleet came in. The whole fleet came in. The *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, *Lexington* came back from Midway. Then we joined them because we had the ship fixed.

Then we started off and they said there was a place that we were going to and the name of it was the Solomon Islands. They said the Marines were there on Guadalcanal and that Henderson Field was under siege by the Japanese. We went down there. They made all these announcements as to what we were going to do and so forth. We got managed to get to Savo Island. The Japanese had us outnumbered, so to speak. Like four or five carriers to our two, the old *Enterprise* and the *Hornet*. Bull Halsey was on the *Enterprise*. He was our commander. I realize that Nimitz, I don't know where he was at. But Bull Halsey was on that trip. He was the one that was giving out the orders.

Early that night, all I remember the sailors, one of my buddies, Patrick, he was one of the cooks. I went to him and I said, "Boy, I sure am hungry." That was the first night we were out to the battle. I said, "I'm hungry." And he said, "Only thing I can give you is a quart can of apple juice." I remember that. Now, why do you remember these little things? I said, "Well, I'd like to have it." I took that apple juice and I went back on the fantail and I drank that whole thing. Then the next morning everybody started talking and they said, "Well, it's general quarters. Our planes have spotted Japanese and they had spotted us," and so forth. And said, "We'll be in battle pretty quick." Here they come about 9:30.

Mr. Garcia: When you say, "Here they come," what did you see?

Mr. Garcia: I saw the planes. That's what we saw. We were alongside the *Enterprise*. There's a reason for that. We had to take anything that came toward the *Enterprise* in order not to let the planes or torpedoes get to it because if they sunk it then our planes, our pilots, wouldn't have any place to land. It would just be gone. That is why we were so important because we were just side by side with the *Enterprise*. There was like maybe three destroyers that just kind of huddled around. We were one of them. We'd been in battle for—we were shooting at everything that moved. The boys all just, well, they were just

doing as fast as they could. Shooting everything. One of them is down here right now. He was on a 40mm, I remember. I was right close to him. His name is Campezi (spelling?) but he's not able to talk. He's in a wheel chair down there. We did that until about one o'clock in the afternoon or two o'clock. We got hit by a Japanese plane. There were so many of them you can't tell who hit who or what. One of them fell after he was shot down on our fo'c'sle. From the bridge down to the front of the destroyer was all cleaned off. There were, I don't know how many men were killed. It seems like to my brain it was around fifty that were killed. The ship was in flame in a way.

Mrs. Appleton: It had a torpedo on it.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, it had a torpedo and it hadn't been released. It had a bomb on it that hadn't been. It all seemed to just—the torpedo went off later, six minutes later. I remember they said six minutes. So it was just blowed all to pieces in the forward. Then I was one of them that, well, I was told after a while to go up and clean up, you know. We had a big long hose. Well. That was horrible. I was going to be seventeen in just a few days on November 5. But I saw all these human parts and pain that a young kid shouldn't see really. But I saw it. I worked at it for about fifteen minutes trying to clean up. I just couldn't take it any longer and I just left. I went to my boatswain's mate, I said, "I can't stand that anymore. I got to come back here." So I did.

We did this all the way up until nearly dark, maybe five o'clock in the evening. They would send over planes more and more and we would send them over. Then somebody would spot a sub and we sunk a submarine. They had four colored men on that ship. Two of them were killed. They were divided up. Two of them were on the fantail where I was. Now it's kind of funny in a way. He was so excited that he would jump up and down and holler, "Here's one here!" and "Here's one there!" "There's a submarine over yonder." He was just so excited. He was pointing. He wanted to be sure we saw it and shoot at it and so forth.

Side 1 of Tape A ends

Mr. Garcia: This is side 2 of the interview with Mr. Appleton, Nimitz Museum. You said that you had participated in other engagements.

Mr. Appleton: Other engagements, yes.

Mr. Garcia: Can you describe them?

Mr. Appleton: Let me go get our ship fixed and then I can.

Mr. Garcia: Okay.

