

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

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

***Interview with Milton H. West, Jr.
Survivor, USS Kitkun Bay
U. S. Navy***

Interview With Milton H. West, Jr.

This is Clarence C. Bryk. Today is September nineteenth, 2004. I am interviewing Mr. Milton H. West, Jr. and the interview is taking place in Texas at the Fredericksburg High School. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. The conference being held at this time is the Leyte Gulf. Now you will be hearing Mr. West who's going to start telling us about his experiences and a little bit about his background in World War II.

Mr. West: Thank you very much. My name is Milton H. West, Jr. but everyone that knows me calls me by my nickname, which is Mickey. I was born on July the twelfth, 1916, in Floresville, Texas. My father was Milton H. West, and my mother's maiden name was Temple, Mary Temple Worley. I was an only child. My father moved the family to Brownsville, Texas, when I was the age of one and a half, I believe it was. I was an only child. I went through the school system in Brownsville, two years I believe it was in the junior college there. I then attended Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where my father was in Congress. I went to law school—first, I had to get a liberal arts degree, or an undergraduate degree, so after I finished three years at law school at Austin I was able then to go to Harvard where I received an LLM in Taxation that my father had recommended that I undertake to pursue a professional career in that specialty.

I went to work after my graduation for Andrews and Kurth, a law firm with which I continued to be present and work for except for my service in the Navy during World War II. Early on in my association with Andrews and Kurth I was given the responsibility to maintain patent protection for the Hughes Tool Company owned by Howard Hughes. I was assigned to protection of patents and that required me to go down into the oil fields in Illinois and Michigan and Indiana where I was on December the seventh 1941. When driving around with one of the field men, we heard the information that Pearl Harbor had occurred. Two days later—this was on a Sunday, I guess—on the following Monday or Tuesday I went down to, I think it was, Evansville, Indiana, and volunteered for the Marine Corps, although I had already had my number for the draft in Brownsville. And that being the case, when the recruiting officer in the Marines was told that, he quickly dismissed me as a possibility and said they had no jurisdiction, I'd have to go on into the Army.

I had returned to Houston where my law firm was located, and several months prior to that, one of my associates there asked me, since he had an extra application to the Navy, would I care to fill in the application and send it in. I did so and promptly forgot about the application all together. I returned to, having spent a year and a half out in the oil fields, I returned to Houston two weeks, I think it was, before I was to go into the Army. I went back to Brownsville, came back up, went to San Antonio, passed the physical for induction into the Army. I came back to Houston to clean out my desk and returned to Brownsville where on the following Monday I was to leave for the Army. And on my desk I found a package that was from the Navy, opened it, and in that package was a document saying that my

application for a commission in the Navy with an ensign grade, and that I was to proceed to the nearest Naval air station and take the oath of office.

The nearest Naval air station was Corpus. I rode the railroad from Brownsville to Corpus. I went into the Naval air station there. The yeoman was sitting at the desk and asked who I was, and I showed him my orders, or showed him what I'd been given. He said "The captain will see you in just a minute." He went in and spoke to the captain evidently, returned, said "The captain will be with you in just a moment." The captain appeared, asked me to hold up my right hand, I held up my right hand, took the oath of office so to speak. The captain said "The yeoman will give you your orders." He left the room. The yeoman typed and then handed me my orders, and I asked him what they were. He said, "You are to proceed to the location where Fleet Airwing Two was located." I asked him what that meant, he said "Well, you'll have to go to San Francisco and report in to the commandant of the district" and I've forgotten the district "in San Francisco."

I went down, got on a train and went to San Francisco.

Mr. Bryk: What date was that, roughly?

Mr. West: This was in early January of forty-two. I reported in to the Naval office there in San Francisco and they wanted to know why I was not in uniform. I said well, no one had told me to get a uniform. And they said well, go down and get a uniform. I asked them where I was supposed to get one, they said "Go find the Naval store," and they laughed at me. Which I did. My order was to report back as soon as I had done so, which I did. When I reported back they said, "Here are your orders. You report down to Dock Eleven (I believe it was) and board the ship there." And I asked them what was, and they said "Just report down to that dock and the ship will be there." Which I did.

The ship that was there was the *Lurline*. Which was a converted luxury transport vessel. When I went aboard they assigned me to a stateroom and I had barely gotten into the stateroom when the word came out on the loud speaker, "Ensign West, Ensign West, report to the bridge." I reported to the bridge and the officer on duty there said "You will take the watch from twelve to four in the morning." I said, "Well, what do you mean by taking the watch." And they said, "Well, what do you mean by that question?" And I said, "I really don't know much about the Navy" and they said "What in the world are you doing here?" And I said "I don't know, these are my orders." And with that the conversation ended.

I went back to my state room and later it turned out that there were seven other gentlemen who had received the same type of orders that I had received, which was a terrible mistake on the part of the then called "dupers," the Bureau of Personnel in the Navy. We were supposed to have been given orders to attend indoctrination and . . .

