

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Educational and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
Mr. Homer Ellis
USS-Arkansas

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This is Larry Rabalais and this is February 18, 2005 and I am interviewing Homer G. Ellis. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, sponsored by the Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Rabalais: Now that we've got that out of the way, the way we'll work it is that I have a general little check list of reminder things I'll mention to you. Now, the best way to do it is where were you, where did you go to school, how old you are, your name, where were you when Pearl Harbor occurred and when did you enlist, just take it from there. So when and where were your born?

Mr. Ellis: I was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1926. I went to school; my home is basically Biloxi, Mississippi, that's where I graduated from high school. I enlisted in the Navy before graduation and after graduation went on active duty with the Navy. Interestingly, my first day of active duty was June 6, 1944. D-Day.

Mr. Rabalais: D-Day itself, what were you about 18 then?

Mr. Ellis I was 18 and I thought my goodness the war is over and I've missed it.

Mr. Rabalais: Not hardly.

Mr. Ellis: I learned different. But anyway, from there I went in the Navy to Williamsburg, Virginia to boot camp which was a CB base, and from there to Boston, Massachusetts went on board the USS Arkansas who had now just returned from the Normandy Invasion. I served in a deck division as a seaman.

Mr. Rabalais: Let me ask you a couple of questions about your boot camp. Was it, you were pretty young then, was it sort of frightening to you or exciting or both.

Mr. Ellis Both, exciting and frightening and it impressed me the number of people who had never left home before.

Mr. Rabalais: You had not traveled very much?

Mr. Ellis: I traveled a little bit, so going away from home was not a big deal for me.

Mr. Rabalais: A lot of boys had not.

Mr. Ellis: But it was a big deal to go into completely new area. I had never been to Virginia. And, to meet people from all over the country.

Mr. Rabalais: A different environment.

Mr. Ellis: It was absolutely different. And, some guys had different views on things. Every Company has someone who doesn't like to bath.

Mr. Rabalais: Yeah, that's true.

Mr. Ellis: And there's a cure for that.

Mr. Rabalais: There's a cure, (laughs)but when Pearl Harbor occurred, of course you were still in high school, you were probably a freshman or sophomore.

Mr. Ellis: I was a sophomore in high school. I would give my right arm if I could tell you what I was doing.

Mr. Rabalais: I was going what were you, might have been doing that day. You probably didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, like most people.

Mr. Ellis: It was a new term, and I would give anything if I could tell you what I was doing when that happened, but I can't. There's a lot of other dates I can remember, but I don't.

Mr. Rabalais: Well, anyway going on so you boot camp and now you've been reassigned ahh assigned a duty station which was

Mr. Ellis USS Arkansas

Mr. Rabalais: OK was that out of New York or where did you meet the boat.

Mr. Ellis: In Boston, Massachusetts. It came back was refitted had new rifles put in for the 12 inch battery and the ship was just refurbished. It was a mess at that time; we got a lot of new people on board, like me.

Mr. Rabalais: What had you been trained as, what duty station, or what duty did you have?

Mr. Ellis: Well I was a seaman.

Mr. Rabalais: Just a seaman.

Mr. Ellis: We called a deck ape.

Mr. Rabalais: OK

Mr. Ellis: And that a term that really means military common labor.

Mr. Rabalais: Yeah, did you have a gun assignment?

Mr. Ellis: Yes. My division we manned the secondary battery which consisted of 5in/51 guns.

Mr. Rabalais: Was those primarily for any aircraft?

Mr. Ellis: No. They were older 5 inch gun. Most people think of 5 inch gun as in a turret that fired automatically for anti aircraft. This was a gun emplacement just like a cannon on the deck. It was nothing automatic to aim it you had a trainer and an elevator and they turned little wheels to move it around. It was about as manual as you can be.

Mr. Rabalais: Was it in a gun tub of some sort?

Mr. Ellis: No. It was inside an enclosure called an air castle. It was just a steel enclosure.

Mr. Rabalais: About all it would protect was from shrapnel or something like that.

Mr. Ellis: Right, that's about it.

Mr. Rabalais: Was it open to the elements?

