

## Charles Petty Oral History Interview

CORK MORRIS: This is Cork Morris. Today is September 19th, 2009, and I'm interviewing Mr. Charles Petty, with Kenny Thompson sitting in as a spectator. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, the archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information. I appreciate your coming by and letting us chat with you a little.

CHARLES PETTY: No problem.

CM: I usually like to start with a little background, where you were born, what your mom and pa did, and we'll just take it from there.

CP: OK. Well, I'm Charles R. Petty, Sr. I was born November 28th, 1925. I was born in a little town in Texas called Bronte, B-R-O-N-T-E. My dad worked for the Santa Fe Railroad most of his time, and he was also a government trapper later on in his life. My mother was a housewife and mother. She had five boys, me and four others. She was born in 1905. I was born in 1925, and then she had another boy in 1945. So it was pretty easy for me to figure out (inaudible). I just add 20 to my age and my

mother's age, and I take 20 away from mine, and we get my brother's age. So I had a (laughs) built-in calculator in my head already. My dad was born in 1903 in McCulloch County, at Cow Creek, which is over close to Brady, Texas, [out on?] (inaudible). I was in high school and I graduated in 1943. I went in the Navy in January of 1944, went to San Diego training station, and when I got through with my training there, well, they transferred me and 65 other people to the Kansas University at Lawrence, Kansas, to become electricians. We got out of there. We went to the amphibious station in Norfolk, Virginia and stayed there for a training period. We left Norfolk, Virginia, on December 13, at 1300, which is one o'clock in the afternoon, on an LST-913, went around in the Gulf, and then landed at New Orleans in dry dock. They put an LCT on top of our LST to be taken overseas for replacement. We got out of there after -- well, we were there about, I think, 40 days in New Orleans, got out and got back in the Gulf and went to the Panama Canal, went through it and come back into California (inaudible) [Terminal?] Island, refueled got some instructions on where we were going, left there, and we headed for the South Pacific, and we made all kinds of stops here, there, and everywhere in between. Of course, it was after Pearl Harbor, so we went through

Hawaii and we saw the devastation there. And we went to Guam, where (inaudible) [there?], and back and forth, in between Guam and Saipan. Then we decided to go to the Philippines. We were in the Philippines for quite a while, transporting stuff back and forth from here and there, and doing other un-war-like stuff, but it was necessary. We left the Philippines. It was 128 degrees in the Philippines. We headed for Okinawa. When we got to Okinawa, it was about 60 degrees there and we [almost?] froze to death because our blood was pretty thin with that high temperature and wind.

CM: What was the date you hit Okinawa?

CP: I don't -- I can't remember.

CM: I mean, roughly.

CP: It was in the latter part of '44, whenever they had that battle there. There were quite a few on that flotilla. We had LSTs that had Marine troops on with their [quips?] and their tanks and their jeeps and their guns. We went into a little alcove back there and beached three of them. We had an LST -- ours was there, [a 913?]. We were to the left of the group, had one in the middle, and I'm thinking it was an LST-712. I can't remember exactly, but I'm thinking. And then we had one that was a 415. It was the first one [in line?]. And the Japanese had a cave up above us, up

above us there, about -- [well, it was?] within 600 yards of the mouth of the cave, but we had to look up to see it. And they were shooting it up because we were unloading Marines and their equipment. [A Jap Betty?] came around the corner of the mountain up there and dove it head-on into the first LST, which was a 415. Well, our LST had 104 people. I mean, we had -- whatever our compliment was there, but we had three times that many, because we had all the rest of the -- [on?] other two was over on our ship when that plane come in and headed into --

CM: So [it dove?] just deliberately.

CP: He dove. And he (inaudible). All you could see was teeth and eyes, when -- (laughs) And he dove into this one LST on the far right side. We finished unloading that after debris quit flying around. We finished unloading and went back out, then, to the rest of the flotilla. And then they said that there was over 10,000 Japanese in that one particular cave up there, so we pinned them down pretty good. I don't know how many were actually killed, but there was a bunch of them, and the cave was finally emptied completely.