Mr. Appleton: They released us from that battle after it was over and sent us to Pearl Harbor. We pulled into dry dock and they worked on it. About fifty men were working on getting all the guns back on and everything. But they sent us sailors to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel for thirty days.

Mr. Garcia: That was the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Mr. Appleton: Right. It was the only good hotel in Honolulu. We sailors are human beings so we all got together and we'd act crazy. We didn't have a whole lot of money but we were having a lot of enjoyment after that battle because we wanted to get kind of loosened up. I remember we had fresh turkey because that was November, first of November 1942, in the hotel. We would take our gas masks out and I'm sorry to say, a six-pack of beer would just fit in those gas masks.

Mrs. Appleton: In the container.

Mr. Appleton: In the container, yes. (laughs) We'd put them in the room, you know, and ice them down. But that's something a sailor would do back then. Then after that was over and our ship was ready to go to sea again, we took on replacements, men that had been killed and so forth. We went back to the South Pacific. We'd go into like Wake and some of the others. Well, we went on to New Guinea, I'll just put it that way. We went to New Guinea and our job there was—there were four destroyers, that's all. Plus we would take the LSTs and we would go bombard—

Mr. Garcia: For the tape, LST was what, sir?

Mr. Appleton: LST was, let's see—

Mr. Garcia: Was that a craft?

Mr. Appleton: Yes, it was a craft and it laid the front down to let the men out.

Mr. Garcia: So the men would exit the LST through the front.

Mrs. Appleton: The Marines.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, the Marines or soldiers would be in those. We'd go ahead and shoot the beaches before, the destroyers would, we would. Then we would back off and then the LSTs would come in with the men to land because that way they'd be protected from our shooting. We did that for eight months. Went all the way from Port Moresby all the way to Finschhafen, Buna, all the way up to New Britain. That took eight months. Our feet never hit the ground in eight

months. Men went insane. It was just terrible because we didn't get relief. We just kept going. Finally the order came over that we could have ten days' leave in Australia. So, we went all the way to Australia. We pulled up to the docks. We were the only one that got relieved at that time. We pulled to the docks and they had trucks lined up with food. Fed us oranges, apples, and then the lettuce. I remember I just took a head of lettuce and I just put it in my face. My teeth were loose because we hadn't had anything that would keep our system fixed, you know. Our teeth were bad because of that. Then milk. Ice cold milk. They had it all lined up for us. There were people, Australians, were over there on the dock lined up across the way. They would holler and clap and wish us well. They'd take us into their homes. I mean they were great people. They were just so nice.

After all that I was trying to think where we went from there. I think we went back up to New Britain. One night, oh my. This is something that don't happen too often. We picked up with our other buddies, our other destroyers that were support. We had been fighting all day. That evening, that day it was like a theater. The P-38s and the Thunderbolts came from Port Moresby. We hollered for help because we were getting beat up pretty well. They came and it was just like a movie. These Japanese planes would be here and our P-38s would get right behind them. Pop, pop, pop, pop—shooting, boy, and they were down. It just kept on and on through the dark. There were sixty Betty Bombers coming after us and that's why we had to holler for help. That's when they came. Oh, it was a sight to see them.

Mr. Garcia: What's a Betty Bomber?

Mr. Appleton: A Betty was like our Fortress, in a way. They were just regular bombers. They bombed us everywhere. That's what they were, just a regular bomber. They called them Betties. That was the name we put on them.

Then it got dark and then that thing stopped. They went back to their base, what was left, and we went back. There was conversation through everything that they might come back later. And sure enough, they did. When they started taking off, over at Rabaul, that was one of their huge bases back during the war, they came and we knew they were coming so we started putting smoke down. It took about ten miles each way to put out this smoke at night. Thank goodness. It was kind of dark anyway and this smoke just made it that much darker. They came in. They couldn't see us. They knew we were in the smoke and they dropped these personnel bombs. You could hear them—shoooo—like that. Just whistle over us, around us. That went on for—the smoke went on for most all the night. Scared to death. We were just scared to death because you can't see nothing. You know they're there but you cannot light anything. You cannot talk. You're quiet. Let them drop their bombs and if they hit, they're lucky, you know. That was one that—

Next morning at daylight all the guys started coming up on deck to do all them things. We looked like colored people. That's how smokey it was. We were just black. So that was very interesting really. That's one that'll make your hair get gray. You know, just sitting and letting them shoot at you and you can't do a thing because if you do, you're going to get it. I think I better quit for you because I could go a long time. I think I gave you enough and I'll let you ask some questions.

