

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR**

**CENTER FOR PACIFIC WAR STUDIES**

**FREDERICKSBURG, TEXAS**

**INTERVIEW OF**

**JOHN O'KEEFE**

**PT BOAT OPERATION IN THE PACIFIC THEATER**

**TAPE NUMBER 1663**

This is Ed Metzler. Today is August 10, 2006. I am interviewing Mr. John O'Keefe in Fredericksburg, Texas.

This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information relating to this site.

We thank you, John, for spending the time. I didn't mean to step on your line there on the opening. Thank you for spending the time with us today.

Let me get you to start by giving your full name, date of birth, where you were born, and a little bit about your family.

JOHN O'KEEFE

My name is John Gail O'Keefe. Sometimes I go by Gail; sometimes I'm called John. I was born in 1923, June 13, in Centralia, Illinois. My mother and father were divorced, and I was raised by my grandparents in Southern Illinois. This was during the Depression, so things were decidedly different than they are now. My grandfather was a frontiersman and part Indian. His mother was Sioux. My grandmother was an educated woman in her days. She had attended a ladies finishing school, which specialized in the arts, and she was a school teacher.

When my parents divorced, my mother moved back in with her parents, so my brother, who was 22 months older than me, and I were raised by my grandparents.

My grandfather, who was quite old by the time we were born, used to tell us tales about the West—tales from his days on the frontier.

ED METZLER

This was in the far West?

JOHN

Yes, in Arkansas and in the far West. When they built the railroad across the West, he worked as a scout and, much later, as a conductor. He used to tell us these tales. We grew up pretty much as naturalists. We hunted and fished. The country side was our playground. But, it was the Depression, and we needed to put food on the table.

ED

Was this on a farm?

JOHN

No, we lived right at the edge of town. Out the front door was town, and out the back door was in the country. As I said, my Grandfather would tell us stories of the West, but my grandmother would often make him stop. I can still hear her to this day, "Sam, if you are going to teach those boys anything, teach them something constructive. Don't talk about that." Later on, we found out, we should have listened more to Grandpa.

I went through school and was very mechanically inclined. Everyone else in the family was an artist or a musician. As I went through school and got into high school, I was really interested in machinery of all types as well as the out of doors. We hunted a lot. When I was in grade school, we had rabbit traps in the field out back. Before we went to school every morning, we would run the rabbit traps, trying to get meat for the table. Our recreation was not playing games; it was running the creeks and rivers outdoors.

ED

So you would have something to eat?

JOHN

So we had something to eat during the Depression, when no one in the family worked. There were no jobs. Thirty some percent were unemployed then. We grew up just as

outdoorsmen, and with my grandfather teaching us how to do things the Indian way. How to cook fish in mud balls and different ways of doing things. As we would go to the creek—we called it out in the woods—on a Saturday or a day off from school, we would tell my grandmother we were going to the creek. We might be 15 miles from home, but that was where we were. We were raised pretty much that way.

I can remember when Hitler was making broadcasts on the radio. We would listen to him because his speeches were broadcast on radio in the United States.

ED

So you were 20 or so when the star started, right?

JOHN

I was 19 when I joined the Navy.

ED

Were you out of high school then?

JOHN

No, the war started in my last year in high school.

Because our outdoor activities—our love of nature—played such a big part in our lives, what we saw of the war also had an impact. One day I went to the theater where they showed a new invention—the Jeep. They showed it jumping a levee. The next day, I went out and jumped a levee in a stripped down Model T and about killed myself.

ED

What's when you learned a Model T was not a Jeep. . . .

JOHN

It certainly wasn't a jeep. In that same film at the theater, they showed the Plywood Derby, which was a test the government had for PT boat prototypes. They were testing these boats in a race down the east coast of the United States. The winner turned out to be the ELCO boat. At the time, I said, "Well, I'll eventually get in the Navy." I knew that I was going to get on a PT boat, which I did. From that point on, everything I did was geared that way.

ED

Well, you made your goals then.

JOHN

I did. I graduated an honor student in the diesel classes I went to and in every school they sent me to—service schools. They were all mechanical.

ED

Let me go back and ask you, do you remember how you came to hear about the attack on Pearl Harbor? Most people remember what they were doing when they heard about it.

JOHN

I was at high school. They were having a lecture. I don't recall who gave the lecture. Anyway, I had to operate all the curtains and this type of thing on the stage. It came over the radio in back of the stage. They announced the attack at the lecture. We didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. None of the kids knew where Pearl Harbor was. Needless to say, we found out soon enough. Most of us were just the right age. Almost every boy that I knew joined the Navy or the Marines, or something. A number of them were lost during the war.

ED

Did you go right in, join right away or how did that work?

JOHN

I went down and volunteered, and it turned out my mother had to sign for me, but she wouldn't. I had to wait until the rules changed. The rules finally changed to where when you turned 19, you could volunteer to be drafted. I volunteered to be drafted, consequently they put me in the Navy where I wanted to go. Until I was drafted, I worked for the Illinois Central Railroad in the Roundhouse.

ED

How about your brother? He was a couple of years older than year.

JOHN

My brother was 22 months older than me. He went into the Army. Right away he discovered he didn't like being a soldier. Other than shooting guns, he was an expert at shooting all kinds of weapons—shotguns, rifles. The Army changed the rules to enlisted personnel could go to the Army Air Corps if they wished. In other words, you didn't have to have a college degree to be a pilot. He signed up to be a pilot, but he had a heart murmur, so they made a Radioman out of him on a bomber. Later on, he got shot down over Europe, was a prisoner of war for a number of months. And that's another story.

ED

[And the things you learned in the out of doors helped him then?]

JOHN

Yes, because he knew what to eat and how to survive better than most, he suffered far less than others while in German captivity.

ED

Let's get back to you. Where did the Navy send you for basic training?

JOHN

I served my basic training in Great Lakes. From there, I was assigned to Diesel Service School at Navy Pier in Chicago.

ED

Did they give you a test—an aptitude test or something?

JOHN

When you get out of your boot camp with a certain grade, you get a choice. I told the Chief that I wanted to get into PT's. He said, "Well, the only way you can do that is to be an honor student in the class in a service school." I did that. I went to Diesel School and was the Honor Student of the class. I made the highest grade that had ever been made. I got my choice of submarines, PT boats or flying as a gunner in a navy plane. I took the PT Boats. They let me go on a submarine and look at it. I asked them, "Do you ever get to see any of what's going on?" They replied, "No, the Skipper sees that." So I went to the PT's—what I wanted from the start.

ED

How long was the Diesel School? Was that 6 weeks or what?

JOHN

Sixteen weeks.

ED

OK, so it's fairly long.

JOHN

It was a very intensive school. I graduated out of that with top honors. I was told later on that my grades were the highest that had ever been made in the Diesel Service School.

ED

Man, that is something to be proud of.

JOHN

Well, that is another story.

ED

Don't hold back on any of these stories.

JOHN

I went to PT school and was an honor student in the engineering part of that.

ED

Where was PT school?

JOHN

That was at Melville, Rhode Island. The first real full class at Melville. I can remember John Buckley was the Commander. He gave us the welcoming speech when we got there. He said, "When we get in PT's, we will have adventures that we would never have anywhere else in the Navy. We would be as close to being a pirate as you could and not be one." That turned out to be true. From that school, I was assigned to Squadron 11 and was based at Tulagi until the rest of my squadron arrived.

ED

When you were in the PT School, you were trained as playing what role on a PT boat?

JOHN

Engineer. Bear in mind you had to learn everything on the boat—navigation, radio, torpedoes, everything that performed. You had to be able to step up and take over as Skipper of the boat if you had to. Everybody had to do it. When I went in, at the first of the war, it was necessary that to get in PT's you had to be single. You couldn't ride a boat and be married. You had to be an honor student of your class in service school. You had to volunteer for PT service.



Later in the war that changed. They started assigning people to the boats. When they started assigning people, you could see a definite decrease in the skill of the sailors on the boat, especially in engineering. My first trip overseas was aboard a cargo ship, the Robert C. Greene. It took 43 days—I didn't see land for 43 days.

ED

What was your port of departure?

