

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

ROBERT HAGEN

Today is August 28th, year 2007. My name is Floyd Cox, a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. We are in San Antonio, Texas, at the Towers Retirement Center to interview Mr. Bob Hagen. This is a follow-up of our interview which was performed on July 9th, 2007. To reiterate, Bob, you were assigned to the USS JOHNSTON. Is this correct?

MR. HAGEN: Yes, it is.

MR. COX: What were your duties on the JOHNSTON?

MR. HAGEN: I was a gunnery officer.

MR. COX: Who was the captain of the ship?

MR. HAGEN: Commander Ernest E. Evans.

MR. COX: I'd like to ask you a little bit about him and then we'll get this interview to go. What did the crew think of him overall?

MR. HAGEN: He was one of the most well liked probably in history. He was pleasant, firm about doing things right but he gave officers assignments and what have you and let them carry them out without hassling them too much, extremely popular with the crew.

MR. COX: Great. Okay, go ahead and tell me a little bit or all about the man. How it was to work for him, what decisions he made during this major battle that you're going to talk about and we'll just take it from there.

MR. HAGEN: How about a title of a MVP candidate?

MR. COX: That sounds good.

MR. HAGEN: The occasion I'm going to talk about is our involvement in the battle of Leyte Gulf that took place October 20, 1944. We were with an escort carrier group, six escort carriers, and we had seven destroyer types and six escort carriers. This was a group that our jobs were really anti-submarine warfare, protect the escort carriers from submarines and also protect them from anti-aircraft fire and also escort planes were used in bombing. They supported the troops that were landing at Leyte Gulf. The morning in question we were called abruptly to general quarters just about dawn on the morning of the 25th by the unsettling news that the major portion of the Japanese fleet comprising

specifically four battleships and six cruisers and ten destroyers, an overwhelming force, the main naval force of the Japanese in existence. This battle called the “Battle of Leyte Gulf was a turning point somewhat in the capture of the Philippines. U. S. brought up countless number of ships and planes and armament and food supplies and what have you and made a successful landing there and had been there for three days before the Japs were finally starting to fight back. They had been in the enemy force coming toward us was this main portion of the Jap fleet and they had been through considerable hell getting through. They were attempting to go into Leyte Gulf and sink our supply shipping in the harbor but they first ran into two American submarines and they lost three of their cruisers during that engagement. The next day they ran into Halsey’s vast task force and they were attacked by many, many planes, more specifically about forty-five or six hits by torpedoes or bombs on their force and the pilots were pretty boastful in saying how well they had done. The irony of it was that of the forty-six hits made on the Jap force, forty-three of them were on the one super battle, battleship THE MUSAUICI. So they killed hell out of it by all those hits. The ship was aflame and what have you and was left twenty-five miles behind the main force. The other three hits were on three different ships but the gut thing was Kurita’s force was not really disabled, it was beat up. They lost a battleship and the day before they had lost two cruisers but they still were a very powerful force. But the pilots, sort of ironical, going back and saying, “Oh, boy, we really wrecked the fleet. We made forty-six bomb hits” but they didn’t particularly stretch the point but most of them were on this one battleship. Halsey was looking for an excuse to go after a group of Jap carriers that were coming down from the north to enter in the battle. Actually they were considered a decoy to draw Halsey away and Halsey after hearing the pilots account of all these hits on the Jap force became convinced that the Jap force was not that dangerous at the present time. So he took off and went north to battle and pretty well destroy the decoy but that left Kurita, the Jap commander, to bring his force around and come through San Bernadino Straits untouched or un-apprehended but they ended up coming. The first thing we hear about it is the general quarters saying the Jap force was forty thousand yards away from us and coming at us. So Commander Evans...

MR. COX: What was his full name?