Mr. Ellis: The front end was. And loading a 5 inch 38 gun which was for anti aircraft, it had a casing containing power and a projectile all in

one bullet. Finest 51 we had a projectile, a powder bag, and you set that on closed the breech and then fired it.

Mr. Rabalais: A lot slower firing.

Mr. Ellis: Much slower, and my job I was the first powder man. They'd put the projectile in it then I pushed that sack of powder

Mr. Rabalais: It was like sort of a bag powder with a fabric bag?

Mr. Ellis: It was about 35 to 40 pounds of gun powder. When we first fired that was off the coast of California.

Mr. Rabalais: Where was your training or practice for that?

Mr. Ellis: Well, when we went on board in Boston we sailed out through the canal and went to California, did training that's where I learned my job on the gun emplacement. A vivid memory, we were the secondary battery and we were firing star shells to illuminate the area for the main battery, 12 in guns. So we were both firing

Mr. Rabalais: kind of together

Mr. Ellis: at the same time

Mr. Rabalais: Noisy environment.

Mr. Ellis: Absolutely, and I'll never forget one of the first times we actually fired that thing, at night, and a guy sent the projectile home and I had this bag of gun powder, and at the instant that I shoved it home the main battery fired. What I saw was just a flash and I thought I'm dead and gone to hell. A few moments later I realized I had survived and felt great.

Mr. Rabalais: Did you all feel the blast from the main gun?

Mr. Ellis: Oh yeah. They made us wear protective cotton. But it didn't do a whole lot of good.

Mr. Rabalais: So, OK you all ended up in the California area and you were doing some training there gunnery. Were you firing at targets at sea or was it at a land target?

Mr. Ellis: Both, we did both.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh, you did. Did you fired against towed targets or just stationary targets usually?

Mr. Ellis: We did both. We did both. Some towed targets but they were far enough away we didn't see them.

Mr. Rabalais: Were you all firing by

Mr. Ellis: A 5in/51 gun, shoot, that thing will go 15 miles

Mr. Rabalais: Oh, my goodness.

Mr. Ellis: The main battery goes 20 miles, plus

Mr. Rabalais: OK, by this time were looking at about mid to last 44

Mr. Ellis: Yeah, and from there we went to Pearl Harbor. And interestingly and it didn't mean much at the time, well I didn't attach much to it, we were moored at Ford Island just outboard where the Arizona was lying. And it was there obviously.

Mr. Rabalais: Still leaking oil there

Mr. Ellis: Absolutely, and I have vivid memories of that but it didn't mean that much at the moment. Of course, now 60 years later

Mr. Rabalais: 1100 boys there, buried down in there

Mr. Ellis: uh huh still leaking oil. And that a huge environmental problem.

Mr. Rabalais: That's what I understand.

Mr. Ellis: Somewhere along the line it going to turn loose.

Mr. Rabalais: It's rusting away quite a bit. Matter of fact I believe the Museum here the bush gallery they have cut out one hatch frame out of metal and it's pretty badly corroded from the Arizona and it's displayed here in the Bush Galley.

Mr. Ellis: Oh, my

Mr. Rabalais: Yeah an actual one

Mr. Ellis: I've been over there before but I don't remember that.

Mr. Rabalais: Alright, so anyway you're at Pearl. Lets backup a little bit your on the ship itself, it's a pretty sea worthy ship, it rides along in the water its heavy, pretty sea worthy

Mr. Ellis: Wasn't fast, it wasn't that maneuverable. It was old and slow.

Mr. Rabalais: Old, and slow and heavy.

Mr. Ellis: An heavy.

Mr. Rabalais: How many men do you think was on board a BB of that size?

Mr. Ellis: At that time we probably had 2-3,000 people on board.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh, that many. I didn't realize that.

Mr. Ellis: It was a city in itself.

Mr. Rabalais: How was food?

Mr. Ellis: Everyone complained. We had a lot of powdered eggs, at that time I had never thought of putting canned cream in coffee.

Mr. Rabalais: I grew up with it

Mr. Ellis: Well, I grew up most of the time we had a cow. We had the real thing, I remember we had cream. In the Navy this is in a can. This was a new experience.