JOHN

San Francisco to Australia and the New Hebrides; it was a lower than normal course taken to avoid submarines. We got down there, pulled into the harbor, and I knew we were getting close to the war. An airplane flew over putting out mosquito spray. It flew toward the jungle and crashed into the side of a mountain. Right then and there—welcome to the war!!

ED

Did you get seasick on your first cruise?

JOHN

I don't remember on that ship. We had a maximum speed of six knots. It was very slow, and we didn't have any bad weather on the way south. We were below the Solomon Islands. I didn't get seasick for quite awhile.

ED

So you ran with all these other PT crew members?

JOHN

There were just a few of us on the cargo ship. The irony is that normally when you traveled around, it was pretty much alone. I think there were about half a dozen or so of us on

the ship. There were some other seamen on it going for other assignments. When we arrived at our destination, they gave us a rifle and a K-bar knife and a few accessories—some ammunition—and put us on a YP boat, and we headed for Guadalcanal. We went up to Guadalcanal, and were told, “We just secured Guadalcanal and the fighting is all over.” Air raids were still occurring when they left us off on the beach. We were told, “Stay here. Somebody will come over and pick you up from Tulagi.” It was ten miles across the bay or something like that to Savo Island in the Florida Islands. We stayed there and nobody came for us that night, so we camped out. The most impressive site where they told us to stay was a part of the island being cleaned up. In this area was a pile of ammunition—30 caliber, 30.06, 50 caliber, pistol ammunition. It was piled up as big as a house. The military was collecting all the loose ammunition they could find on the island, Japanese too. I was impressed with how big it was. We were wondering how many rounds were in that pile. We were told the military was going to take the pile and dump it in the ocean when they got through.

The next day a YP boat came and picked us up and took us over the Tulagi.

ED

Yippy boat?

JOHN

Yes, it's a yard patrol boat. We called them “Yippy” boats. They are really cargo ships with single holds. Anyway, the YP boat took us over to Tulagi and I was assigned to work on a boat in Squadron 5, in which the 107 boat was assigned. I was in Squadron 5 for about 2 weeks.

ED

How were they organized with the PT boats—in squadrons?

JOHN

Basically squadrons. Twelve boats were assigned to a squadron. Later in the war, they started switching the squadrons around. A squadron is basically 12 boats. If the number of boats in a squadron fell too low, then those boats might be reassigned and absorbed into another squadron. So, Squadron 6 might end up becoming a part of Squadron 11.

ED

And these squadrons were assigned where? All over the Pacific? Did they operate out of a particular area, or how did that work?

JOHN

Squadrons were generally assigned to operation in aid of the war somewhere. Squadrons did not go on invasions. Normally the big Navy didn't want PT's around the big ships. There were too many chances for problems and there had been a number of incidents. I ended up working in Squadron 5 on 107.

ED

This is PT 107?

JOHN

PT 107 after it was repaired. From there I was transferred out to a tiny island located between Rendova and Munda. We had just invaded Munda, which is in the Solomons. There I was assigned back to Squadron 11. I ended up on PT 184 in Squadron 11. I was on that boat for approximately two years.

ED

Give me just a summary of crew members on a typical PT boat, just so I get an overview here.

JOHN

Basically, it had two officers; sometimes they would have more—a trainee on board. Basically the boat had a Skipper and an Executive Officer. Rarely were any of them higher than a Lieutenant. Most were Lieutenant, JG's or Ensigns. In the crew, you would generally have three Engineers, a Torpedoman, a Gunners Mate, a Seaman, a Quartermaster, and a Radioman. The Radioman handled the radio and radar when we got radar. At first, we didn't have radar. The Engineers, per se, you were assigned a gun to shoot if there was a problem. You were responsible for that gun. You had to clean it, get all the ammunition. That gun was yours. You had to take care of it. I was in the Engine Room, the First Engineer in the boat—in other words—Senior Engineer. I had been assigned the forward 50 calibers—twin 50's. The reason I was assigned to that was because I was the best shot on the boat. I also had very good night vision. The deal was that if you didn't know where to shoot, just shoot where I shot. That was the way it went the whole time I was on the Boat.

ED

During combat then, you are gunner. When are you doing your engineering duties and what were your engineering duties?

JOHN

Engine Room: I was on an ELCO Boat—an ELCO 80 foot boat. It had three engines. People nowadays can't comprehend what we went through. The temperature in the Engine Room ran about 140 degrees. We were allowed to stay in the Engine Room about one hour, then you had to get out. Beyond that time, you would begin to dehydrate. Three of us rotated in and out of the Engine Room. One engineer would enter the Engine Room and start the engines. He would run for an hour, then another of us would go in, and an hour later another would go in. We rotated constantly in and out of the Engine Room. The rest of the time, you were on a gun. I

was on 50 caliber machine guns most of the time. We also maintained all the machinery and gassed up the boat at the end of patrols. We performed all mechanical checks and repairs.

ED

When you were in the Solomons, you were operating out of what location?

JOHN

The first really heavy patrols we ran were at Rendova, and we were on a tiny island called Beau Island. Right across the other way was the big air strip of Munda. The Japanese had it and, then, the Marines took it away from them. They were fighting when I got there. The real hand-to-hand type fighting was on Munda. The Marines never tried to invade Rendova. It was a big island, and I don't even think the Japanese were on it in force. When the Japanese were on bombing raids, the Betty Bombers would come over our island, flying tree top high, drop a bomb on us, and go on to Munda. Their home base was at Rabaul.

The night we arrived at Beau Island on the YP, we immediately began unloading the ship. A Betty Bomber came over, dropped a bomb. I fell down the cargo hold and injured a kidney and my back. This caused me much misery for years. We had many air raids at that base. We also went to Boaganville.

ED

What role were the PT squadrons playing then? I mean, was this a patrol? Was this an attack, support of others?

JOHN

You were always basically in a blockage. By the time I got to the Pacific, the U.S. had begun blockading. MacArthur wanted to invade every island. Nimitz said he didn't have enough Marines to invade every island. They would lose too many people. Actually, it wasn't

MacArthur, Nimitz was the one who said we were going to hop, skip, and jump across the Pacific. When he devised that plan, it meant that every island we passed had to be blockaded. New Ireland was one that we passed. New Ireland was reputed to have Kaviang Air Base, with about 40,000 Imperial Marines on it. That had to be blockaded. At night, there were two PT squadrons, Squadron 5 and 11, blockaded. One boat would be assigned about 50 miles off the beach, and it would patrol that beach. Then there would be another boat.

ED

Back and forth?

JOHN

Back and forth and whatever. But you just piddled around all night long looking for lights or other movement. I said, "It was like squirrel hunting all night long; only the squirrel would shoot back."

You would do that to blockade the island. When it started to become daylight—I don't mean when you can see it bright, just when the sun began to light the sky—we would start moving away from the island because a PT boat just wasn't any good out in the broad daylight. We would move away from the Island. Generally, the Marine fighter squadron would come in, and they would patrol that island all day. The Marines would patrol in the day, and we patrolled at night. We would do that until the boat started wearing out, the planes started wearing out, then the Navy would assign a new squadron of planes and a new squadron of boats. Then, we would go back in a back base and rebuilt. It would take us about two weeks to rebuild the boat. Most patrols were from 100 yards to 500 yards from the beach.

ED

This must have been mid to late 1942.

JOHN

Dates kind of all away. About the first of 1943 or the last of 1942, something like that. I don't remember for sure, but I could look it up.

ED

With lots of patrolling at night, anything ever happen to break the monotony?

JOHN

There wasn't any monotony. A lot of people have a tendency to forget or ignore the bad stuff and remember the good. To me, it's like my brother says, "War is just a hell of an adventure if you live through it." To kind of sum it up on PT's, it is just like Buckley said. I never met anybody else in the Navy that it sounds like we were in the same Navy, because the PT's operated so opposite of typical Navy. We were even kept separate at times. If we came back to the United States, they didn't allow us to associate with other sailors too much. We were kept in a special barracks, because we had no formalities, as compared to the rest of the Navy. Every day was an adventure of some sort. As a crew member, you had no routine hours to sleep, daylight or dark. You had time to work, no time to quit. You worked until it was all done and you were ready to go on patrol. You got the boat ready again to go out, and, then, you waited until they assigned you another patrol. So you go out the next time. Maybe you go out four or five nights in a row, maybe you would skip a night. Whatever the Commander of the squadron would assign you. At that period of time, I think I went on 102 patrols and had combat of sorts on 81 of them.