MR. HAGEN: Ernest E. Evans came out of his cabin, had been in bed, assessed the situation and said, "This is an emergency, all hands to General Quarters. Light off all boilers and prepare for an attack on major portion of the Jap fleet." He increased the speed and he finally said, "Left full rudder." What that was for was to lay a smoke screen. This is just an automatic reaction of a fighting man to make a smoke screen to cut down the vision between the two forces. At forty thousand yards you could just barely see tops of them on the horizon. He was the first one. One of the outstanding things that he did was order left full rudder and he proceeded right across the length of our formation in such a way to lay the smoke screen where it would hide the ships and the size of the ships we had and also gave us a brief breathing space where the Japs didn't know what to do. Now the Japs had two choices. They had to decide whether we were one of the fast moving task forces led under Halsey or were we one of the auxiliary CVE groups that have a maximum speed of only 17 knots. So having this brief look allowed by our skipper for them to see what the hell we were, Kurita guessed wrong and he said he thought we were one of Halsey's fast moving dangerous task forces whereas we weren't. At that point the Admiral, Kurita, had to decide how to attack us and he elected to send his cruisers and destroyers and battleships forward and kept his destroyers in reserve and this was a key action. It was exactly the wrong thing to do. So the first thing Commander Evans did was to trick this admiral into fighting the wrong type of a battle. Now, what should the admiral have done under the circumstances that were real? He should have sent his two squadrons of destroyers out ahead similar to what the Admiral Oldendorf, that ran the battle the night before, did. He sent his scores of destroyers ahead of them and they did sixty percent of the damage to the Jap force in Surigao Straits, damage to them before the battleships and cruisers even opened fire. If he had done properly what I am saying, with the two fast destroyers coming down at 25 to 30 knots passing us by, it would have thrown our screen into an absolute state of chaos. What would they do? So here we were the Japs coming at us at 25-30 knots and the rest of us just running away as fast as our task group commander would allow. Finally, as a result of our continuing making the smoke screen, it was decided that the other ships eventually all started making smoke and even later on even the carriers were making smoke. While we were the only ones the first four or five minutes making smoke, we got shot at a lot.

Shells were sort of mounting falling a hundred yards away here and fifty yards away. It was getting to look pretty threatening when the captain made the decision we're going in for a torpedo attack. I loved that stuff. Hearing that was making music to my ears. It was an unorthodox thing but it was just the right thing at that time to stir up things make something more confusing happen. So we turned and we were about thirty thousand yards away. They're running their best at 25 knots and we're turning around and we're running at them at 30. We're closing pretty fast and they're thinking who the hell is this? What the hell is it? They thought it was a cruiser. We were just a destroyer. The captain brilliantly picked the right target and we set up for a torpedo attack and we fired a successful torpedo attack. All torpedoes were fired at about 8,000 yards distance from the four cruisers that we were aiming for and actually I was sitting up in the director biting my fingernails until we got into raids 18,000 yards where my guns would carry that far. Shortly after that I started firing like mad and continued to fire during the whole torpedo attack. After the attack, the captain was turning away and making our escape, I was still firing as long as we were in gun range. Later count I estimated we made three torpedo hits, in reality we were given credit for one; that was the only torpedo attack confirmed made by destroyers on this particular day.

MR. COX: Had your ship taken any hits yet?

MR. HAGEN: No, we were unscathed and then we were heading back as fast as we can back to our group and all of a sudden we were hit and this is a crushing hit. We had three called twelve-inch projectile hits by these battleships, a 12-inch gun shoots a projectile that weighs about a ton.

MR. COX: A shell that weighs about a ton?

MR. HAGEN: Yes. The shock of being hit by three of those shells at one time was indescribable. The best way to describe it is the mast was shook so that it broke in two. We were rattled and everyone was banged up but we came out of that. Part of the ship lost power and never did get it back during the rest of the battle.

MR. COX: Were your guns still operating after you took these hits?

MR. HAGEN: Yes, the after three part of the ship where they lost electricity they no longer could keep up with us. I still had complete control of the two forward guns. So they made ninety percent of the firing from this point on during the battle. They called