Mr. Bryk: Some kind of training.

Mr. West: . . . obviously none of us had any training and when we landed, we were unexpected, when we landed at Oahu . . .

Mr. Bryk: So you actually did go out on the ship.

Mr. West: Yes, yes.

Mr. Bryk: No training at all.

Mr. West: No training at all. When we got to Oahu there was, I believe, a car that met us and although when we arrived, we proceeded then all to Ford Island, which was of course the island surrounded by Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Bryk: Was your father an active member in Congress at that time?

Mr. West: Correct.

Mr. Bryk: But they didn't make the connection at all that he was in the House of Representatives?

Mr. West: Yes, he was, he was on the Ways and Means Committee, a very powerful committee.

Mr. Bryk: Nobody knew that? Did anybody make an association?

Mr. West: Oh no. They couldn't care less.

Mr. Bryk: You were just a guy named West. And your father was on the Ways and Means Committee. I imagine the admiral would have liked to have known that.

Mr. West: Well, I don't think that had anything to do with it. Only I remember, in taking the Army exam, I guess it was, I didn't take an exam for the Navy, I don't believe. But in any event, when we got to Pearl Harbor they really didn't have any, they weren't expecting us apparently, and they said "Well, we'll just have to put you up here at Ford Island where, you'll be happy to know, we have some of the Navy brass." And sure enough, there among other young men, officers in the Navy, was one Mark Mitscher.

In any event, about two or three days later one of these ensigns that was among the eight was walking ahead of me, and walking behind him was the chief of staff of Fleet Air Wing Two, who was a captain, and this ensign saluted a petty officer, and the captain went up to him and said "Son, what were you doing saluting the petty officer?" And he said, "Well, what was I supposed to do?" And at that time, it finally hit the fan out there that they had eight ensigns that didn't know anything about the Navy or anything else connected with the military. As a consequence, to make a long story short, they set up a school for us and really put us through, while it was hastily thrown together, it turned out to be a very realistic course in handling ships, and so forth.

I was assigned to shore duty where Fleet Air Wing Two was, which had the responsibility of sending out the patrol planes around the Hawaiian Islands. And there I was in communications and learned to type fast, then learned to handle the secret codes which thereafter throughout my Naval career I was required to do, which was to, while all the encrypted messages were being taken in by radio, then in the secret code rooms was where the officers would go, the communication officers would go, and then with the code break down, using the machines, and type out the messages that would be destined for—of course, when I was, in my naval career after that was always attached to a flag admiral. And these messages that would come in and would be marked “For eyes only” I would break down and read and then—because it was very difficult, in many instances, to come out with the exact wording that these secret messages would have. Because taking down the encrypted message by the enlisted men would not be perfect by any means, and we’d have to fill in what really made sense. And I got accustomed to doing that.

Mr. Bryk: You were a communications specialist.

Mr. West: Well, in that sense. Not familiar with the technical, but yes.

Mr. Bryk: You read the codes.

Mr. West: Yes. The headquarters of Fleet Air Wing Two was on Kaneohe, which was across what they called the Pali on the island of Oahu. A very beautiful place, by the way. I’ve forgotten how long I was there. We flew out and sometimes it was Midway, another time we flew out to Wake, spent some time there getting communications set up.

Mr. Bryk: Had you gone to Midway before the Midway Battle?

Mr. West: Oh, this was early on. I should say that when I arrived on the Lurline at Pearl Harbor and we then went on over to Ford Island, this was in February of forty-two. And I was shocked, of course, as everybody else was, on first visiting Ford Island and Pearl Harbor and seeing all the battleships that were in the mud, on the side, oil everywhere. It was a disastrous looking place.

While at Ford Island I had the opportunity of meeting, among other officers, Captain Mark Mitscher who later became, of course, a great air admiral. *One time while I was there at Ford Island I had heard about the officers’ club over across the island where the submarine base was. I went over to the submarine base and I was having a drink at the bar and I was looking at the pictures on the wall, and I noticed that there were pictures on the wall of horse racing. I asked the bar tender where the pictures were taken, and he told me they were taken off of Japan. I said “What do you mean, Japan?” And he said “Yes, our submarines would get close enough to push up the periscopes and take those pictures.” Today at the symposium I heard that one of the great carriers that the Japs were building toward the end of the war was a configuration for a huge air craft carrier basically on the hull of the Yamoto and the Masashi, the great battleships, and that later on one of our*

submarines was waiting and when they launched it, they put two or three torpedoes in the thing and sunk it.

Mr. Bryk: This was early in the war?

Mr. West: No, this was right at the last.

Mr. Bryk: That thing never got to sea.

Mr. West: Out of chronology. But in any event, as a result of that I went over and volunteered, or asked for duty, on submarines, and went through the whole examination except the eye examination. While I passed it visually, there was a particular examination to see if you could hold that eye acuity for long hours at a time, and I failed that, and as a consequence I was rejected for submarine duty. I had applied earlier for sea duty and was granted that, and my first tour of duty at sea was, I was attached as a staff officer to Admiral Black Jack Reese, as he was known throughout the Navy, a task master that was not reluctant to order the officers on his staff to stay in their rooms. In fact it amounted almost to house arrest. He was known throughout the fleet, apparently. He was a terrific admiral, and I got along with him very well.