The basic thing about a PT was—and Buckley put this right. He found out in the Philippines when he had to fight capitol ships with PT's that you can't really fight them in

daylight. You know, little wooden boats don't match up to a big ship. Although, we did fight large ships on a number of occasions at night.

ED

No matter how fast you go, you can't outrun a shell.

JOHN

We laid traps. We trapped the enemy, shot them or at them, and got away. The minute the shooting came back, we got out. We didn't stand and fight because the boat was made of wood and had aluminum gas tanks in it at that time. One bullet hole through the bank, and you had a gas filled bilge. The big thing the skipper of the boat had to do was to break off a battle at the right time and get away. Everyone that I know on a boat that was seriously damaged had problems in which the skipper or others in charge tried to maintain a fight. Even at night, you didn't maintain a fight. Once the enemy figured out where you were, a bullet would go right through the engine room and out the other side. Many a time on the morning following a fight, rays of light would shine into the engine room all over the place. We didn't even know we'd been hit, but we had new holes. We would take wooden plugs and drive them into the holes and cut them off, and, then we were ready to go again.

Life was tough. You had no regular sleep. Our average run was about 22 hours a day—you were awake most of that time. In PT school, they taught us how to sleep without being asleep in order to get a moment's rest. Even to this day, I can go to sleep in a minute. They taught us how to relax and how to go to sleep. If you were topside on patrol, you would be looking through binoculars (10 x 50), your eyes wide open, but you would be sound asleep. The skipper would walk by to check, and he would move his finger in front of your binoculars, it would wake you up.



Nothing about my life was regular. The official records state that PT crews had more frequent contact with the enemy and closer contact than any other personnel in the Navy.

On the boats, they weren't comfortable. There were no fans anywhere—no ventilation fans in the engine room.

We had a hand pump toilet in the fore peak, which couldn't be used if you were underway. If you had to go to the toilet, you held onto the aft flag staff and went over the fantail.

We had very little water onboard. We washed in sea water and dove over the side for a bath.

We wore cutoff dungarees and no underwear. When I went back to the states the first time, I had a shirt, a pair of dungarees, no underwear, and a Marine hat. My shoes were Marine boots, cut up like apostle sandals. It was a good thing I needed no money, because I hadn't been paid for two years.

When I left, my orders were to report to the nearest Navy base in the continental limits of the United States. I had to find my own way home, which I did by plane, boat, and ship. It took more than a month to get to San Francisco.

ED

Who was your skipper?

JOHN

The first one we had was named Meyers. I don't know why but all you ever knew was someone's last name or nickname. I ended up knowing one person's full name. That was it in almost three years. You were really close to people and did develop a very close kinship on the boat. But the attention was to the boat, not to the people on it.

Our first skipper was named Meyers. I didn't know his first name. The second was named Josey. I remember him but I don't remember his first name, but I did know where he was from.

ED

Were these guys top cut? What was your opinion of your leadership?

JOHN

Each one of them was different. Later on they got worse. The first ones were best. We said the war was divided in two halves. In the first half, most of the skippers were extremely wealthy people because the Navy was selecting people that could handle speed boats. The only people then were wealthy people. You had Kennedy's, you had Cornelius Vanderbilt, and people like that. If you go through the list of people that were on PT's, it's kind of ironic. You find—our intelligence officer was Supreme Court Justice White. We also had many famous athletes—mainly football players.

ED

Byron "Wizard" White?

JOHN

Yes. I met a lot of famous people. Kennedy, White, Charles Lindburg, Joe Foss, and others who became famous after the war.

ED

Isn't that something? Here you were with all those famous people.

JOHN

Vanderbilt had a boat in Squadron 9. He bought the boat. When he wanted into the Navy, they wouldn't take him because he had something physically wrong. It think it was a

heart murmur or something. They turned him down repeatedly and, then, he asked how much a PT boat would cost. They told him, and he asked, "If I bought it, would you make me the skipper of it? They said, "Yes." His boat had a plaque in the chart room that read, "Donated to the United States Navy by Cornelius Vanderbilt, III.

ED

Did you see that plaque?

JOHN

Yes. I guess they burned it. I don't know. They burned all those baots at the end of the war.

ED

Is that what they did?

JOHN

It was heartbreaking. You literally fell in love with these boats. Every day was an adventure, and you did things that nobody else ever did. What other sailor got on islands where they had never seen a white person?

To this day, one of my favorite stories is this. I found a photograph of Amelia Earhardt with a Japanese officer during the war. I was on an island there before anyone else got to it. I went in to get a canoe. I had six cents. That was all the money I had. I shined it up on the sand on the beach and swam in and gave this native six cents for his canoe.

ED

He was happy and you were too.

JOHN

I was real happy. In the process, I discovered this picture of Amelia Earhardt with a Japanese officer and a missionary. This created more trouble than I bargained for.

ED

Tell me about that.

JOHN

I sent a letter to this museum about this. The lady that I sent it to—my daughter has a copy of it at home. In the process of bartering for this canoe, I looked up in his hut. It was a native grass hut made out of bamboo and Neepa grass. There were some snapshots on a post, on a center post in his hut. I looked at it and asked him if I could go up there to look at it. He couldn't speak English, and in pidgin English I told him there was something I wanted to look at. I went up and it was Amelia Earhardt with a native boy and a Japanese officer, and the missionary. They were standing in front of a building. Later on in talking to the native, it turned out the native was the missionary's number one boy. He was the native in the picture. He had this picture. We had been told before we went on this invasion, this island of Emirau, that if we found any sign of Amelia Earhardt to immediately let them know—break radio silence and tell them.

I went back to the boat, left the picture in the hut. When I got back, I finally told Mr. Josey, our skipper. I said, "You know what I found in there?" He wouldn't believe me and told me to take him in. So, I loaded him in the canoe and took him ashore. He verified that it was Amelia Earhardt. We left the picture again and went back to our boat. He contacted Naval Intelligence. . . he broke radio silence and contacted Intelligence. The irony is that three days later a PBY "Black Cat" landed in the bay and taxied over and threw an anchor out. A guy got in a little boat called a RearmingBoat. They came over and wanted to know where Josey and the

engineer (me) were. We were really surprised. We were virtually on the equator, and he was in Navy dress blues. What in the world are you doing in a wood uniform on the equator?

He said he was from Naval Intelligence; never told us his name. He went in, looked at the picture and asked the native in very good pidgin English if he had a copy or negative. Where is this person? He said Amelia came there with this Japanese officer and left with him. The missionary had been transferred away and he (the native) heard he had died. The native was the only one left. That was the only one left who was in the picture. The intelligence officer took the picture, put it in an envelope, and stuck it in his pocket. The native objected, and the officer grabbed him by the throat, put his hand on his pistol, and appeared ready to shoot him. The officer took the picture and left.

After that we tried and tried to find out something about what happened. We were coming in off patrol one day and got a radio message to report to the office when we got in. This happened a couple of times. The second time, when Josey returned to the boat, he was ashen and acting nervous. He said, "Let's go up to the bow of the boat." When we got there, he said, "Read this." It was a dispatch, which read—I forget the exact wording of it now but it was something like this, "In regards to your inquiry, cease and desist; continue on with your contributions to winning the war." And it was signed by Chester Nimitz, Commander South Pacific.

ED

The man himself.

JOHN

He said, "You know who that is? I said, "What does cease and desist mean for sure?"

Josey said, "What he told us was to shut up and don't talk."

ED

Go do your job.

JOHN

We didn't mention it again until years after the war. I actually had a conversation with a former member of the Museum staff about this incident and sent her a letter. This seemed to elicit some interesting contacts, including a man who identified himself as a soon-to-be retired customs official. He said he was interested in the Earhart story because he wanted to write a book after he retired. This man also indicated he was a former Defense Intelligence Agent. Anyway, he seemed able to access detailed information about people I mentioned—people such as officers or squadron commanders involved in this incident.