CM: Mm-hmm. Well, did -- [is?] it from like the ships, destroyers and stuff firing into that, or were the Marines actually --

CP: No, we had some [battleships?], (inaudible) 10 miles offshore and they were firing 16 millimeter bombs over our heads into that island. The concussion had -- if you were topside, [you're in the?] -- the seams in your blue jeans were ripped out -- they just -- you know, [with the concussions?]. Of course, I was real lucky. I was three stories down in the engine room, running the -- I had to put [three-ten?] generators on the line (inaudible) at the same time -- and it's kind of a chore -- so we'd have enough power to operate the gun sites and the lights and all -- everything that needed electricity to operate. So I didn't see very much of this, but I could hear quite a bit going on. We left there and [we went then?] -- on VJ day we went to Japan. And we went to Nagoya and [Wakayama?], however you pronounce it.

CM: Somebody will figure it out.

CP: My tongue gets tied in knots sometimes. I don't speak Japanese very good.

CM: Yeah, I hear you.

CP: And then we got enough points to get out. Well, they transferred us off an LST-913 to an LST number 990, because it was on its way back to the States. They were going to leave 13 over there to -- you know, they everything else cleaned up. On the way back to the States, the 990 had a

breakdown, so we had to repair it and fix it up and then we went on into hit Terminal Island, in California. In the meantime, when we left the States, well, our captain told us that anywhere we went in the Pacific, we'd be only five miles from land, anywhere we went. Well, being an 18-year-old cowboy, I just thought it was over this way. Come to find out, he meant it was straight down.

CM: (laughter) Pretty clever.

CP: So anyway, but it helped us out because it went -- we were only (inaudible) [weeks?] -- [we went five?] miles without any problems. But he failed to tell us that we had to be penguins or porpoises to go that far down. Anyway we -- but we still trusted him. Everything was [Gucci?].

CM: Can you give me some kind of an idea of how big an LST is?

CP: An LST -- I know for sure, it's 104 foot wide and it's somewhere from 170 feet to 212 feet long. It's been 60 some odd years, so my memory bank is only about two inches long and 65 years is a long time to remember back. But pretty close to the size of a football field.

CM: Were you part of, like, a battle group?

CP: We were part of a flotilla. We had some cruisers and we had some destroyers and we had some -- had one battleship that was assigned to our flotilla, and then, we had about 20 LSTs and -- I'm trying to think [if?] there were some

LSMs in that, too, but I think we had a few LSMs there, too, [which was?] smaller -- it was smaller than the LST. The LST was a landing ship tank. That's what the LST stood for. The LSMs were landing ship medium, which they were -- hey didn't carry troops. They just carried the jeeps and [tankers?] (inaudible) -- and ammunition and stuff that the Marines and soldiers used.

CM: So obviously as you were saying before, you just -- weren't always landing Marines and stuff. You did a lot of just supplies --

CP: Supplies and transport stuff and, [you know?]....

CM: [Would?] the whole flotilla move as a unit? Or did they, like, pull you off and send you somewhere?

CP: We were basically (inaudible) -- stationed in Guam. So they'd send us out -- you know, if they needed two or three, they'd send them [in a bunch?] to go somewhere. And then, if it was a combat zone, then everybody [gathered up with?] the rest of the flotilla and then went to the -- like, when we went to Okinawa, we all got together and went over.

CM: Did you have any armament on that?

CP: On that LST?

CM: Yeah.

CP: We had twin 40 -- [mount 40?] machine guns on the bow and one on the stern. And we had -- they brought some extra -- 20-millimeters on it when we got to New Orleans. It had two on each side and they put two more on each side. And so we had four -- eight 20-millimeters and two twin 40 mounts on the bow and the stern. That was our fire power. We were not supposed to do too much fighting. We were just supposed to get the people on land and let them do the fighting. But [we had ours?] just in case and we could help them out just to get them ashore.