Mr. Rabalais: Well the powdered eggs usually are. I have never got used to those either.

Mr. Ellis: Well, but

Mr. Rabalais: But generally speaking it was OK?

Mr. Ellis: It was OK sure

Mr. Rabalais: How about sleeping. Did you all really sleep in hammocks or did you all have bunks?

Mr. Ellis: When I first went on board the Arkansas I slept in a hammock.

Mr. Rabalais: That's the old Navy.

Mr. Ellis: That's a trick to learn how to sleep in that and of course I fell out every now and then. But you get to where you can even roll over on your side and all that and after awhile you like it, its comfortable.

Mr. Rabalais: Did you have to stow your hammock everyday?

Mr. Ellis: Everyday, every night and morning you either stowed it up or you unraveled it and hung it up. Then one of the status symbols was

when you been there for enough seniority, you would be issued a cot. Folding cot. That was so much nicer.

Mr. Rabalais: So we are heading for Pearl now

Mr. Ellis: We left Pearl, we just stopped there took on fuel and supplies and went to Ulysses Atoll. And from there, now this is into 1945.

Mr. Rabalais: Ulysses was a huge anchorage. Were there a lot of ships when you were there?

Mr. Ellis: As far as you could see. As far as you could see there was ships at anchor.

Mr. Rabalais: You all were preparing for Iwo Jima.

Mr. Ellis: And then from there we went to Iwo Jima. And see we had been there from around Hawaii where the temperature was rather mild. Up around Iwo Jima it's colder than get out.

Mr. Rabalais: Really. I understand it began to rain after a couple of day so it's not totally unlike what we are having outside right now.

Mr. Ellis: But colder than this. We were issued heavy jacket.

Mr. Rabalais: I thought this was a tropical area.

Mr. Ellis: No, No. If you look on the map its right by Japan.

Mr. Rabalais: It's pretty far North. I am surprised I just thought islands would be tropical.

Mr. Ellis: No this is cold, bleak and rainy.

Mr. Rabalais: Well, then the simulation, they are going to have tomorrow is going to be very realistic.

Mr. Ellis: It sure will. It will indeed. Of course, I never got on the beach.

Mr. Rabalais: I understand, but you could see it from a distance I guess. I guess you all could see it.

Mr. Ellis: We were in fire support.

Mr. Rabalais: So you arrive at the island ahead of the invasion.

Mr. Ellis: They had been shelling, hitting the island with army air corps, bombers, and then the deal is the United States used these old battleships that were obsolete, but we didn't get put in harms way very much. We were old and slow. But they would pull-up to 5 or 6000 yards and layout there throwing shells.

Mr. Rabalais: That close.

Mr. Ellis: and on this side of the island, this is where the landings took place, Nevada, Idaho, Tennessee, New York. This side, this is where the landings took place that's where the action was. On this side Arkansas, Texas,

Mr. Rabalais: So the old battleships were over here on this side.

Mr. Ellis: Well, New York was pretty old, Nevada was old.

Mr. Rabalais: Texas was old too

Mr. Ellis: Yeah, but Texas and Arkansas they had some carries out there and I remember seeing mine sweepers. You talk about gutsy stuff.

Mr. Rabalais: They get in close.

Mr. Ellis: they get in close and what are they looking for? Mines, they blow ships up. They just go right in em.

Mr. Rabalais: Did you actually see some of these off shore rock and things they had off here,

Mr. Ellis: I don't have any memory of that.

Mr. Rabalais: So you all are off shore here

Mr. Ellis: I say 5 or 6000 yards.

Mr. Rabalais: May have been a mile or two?

Mr. Ellis: Pretty close, couple of miles.

Mr. Rabalais: Did you see Suribachi, actually see the hump?

Mr. Ellis: No. Well let me tell you what one of my great memories of that place , our guns were aimed by the trainer pointer who had these little wheels. Each of them had a telescopic site and I'll never forget a little bit later on during that thing one of the guys said "Hey guys, they just putting up a flag there on top of that mountain" and we lined up and took turns looking through the telescopic site

Mr. Rabalais: So you actually could see that.