After talking with this “retiring customs official” I received a call from the commander of the squadron, Mr. Taylor.

One of things we talked about was when we sounded a harbor for Joe Foss's Marine fighter pilots. The Navy was going to invade it but they didn't know what the harbor was like, depth of water, etc. Back then, we didn't have satellites and all that. We went in at night and sounded the harbor with an old lead line. Back and forth all night. The entrance to the harbor was a rifle shot across. We snuck in two boats and recorded all the depths.

ED

And where was this?

JOHN

This was when we went to Green Island in the early part of 1944. When Mr. Taylor and I talked about it, he remembered one of the interesting things that happened during that night. The Japanese detected us and knew somebody was out in the harbor. Green Island was an atoll, a

round thing with one entrance. The Japanese turned on a spotlight shining out into the harbor, which picked us up. Mr. Taylor waved at them, and they shut the light off. I guess they figured we were Japanese too.

ED

You acted friendly. Maybe you were. . . .

JOHN

The irony is that the book *In Close Quarters* states that we entered the harbor, sounded the depth, and got right out. It implies that we were in the harbor for only a short period of time and mentions nothing about the Japanese shining a spotlight on us.

ED

You mentioned you had seen some combat on 80 something missions. Give me a sense of what this was like. I mean, was it aircraft, was it surface ships?

JOHN

It was machine guns, shore batteries, people shooting at us. A big part was simply machine guns and automatic weapons. Somebody on the beach would see us and figure us out or we would get too close. On some of the islands we would go to, they didn't have roads on the islands so they had to supply themselves with barges. We found out that it was difficult to see the barge silhouetted against the bank. If you had a lot of nerve, you would go in close to the beach and try to silhouette them against the sky light. You would be able to see them better, but you also got real close to the beach—a couple of hundred yards off the beach. Sometimes, you just got too close and people saw you and would shoot at you. We would immediately get out. We would move along the beach with everyone looking through binoculars. We would get closer and closer—watching. We would see a light—sometimes we would shoot at it, sometimes

we wouldn't. Sometimes we would try to set up a trap or something on the beach or a barge gunboat, always looking out for Japanese float planes.

Generally, we returned fire when they shot at us. Most of it was machine guns, I guess. You didn't ever see a rifle bullet. Machine guns you could see and 20 mm. If we were moving, we had one advantage. It was always hard for the enemy to figure you out, because the wake in back of the boat would come up. It would come up and raise this rooster tail in the back of the boat. The Japanese would always interpret that as the front, so they would shoot in back of us. We knew to get out before the Japanese figured out they weren't shooting in the right direction.

Buckley devised this strategy in the Philippines. That is, don't try to maintain a fight with the enemy. Lay a trap, set it, hit them with it, then get out. Lay it again if you have to, but don't stay and sustain a fight, because the boats weren't built to do that. A rifle bullet would go clear through the boat. There were many contacts and close calls, but I never got seriously hurt. I did have several minor injuries.

ED

What about firing the torpedoes, did that happen very often?

JOHN

That happened very seldom except right at the first of the war. At Tulagi and Guadalcanal and at the first of Rendova, when Kennedy got run over. They had action with surface ships, big ships, destroyers and up. After that, after I guess Bougainville in the Solomons, they quit sending ships down because the Americans had gotten control of the air. Once we had air control, the whole picture changed. What really changed was that we would patrol these islands—New Britain, New Ireland, Bougainville, all of these different islands. We would find that we couldn't find the Japanese anymore. They had moved inland off the coast.



They moved the line to the mountain range or valley or some place that they could stay off the coast. They used to kid me about it because one night I shot a guy who we believed was going to the toilet. We kept seeing this flashlight walking down the edge of the beach. There was something back in the jungle—we could see the building. We finally decided that it must be a latrine. The skipper says, “The next guy that comes by, can you hit him?” I said, “Yeah.” I got one burst of the twin fifties and apparently hit the guy. The flashlight went way in the air. We laughed and came back in half an hour or so later and the flashlight was laying there still burning. Nobody had moved it, so I guess I shot the guy going to the toilet. After that, we didn’t see anyone on the beach anymore.

ED

At least not with a flashlight.

JOHN

The war was totally different in PT’s than anywhere else. You were subject to torpedoes but rarely did you have to use them in the middle of the war because the Japanese quit sacrificing their big ships for little boats. Then, we started replacing some of our torpedoes in favor of the bigger guns. The Navy put 40mm on our boats, and we started shooting more boat to boat and using gun boats too.

About the middle of the war things started changing. The Japanese lost control of the air, and they didn’t have the big navy out anymore. They were having to save it up for Japan. All of these islands—Halmahara was loaded with Japanese, Bougainville still had a lot of Japanese on it, New Ireland had loads of them, New Britain was a big Japanese base. Rabaul was still occupied. They were still strong, but all during the war they were blockaded. No one got to go out. Tichter the Marine fighter pilots hit in the day or we hit them at night. The Japanese were

just constantly hit. They just couldn't move without getting shot at some way. They finally quit shooting. We even shot up trucks and cars on the coastal roads on New Ireland.

When Squadron 11 went out, four boats went to the island of Fudi Fudi. They thought the Japanese were going to invade down that way—those boats were called 11. The other eight boats went to the Solomon Islands as Squadron 2—these were the boats I was on. The 11 and 2 boats were the PT's that rescued Eddy Rickenbecker when he was lost in the Pacific.

One night at Mios Woendi, we rescued a Chinaman and his ten-year old daughter. When we got back to the base, I gave her some ice cream I had gotten from the cook on the base. I had to sample the ice cream to get her to eat it. She didn't know the difference between hot and cold and wouldn't eat the ice cream because she thought it was hot.

On one occasion, a native policeman informed us of a downed Japanese flier on Tinch Island. We finally found the island fifty miles out of position, as reported by Captain Bligh, on the chart. The natives on Tinch, a small coral atoll, had killed the flier. They had never seen white people. As we talked with them, the natives kept rubbing our skin to see if we would change color.

While we were at Emirau, an Australian coast watch told us of a native village on New Hanover Island that the Japanese were using as slave labor.

Several of our boats went at night into the pass between New Ireland and New Hanover. With the coast watch as guide, we loaded all the natives in the village, pigs, chickens, a sewing machine, and all of their possessions onto the boats, while some other boats stood guard. We departed and took them all to Mussau Island to establish a new village.

We always wondered what the Japanese thought when they came after their workers that next morning.

ED

As the war progressed your station and your patrols, where did you go after New Ireland and New Britain?

JOHN

We went from the Solomons to the Admiralties and through the Admiralties to New Ireland and New Britain; from there up into the Northern end of New Guinea. Then, we went to Mios Woendi, then Morotai and further north. That was getting closer to the Philippines all the time. We patrolled there. I came home then for some time. I was gone for a couple of months or so, three months I guess before I got back.

I wish we could have done more but our squadron rescued fliers, shot down planes, sunk small ships and barges, raided a barge depot. We blew up ammunition dumps and destroyed trucks and cars. We went on a raid to wreck a rice farm, supported the Australian coast watches, killed a lot of the enemy, and rescued other people.

We did what we were ordered to do.

ED

Were you given leave to come back?

JOHN

Well, I was sent back to go to Officer Candidate School. I didn't want to go to Officer Candidate School. I was a First Class Engine Man, and they had appointed me to Chief. Then, they cancelled that because the Navy had too many people. They gave me a promotion to Warrant, Junior Grade, and they weren't appointing any more Warrant, Junior Grade. But, I had to go to Officer Candidate School, so they sent me back to the States to do that.

ED

Where in the states?

JOHN

Well, I didn't go. I ended up—I refused OCS and asked to go into scuba diving. They had invented the scuba, and I asked to go to the Frogmen. I thought I would try that. They asked for volunteers out of PT's, and I asked to go for that. Then I discovered that I had a great fear of black depths in the ocean where the light ceased to exist. It scared me. I almost drowned one time. I came so close to drowning and that apparently put some of the Fear of God in me about black depths.

