

## Jack Matthews Oral History Interview

JAMES LINDLEY: This is Dr. James Lindley. This is an oral history that is being taken at the Museum of the Pacific War. The purpose of the museum of the Pacific War Oral History Project is to collect, preserve, and interpret stories of World War II veterans' upfront experiences, the life of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and the Old Chester Nimitz Hotel by means of recordings both oral and video. The audio and video recordings of such interviews become part of the Center for Pacific War Studies, the archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission, and the Texas Historical Commission.

These recordings will be made available for historical and other academic research by scholars, members of the family, and the interviewee. Thank you, Jack, for taking the time to tell us your story. At this time, would you please introduce yourself. This is Mr. Jack Matthews. This is August the 3rd, 2009. I'm Dr. James D. Lindley. This interview is taking place at the Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas. Would you please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to serve our country during World War II?

JACK MATTHEWS: Absolutely. If I may call you Jim, and forgive me for not using your official title of Doctor.

JL: Yeah.

JM: However, thank you for giving me this opportunity to record some of my memories, limited as they are, of my experiences in World War II. First, I was born in Houston, Texas, in 1925, making me almost 84, as we speak, and I'm still alive and well, thank God. My family moved to La Porte, which is 20 miles east of Houston. I went to school right on a school that faced the Houston ship town. One of my early experiences was that I saw these ships coming to and from the Port of Houston and back into the Gulf of Mexico and wherever they came from. I was interested because my dad was in World War I and he was in the three major infantry battles in France: [Soixante?], the Argonne Forest, and another one, Saint-Mihiels. And he was shot in the head and treated in a French hospital. He recovered, but he was also declared a total disability.

At an early age, I decided if I had to serve our country in the armed forces, it wasn't going to be in the infantry slugging it out in the trenches of France or anywhere else. Hence, when I approached the age of 18, I got in touch with a congressman in Houston, and he secured me an appointment

to the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, in New York. It was an academy to train maritime officers for the United States Merchant Marines. I chose to go in the engineer's program, which is commonly known as the [black?] gang. In October of 1943, I was shipped off to a place called Pass Christian, Mississippi, to begin three months of speeded up basic training at that point over there.

Following that, we were required to serve on board a US merchant ship for at least six months and learn, whether you were in the engine room or up on deck learning to be a master officer or deck officer, that was the program. So, it came in January of 1944, when I was assigned to a tanker, a US T2 tanker carrying fuel oil for Navy ships all over the world that was currently in the shipyard in Galveston, Texas, being repaired following a torpedo attack that practically blew the bow off of it down in the Caribbean between, I think, Aruba and Panama. And the ship was repaired, and we took off, and after several coast (inaudible) voyages up the East Coast to New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and South and Central America, we were assigned to carry bunker C fuel oil for naval ships in the South Pacific. This was, I think, soon after the

Guadalcanal experience. It was in the early months of 1944, and we made several trips across the Pacific, back and forth, between a refinery in Aruba and also one in Venezuela, Puerto la Cruz, and (inaudible) in Australia and other ships.

The incidents that I'm going to describe were out of the ordinary, certainly for our merchant ship. We had a crew of about probably 30 civilian merchant seamen of various ages, and a gun crew provided by the United States Naval Armed Guard of probably about 15 guys. They were, to a man -- we had a three-inch antiaircraft gun on the bow of this tanker and we had a five-inch gun on the stern, and we had eight .20-millimeter rifles stationed in gun tubs around the ship, midships and aft. I was -- due to the shortage of naval personnel, I was assigned to man one of these .20-millimeter gun tubs, which I'll tell you about a little bit later on. One of the first incidents, we were sent to New Guinea, which is an island -- I think it's an independent nation now -- north of Australia, and we were scheduled to go into a town called Lae or Finschhafen, with our load of bunker C fuel oil. I remember being on the deck one day reading one of the two books that were on board our ship as we were steaming into this harbor at Lae, and, apparently,

the Captain told me they did not have any detailed charts going in there. I soon found out, when there was a tremendous scraping noise and I was thrown off the bunk house, sitting on deck reading my book, we had run aground on a coral reef. I don't know if you know, but coral is like a bunch of knives together when it's in a reef, and it's beautiful. The bow of our ship came out of the water, and only the stern was hanging over the back of this reef.

Well, to shorten the story some, it took us a week, within easy bombing distance of many Japanese aircraft, to get off that reef. The Australian navy sent corvettes over. They broke every cable, or line they call them, on board. The Army had an outfit called the Army Transport Service that had tugs over there, and they couldn't get us off. They finally sent an empty tanker, similar to our T2 tanker we were out on, from the western end of New Guinea called Milne Bay up to pump out some of the fuel oil we were carrying to lighten our ship and thereby allow it to float off, which it did.

Following that, we were directed to go further up the northern coast of New Guinea and participate in the invasion of a place called Madang, M-A-D-A-N-G. I never

saw the place because we were out there with the Navy ships during the invasion. From Madang, we were sent further north to the Admiralty islands, where there was a major battle in progress. This is like in March and April of 1944. And from what I have gathered since then, for the Japs it was a very -- I have some notes here I'm trying to look at, at the same time I'm speaking to you, and I'm trying to look at, I might add, unsuccessfully. But at any rate, my memory tells me there were several thousand Japanese troops on this island, maybe around 4,000, and our force was, I believe, was the First Calvary division, wiped out almost all of them and captured about 75.

We were sent up there to refuel the cruiser *Boise*. All of our Navy cruisers are named after cities in the United States. And that, we did, and we were there for -- I can't remember -- two or three days while this battle ensued. I know the first mate and I got a life boat and took a trip ashore, unchartered and unauthorized, but we were told the Japs on that particular island, which was the major island of the Admiralties -- it's called Manus, M-A-N-U-S -- they had run out of -- some of them had run out of food and ammunition, and they were hungry. And if you went at

night, they were very likely to attack you and kill you and steal the boat to help themselves.

At any rate, we got back safely and returned. And the ship, at that point -- I think I -- did I mention we ran aground? I think I did. The Captain was concerned about hull damage from that running aground on that coral reef, so the people that ran our company, a company called Barber Asphalt Company, back in the States, directed us to go to the shipyard in Newcastle, Australia, which is just north of Sydney. We went down there to get the hull inspected. Being aboard that ship, I was supposed to be on there as a Merchant Marine cadet for six months. At this point, it was running into the seventh or eighth month, and I learned in Australia that the ship was destined to be sent on a shuttle run to the Middle East and that I would maybe still be there today in 2009.

At any rate, I went to the United States Consul in Sydney and got permission to get off the ship and be transported back to the United States. Fortuitously, they couldn't find any way to get me back at the time, so I spent six weeks in Sydney, Australia and joined the Australian ladies and other activities there. Then, eventually, they found a

ship, and they put me on a train for Brisbane, to the north, and we came back on a Liberty ship that had been involved in a wreck with a Navy ship. The term used is down by the bow. Most ships, the bow being the front of the ship, most ships, the bow is up when they're under way, in the ocean, and the stern is down. We had a load of concrete in the bow. That's the only way they could fix it, and we were down by the bow, and we made a record crossing of 21-something days from Brisbane to San Francisco. At any rate, the story goes on. I got out, graduated from Kings Point, got my Navy commission, maritime commission, and my license as a third Marine engineer and went on to sail for a couple of years in the Merchant Marines. So thank you very much for this opportunity.

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