- Mr. Garcia:** When you were on the ship and when you did have some down time between maintenance and things like that, did you get a chance to write the family? What was your family doing back stateside?
- Mr. Appleton:** Yes, I got a chance to write. What my folks were doing—my dad died when I was nine or ten, but my step-dad, my mother had married a real nice guy, he was superintendent over the Phillips Petroleum Company in the construction department. He and my mother would write me. I'd get letters and I'd write to them. But I couldn't write where I was or anything like that. I could just kind of write just a short letter of some kind that I was still alive and so forth.
- Mr. Garcia:** On that subject, censoring, could you explain how that worked a little bit? Did they censor your mail?
- Mr. Appleton:** Yes, oh yes, yes. They censored our mail—
- Mr. Garcia:** Could you explain how that went?
- Mr. Appleton:** —before it ever left ship, I think. Because we couldn't seal them. They wanted to look it kind of to be sure we weren't giving out information.
- Mr. Garcia:** Would they black it out with ink or would they cut out the spots?
- Mr. Appleton:** I think they just blacked it out that I remember.
- Mr. Garcia:** How often did you get a chance to write? Was it on a regular basis, a daily basis being in the Navy?
- Mr. Appleton:** Not on a daily basis. I would write maybe once or twice a month.
- Mr. Garcia:** What about receiving mail or packages from home?
- Mr. Appleton:** Didn't get anything that I remember.
- Mr. Garcia:** We took a short pause and in that short pause, Mr. Appleton mentioned that he has some knowledge about the sinking of the *Hornet*. Were you involved in that engagement and if so, how did that come about?

Mr. Appleton: It was sunk during the battle of Santa Cruz. I did want to mention to you about, and I'll go ahead about the *Hornet*. The *Hornet* was hit so bad that we had to sink it ourselves because we didn't want the Japanese to get it.

Mr. Garcia: Why not?

Mr. Appleton: To get our knowledge of certain things, radars and the ship. They could take it and go through it and everything and know. There was one destroyer that went and put, I think, two torpedoes in and finished it, to sink it so the Japanese couldn't get it. We had most of the men or all the men off of it when that was done—our men.

Mr. Garcia: How did you feel about having to sink one of your own ships?

Mr. Appleton: It was kind of scary for us. For me it was. Because I could see where it was. It wasn't over three miles, maybe four from us. You never know. You think about we had the *Enterprise* left, so you know, that's all we had left with us. You think I hope that one doesn't get sunk. That's how the *Hornet* got sunk. It was laying on its side and it was just terrible that it had to be done but they sunk it. We did ourselves.

Mr. Garcia: Do you remember how it got damaged or what caused it to get into that state to begin with?

Mr. Appleton: Yes. The Japanese planes had launched torpedoes at it themselves and bombs. Their planes had bombs. I had a picture of one that shows. You can't believe how many shots that were up in the sky.

Mrs. Appleton: Flak.

Mr. Appleton: Flak, yes, thanks.

Mrs. Appleton: Solid.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, it was just solid, wasn't it?

Mrs. Appleton: Um hum.

Mr. Appleton: It was just solid flak. But they could get through sometime, you know.

Mr. Garcia: A lot of people and a lot of history books refer to the kamikazes. Did you have any personal experience with kamikazes?