ED

Did it surprise you that you had that reaction?

JOHN

I just loved the reefs. Anytime I had time off, I was out catching lobsters and green sea turtles and doing all kinds of hunting and fishing-type things. I thought I would be great at scuba, because I could do free diving pretty good. I could dive down to 50 feet easy, but I couldn't do that at night I found out.

That's another story. We took a propeller off a boat one time in deep water. In taking it off. . . . We had one propeller left. It was a Federal Mogul propeller made by Federal Mogul Bearing Co. It was a beautiful, high speed propeller.

ED

Where was this occurring?

JOHN

It was—I can't think of the name of the island now. We were going up Manus Island, in Manus Harbor. MacArthur had just invaded it, off of New Guinea. In the process, we bent a

propeller. I dove down under the boat and got the propeller off. It had one blade bent. We had hit something during the typhoon.

ED

That must have been interesting.

JOHN

Yes, that was interesting, but that's another story.

ED

I want to hear about it.

JOHN

Anyway, with this fear of black water, I said, "With this new propeller, we can't lose this in the deep water. If we dropped the propeller, it was gone. We had tough luck. There was no diving down to get it. We tied a line on, and I dove down under the boat with a mask on, and the crew was pumpint air to me with a hand pump. The deal was, they would lower that propeller down, and it was a three blade bronze prop, 32 inch diameter. They would lower it down, and I was going to slide it on. Everything went just dine. I had it over the properller shaft and locked my legs over it, grabbed the propeller and started sliding it back when the guys up topside lost the line. They let loose of it at the wrong time and away it went. They knew there was nobody holding the weight of this big propeller. I had it by the prop blade and that thing swung back, and it pulled me back. My legs came off the propeller shaft, and I went down with the propeller and the propeller spun as it went down. I was holding it as it dove down. It started spinning, then my face mask jerked off because it came to the end of the hose. I was still going. Finally, I realized it was getting down deep. The light was diminishing, and I let go of it. I had expelled all my air by then. I was out of air and really having troubles with light and everything else.

Then I discovered that as the propeller had spun going down, it wrapped that line around me. So after I turned loose, it was still pulling me down. I went down so deep I couldn't see. To this day, I have thought about it a lot of times as to whether I totally blacked out from lack of oxygen or whether I was down that deep or what. I couldn't see and finally got loose from the line and finally started seeing light. I continued toward it and finally got to the surface. The crew helped me out of the water and back onto the boat.

After that, apparently, the fright of that going down wiped me out of that scuba thing. That was the end of that.

ED

At the time, you didn't know that it had that impact on you, until you went to the Frogman school?

JOHN

That's the first time I knew that something was wrong. I just got scared to death. I came out of there and went back out in the Pacific. It wasn't too long after I got back out there that the war ended.

ED

Did you rejoin the same PT?

JOHN

They sent me to PT Base 17. Then, I went to a PT base at Samar. I did a lot of engineering work, worked on things and decommissioned some of the boats.

ED

The war was over at this point?

JOHN

The war was over then. Then they sent me to a base at Alongapu, a Navy yard in Luzon, in the Philippines. There, they said due to my background—they had sent so many people home off the ships they couldn't move them. They would send me out on small craft figuring I could bring the boats into the dock to be decommissioned. I had two guys who were engineering specialists—they'd been kicked out of college—that were really intelligent. They had some personal problems. They assigned them to me. We would go out to a ship anchored in the bay and try to figure how to run the ship. After we got it runnable, we would tell them to send a pilot to take it in to the dock. I did that for about a month or two months, I guess. One day, they assigned us to pull four engines out of a big Army Crash Boat. We pulled out all four Scott engines and put four Packard PT engines in.

ED

What is an Army Crash Boat?

JOHN

It's just a 110 foot crash boat that goes out in the bay to get downed airplanes. It's rescue boat. They were converting the crash boats into yachts. One was for the President of the Philippines, one was for the American Ambassador to the Philippines, and the other one was for the American Commander of the Philippine Sea Frontier. I don't know if they ever assigned the fourth one. We put these engines in all these boats and got them running. In the meantime, I had trained a crew—a Filipino crew. For quite awhile, all I had to do was "be available." The war being over, I had it pretty easy. I'd go hunting up in the mountains with the Filipino natives. We just had many adventures.

ED

Always hunting and fishing?

JOHN

Outdoors—hunting and fishing.

ED

How long were you in the Philippines after the war?

JOHN

I was assigned there—It seemed everybody I knew was sent home after the war. It was 1946, the latter part of 1946. I was in the Philippines for a full year, perhaps a little longer. What I did—the military had a point system. I had the points; in fact, the highest point rating in the Alangapo Navy Yard. The Navy had a list they put me on once a week, I believe it was. It indicated who the top person was and how many points they had. I forget now how that worked. It was based on your rate, the time in service, the time in combat, I think it was. Combat points really added up. My points—I don't really recall—they were sky high compared to anyone else on the base. They called me in and said they couldn't afford for me to leave; would I stay until the Filipino PT crews were off and running. When they were trained and running and everyone was happy, I went home.

ED

What were the Filipino folks like?

JOHN

What were they like?

ED

Easy to work with?

JOHN



Oh yeah, I enjoyed it. Number one, they were a good contact to where to hunt, because they call came from the mountains somewhere. A number of them were trained on how to be mechanics. I was to teach them what makes a diesel run, all the fundamentals of engines; but I had to be real basic with them. I stayed in the Philippines doing that and really enjoyed it. I used to get invited to big pit roasts and family reunion-type activities and to Christmas parties. I had a heck of a time.

ED

What were you hunting?

JOHN

Wild boar and deer, wild chickens—those are other stories, such as the House of the Green Rock.

ED

Tell me about that.

JOHN

I used to hunt with a guy named Goudy. We would go hunting, and this one fellow named Nicholas Inocentia would take us up into the mountains and introduce us to another guy. The other many took us up to hunt and live with the Negrito, the Little People. They would take us way, way up into the mountains. It would take two days of walking to get up there. They told us, “We are going to take you to the House of the Green Rock.” The war was over. That was when I was training those crews, and I had time off. Finally, we went up there. It took two days to get up there. He told us, “Before we get there, these natives are little primitive people. You can’t insult them.” “When you see one—they will present themselves to you—you have to make yourself undefendable; you have to give them your pocket knife, your rifle, your machete,

everything you have to give to them. That makes them obligated to take care of you. They have to protect you.”

The second day of going up there, he said we were getting close to the House of the Green Rock. We got there, and this native, this little bitty guy that could under my arms, came out and he had a little bow and arrow and that’s about it. He did have kind of a loin cloth on. We immediately gave all our weapons to him—made ourselves totally at his mercy. We gave him everything we owned. They said we had to run this green rock. The top of it was very green. We looked at it, and Goudy and I figured it was jade, a big volcanic glob that had been blown out of Mount Pinatubo. It was shiny jade, and it had been rubbed so many years, I guess, that it was slick, just like glass. We rubbed the green rock. You just wouldn’t believe the experiences we had up there; we were there for three or four days.

ED

They could speak English?

JOHN

No. They couldn’t speak any English. They didn’t even speak Negrito. They spoke a little separate language. We would just make signs and sounds. We just had a really good time.

ED

I think you mentioned earlier today to Mike something about running into a whale. Tell me more about that.

JOHN

We were running one night; we were on the far side of between New Britain and New Ireland getting close to Rabaul. Rabaul was assigned to our area. A bunch of shooting started—big stuff with big explosions. You could see them off in the distance. We all stood topside just

idling along New Ireland and agreed it looked like some big stuff and agreed to go take a look at it. We put everything in gear and took off running wide open toward the shooting. All of a sudden we hit a whale. We didn't know it at the time, but it was a whale on the surface. We hit that whale and that boat just leaped out of the water, up in the air, airborne, and the propeller went across that whale. Later on, the water was just full of chopped up blubber. In the process—when we jumped that whale and ran across it—the boat pitched up. I was in the Engine Room; I was just getting up out of that little seat. In the ELCO boat, the engineers sit in a little seat on top of one of the engines—the starboard engine. I was just getting up when we hit that thing, and it threw me up and it kind of flipped me, apparently, and I went head first between the starboard side and the engine. It jammed me in there. There was only about a foot space. I went down in there head first, and I couldn't get out. The engineer had to shift the thing out of gear. They set it in neutral, and I didn't respond. Another engineer came down and said, "O'Keefe is gone." They finally found me sticking out and hollering. They couldn't hear me because of the engine noise, I guess. But, they finally found me.