He was on the, his flag was put on the *Enterprise*. I stayed on the *Enterprise*, and I was trying to recall the other day how long I was on the *Enterprise*, and I do remember that while in the initial months of being on the *Enterprise* and under the flag of Admiral Reese, we were operating out of Pearl Harbor, and we'd go out and make strikes and cover the landings and all of the missions that we did, that after we, when we went to the Marshalls and the Marianas. But after we'd taken Madura Atoll, there was a huge coral reef that came out of the depths of the ocean and rose about, at normal tide, about four or five feet above feet level. And it was about ten or twelve miles across. The only entrance was a narrow entrance, and they built a steel net that was moveable, and there they would, they dropped that net and when they raised the net, the anchorage within that coral reef was wide enough to accommodate the whole Pacific fleet. There we would come back, after these strikes, and naval operations, and second and third battle of the Philippine seas, and so forth, and there we would refuel, rearm, and not have to go all the way back to Pearl.

Mr. Bryk: What island was that now?

Mr. West: It was Madura Atoll, it was an atoll—I think it is now referred to as *Ulithi*, but the pictures that I have taken of the admiral's staff was aboard, of course, the *Enterprise*, and I remember having spent without stepping ashore nine months, so I know that I was aboard the *Enterprise* for one period of nine months that I never stepped ashore.

Mr. Bryk: When did you start on the *Enterprise*? What month, do you remember, what year?

Mr. West: No, I don't.

Mr. Bryk: You were involved anywhere near the Battle of Midway?

Mr. West: Right immediately after the Battle of Midway. As a matter of fact, the officers that were then having been assigned, I believe, to sea duty, were waiting assignment and we drew straws to see who would go, literally, to Midway and who would stay, and matter of fact, I guess I drew straws to stay in Pearl Harbor, Kaneohe, really.

Mr. Bryk: The *Enterprise*, of course, was involved in . . .

Mr. West: Oh yes, the *Enterprise* was at Midway.

I want to talk about the relationship in the Navy between the staff of a flag admiral who comes aboard, outranks the captain, and your relationship to being on the staff of the admiral. Your relation to the so-called ship's company was not too good, and it depended largely on the action of the admiral or the captain and the ship's company. For example, when we boarded the *Enterprise*, as a matter of fact, this admiral that attended the symposium here is a hundred and two years old, vice admiral, he sat in front of me during the thing, and I asked him if he knew, had heard, of Admiral Black Jack Reese, and he said "Yeah, I had heard of him."

When we came aboard the admiral had his staff formed. And the first thing he did, the ship's company was out on the deck there, without anything but shorts on enjoying the sun, you know, sunbathing and whatnot. He told the captain, "Order all those men to put their clothes on." And the whole ship's company knew the admiral had come aboard and staff officers, it was just, you know.

Mr. Bryk: So here you are, you're on the *Enterprise*, the admiral sort of takes it over when he moves on to it.

Mr. West: It depends on the personality of the admiral. And it just washed off on the staff officers.

Mr. Bryk: Was that near the end of 1942?

Mr. West: As soon as we went aboard. He pulled us off . . .

Mr. Bryk: What time frame was that?

Mr. West: The latter part of forty-two, I guess.

Mr. Bryk: So now you're on the *Enterprise* with the admiral, and you're going where?

Mr. West: Thereafter we were assigned to Third Fleet. At that time, Halsey—no, I mean the Fifth Fleet. Halsey, and it was just a name, but when Halsey was in command it became the Third Fleet. And then Halsey, during this period of time, was just no where to be seen, and

therefore it was all Fifth Fleet, Admiral Spruance, and Admiral Spruance was the commander of the Fifth Fleet, the commander of the Task Force Thirty-eight, which was all of the carriers. And the air arm was then at the very beginning? I'm not sure. But certainly not too far after we went aboard it was Admiral Mitscher, they made Mitscher admiral, and he became the commander of Task Force Thirty-eight. I mean Fifty-eight, Fifty-eight, I'm sorry.

But now, for your information, to straighten the record out here, as soon as we left Pearl, we were stationed at Pearl until in the Marianas we took this big coral atoll, until that time we would just come back and the ship and Task Force Thirty-eight was just stationed at Pearl Harbor. And it was only, oh, I don't know, after we got through, well, we went through the first and second battles of the Philippine Sea, we went to, let's see, when I broke the code, broke the message to the admiral, we were at Madura Atoll, and my god, I remember thinking when I read this thing, "If you will prepare to strike Truk," my god, I knew that as soon as word was passed to the crew and everybody else that we were going to attack Truk, it would create waves, but that didn't come out until, I don't know, a month after that.