Mr. Appleton: Yes. After this battle here, we got all fixed and everything and that's when we

went back to New Guinea. Then the *Smith* came back to the States. I was transferred. I took four men and myself across the United States to Norfolk, Virginia, for further training. They wanted me to train with them. I'd been through the mill, so to speak, and these boys hadn't.

Mr. Garcia: How old were you at that time?

Mr. Appleton: I was eighteen. I took them across the United States then I put a new ship in commission, the *USS Hank*. It was a destroyer. It was brand new. It had twin turrets on it rather than just one so it was double for shooting. I went back and we went to Brooklyn on the shake-down cruise. Do you know what that is? That means a brand new ship. You just go out and see if it's going to run right; tune it up like a car. We went and first thing out of the box, we head into a storm, a very bad one.

Mr. Garcia: Since you were in Brooklyn did you test it out in the Atlantic?

Mr. Appleton: No. When we got out it was tied up, it was a brand new ship. We took off on what they call a shake-down cruise. We ran into a heavy storm and the rivets on the thing were popping it was so bad. Anyway, we went back into Brooklyn Naval Yard and they fixed it in a couple or three days. We went to Panama Canal and up the line. We refueled a couple of places, San Francisco, Mare Island, and then we went up to where the suicide planes were. That was Formosa. That was before—what do they call Formosa now, honey? They changed the name.

Mrs. Appleton: To Taiwan?

Mr. Appleton: What's on the stuff we buy all the time?

Mrs. Appleton: Taiwan?

Mr. Appleton: Well, anyway we were talking about suicide planes. They would send four of us up ahead fifty miles. Anything that came off Japan or Formosa, our radar, that system, was pretty good back then. They had fixed it pretty good. We would see them a-coming. We would send a message immediately to the plane that there they come. They may peel off a couple of them and try to get us destroyers. They got close, not real close, once. A piece of the plane we'd hit blowed up and a man was standing up there in a little cubby hole on the deck. He's got his phones on and he had to duck because there was a piece came right down through that hole while that was going on. The plane went on then and fell in the water. But that's how close they were coming. Well, it was terrible the way that all went about. It was just ship after ship hit, you know, be afire. If we had kept on, I know this, trying to get the war won instead of the atomic bomb, if we hadn't used it there would have been a million men

of ours killed before we could get it won. I feel that way. I just think the kamikazes were bad. They were bad. They were hitting about, I would say, one out of four ships, they were hitting. It wasn't good. Now, that's about the end of my tale.

Mr. Garcia: What do you miss most about that particular time in your life, as far as your military life?

Mr. Appleton: What do I miss? Right at the end of the war I got a thirty-day leave. That was the most enjoyable when I got to go home to see my folks. That was just before I went to the new ship, I think it was. I got a thirty-day leave. That was the best time I ever had in the service. I think I felt better being home and so forth.

Mr. Garcia: You mentioned that you found out that they had dropped the bomb, or the bombs, where were you when you learned of that happening?

Mr. Appleton: Wake. Wake Island. I was on Wake Island and we heard it. We were getting ready to go on up. They said, "Well, they dropped a bomb on them." Whoever it was said that it told on the radio, it said that they have surrendered. That's the first thing they said, "surrender." Then they got to telling us what it was that made them surrender. Said that thousands of the Japanese were killed and it was one bomb. We couldn't figure it out. Then we sailed on up and went to Japan and I was there during the surrender then when they signed.

Mr. Garcia: So you were there.

Mr. Appleton: I was there on the USS *Hank*. They issued me a gun and a rifle. I still got the sheet at home. There was about eleven of us. We went ashore. They told us to patrol a certain area and they said if they blink their eyes too much, shoot them. Just like that. I mean, you don't have any pity. Because they'd done so much to the Americans. I got this letter that says we don't have any mercy on them if they bother you at all. Well, they didn't. We'd go down the street and they would bow just like this, you know how they do. They would bow and we'd just keep on walking. I did that a couple of days and they relieved me.

Mr. Garcia: When they relieved you and you got back on the *Hank* did you leave right away or did you stay in the waters of the Japanese Sea?