ED

That must have burned you.

JOHN\

It did. It burned a streak across my stomach. The boat had a water cooled manifold, but there it was still about 200 degrees. That burned a streak across my belly. We never did see the whale, but it had to have been a whale because this white blubbery stuff was all over the water. It didn't damage the boat. Apparently, it was soft enough that the boat ran up on it. I figure just the bottom and the three propellers hit. The center one got damaged because the center was a little lower and sat deeper in the water.

ED

Did you resume going in to where the combat was and what happened there?

JOHN

We finally discovered and found out watching it that the Americans were bombing Rabaul, and it was all these bombs going off. You could just see them flash on the horizon. From where we were, it looked like Naval guns shooting. By this time, we got our bearings and figured what it was. We decided we better not stick our nose in to that. We turned around and went back to our patrol area.

ED

You mentioned also earlier in our discussion something about being in a typhoon. Tell me about that.

JOHN

Well, it was—we were leaving—I can't remember, but there was another boat leaving with us. I think it was the 183 boat. We left Emirau. This was before weather forecasts and satellites and all that. We let Emirau just to go over to Manus Harbor. Then from there, we were going to Hollandia, New Guinea. Each boat took a step north. When we left Emirau and got caught in a typhoon, we didn't even know the storm was coming up. It just got worse and worse, and we ended up in the middle of it.

ED

What was that like in a 70 foot boat?

JOHN

An 80 foot boat. It was very interesting. We forgot about the war. We just wanted to survive. When we got 30 to 40 to 50 foot waves, they broke over the top of the boat. The boat

would be totally submerged in the water at times. It would bob right back out. We just closed everything up as tight as we could and held on. Steering the boat was a problem. Normally, you had to steer from topside. We had worked out a way to steer the boat from the chart house. There was a shaft in there that we could turn. We put a wrench on that and made it where you could stay inside and still steer. We did have a little radar, so you steered by watching radar. The engineers suffered the most because they had to go into the Engine Room. In the ELCO boats, you were in a compartment that is called a Day Room, which lays just in front of the Engine Room. You would open this little hatch and slide down. You didn't try to stand up. You would crawl around on your hands and knees or on your belly. You would crawl down in the Engine Room and the Engineer would crawl back up and get in your bed. He would wrap his arms and legs around the bunk and just hold on. I can still remember holding on to my bunk. That boat would be thrown up, then bang down. It was a terrific beating. You would almost want to cry because you didn't know what to do. You could go to the Engine Room and lay down on top of the center engine and hold on to it. It would just throw you up and down. It was at night time, most of it. We could watch the gauges, which had ultraviolet light showing on them—there were 43 of them. The worst part if that periodically you had to get up and transfer fuel from one tank to another to keep it balanced. We tried to pull fuel out of the wing tank down into the bottom tank to keep the weight low on the boat. That was two days. Finally, the fuel was getting low enough. We didn't want to cut the engines off. I told the Skipper that we had to get down to one engine. So, we ran the center engine and killed the rest. We rode it out. We went into the center of the typhoon—or hurricane, whatever it was. You could see the other side coming just like a big wall. In the eye, you could look up and see the sky. It took another day getting through the other side. We would let one engine idle just to keep rudder way. Wind

gyrations slowly blew us to the outer edge of the storm, so we could get underway. We came in Manus Harbor. I guess the word had got out that there was a PT boat out there lost or something. We came in and the Battleship *Pennsylvania* was anchored there.

Anyway, when we came into the harbor the first thing we did—we hadn't had anything to eat or drink for almost two days. To keep rudder way is the only thing we could do. We entered the harbor and made a pot of coffee. We just layed to and made coffee. We had gotten inside the harbor where there were no big waves or anything. We made our coffee and were sitting around there on top in shorts—cut off dungarees, nothing else—barefooted, no hats, no shirts, just shorts. We were dirty looking, cruddy guys. We passed by the Battleship *Pennsylvania* and the whistle sounded and noise was going on—cugle calls. I remember asking the skipper, "They're running flags up. What's going on over there?" He said, "You wouldn't believe it. They are paying tribute to us." They even called out the Marine Honor Guard. We had fought through that thing and came out.

ED

It's tribute to the boat too.

JOHN

It was pretty much the storm that got Admiral Halsey in trouble. That other boat that was with us got out of it. It didn't get trapped into the big part of the storm. Anyway, I mean we were beat up after that. We had a hard time.

It was right after that, sometime during the night, when we screwed our propeller up. It was two days later when that propeller almost took me down.

ED

You dive down to the dark reaches. . . .

JOHN

Some of it Trish [daughter of John O'Keefe] has mentioned. Our Executive Officer, Comptom D. Swanson—this guy could do more with a boat in handling it. He could make it go sideways. It didn't matter what it was. He knew how to make it do it. He was the best boat handler I was ever around. He knew how to ride waves. He could get in those big waves or Pacific ground swells. For him to save gas and get us out of that, I attribute a lot of it to his ability in boat handling. If I ever got into gas troubles and running short of gas on long patrols, he would take over, and he could always ride those ground swells and give me twice the mileage anyone else could get. He was just good.

ED

You mentioned earlier that while you were close to your shipmates that the real close relationship was between the crew and the boat itself. Tell me more about that—how you felt about that boat.

JOHN

It's pretty hard to put into words. You find it difficult to put into words. You feel an attraction for the boat that's more important than anything. You save everything for the benefit of the boat.

ED

She saved your life many a time.

JOHN

You just got htat way about those boats. When they wanted to take me off and put me on the beach as Chief Engineer of the Squadron, I didn't want to leave the boat. They said one of the most dangerous parts about the thing is when a person gets to liking the boat in combat too

much. It might be dangerous to them. So, they would take you off of it, generally, and send you home or assign you to something else. They assigned me on the beach as Chief Engineer of the Squadron.

Really, I was already doing that job in an informal way. Because I could always make my engines perform beyond the norm. Sometimes I would come in from patrol, and the Chief Engineer or the Skipper would ask, "Do you have everything ready? Are you tuned up, fueled, and ready to go?" Usually I responded, "Yes." Then, they would have me help another boat engineer tune up his engines. They moved me around a lot for that reason, and I was performing a lot of specialty work anyway.

We tended to idle the boats all night. As we patrolled, the engines mostly idled, but they were not made to idle. If shooting did start and you had to speed up and run real fast, the engines backfired. We couldn't get up speed because the spark plugs were fouled from idling so much. I got to thinking about this. We used, I believe, B-4 spark plugs. At the end of our patrol, before we cut off all the engines, I would ask the other guys to cut off only one engine. I would take out two plugs at each cylinder and look at them. The plug that was always really oily, really bad, was by the intake valve. The cold wet air would come in over that valve.

Some of the parts of our Packard engines were actually aircraft engine parts. The magnetos, the carburetors, breaker points, spark plugs were all aircraft parts. I went over and talked with the aircraft guys and found out we could get spark plugs that would tolerate different heat ranges. So, I got a plug that would tolerate higher heat and stuck it on the inlet side of the cylinder. Then, when the shooting started, we could jam the engines forward and quickly speed away with no coughing, backfiring, spitting. The word got around the squadron, and everyone else started employing the same technique.



As a result, I found out that one of the things you don't do in the Navy is to contradict what an officer tells you. Even if he is wrong, by publicly proving him wrong, he would eventually get back at you.

The Engineering Officer, an old Navy man, came up the hard way. I had told him about this idea, and he said, "It won't make any difference." I did it anyway. And, the next time the shooting started, we sped away but nobody else could. Of course, they all wanted to know what I had done, and I told them. The word got back to the Engineering Officer about what I had done—which had proved him wrong.

ED

What happened?