All the action that occurred during the next, I don't know, year and a half, started initially while we were stationed at Pearl Harbor. And then later, after we moved the whole thing, taking islands, all these different island structures, finally we hit this coral island and I think it was in the Marshalls. But in any event, this was I don't know how many months after that we were stationed at Pearl, that we dropped at Madura Atoll and took that, and we never came back to Pearl again.

Mr. Bryk: You just came out of the Marshall islands?

Mr. West: Yeah, right. So, do you want me to correct it now or later?

Mr. Bryk: No, it's on here. What time frame are you in now? Where are we year wise? About a year and a half out of, you were on the *Enterprise* or in that task group?

Mr. West: Let's see. Leyte Gulf operation . . .

Mr. Bryk: It was October, forty-four.

Mr. West: October, forty-four. So I was, by the time the thing, Admiral Reese was, the war plan was to establish a big naval base at, I don't know if it was Tarawa or where. And Admiral Reese was assigned to head that naval base and therefore go ashore. And I remember, he asked me if I would go with him, and I didn't want to go ashore, and I hated turning him down because I was one of the few officers that he never really raised hell with. (Laughs)

Mr. Bryk: So you changed, when he had the head of this shore . . .

Mr. West: When he was assigned to the shore duty, then they got ready to reassign his staff. He was

putting his staff together. And then when I said "I'd rather not go with you," then I got into the pool of deck officers at Pearl Harbor and Nimitz's staff assigned me then to Admiral Ofstie's staff, and Admiral Ofstie then at that time was a young admiral and his, I guess, first assignment as an admiral I guess, was to the, his flag was to aboard the *Kitkun Bay*, and that's how I wound up then on the CVEs.

Mr. Bryk: How does Ofstie spell his name?

Mr. West: I think it was Ralph O-F-S-T-I-E. A very Swedish name.

Mr. Bryk: So you now went into the pool, and then you were assigned to Admiral Ofstie, and he put his flag on what ship?

Mr. West: Kitkun Bay.

Mr. Bryk: How do you spell that?

Mr. West: K-I-T-K-U-N.

Mr. Bryk: K-I-T-K-U-N.

Mr. West: Bay.

Mr. Bryk: B-A-Y.

Mr. West: B-A-Y.

Mr. Bryk: So this is the ship that you talked about.

Mr. West: And the sister ship was the *Gambier Bay*. So that both of those were two units on which Admiral Ofstie was the commander.

Mr. Bryk: And what kind of ship was this again? Was it an aircraft carrier?

Mr. West: A CVE. It's small.

Mr. Bryk: A small aircraft carrier.

Mr. West: It was one of the six caught at Leyte Gulf.

Mr. Bryk: The six that were left there all by yourself.

Mr. West: Yes.

Mr. Bryk: And that was called a CVE?

Mr. West: CVE.

Mr. Bryk: And that identified it as a small carrier. You have to remember, I'm Air Force.

Mr. West: Sure, sure.

Mr. Bryk: So now you're on the *Kitkun Bay*, one of the small carriers, and ultimately you landed up defending the landing.

Mr. West: As a matter of fact, the time—let me get this straight. I don't know that I'd even met Admiral Ofstie until we, I've forgotten how I got from the . . . I hate doing this because I can't remember whether I was sent to Manus, which the big gathering place for all the ships, including the fast carriers and whatnot, all the ships for the invasion of Leyte, was at Manus. And I think that I was sent, caught a plane from, I don't know where the heck I did. How I got to Manus, but Manus is where I think Ofstie, I met Admiral Ofstie, and we went aboard the *Kitkun Bay* there. I think that's right.

Mr. Bryk: How many airplanes did you fly off of that?

Mr. West: Only about thirty. *Enterprise* was, you know, a hundred or something like that.

Mr. Bryk: So it was considerably smaller. These were converted . . .

Mr. West: Oh yeah. It was converted. As a matter of fact, it was supposed to be what was it, destroyers, I think? Laid down. They were converted.

Mr. Bryk: So then you ultimately became part of the force that went to the Leyte invasion, and the landing, and then you went, Halsey went north as I recall, and somebody went south. You were left in the center. And you're the ones that faced the, was that the center group?

Mr. West: Well, you want it to be pretty clear, but I can dictate fairly accurately. After Manus and from there on we need to fill in—how far did we get?

Mr. Bryk: We got you with you're assigned to Admiral Ofstie's staff and you're on, and his flag was on the *Kitkun Bay*, and then you went into the Leyte Gulf operation.

Mr. West: Let me fill you in right quick. Admiral Ofstie was a young admiral, and the two ships on which he had under his command were the *Kitkun Bay* and the *Gambier Bay*. When we joined up at Leyte, we rendezvoused with four other carriers of which the flag officer was Admiral Sprague. And he was senior to Admiral Ofstie. So six together. But, the tactical responsibility, all of that, rested solely with Admiral Sprague. And as a consequence, what we became was simply observers. No responsibility, no authority, we simply became

spectators, then still with our own structure, still with the admiral's bridge, staff and the admiral. Nothing to do but observe.