Mr. Appleton: I got to come back on the USS *Indiana*. It was a battleship. I got to come back on that to Seattle. Took about four days, I believe, for us to get back. We had about three thousand men that were relieved to come back to the States and I was one of them.

Mr. Garcia: When you got back stateside, did you remain in the military?

Mr. Appleton: No.

Mr. Garcia: Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

Mr. Appleton: As soon as I got back from the war, I went over to the rehab, or whatever. They had lines where you could just go through a line and they'd have your record and you'd get discharged. You'd get your money that you had coming, the pay and so forth. I remember I was so happy. I was free. Like I was free, you know. I walked a long ways. I had about three hundred dollars mustering out pay. That was a lot of money. I didn't want to ride anything it seemed like. I just wanted to walk. I walked a long ways and then I finally got a ride to El Paso, Texas.

Mr. Garcia: You were discharged in San Diego or San Francisco?

Mr. Appleton: Yes, San Diego.

Mr. Garcia: You arrived in El Paso, Texas.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, that's where I went. Then I started walking. Back then people would pick you up because you had on a uniform and they knew you were all right. I saw some people I thought I knew, but I wasn't sure. And sure enough, yes, they had a football game going on from Odessa, Texas, to El Paso. They picked me up and delivered me all the way home.

Mr. Garcia: When you got home and you met up with your family, what was that like?

Mr. Appleton: Well, it was wonderful. Everybody was—yeah. It was good. I started looking for a job then. All I could do. I couldn't do very much as far as—I went to some people and I kept going and I couldn't get a job. Finally, a guy told me, “Why don't you go out to Brown Oil Field?” That's a fuel company out of Houston. “Why don't you go out there? That old gentleman will give you a job but he's mean. He's mean. He'll probably fire you in one day.” I said, “Well, I'm going to go out there and try it cause I need the work.” I went out there and I saw him. He was walking in the shop. That shop was way long. It was a quarter mile long and overhead cranes and hobbing machines and drill collars for the oil field. I went in and I saw him. He was a little short, heavyset fellow. I walked up to him and said, “Mr. Brown?” And he said, “Yes.” I said, “I need a job real bad and I'll do anything you have to do in this shop.” “You're the kind of guy I'm looking for.” (laughs) So that started that romance.

I worked pretty hard and I made seventy-five cents an hour. That's a lot of

money. I learned how to do the crane. How to load machines. How to put the drill collar in a machine, a turret blade. I learned how to heat-treat iron, metal. I learned how to weld. I learned how to run a hobbing machine within three days. If I didn't learn how, I was fired. He said it was a forty-thousand dollar machine brand new. "If you don't learn how to run it in three days, you're fired." I stayed on it night and day. I learned how to run it.

Mr. Garcia: How long did you stay working for that particular company?

Mr. Appleton: About two-and a-half years.

Mr. Garcia: Two-and a-half years.

Mr. Appleton: But I learned more from that place than I ever learned hardly in my life. Because it helped me to make a man out of myself. I became shop foreman over thirty-six men in that period of time. So I must have done something right. Those men were a lot older than I was, the ones who ran those machines. But he said, "You're gonna do it." I said, "Okay."

Mr. Garcia: When you left that particular company, what did you move on to? Why did you leave the company?

Mr. Appleton: I was tired. I had worked like fifteen hours a day and I was just tired out. I just finally told them, "I'm going to quit." He didn't want me to but I did. I said, "I may be back." I never did go back. Oh, I went back to visit. I went to a company named Patterson Ballagh out of California. They put on these rubber protectors on drill pipe that's going in the well. It's used as a shock absorber, you see. It wouldn't do this, slap around in the casing and knock holes in it. It kept that going. I did that for several years.

Tape A, Side 2 ends. Tape B begins.

Mr. Garcia: Talking about the drill bits rattling around and then you were coming back.