JOHN

He didn't like me for a long time. There was another occasion that I did this. We had an auxiliary generator made by Hercules Engine Company. We had to have it for the radar to get enough power. Everything went into the battery. About halfway through the night, the generator would always quit. I would take the spark plug out and put in a new plug, then start it back up. In the meantime, you had to restart everything because losing the generator would kill the radar, radios, and everything. I got to looking at that generator. Whoever designed that thing was circulating cold inlet water—cool sea water—in on the head of the engine where the spark plug was. They were cooling the head, but leaving the rest of it hot. I told the Chief Engineer how to solve that problem, but they said didn't make any difference.

ED

The same guy?

JOHN

The same one. Anyway, again, I went ahead and fixed the problem. I switched the water supply down to the bottom of the cylinder, just like an automobile and took the hot water out right off the head. We never fouled up another plug. Well, word got around the other skippers were wanting me to come over and fix their auxiliary generators. Word got back to the Chief Engineer again.

I was supposed to get promotion to Warrant Officer Junior Grade, and the CE stopped it. He said the Navy wasn't issuing that rank anymore. I don't know if they were or not, but I always felt this was how the CE got back at me.

ED

So these were Packard V-12 engines?

JOHN

Yes, but not like the automobile engines. They were much larger.

ED

What kind of horsepower are we talking about?

JOHN

To start with, they were 1,260 horsepower. Then, later on, toward the end of the war, we changed the RPM, and I had to do this in the squadron. I had to add a supercharger on every engine in the squadron and change the gear ratio and rebuild the supercharger. As a result, it jumped to 1,550 horsepower. We upped the horsepower of the boat by changing the speed of the impeller on the supercharger.

They were beautiful engines. They have a history of their own. They started out with World War I Liberty engines. Then, the rum runners during Prohibition, they used those engines to put in speed boats to run booze from Cuba to Florida. The rum runners developed this engine;

they actually built the thing. Sir Malcolm Campbell got hold of it; he upped it and redesigned part of it. Then, he put it into the “Miss America” speedboat and broke the world record with it—with the Packards. When the war broke out, that was the best engine available. Actually when the Plywood Derby took place, some of the boats in the Derby didn’t have Packard. Only one had a Packard engine. Each engine consumed about 156 gallons of aviation gasoline an hour at top speed.

ED

So, they had three 1,500 horsepower engines?

JOHN

At that time, they had three 1,250 horsepower engines.

ED

What kind of top speed could you get out of a PT boat?

JOHN

The speed depended on the war load on the boat and how long it had been in the water, as well as how well the boat was maintained. On the average, one in good shape would do about 42 knots, something like that. The boat I was on set the world record for a combat craft. Believe it or not, we rebuilt the boat and put three new engines in it while we were at Tulagi. I had just been assigned to the boat, while two other engineers had been sent to Australia on leave. That left me and another engineer to do all this work—pull the engines, rebuild the engine room. Then, the other engineer hurt himself. He cut his foot really bad. They put him on no work and that left me, by myself, to rebuilt that boat in 10 days. I think I worked around the clock. I don’t even remember taking off to sleep. I pulled the engines, cleaned the whole engine room, rebuilt everything, modified the exhaust stacks, the mufflers. The only thing I didn’t do was paint. I

just cleaned everything. I put new engines in—three new engines, and they were brand new from Packard. I got that boat all fixed up with a full war load except we didn't quite have full tanks of gas. I think I had about 1,000 gallons of gas on board, maybe. It normally carried 3,000 and something. There is a major ten mile course between Guadalcanal and Savo Island. The two markers they put out there for ten miles. It was for ships to go by and calibrate their instruments. We went out there and started. The skipper wanted to know, "You have to run these engines slow to break them in?" I never found much credence in that story. I said, "Just gun it and see what we can do." We took out and that ten mile corridor at 52.8 knots per hour. That's the highest speed attained by a combat ship. We did that on the ten mile course. The engines got to running so fast that I left the engine room. The superchargers—there is a quill shaft that drives them, and it will start flexing if you start running it too fast. When it starts flexing you hear kind of a whinny noise. That's just before it explodes.

ED

That's just before you want to be out of there.

JOHN

Yes, you want to be out of there. I came out of the engine room. That engine is supposed to run 2,450 RPM and the engine was at 3,450 RPM. It was running 1,000 RPM faster than it should. We ran that course, and it was unbelievable. Nobody ever ran a PT that fast. About two weeks later, we were back to normal. I never could get it back to that level. We would be in dry dock, put new engines in it, a new shaft, new propellers, polish the rudders. The bottom of that boat looked new, it was so shiny. We just hit it right. We received a congratulatory letter, with a commendation on it. That was it.

ED

You mentioned earlier: Buckley. Tell me a little more about him and what you know about him. What his role was in the PT program?

JOHN

Buckley was everything to the PT program in that he started it out. He was assigned half a squadron in the Philippines before the war and got out just before the war was about ready to start. He was known and liked by MacArthur.

ED

What was his rank?

JOHN

Buckley was a Lieutenant JG when he started out. Later he was made a full Lieutenant. The Navy had experienced terrific defeats all over the Pacific. What ships we had left, according to the history I've read and what I heard talked about, the Navy—what good existing ships it had—pulled them back so they could reassemble.

What they did was they left the Philippines and all that area with nothing, no combat ships to speak of any more. It wasn't that they were afraid, but they had to preserve. They had lost so much and had to preserve what they had. The biggest navy in the world at that time was the Japanese. They would tell Buckley that he was all they had, and he wanted to get them out. The Navy told him to coast watch. People would tell the Navy that the Japanese were sending so many ships down to a certain area. They knew where they were so they would tell Buckley where they were and he and Kelly, his Executive Officer on another boat. Then, they started having six boats but ended up with three. They lost the others. They found out right quick that they could outrun the Japanese ships but even had a hard time of that with the destroyers. They could not battle big ships in the daytime. Buckley discovered right quick the boats were so

fragile in the sense of the way it was built. It couldn't stand machine gun fire and, above all, it couldn't be caught by an airplane. Buckley had to preserve the boat. That may be where that comes from—some of that preserving the boat.

Buckley would go out, and he sank some big ships, heavy cruisers and ships. He did it just by sneaking in, not letting them know he was there. He would sneak in and try to stay in the troughs of the swells where they couldn't be seen, get in there and get as close as they could and get out. In some cases, people would get in under and turn the torpedo propeller up in the nose. They would wind it up so it would arm quicker because they found out they would hit something with a torpedo, and it wouldn't go off. It never armed, didn't go far enough to arm. Buckley just found out how to fight that boat. You always fight on the offensive, but it's got to be a trap. You've got to lay a trap for the guy. Never let him know you are there, fire, and, then, sneak out. If the enemy starts shooting or sees you, get out quick. Don't mess around with him because you just don't have the ability to fight him. Your fight was in your stealth, shallow water and speed. You would do things that other people wouldn't do.

Buckley carried that back to schools, and it was taught to the officers, and, of course, everything was taught to the enlisted personnel about preserving the boat. They would do anything for the boat. The crew was that important, but the main thing was the boat.

ED

So you make those boats, the ELCO boats were made. Where were they made?

JOHN

In Bayonne, New Jersey. The Electric Boat Company made them for the Navy. They were fine. There was an element of boat building. I have a book at home that explains boat building, and the ultimate in wooden boat building is the American PT boat. The ELCO. It

wasn't the Higgins. If you get into the Higgins, you find a lot of metal. Metal frames and struts and supports. Everything in the ELCO was wood.

ED

Was that good being all wood?

JOHN

It was flexible. It was a very flexible boat. It would stand up. It wasn't rough as the Higgins. The Higgins was built like a landing craft.

ED

That's what they were known for. How was the food on a PT boat? You didn't exactly have a galley on board.