Mr. Bryk: So under Sprague he was.

Mr. West: Sprague was the senior admiral.

Mr. Bryk: So he just told you what?

Mr. West: Oh, nothing. We just sat on the sideline totally, and we were simply observers. And that's why I turned into from a participant to an observer with a fifty-yard seat. (Laughs) I don't know how many other officers in . . .

Mr. Bryk: Tell me about what you observed the, I think that would be interesting. You're there and you're in the six small carrier group. Getting cold, are you?

Mr. West: Yeah, my fingers are getting cold.

Mr. Bryk: You're in the small carrier group under Sprague, and you say you were an observer, meaning that you saw all this action and so forth but didn't participate particularly.

Mr. West: Not particularly at all. Not at all. No authority, just no action that an admiral's staff would take. Because he had no authority he was outranked by . . .

Mr. Bryk: So he just did what he was told.

Mr. West: Right. Well, he wasn't told anything. The admiral, senior admiral acting as an admiral, not as a captain of the ship, the captain of the ship, the only other person that the captain answers to or listens to is the admiral under which he is service.

Mr. Bryk: Which is Sprague.

Mr. West: Which is Sprague.

Mr. Bryk: And he had no tactical mission for you or anything?

Mr. West: Nothing.

Mr. Bryk: Where were you located, exactly in that, when the defense of the landing came on?

Mr. West: Admiral's bridge.

Mr. Bryk: Right in the center of it all.

Mr. West: Oh yeah, sure.

Mr. Bryk: Good. We're getting near the first half of the tape, so we must have gone something like what, an hour? Something like that. You might tell us now, probably the most interesting is what you saw. At the conference you were talking about watching kamikazes and so forth, and so what did you actually eyewitness see out there? You're on the bridge and you've got no particular task and you're watching what's going on.

Mr. West: What if I said just simply that it was a fact, and this was not mentioned specifically, but as far as I knew and as far as Admiral Ofstie and Admiral Sprague knew, *our information* was that the middle strait, oh I know this is a fact. After this happened, it was almost impossible to believe, but the survey ships over the years in the Navy apparently had never tried to navigate or mark and determine the depth of the ocean through the middle of what they call San Bernardino Strait. Our information was that it was not deep enough to accommodate capital ships. Therefore, there was no consideration ever given as far as we knew, and when I say that, as far as Admiral Ofstie knew, it was never contemplated that an attack would come by capital ships coming through the middle of the Philippines. We knew from breaking their code that they were coming and we knew. In any event, we knew that they were coming from the south, we knew that they were coming from the north. And we knew that the carriers would be coming from the north, and we knew that mostly the battleships would be coming from the south. Nothing in the middle. Nothing.

Mr. Bryk: This water was too shallow.

Mr. West: Too shallow. It would not accommodate, it was just never . . .

Mr. Bryk: Not brought out.

Mr. West: So how do we get that quickly into the . . .

Mr. Bryk: We're just about coming to the end of this first tape, and I think you've set it up for us now that there was no thought or no one worried about anyone coming through the center of this thing.

Mr. West: Well I told you that.

Mr. Bryk: It's on tape now too. We've taped all this.

Mr. West: Oh, really?

Mr. Bryk: Yeah, that's all been on there.

Mr. West: (Laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE.

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO.

Mr. Bryk: Capital ships weren't supposed to be, capital ships could not enter this strait?

Mr. West: I was having breakfast on the morning of . . .

Mr. Bryk: October twenty-fourth or -fifth?

Mr. West: October the twenty-fourth or the twenty-fifth, and aircraft carrier quarters were ordered. My recollection is and I wondered why that was so, which is neither here nor there. It meant I had to go to the bridge which was my battle station, even though Admiral Ofstie had no tactical responsibility. I arrived at the bridge and asked the officer who was on Admiral Ofstie's staff what was going on that led to the in effect battle station call. And he said "We are under surface attack." I said, ah, pooh-pooh, surface attack. He said "Yes," and about that time a salvo came over the horizon and as it turned out later, in retrospect, we learned that it was, that first salvo, and several salvos later came from the *Yamato* which was the huge Japanese ship that had the eighteen-point-one guns that no battleship the, or since, has ever had. Shells were enormous.

But in any event, the first salvo landed sort of somewhat astern of us, and the next salvo, one of the shells exploded right under our fantail and it was so powerful that it raised the aft portion of the ship to a position that made the entire ship almost vertical, and I thought it was going straight down vertically at the bow, and finally it settled down back with a huge splash.

Mr. Bryk: How high do you think it went up?

Mr. West: I thought almost vertical. It just raised it up like this, and I thought, my god, this thing is going to go straight down.

The *Gambier Bay*—we were at the opening of the engagement, the *Kitkun Bay* was on the, looking at a map north and south, and the Japanese, two Japanese carriers were detached—I mean, not carriers, cruisers, I'm not sure whether they were heavy cruisers or light cruisers, but two Japanese cruisers appeared on the horizon, the *Yamato* was not . . .