Mr. Appleton: That was in the oil field. That paid pretty good money, so to speak. Then I came to Missouri, Springfield, Missouri. I'd sold out what I had interest in Texaco and I had a little bit of money so I came up to Springfield. I bought eighty acres on a kind of a highway. I paid \$40,000 for it. That was a lot of money. I had to borrow some and so forth. I built some houses. Anything I want to do I—somebody said, "How did you learn how to do these things or this thing?" I said, "I worked at it." I said, "That's the reason." I built the houses and then I got into other things on the side, like explosives. Then I got into putting up mercury vapor lights. Oh, I couldn't do all of it but I hired people who could do this for me.

I'd go buy a farm. I liked to do that. That's the one thing I like to do, buy a farm. One time I had about four. But it ran you to death, you know. I had cattle. Even now, every chance I get to talk to a young man or young boy, I tell them that you can make it if you want to work. If you don't want to work, you ain't gonna make it. I tell them sometimes you've got to stick with something to learn. Everything you do, learn. I mentioned this to a couple of young men before I left to come up here is why it's fresh on my mind. They listened. I could tell they were listening to me. A lot of times, they won't listen; they just look at you. I tell them that I might be a prime example. I said, "I've had maybe three small, I should say, corporations." I got my education by the way of knocks. I feel like I've done pretty well. I sold the last piece of land I had just the other day before we came up here, didn't we, honey? I sold a little strip of land I'd had for years and years. A man came up, there were two of them, and they said they wanted to buy it. I said, "It's not for sale," because I had my little workshop out in the back. "Well, we sure need it." I said, "Well, it's not for sale." But I said, "Give me a couple of days to think about it." So, I thought about it a couple of days and I said, "Okay, I'll sell you that." They seemed very nice and they were. It's a strip of land that lays in behind our house. I wanted to get away from work. This strip is right behind the house. At the very last there, I used to get cattle just to say I had some, you know, because I wanted to just look at them. I'd go out in the evening and I'd just watch them and they'd eat out of my hand. Things like that. Little chickens, I always had chickens because I like little banty chickens. That came from childhood. I told these gentlemen, I'd talked to Louise about it, I said, "If we sell that little strip, we'll have to sell that building and the whole works back there. But we won't have too many feet to mow." We have a big house to clean. (laughs) We talked it over and decided to see if we could sell it or not. I told them I was going to have to think about it, so I thought about it and I said, "Well, I'm going to ask what I think it's worth and maybe it's worth more than that but I'll (?)" They came and they said, "How much?" I said, "Fifty-five thousand." "We're going to write you a check." (laughs) So you know, you never know. We have a little money. We couldn't come up here without it. It's nice to have that.

Mr. Garcia: You've mentioned your wife a couple of times—

Mr. Appleton: Yes, she's a dandy.

Mr. Garcia: —in the tape here. Tell us about how you went about meeting.

Mr. Appleton: How did I meet her?

Mr. Garcia: Yes, sir, your wife.

Mr. Appleton: I lived at a town, Republic. I met her through my sister. My sister introduced me to her. So we started going together, just having fun.

Mr. Garcia: How old were you when you met your wife? Was this before, after, during your military?

Mrs. Appleton: This is both of our second marriages.

Mr. Appleton: This is both of our second marriages.

Mrs. Appleton: 1972.

Mr. Appleton: She came from Holland, Amsterdam. I came from Texas. That's quite a ways.

Mr. Garcia: Sure is.

Mrs. Appleton: I was on the other side of the war. I was—

Mr. Garcia: Experiencing a different war.

Mrs. Appleton: I was experiencing a different war. More of occupation by the Germans.

Mr. Appleton: She was occupied away from there by the Germans. (laughs) And I got her off of that.

Mr. Garcia: Any children between you all?

Mr. Appleton: Yes. I had four children; she had four children. Put them together. We raised them.

Mrs. Appleton: Well, (?).

Mr. Appleton: Well, pretty well.

Mrs. Appleton: Two of them were raised already.

Mr. Appleton: Oh yes, two were already. We turned out pretty good. We had Phillip, let's see, no, we had Ray.