them twelve-inch shells but, as the years go by when I think about it, more likely they were eight-inch shells but even those are pretty damn tough and manage to do the damage they did to us. But that is one place where I probably exaggerated. So we're trying to get over our wounds and I'm scrambling around. I look down at the captain and his shirt's in tatters and he's got a handkerchief out and he's putting it around a couple of fingers apparently were shot off. He was saying to the medical help, "I'm okay, take care of the badly wounded people." So we continued on. We went into a smoke screen. I said what the hell I couldn't see anything but let's commence firing. There were enemy ships all around us. So we went five or six rounds. The captain a half-hour later said, "Hagen, that was okay to fire but now we are mixed up back with our group so no more firing on your own unless you can see the target 'cause I don't want you to fire into any of them." "Okay, alright." I was a little enthusiastic there. Then we were on our way to rejoin our force as best we could. Our speed was slowed down from 30 knots to 17. An interesting incident came up around this time. We're halfway back, we're broken down and badly wounded and we're trying to join force. The admiral from Fanchaw Bay gives the order, "Small boys make torpedo attack." That meant the screen of the two other destroyers and even the DE's decided maybe that's the thing they ought to do. So they answered this order from the supreme boss and started forming up, and then I hear from Commander Evans, "We'll fall in behind them and provide fire support." I said, "Oh, no" to turn back to all of those enemy ships.

MR. COX: You had already expended all of your torpedoes, right?

MR. HAGEN: Yes, and I had some validity in my being horrified. We were there really to protect the carriers and we didn't have any responsibility about providing fire support for the other ships. The skipper had that notion and he gave the command to come around. I reported that we did do it but now I say, "He didn't do it, it would have been foolish." He realized after he gave the order but at the time the ship was in delicate condition and one of the delicacies was we did not have automatic control of the rudder. We had to call back rudder changes by voice to a couple of enlisted men that were working on a big wheel in the bowels of the stern of the ship. So we started turning around and the captain second guessed himself and said, "Oh, belay that order." Too late we were going around so what did the skipper do? I have control of where the guns are,

the directions, but we started turning around and I have the guns going with us. All of a sudden we got to the stops in the rear of the ship and I said, "What the hell's happening?" I got all confused. I swung the director around to pick up wherever we were on the back thing. The captain what he did in effect by saying we'll continue on around until 360 degrees so we ended up going the same way we were before the maneuver started. We were not one of the destroyers that went in to provide fire support for the other two that were firing their torpedoes. That was the reality of that story and I was wrong about it in my report that I wrote up in 1945. You read about the very fine tactics two destroyers and one destroyer made torpedo heroic attacks but two out of the three of them were sunk during the process. We were keeping going. I can remember relative quiet for awhile. Air attacks hadn't started and we were sailing along. I can recall one time we ran across a Jap battleship about 7,000 yards away and I automatically started firing at it. The captain was the one that provided the incentive for that battleship to turn away from us in fright 'cause he made a gesture of launching torpedoes at this battleship and it got scared and turned away. An interesting thing, were they even firing at us? No, they didn't fire a shot and I said why aren't they firing? Well, there's a lot of speculation on that but I could see from my position miles away that they didn't even have their big guns trained out on us. They were trained fore and aft and what were they doing with their 5-inch antiaircraft guns? The antiaircraft guns were pointing at the air. So they weren't scared of me and my bullets but they were scared of the planes and also the skipper threatening to make a torpedo attack on them. At this point I'd like to put in something about equipment and five-inch guns. When we started out on the mission, we had exactly 200 rounds of 5-inch 38 common ammunition; 5-inch common can penetrate over an inch or so of metal before it explodes; over 2,000 rounds of 5-inch influence antiaircraft. That's what we were there for to provide air support mainly. Influence projectile metal attracted distance within the sensitive zone of another piece of metal. There's a reaction there, the shell explodes, and that's invaluable using it against aircraft when you get close to an aircraft and it explodes and kills it. Now what happens? All these ships have a great majority of antiaircraft ammunition. So what happens when you fire one of those shells at a battleship or at whatever? When it gets within twenty yards, ten, I don't know what, the 54-pound shell explodes and we're hitting them with a flack of shrapnel. Shrapnel

doesn't penetrate anything except bodies and things like that so big ships are not very impressed by it 'cause it doesn't break through any of the defense distortions and that 5-inch antiaircraft gun just makes a big puff.

MR. COX: A lot of noise and very little damage, huh?