Mr. Bryk: Put a dot there on the map exactly where we're talking about. Where were you located?

Mr. West: We were right off in here.

Mr. Bryk: Okay.

Mr. West: The *Kitkun Bay* on the initial opening of hostilities and gun fire was the closest of the six

carriers, the CVEs, to the oncoming pair of Japanese cruisers. We speeded up a bit over what the Admiral Sprague had posted as as speed performance for all six carriers. We had a position in effect left the *Gambier Bay* being the closer of our ship to the two giant cruisers that came on and took positions on either beam of the *Gambier Bay* and proceeded to, at very close range, start throwing shells right into and through the *Gambier Bay* simply because the Japanese force was expecting surface action with the battleships and cruisers and consequently were all loaded with armor-piercing shells with delayed fuses, which were designed to not explode on impact with twelve- and fourteen-inch armor plates of the battleships, but would on impact would proceed all the way through the armor and then by reason of the delayed fuse, explode within the battleship.

The carriers, including the CVEs, having no armor plate, simply these shells would instead of exploding on impact on the side of the CVEs, or even the fast carriers, the shell would penetrate the point of impact, proceed through the ship, pass through out the other side, and then explode maybe twenty-five, thirty yards out at sea. And as a consequence, the *Gambier Bay* was hit and hit and then finally, and this was all just direct firing right at close quarters from either beam on the *Gambier Bay* and finally, looking back, we could see it, it lost power, lost speed, and the shells were just kind of, finally we could see it was on fire, it had fallen out of formation, and then those same two cruisers came right on to the *Kitkun Bay* and then on either beam, one cruiser was on the starboard beam, one cruiser on the opposite side, on the port beam, and then they proceeded to fire these armor piercing delayed fused shells into us, and fortunately no casualties were suffered on the *Kitkun Bay* as these shells passed through *Kitkun Bay* and all went out into the ocean and then exploded outside.

One carrier that I was aware of that, later, received so many of those things. As a matter of fact, I think the *Kitkun Bay* took seventeen shells like that. But the *White Plains* took , one of the other six carriers—at that point, we only had five left. The *Gambier Bay* had been lost and sunk. The *White Plains* received probably more, I know more than we did, which is a point of relevance when we finally had to go on our own way after.

But at this point, now, these two cruisers that were firing dead at us, there was no hope for us. We all, the staff, four or five of us gathered together, we could see everything. But it was apparent we had no, we were about to end it all right there. All of a sudden here, and this was today at the symposium a question of why it happened, all of a sudden the two cruisers simply peeled out of formation and left. And today the big question, why did that happen? But it did happen. As a matter of fact, this is where Admiral Kurita called off the ships and decided to retire.

Mr. Bryk: Is that where the *Yamato* got sunk, though?

Mr. West: No. Why he did is going to be the subject of a new book coming out.

Mr. Bryk: So he had you just cornered there, huh?

Mr. West: Well, he had, yeah, he had the port. Now we had five carriers, all really shot up, but good night! I don't know. He ended it. The battle assignment of the Japanese force was to destroy the landing force and all of the amphibious ships that the United States had spent two years in producing, and all of the premier landing troops were ashore and were sitting ducks and the six carriers were designed not to provide protection against any kind of a force, but simply land-based aircraft that might be coming in to cover Halsey and his then four divisions of fast carriers, sixteen of them. Battleships, everything, they were supposed to protect the landing force but now there's some by reason of addendum that Admiral Nimitz added to the battle plan, which was that in the event—no. That what was to become the primary mission of the fast carriers, if it developed or if it were caused by Halsey's force, to offer the opportunity to destroy the Jap naval forces, then that became his primary operation.

Mr. Bryk: It came out, I think, here. I heard that.

Mr. West: That being so, for various reasons, that morning there were no Halsey forces. He had gone flank speed north and the small carriers and the seven destroyers and destroyer escorts, which were our only screen. But which were under orders as were, we thought, not knowing this last addendum, Admiral Nimitz's order to the Halsey force, that the main protection was to be afforded by the naval forces to the landing group already ashore. And that of course is where General MacArthur comes down from the *Nashville* on his famous "I have returned."

The next thing that happened, and it was mentioned today, there was a lull after the two Japanese cruisers, and in fact, though we didn't know it, the balance of the Jap force, then had turned and were leaving the scene. And of course the admiral, the Japanese admiral, had not made any effort to carry out what was his primary objective, and that was the destruction of our landing force.

After about an hour and a half or two hours, I at least, standing next to our admiral on the *Kitkun Bay*, up in the island structure on the admiral's bridge, I was standing next to Admiral Ofstie there and we both looked up and saw two kamikazes that we knew were eventually coming, and as far as I know, this was the first actual kamikaze attack, although there's references to it, and we knew that they were finally coming. This is as far as I know, and the Navy was quite interested in what sort of tactics, how were they going to proceed, and so forth. We had known before in trying to bring down their planes, their torpedo planes, coming in low that you couldn't stop them unless you blew off the wings. And we were interested in what tactics they were going to use.