Mrs. Appleton: Tommy. His two oldest children were already gone. My four children were still at home. His two other children were with their mother.

Mr. Appleton: And I had two at home.

Mr. Appleton: They've all done okay. She's a nurse. Then we have a doctor and two other nurses, right? Yes, two other nurses. The boy in California he's a public speaker. He works with people that are going to build something and he's a go-between. In other words, he'll help people who are going to build a house or addition. Then instead of them messing with it, he does it. He talks to the city about it.

Mrs. Appleton: He lives in Santa Barbara.

Mr. Appleton: He lives in Santa Barbara.

Mrs. Appleton: Santa Barbara is very strict. Zones are very strict. Very hard to get permits to do anything to change additions or new property. So he more or less made himself an expert in helping people get their permits to add or change or build. He does that and does pretty well with that.

Mr. Appleton: He makes his talks and so forth. He's a good speaker. He's the oldest boy. He's fifty-six. Then the next boy's fifty-four and he's a carpenter and boy, a good one. He can look at something and make it. Then Phillip falls next. He's the doctor. Then the nurses. Erin and so forth. That's about it. They're all okay.

Mr. Garcia: Good, good. What I'd like to do is finish up with how we went about meeting you today. You're here at the Menger for a reunion of your ship. In a few words can you describe how the organization kind of started and what you do in order to stay together and in contact with each other and some of the other cities you might have visited?

Mr. Appleton: First of all, I don't know who started this. Do you, Louise?

Mrs. Appleton: I think the first letter we got was shortly after we were married. That was around '72 or so. They've had seventeen reunions since then. This is number seventeen. They meet every two years.

Mr. Garcia: Every two years.

Mr. Appleton: We've only been to three or four of them.

Mrs. Appleton: We hosted one in Springfield.

Mr. Appleton: Yes, we hosted one.

Mrs. Appleton: And we went to New Orleans and then this one.

Mr. Appleton: Yes. We were the hosts for the group in Springfield, Missouri. We took

them to Branson. I got limousines and we all went over there and that was a lot of fun.

Mr. Garcia: Other than visiting the cities, and of course, the attractions that are part of the city, what is the main purpose of the group?

Mr. Appleton: Just to stay together and see each other.

Mrs. Appleton: A lot of sharing.

Mr. Appleton: Sharing.

Mrs. Appleton: A lot of shared memories.

Mr. Appleton: Sharing of the memories is about 80%. We all enjoy it. Over the years there has been people that passed away that were on the *Smith*. I think that's about it.

Mr. Garcia: Something I like to do as an interviewer and that's to ask the interviewees to provide a special message to persons who are reading the documentation or listening to the tape. What message would Mr. Appleton like to leave for generations to come? Either through your experience or whatever your thoughts are about the war that you went through and, of course, in 2004 we're going through a difficult time ourselves. What message would you like to leave to future generations?

Mr. Appleton: That's a big order. (laughs) That's a big order. For future generations to have. Oh, boy. First of all, I'd like to avoid war if at all possible. The war today that we're in makes no sense to me. It's a time when people are trying to kill other peoples all over the world and I just believe that a lot of it could have been avoided. Our young men over there are being killed these days in Iraq. I realize there are a few, very few, that have made our name to be bad. Those that have been put in prison, so to speak. I just hope that we have leadership for this country that thinks very deeply in their thoughts before we have another war. That would be my primary interest right now at this time. Our young men, I hope, takes heed and thinks about love more than they would about killing people. I suppose I would say that.

Mr. Garcia: Mr. Appleton, on behalf of the Nimitz State Historic Site, Museum of the Pacific War, we'd like to thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs. Appleton. This will be the end of tape number two, side one. I as the interviewer, Michael Garcia, was also assisted with the tape and the interview by my wife, Patricia Garcia. Thank you very much, Mr. Appleton.

Mr. Appleton: I hope I did a little good for you.

Proof

Bonnie Day Rush
January 3, 2010
Dublin, Texas
Tape 1169 a & b