Mr. Ellis: I saw that less than a half hour after it had been raised. I don't know if it was the first one or second one.

Mr. Rabalais: But you all had been there since the day before, probably.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah, just throwing shells at em.

Mr. Rabalais: The big shells. That was before the actual beginning of the landing, you all were doing shelling before the actual landing. This picture was taking, we're referencing a photograph supplied

here, its just a copy of it, but it shows Suribachi in here and here are the little waves of the little LCBP's lined up in front and here is support, probably LST's I imagine and maybe destroyer escort , destroyer there, providing support services, but back in here somewhere was the battleships. And you all would just throw in shells., So you all were on this side at the same time that they were doing it, Now was there anything going on landing wise in front of you here.

Mr. Ellis: No

Mr. Rabalais: You all were just support fire in this direction., I suspect the Japanese knew that the landing would be here.

Mr. Ellis: Yes, I'm sure they did.

Mr. Rabalais: But they didn't know. The gentleman I just interviewed told me that the Japanese had actually put marker buoy for distance ranging off shore and he was in an LCI which went real close for close shore support and they were firing at them very accurately because they were right in front of this marker buoy which was at 1000 yards and they knew exactly what the distance was. So you could actually see Suribachi from where you were at?

Mr. Ellis: Oh yeah, Oh sure. We couldn't see people on it or anything, we could see that flag with that telescopic site.

Mr. Rabalais: You all were firing at designed targets so I would assume with that firing range how would you know what to fire at?

Mr. Ellis: We didn't. We didn't see what we were shooting at., Fire control did that.

Mr.. Rabalais: Fire control

Mr. Ellis: We were really, but we had trainers, but he was matching bugs on a little dial, He wasn't looking at a cave, he was matching bugs his dial. We couldn't see what our target was.

Mr. Rabalais: So how would you all adjust to what he was telling you, He was looking through the telescopic scope and matching some

Mr. Ellis: He wasn't looking through the telescopic site he had a dial there. It had cross hairs on it and he had to match cross hairs.

Mr. Rabalais: And that was a target point

Mr. Ellis: Yeah, he was looking at this dial, he didn't look out there where there shooting

Mr. Rabalais: There firing at coordinates ten.

Mr. Ellis: You bet ya.

Mr. Rabalais: Not visually.

Mr. Ellis: He wasn't doin it visually at all. Now at night time we would fire, the main battery would put star shells up. We didn't see we just shot it out there. The fire control people were really the ones that aimed the guns.

Mr. Rabalais: At that distance you all might or might not have receive any return fire from shore. Did you all ever receive or see any shell splashes.

Mr. Ellis: Occasionally . As far as we were concerned it was just like in training.

Mr. Rabalais: So how long were you out there in front of the island? A couple three days or several days?Mr. Ellis: I don't know the exact time, I'm gonna say about a week or more.

Mr. Rabalais: That long. Obviously the Marines are grinding on shore going inland and their fighting their way toward Suribachi and especially towards the airport area and back this direction.

Mr. Ellis: We had no idea where they were.

Mr. Rabalais: What I'm saying your target designators are I guess giving coordinates to fire on shore.

Mr. Ellis: My impression has been that what we were shooting at was on that mound.

Mr. Rabalais: The far end over there

Mr. Ellis: Yeah. My impression is we didn't shoot at anything down here.

Mr. Rabalais: This is fairly open at this end of the island and they had cut the island in two, eventually we did and then pushed the Japanese against Suribachi before they had secured this. There was a lot of activity by resistance by the Japanese at Suribachi itself. Dug in caves in support. But the incident about the 12 inch shells that I noted to you was

Mr. Ellis: You said his name was

Mr. Rabalais: He's here I'll introduce him. Evan is here and he's running a little shuttle service tween here and there he's wearing a yellow scarf I want you to meet him because when he told me about that I kept that in the back of mine that was just maybe an hour or two ago, he said he entered the cave this was a few years later when they went in there for cleanup and there was a point a 12 inch shell.