Mr. Bryk: So this was the first time the kamikaze concept was utilized, to your knowledge, during World War II.

Mr. West: This is correct. I couldn't believe that Admiral Ofstie, who was standing next to the urinal, and he turned around and took a step outside and had in hand a notebook and he was

taking notes as this kamikaze was diving at us and firing, and you could see his machine gun firing right directly at us.

Mr. Bryk: Did the admiral have an idea that this guy was a kamikaze?

Mr. West: Oh, no question about it.

Mr. Bryk: This was the first time anybody had seen it. He recognized what was going on.

Mr. West: Yeah.

Mr. Bryk: No way he was going to pull out.

Mr. West: I don't know why we both thought this was a kamikaze.

Mr. Bryk: It could have been a torpedo bomber. He didn't have any bombs.

Mr. West: No. He was just diving at us and firing.

Mr. Bryk: You just surmised that this was it.

Mr. West: Well, I guess we did.

Mr. Bryk: Had you had any inkling that this kind of tactic was going to happen?

Mr. West: Not there. But we knew that they were coming.

Mr. Bryk: You had an idea that . . .

Mr. West: We had broken their code, we knew from various sources. I guess there were isolated instances where maybe this had happened, that the Japanese were going to pursue a program of suicidal attacks just like the terrorists are doing today.

Mr. Bryk: So you saw these planes and said, aha, here it is.

Mr. West: Here it is.

Mr. Bryk: To your knowledge, nobody had recorded it, and you now, you'd got advance information through the codes and stuff, and here's the admiral at the urinal as I recall.

Mr. West: That's right. He stepped out around the urinal, the protection, whatever protection it was.

Mr. Bryk: And he was writing down just whatever happened.

Mr. West: Yeah, he's taking notes. And I reached out, and said "My god, admiral."

Mr. Bryk: I think this is very critical, your seeing the first actual kamikaze.

Mr. West: As I said, we observed two attacking kamikaze, I say kamikaze, I assume that that's was what it was. The admiral obviously did. Why we did that, I don't know. But in any event, what happened was that the kamikaze dove at us, was diving at us. Apparently he so maneuvered and everybody said how did he happen to miss the island structure, that I don't know.

But in any event he just barely missed the island structure and hit the port side of our ship, and when he did, even though ?????? book says that it hit the catwalk and fell into the sea, well in point of fact, what happened was, when he hit the port side his bomb went off, and when that bomb went off the force and blast of it went all the way up to the island structure where we were, and the blast nearly blinded us. But when the smoke cleared and we looked down, there was very little damage to the ship. It is true that the plane itself fell off into the sea, but how that bomb exploded without blowing it all to pieces, I don't know. What next happened was, I turned around to see what happened to the second kamikaze and it went on beyond us and went straight up and then dove straight down and then hit the *St. Lo* amidships. Our ship was in relatively good shape aside from all the shells we'd taken.

The *St. Lo* caught fire and we were watching it, the admiral and I, and he said "Can you see where the fire is on that ship." I took my binoculars and was looking at it and that ship blew up. All you could see was this column of black, dense smoke, and as they now say, it was the eighth explosion, and it went up and up and up and out of the top, you could see these little pieces of something, pieces of flight deck and what looked like little toy soldiers, coming out of the top of it.

Thereafter all was quiet and of course, now we're down to four carriers. The symposium her today has dealt with the great gallantry of the destroyers and destroyer escort, and they talk about different signals that were issued and the confusion and whatnot. But my recollection is clear that the commander of the screen of the seven destroyers, clearly, and I remember, and the reason I remember this so clearly is, I thought initially, golly, how he rattled off saying "That's one, X two, X three, fall behind me, I'm going in." I remember thinking, how did he, well, gee, he was prepared, knew a torpedo attack was coming, and then as soon as that, as soon as he made that foray right into the attacking force, the second commander of what was left, the other three or four of our screen, then said "Follow me in" and he went right in behind them and they were being shot off right at the water line and it just, you knew that they knew, "Into the Valley of Death strode the Four Hundred."

We were left, all was quiet. We just had the four carriers, no screen, and the flight planes were so badly shot up that we could, and we had to stay together. We couldn't get up a speed of, think, over, it was something like twelve or fourteen, maybe fifteen, knots. That night a

contact was picked up by one of our radars from one of the carriers, that there was a surface vessel trailing us and the assumption was that it was quite possibly a Japanese submarine being able to overtake us on the surface simply because we couldn't go any faster than we were then going. So obviously the call went out for help. A destroyer was detached either from Taffy Two or Taffy One, or it may have been from Halsey's force.