CM: So I assume when they dropped the atomic bombs and stuff, you were at Okinawa at that point?

CP: No, we had already got through with that and we [gone back?] back to -- well, we had made several -- we made two trips across the equator, two different places in the South Pacific, [and passed the?] -- so we were out there [when the?] -- the bombs were dropped when we were in the -- not in the near vicinity, but we were within two sailing days to get down there. And then VJ day, well, we were in Japan. It -- well, we went -- [made it in?] two places. And then, after that -- then they decided we could come home.

CM: So you didn't do any -- did you actually get to go on shore or were you just there in the harbor?



CP: In Japan, yeah, we went ashore to see how [it is?].

CM: Did you get any impression about how the people felt, or --

CP: Well, I had several of them come up to me and say, well, you all might have whipped us in the war, but we will buy you -- [the United States?] (inaudible) [Navy?] -- you all will still be our slaves eventually. So, you know --  
(laughs)

CM: [They said that then?]?

CP: That was kind of scary to us, you know, because we were just, you know -- young kids are pretty impressionable, you know, like get scared pretty easy. Yeah, but we had -- we were scared but we had nerve, (laughs) so we told them, oh yeah, we realize that. You all come over here and we'll kick your [hineys?] again over there, so -- but, you know, that was just talk. But some of their suggestions [just coming to pass?] because the Japanese are buying lots of land in the United States right now, along with other foreign people. Of course, they say, well, why do you call them foreign people? [Y'all's?] forefathers came over here, they were invaders of the land, too, and I say, well, that's right but we done something constructive and we built it up to where it was worth living in. Of course, patting ourselves on the back because we felt like we were heroes.

CM: What were the living conditions? I'm sure in Japan, I mean, there was obvious damage everywhere.

CP: There was damage. Everywhere you looked, you could see some kind of destruction that had been caused by our bombers. They were a hungry people, and they were people that had -- their families had been broken apart through deaths and injuries and stuff. It was not a good sight to see. Of course, when I got back home, well, we could see the same thing over here, but ours was self-inflicted.

(laughter) Theirs, we'd done the inflicting. And when we came home, well, people in the United States told -- spit on us and told us that we were murderers, [over?] killing all them people, you know.

CM: Really? Huh.

CP: So that was kind of disgusting, but to think that people would spit on us while we were over there trying to save the place for them to live and being free, and they were -- that's just the way they showed their gratitude, that we were murderers.

CM: Was this, like, a general feeling? I mean, it's the first time I've really heard this.

CP: It wasn't too bad. It didn't last very long, because, you know, you can whip someone's hiney once or twice and they're talking, sometimes. But here was lots of that

going on, but we lived through that, too so it's -- but it was a fact. But I say when you get spit on, you kind of retaliate pretty quick, because you don't -- we don't like to be spit on. But it was kind of unnerving to me because I was an American and trying -- over there doing my part to try to preserve the United States so we were able to still be a free country, and they were unappreciative of what we did over there, saving all that stuff.

CM: You talked earlier about your captain. Did you have the same skipper the whole time?

CP: No. The one that -- his name was Clarence [Hahn?] -- was skipper of the LST-913, and I can't remember for my life of me what the skipper on the 990 was. It was Chris something. But, you know, I'd say, it's been 60 some odd years and my memory bank is not that long.

CM: What size crew was there on one of those things?

CP: I think there was probably 100, 120 (inaudible).

CM: Did you pretty much stay -- well, like, say, on the 913, was it pretty much the same crew the whole time you were on that?

CP: Yes. Yes. Yeah, when they decided to send -- to [leave it?] (inaudible) and we -- you know, they started giving us points after the war was over, VJ day was over. They started -- you know, the length of time in the service, and

[where?] you had been, and how many many battles you had been, and all that stuff, (inaudible) --

CM: That's all part of the point system?