JOHN

We had a galley. A little two burner electric 24 volt or 48 volt with an oven, about a foot square. We cooked very little. At night when we were going on patrol, they usually tried to feed us—the crews of the boats—once a day some way, on the beach. You would get K rations. They gave you a little Cracker Jack box or something like that. You couldn't cook or anything like that at night when you were on patrol. You couldn't make any coffee, so they would make coffee before we left and put it into a canteen. You treated the canteens like hot water bottles; you kept them on the engine in between the banks of cylinders. Sometimes they would explode. By morning, if you were getting sleepy and really exhausted and tired, all it took was a sip of that coffee and you were awake. First thing you did when you got away from the beach in the morning was make a pot of coffee. We would keep coffee grounds aboard. That was really tough times. Any new ship that would come in from the States, we would go out and try to bum food from them, coffee especially.

Talking about food, we got poisoned one time. It about killed everybody in the squadron.

ED

What happened?

JOHN

The cook made Chicken a la King. This was down in the Solomons. We were going up to invade Emirau the next day. We were supposed to provide some relief for Squadron 11. The cook made this Chicken a la King and forgot to put it in the reefer—the refrigerator. He let it set out all night in the tropics. In the morning, it looked good but it wasn't. I'll admit it tasted good. We really ate that Chicken a la King. That was good stuff. The next morning we were supposed to go on this invasion. That night, we all got sick. We had one guy in the boat that didn't eat, and he didn't get sick. The officers didn't get sick. All the crews on all the boats were just deathly sick. You name it, and we had it. Finally, they took us off the boats. Anyway, they put us all up on the beach, and we lay there naked on cots with no mattresses under a big Banyan tree. We had to sweat it out. They would come by every now and then. A Corpsman would get hold of our hair and pick it up and pour water in your mouth while you were just laying there. Everything just unloaded in us. The wonderful part about it, one of the wonders of life was that cook. I can't remember his name, but I can sure remember him. They took him and marched him, with two Marines in MP uniforms and rifles—they marched him up and down the column of us guys laying there sick. We couldn't cheer, couldn't laugh, we couldn't do nothing. That sure was nice to see him. I still enjoy thinking about it. I often wondered what invasion he went on.

ED

He got some hard duty somewhere.



JOHN

He got some hard duty somewhere. Those MP's took him off somewhere. To show you how it was, a ship came in. This was one of the funny parts of the war. This ship came in, and we knew it had just come in from stateside, so we went out to bum some coffee off them. We asked them, "We need some coffee. Could you give us some coffee?" A guy came out with a pot full of fresh brewed coffee. "You missed the point, we want coffee grounds," we said. He replied that they were down in the ship's store. "I'll get you some. I'll ask the storekeeper." He went down and they responded, "By the way, it's about chow time. Why don't you just eat with us?" The whole PT crew climbed up on this ship and went in the chow hall. All these guys are generally griping about their food. "Oh, man, it's horrible food."

ED

What kind of ship was this?

JOHN

It was called an AK. We looked around and here was fresh sliced tomatoes, real weenies with the skin on them. I forgot what all they had there. Then, they were complaining. We hadn't had anything like that in two years, I guess. What we did, we started eating those tomatoes. They tasted good, wonderful. That night, all this commotion started on the boat. We were wondering what it was. You would look at your buddy over there, and he had knots all over his head. It looked like golf balls under his skin. You would start laughing, and, then, you would start hurting and you would discover you had them. Everybody that ate those [tomatoes]. The doctor asked us what we had done. We told him, and he said, "It's the acid in those tomatoes. You haven't had any acid in your system so long, it is just reacting. It's what they call Boulder Hives. When you laugh or do anything to stretch your skin, those knots hurt like

heck.” We would look at each other and just die laughing. It hurt so, you would take your hands and put them over your eyes, so you couldn’t see anybody. When you quit laughing, you would get to where you didn’t hurt. This went on for 3 or 4 hours, laughing and hurting. I never eat a tomato that I don’t think of the boat and us.

Those are just adventures of war. When the war is all over, you forget the near misses. I could tell you tales about the near misses and all that. I made it through without getting hit and hurt real bad.

ED

The propeller story sounded like you came pretty close.

JOHN

I came close lots of time. As close as I ever got was near Hollandia. I was shooting the twin fifties. Due to salt spray, I couldn’t wear glasses because my glasses would salt up. I had to get used to wearing no glasses. I had good night vision without glasses; I could see very well at night.

The flashing of these guns—when I would shoot bursts out of it—the flash and fire coming out of the end would blind your eyes a second. A guy gave me two flame arresters to put on the end of the guns that looked like funnels that had a flat disc on them. He said they will hide the flash from your eye. It did. It hid the flash real well. We went out that night, and we got into a fire fight with somebody on the beach. They started shooting back. I can always remember this. Our tracers were kind of red. Theirs were orange. I was shooting bursts where these tracers were coming out, and I was hitting right on that guy wherever he was. All of a sudden, one tracer came out of there that was white. Believe it or not, I started shooting at that white tracer. I don’t know why. I didn’t think about it. It was just a target. I started following

that tracer. It arced and came right in over and hit the flame arrester on the end of my gun and ricocheted over my head. If I hadn't put those on the end of the guns, that tracer would have hit me between the eyes. Ultimately, I took the flame arresters off because they were hindering my vision some from what I was shooting at.

Another time, I was up on the chair on the engine. They signaled down for me to open the mufflers because we were going to speed up. I spun off the chair and stepped up to close the switches and turned around and kicked something on the deck. It was the clipboard that usually hung on the back of my chair. When you start up the engine, you logged it in. Anyway, I picked up the clipboard and hunt it back up. I didn't think about why it had fallen off until the next morning. I got into the engine room and found a bullet hold in my seat, right through that clipboard. When I turned to get off the chair the night before, a bullet had come right through my chair, went out the back, through the clipboard and outside the boat. It would have hit me in the belly button if I had been sitting in the chair.

ED

How did that make you feel?

JOHN

Fine, it missed me.

ED

I have talked to a lot of veterans who say, you know, I don't know why. I was the one that got lucky; didn't get hit by something like that.

JOHN

We didn't have. . . our casualty rate was low for what they thought it was going to be at the start of the war. They considered giving us premium pay because of the life we had to live

on the boat and the danger we would go through. By fighting the boats the way Buckley said to fight them, it kept us from becoming very high. While I was on the boat, we only had one guy that was real seriously hit. He got hit in the mouth by a bullet—and one of the officers on the boat we were with one night, a 20mm bullet hit a spotlight next to him. He was good looking, a typical Joe College quarterback type. He ended up with his face all screwed up. We didn't get too many injuries. Some of them died. We lost as many by accident as we lost in combat, but we had an awful, awful lot of near misses. That's just the way it was.

ED

How shall we wrap this up? Any final words here?

JOHN

It's like my brother said, "War is a hell of an adventure if you live through it." To top it all off, when the Korean War broke out, they called me back.

ED

What did you do during the Korean war?

JOHN

They called me back to be in the PT's, then they decided they didn't need me. They changed my rate from E.N.D. to E.N.G. I think I have the only E.N.G. in existence in the Navy as a rate. That is for gasoline for the Packard engine. They changed my rate and were going to send me home. An officer looked at my records and asked, "Did you go through this diesel school they are talking about here in your records? At the Navy Pier?" I said, "Yes, that's it." He came back and told me, "You made the highest score that's ever been made in Diesel Service School." Then he went on to say, "We got a problem." "What's that?," I said. He replied, "Well, we have already told you we were going to send you home, but we don't have any

minesweepers on the West Coast. Now we are in a war with North Korea and need them.

Would you stay and help us get some running?"

I told him I had never been on a minesweeper but it was just machinery. I told him I would stay. He promised to send me home as soon as the replacements and the ships were ready and they were on their way to Korea. So, I got the minesweepers running, got the crews trained. For three months, I didn't get paid, then found out I wasn't even in the Navy. One of the two officers had discharged me. My wife was having to send me money. That got straightened up, and I ended up in Korea for over a year, sweeping mines off North Korea and Manchuria. One day the skipper called me up and said, "We made a deal with you and you are going home. I got your replacement." They told me something when I left. He said, "I want to tell you something before you get away from here. I kept denying you getting a commission. K kept delaying because I would lose you." I responded, "Don't call me again." He gave me a commendation for my work.

ED

Let me thank you for spending the time to talk with us.

JOHN

I apologize for spending so much time.

ED

Never, never apologize for that. Thanks again.