Mr. Ellis: I could be wrong New York could have had 12 inch but I don't think so I think they had 14 inch guns in the main battery

Mr. Rabalais: You all would have been firing at this flank of Suribachi and that's I think where he was saying that cave was on this side over here

Mr. Ellis: They had gun emplacements all in there. They had them down in here too, but my impression was that is was the end that we were shooting it.

Mr. Rabalais: Now there was a lot of smoke and fire and everything, you could hardly see anything of the islands because of the smoke or did you see,

Mr. Ellis: Of course we were a mile or two away. It was a great big hill.

Mr. Rabalais: It was the most prominent thing on the island, like everything else it was pretty flat from what I can see on the photograph here. So then after a week there where did you all go after that. You all received no casualties.

Mr. Ellis: No we didn't have any casualties from there.

Mr. Rabalais: Heres a little LCI the other gentleman that I interviewed received a direct hit while providing support for UDT team's right here, like I said they were in front of a marker. They received 5 hits one of them was devastating and lost 11 and 6 wounded and were forced to withdraw.

Mr. Ellis: The only time we really had injury was at Okinawa.

Mr. Rabalais: Okinawa. That was later or before?

Mr. Ellis: Oh, later. We were just a little island group where the evening we would come back from Okinawa and we'd clean things up

Mr. Rabalais: This was after Iwo you all went to the invasion of Okinawa then.

Mr. Ellis: Un huh, and while we were there that's

Mr. Rabalais: You all provided fire support there also.

Mr. Ellis: Same deal. You know lay off the beach and throw in shells. But each evening we would go out to this little anchorage and one night a bunch of kamikaze air planes came at us. The New York was anchored here and we were anchored here. The plane came from way over aiming for the New York. He was too high. Over flew it and the New York just kept shooting it. Now as the airplane is going away their line of fire came down right where the Arkansas was.

Mr. Rabalais: It hit you all

Mr. Ellis: We had about 20 guys that got shells. No one was killed but we have had 20 guys who have got purple hearts from friendly fire.

Mr. Rabalais: Was the plane shot down

Mr. Ellis: It was finally shot down.

Mr. Rabalais: Before it reach you all

Mr. Ellis: After it reached us. It went over. I think another ship was back there as well and who got it I don't know.

Mr. Rabalais: But it went over you and went passed and was shot down.

Mr. Ellis: But that was all after Iwo Jima. At Iwo Jima we didn't have anything.

Mr., Rabalais: There was no kamikazi that attempted to come at you all, as far as you knew.

Mr. Ellis: Not at Iwo Jima.

Mr. Rabalais: They really got into that at Okinawa I know that's where the big kamikaze was.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah that was a big deal there and they first started I think in the Philippine Islands.

Mr. Rabalais: I think off Okinawa the Franklin got beat-up pretty bad. So you were at Okinawa at that invasion. You all stayed during and through the invasion it for awhile, I gathered.

Mr. Ellis: Then a little later the Atomic bomb was dropped, and that ended it all.

Mr. Rabalais: Where were you all at when that occurred. Did they talk about the atomic bomb?

Mr. Ellis: We were off Okinawa.

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Mr. Rabalais: Did you have any concept of what that might be, a lot of people didn't fully understand what the atomic bomb was.\

Mr. Ellis: I had no idea. I had no idea.

Mr. Rabalais: They just said some big bomb had been dropped maybe.

Mr. Ellis: On the Arkansas we had a detachment of Marines and they went ashore at the second atomic bomb site Nagasaki. I just didn't have a real concept of the magnitude of what that destruction, or what it was going to mean to the world. Then after that the war was over and everyone was wondering when I can get out. The Arkansas then took on duties in what was called Magic Carpet Duty. People who were eligible to be discharged they had to have transportation and they trimmed our crew down, I don't know 2 or 3000 people we probably were functioning with 750 people to crew the ship. That's when I became a quarter master and we would take on load of sailors, solders, people who had enough points to get out and we ran them to Pearl Harbor, mostly we ran from Pearl Harbor to the West coast, just back and forth.

Mr. Rabalais: Like a bus shuttle.

Mr. Ellis: Exactly, and these guys were bored stiff. 'You got any work I can do' Well yeah you can do this and that and the other. We did no work and that's when my wages ballooned. All I did was eat, and lolly gag around.