But anyway, the question then, because that destroyer was coming up from our starboard side and the direction we were going was one coming at us and aft of us was the other. And the question was, who was going to get to us first. Either what we assumed would be possibly the Jap sub or the relieving destroyer. Admiral Sprague was *concerned* that was approaching us was what he called, as he kept cautioning, he was in radio contact with the captain of the destroyer, saying "Be careful. This may be a wounded friendly whose IFF" [that is, the identification friend or foe who had been shot out and was not able to identify itself} . . .

Mr. Bryk: You couldn't tell the difference if it was a sub or . . .

Mr. West: The vessel trailing, without possibly the ability to identify itself. And Admiral Sprague was saying "Be careful. It may be a wounded friendly." And the destroyer captain simply paying no attention to him, giving his orders, and you could hear his orders, to the gunnery officers, "Prepare to fire," and Admiral Sprague said "Wait, wait," and he tried to break in and the destroyer captain paid no attention to him, just "Open fire, open fire." And sure enough, it was a Jap submarine. They sank that submarine.

Mr. Bryk: They hit it on the surface.

Mr. West: Yeah, caught it on the surface. And then later on that night, some patrol plane or search plane or something of the Japanese dropped a flare right among us, here we are, struggling, four little carriers. I didn't know what was going to happen, and nothing happened. End of story.

Except, the *Kitkun Bay* was the least damaged of all of the four remaining carriers. The landing on northern Luzon, going up, the *Leyte Gulf battle* was on the east side of the Philippines. The next landing was to occur on the west side of north Luzon. I don't know whether we went back, I think we went back to Pearl, got some repairs—well, I'm sure we did. Got repairs and we were ordered back then to join the force that was attacking and conducting the landing on northern Luzon. So we proceeded back and the night before *Dog Day*, as we proceeded north off of Corregidor, we had the entire Pacific Fleet now with Halsey, all of his ships, all of the landing craft, this was the Pacific Armada. Here came the kamikazes, and our fighters got every single one of them except one. This one picked out, of all the ships, the *Kitkun Bay*.

It dove on us, and I'll tell you now, we got pictures. It dove on us and the *Nashville*, on which MacArthur was situated, was off of our starboard beam and as the kamikaze dove on us,

automatic fire, I thought it hit us right at the water line on the port side. You could feel the impact, and immediately there was another substantial impact, and I thought what had happened was that the bomb on the kamikaze who had hit at the water line had skid across the hangar deck of the carrier and had exploded on the starboard side where apparently this second impact had come, and what had happened was, the *Nashville* on automatic fire, firing at the kamikaze, as he hit us, their shell hit us on the right side. Immediately, almost immediately, the hole that the kamikaze put on our port side at the waterline, was as big as the airplane, just started taking on so much water that fire control, everything, just called up and the captain ordered "Abandon ship."

And by the time that I could get down and, as communication officer, I was required and determined, or had already determined, the depth of the water there, I was required to go down below decks and into the code room and get the codes and the moveable parts of the machine, put them in lead weighted sacks, and I had to do so. To do so, I had to go through the communications room where the other personnel in there were just so disoriented, it was a fire, and I guess they had seen what had happened to the *St. Lo* and thought we were going to blow up. I had difficulty in getting the sacks together and getting things together, but I did. And went back up to the deck to get the admiral's file, acquiescence or concurrence with the regulation that those codes be dropped off of the side. And at that point, so much water had been taken on on the port side, and the carrier's port side was almost in the water, and it was difficult to walk to the admiral to get his permission, which I did. and he gave it, and over the side they went.

Then, they had detached a destroyer which simply stuck it's nose right in our fantail and we jumped off of the back end of the . . .

Mr. Bryk: They actually had you jump from ship to ship.

Mr. West: Yep, jumped from ship to ship. And late that night we transferred, that is, the staff, because Admiral Ofstie was still in command then of the landing force, and so we transferred then to the carrier which happened to be the carrier right behind us, and as I walked down the gangway there, the door opened, and the guy says to me, "Say, Lieutenant," he says, "would you like to see what happened to your carrier?" I said,, "Well, yeah, why?" And he said, "We took photographs of it." And then I have in my office the photograph that shows the kamikaze hitting us right at the waterline and then showing the explosion on our starboard side of the shell that the *Nashville* put into us.

The end of the story was that, of course we had to abandon ship and what I'd accumulated in the three years out without coming back all went down. But oddly enough, and I didn't know this until much later, about three weeks or months later, one of our patrol planes saw this derelict ship out there, and it was the *Kitkun Bay*. It had taken so much water aboard it had put out the fire apparently, and it was still there. They hauled that, towed that thing all the way back to Pearl Harbor and what they discovered when they put it in dry dock, was

that the bomb that the kamikaze had was a dud and it skidded across and lodged against the boiler. End of the story.

Mr. Bryk: Thank you very much, Mr. West. I'm sure this will provide great information to the Library, and we thank you for spending the time with us, and thank you for what you did in World War II. We are all very much in your debt. It's been a great pleasure for me.

Transcribed by: Betty Paieda
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