MR. HAGEN: So people give a lot more credit to how dangerous 5-inch gun destroyers are but they're basically an antiaircraft ship and have ammunition for that. So we fired all of our common ammunition at this one cruiser that we fired our torpedoes at so that gives more reality to the picture of what support the destroyers were capable of doing besides the torpedoes were real. So that battleship turned away and in the next hour or so we had a couple of other instances that I don't even remember. We did have one occasion where we caught the Gambier Bay being shelled by some cruisers and the captain yelled up to me, "Hagen, take that cruiser out of the fire so they fire at us rather than the Gambier Bay." I was saying, "That's easy for you to say." Of course, I understood it and we started doing that. A funny thing happened; the cruiser didn't do anything. I had the feeling it was growing that they were not paying as much attention to destroyers or like us and why? The why is our Navy Air Force was coming to our rescue and Adm. Stump was the hero, the skipper of this Taffy unit thirty miles south of us was running planes. The planes were a nightmare for them. He had his own planes to take care of and all of the planes in Taffy 3. The first thing the admiral ordered was "Get these planes off this ship. Throw them off, slide them off, whatever, they're just a piece of equipment for gasoline that will cause fires and brimstone on board our ship."

MR. COX: On those escort carriers?

MR. HAGEN: On the escort carriers. All of a sudden our escort carrier was launching 150 planes in the air. Where did they have to go? First they tried to get out Admiral Stump's plane. They had their routine and they all had their full quota of planes. Some could do just so much but it had to be a nightmare for him trying to decide who can come aboard, when do they stop and turn around and fly off the planes that they already have. He was getting organized better and better so there were more planes as time passed on. This was in the second hour of where the planes were beginning to assert themselves and as a result of them having torpedoes and 500 pound bombs and what have you, they became more dangerous than the destroyers. So it sort of eased our load but here's the

captain maintaining his position which is always important. The proper position where he can fight either the Japs coming up the line from behind; or he was to protect the carriers. He was maneuvering the ship to do that and zigzagging all this time. So it was lively for me, the guns doing zigzag with them. We're getting spun around pretty good up in the director. During the second hour of the battle, the admiral in charge put out orders, small boys intervene between me and the destroyers approaching from the starboard side. So who could answer that call? A couple of ships had already been sunk and we were the only ones that were in a position where we could conveniently interfere. So here I am, we're lower on ammunition, I'm firing two guns sporadically. The skipper is steaming over toward these five enemy ships that are speeding by at 25 or 30 knots that were heading right for our carriers. They were looking to get up a little bit closer where they could fire their torpedoes. So we were there and the captain said, "Let's go get 'em." That sounds great. Five destroyers and here we are with two guns and making a stand. I started firing at them, the lead ship. I figure we were firing about twenty shells a minute, that's less than an avalanche of shells, but that's how we were able to get out. We were making hits and what was the hit? It was this big puff of shells exploding and hitting up with the shrapnel. That was the extent of the damage we were doing, but all of a sudden, we had been firing for awhile and captain was closing in on them as best we could, and the first one turned around and turned right and was heading directly away from us. I am surprised. Then we're firing on the second one in line another three or four or five bullets go out and that one turns away. All five destroyers turn away from us and I'm saying, "I'll be damned, what the hell's going on?" And the captain was chortling up and down the bridge saying, "Now I've seen everything." What happened at this particular day? This is the key thing. These Japs were firing their torpedoes; this is the only torpedo attack the Japs made during this whole battle. Now we knew that their position was not good, I mean, we were vaguely aware of it, but I really didn't understand fully why they were turning away like that. So it wasn't until after the war that we find out that this is the one torpedo attack that the Japs made. Another ten minutes they would have been in perfect shape to destroy the six escort carriers if they had held course, but we slowed them down and hurried them up enough till when they did fire their torpedoes it was somewhat early. They weren't in the proper position and

the torpedoes got up to within yards of a couple of the carriers. When one torpedo reached the end of its journey and popped to the surface a plane detonated it. One of the guns out of the escort carriers claimed they knocked off one of which I will not touch with a story. It could also have been the torpedo was running out of its steam and come to the surface and are easily exploded or maybe they're primed to do that. (End of side A; nothing recorded on side B)

Edited copy typed August 6, 2008, by Eunice Gary.