Mr. Rabalais: That was pretty good. So you stayed in til when.

Mr. Ellis: 1946 I had two years in and I got out.

Mr. Rabalais: Where did they disembark you. Where did you get released at.

Mr. Ellis: San Diego. At that time we were getting ready for the atomic bomb test at Bikini. We were docked right near the Nevada which was painted completely orange. A target ship. They wanted me, they said we will make you a second class petty officer if you'll stay and go out there to Bikini Atoll. I wanted to go to college and I didn't trust the Navy, because I knew that I'd get out there and I'd be late for starting college in September. I said no I want out. And for 50 years I regretted that that I could have taken part in that historic atomic bomb test which finally sank the Arkansas.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh, they did use the Arkansas?

Mr. Ellis: Oh Yeah.

Mr. Rabalais: I did not realize that.

Mr. Ellis: Threes a famous picture that shows the blast from underwater just a water spout went up. They always talk about a dark horizontal area that was believed to be the Arkansas.

Mr. Rabalais: Going up

Mr. Ellis: Straight up in the air.

Mr. Rabalais: Something that big,.]

Mr. Ellis: Anyway I spent 50 years regretting that I didn't take part in that historic monumental test. My wife pointed out to me and said no they didn't know anything about radiation, we know so much that

its so hazardous somebody was looking out for you just didn't realize it.

Mr., Rabalais: You'd probably been exposed to some pretty heavy doses of radiation.

Mr. Ellis: I'd be bald, no teeth, no children and probably have cancer from radiation, and I don't have any of those.

Mr. Rabalais: Well, I've got the bald and teeth thing done, and wasn't exposed that I know of, other than x-ray. Like they used to x-ray you at the drop of a hat in those days you know.

Mr. Ellis: Even after WWII people were casual about our x-rays.

Mr. Rabalais: Oh they were. They didn't realize the danger in that. We used to play around at the podiatrist office with a little foot machine.

Mr. Ellis: Where you went to the store where you bought shoes and look at your bones. My god I'm getting old.,

Mr. Rabalais: So your separation station was at San Diego, or were you separated somewhere else

Mr. Ellis: Well I, the priliminary stuff was at San Diego they gave me a train ticket to New Orleans, Louisiana. My home was Biloxi, Mississippi.

Mr. Rabalais: That's close by.

Mr. Ellis: They sent me to New Orleans and they had a discharge center. You get another physical examination and you go through all that stuff and they tell you about insurance and a Chief Petty Officer

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was addressing us and his speech was encouraging us to join up again to reenlist. Well dumb little quarter master that I was I got up and I was fixin to go out for a smoke, and he quickly says sailor what are you doing. I say I'm going out for a smoke I ain't gonna signup. He says you want to get out of this mans Navy you better sit your butt down and listen. The only thing I could think of was yes sir, cause I wanted out But anyway.

Mr. Rabalais: So you used the GI bill then and went to school.

Mr. Ellis: Oh, yeah. That is absolutely the most wonderful piece of legislation that ever been passed.

Mr. Rabalais: I heard so many people that had not been able to go school say.

Mr. Ellis: I guess if you want to bad enough you gonna work your way through and I probably would have done that, but man my tuition and books were paid for. That's the greatest thing in the world that ever happened to me.

Mr., Rabalais: Had you married at that time?

Mr. Ellis: No, No I didn't get married until oh a number of years later. I went to Tulane at New Orleans. I graduated in 1950 did some graduate school work then finished medical school in 1955. Then the senior year I was in medical school I got married.

Mr. Rabalais: Well I appreciate your sharing all this with us, every bit helps us provide academics with details, little details that we know the big picture of the war. Everybody knows how the war went but they

don't know the little things, and that's what's important to the museum and to historians. The little bits and pieces you share with us such as you have in your story. Little incidents like separation hassles and stuff like that is what were looking for.

Mr. Ellis: No heroics in my story.

Mr. Rabalais: So Homer I can't tell you again how much I appreciate it, and I'll let you go on to lunch now and thanks a lot.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much.

**Tape 1354
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