CP: That's part of the point system. And when we got enough [point system to go?], then they combine all of them off of several ships, to the 990, (inaudible) [going to leave the?] 913 to finish cleaning things up, but the ones that had enough points to be discharged, [put them on?] United States-bound ship. So when we got back, the Captain asked if I'd like to go around through the Panama Canal (inaudible) Charleston, South Carolina, and [decommission that?] 990. I told him, "Thank you, no thank you."  
(laughs) I was an old-time cowboy and, you know, dry land was my best friend. When I got to where I could see the land and Treasure Island out there, I told [the Good Lord?] -- I said, thank you, sir, but I'll never be in water any deeper than a bath tub, and that will only be half full, and I've lived to that -- I've kept my word on that.

CM: No vacations on the Gulf, or anything like that.

CP: Let's go out in a boat and go fishing. No, thank you. No. I didn't care for fishing anyway and I sure didn't want to get in the water. So -- I'm not afraid of water, I just had enough of it.

CM: You had enough. I understand. Well, do you figure that -- you know, when you were training for all the -- you said you were trained as an electrician. Was that your function on the LST?

CP: Yes. I was the head electrician on the LST, and also when I got on the 990. I don't know why. I guess they just liked me. (laughs) But, yeah. My job was -- when we went out in general quarters was to go to the engine room, which was three decks down, and keep those three generators -- 5,000-unit generators -- it's kind of hard to keep them synchronized where they all function like they're supposed to be, because if you move the dial just a little bit too much, this one here phases out and these other two take the load and, well, first thing you know, you're -- they're in trouble, so you have to keep all three of them on the level, and operate the gun sites and all the other electricity that they need to -- in the combat zone.

CM: Did you still with the -- well, after the war, did you stick with being an electrician or anything like that?

CP: No. I got stupid and went back to cowboying. Cowboying was all I knew. And, you know, I got out of school and got me a job -- got a job when I got back. I was in the little town of Sterling City, in Texas. My uncle, aunt lived there. I went up there to see them because I was just back

from overseas. I was going to walk uptown, I needed some parts for my bridle, a set of bits to on the bridle for my horses, and there's a guy up there filling up his car with his own gas, [and he?] had a pump at his house. And he said, "Are you a cowboy?" I says, "Well, I try to be." He says, "Well, I'm fixing to need somebody to help for about two weeks. Would you like to have a job?" And I said, "Well, sure." You know, so that two weeks turned into five and a half years. Then, I finally got tired of cowboying and started to find me another job, so I interviewed for fire-fighting in Lubbock, Texas. I worked for the fire department in Lubbock, Texas, for 13 years. Then, I got a wild notion that I needed to become a truck driver, so I quit the fire station and was driving a truck. And I drove it until 1975. [Then I?] went to work for (inaudible) building, people in Bryan, Texas. I was still driving a truck, but it's just a little -- I was hauling -- [spotting empty trailers from the load?] going out to different places for that. Then in '88, I got another job driving a truck. (inaudible) Texas [commercial-based?] (inaudible). I picked up trash and stuff. I had [roll-off trucks, pick up trucks and trailers?]. (inaudible) [whatever people wanted to put on and haul off?]. In '88, I got the good idea to retire. Well, I must've retired three weeks and

decided to do something else. So I went back to work and worked until 2008. And, well, I run a red light, or attempted to run a red light, and I stopped in front of the red light, but it tore up my car and my boss [changed his mind?], said I wasn't an asset anymore, I was a liability, so he fired me on August the 14th. I've been unemployed since.

CM: Well, it may be time to rest a little, you know.

CP: I'd still go to work today if I could find a job, but people are -- they're not hiring anymore. They're firing.  
(laughs)

CM: Right. I hear you. Well, [sir?], what's your -- I guess the general sense of your time in the service during the war? I assume, like, when Pearl Harbor started, you were still in high school, (inaudible).

CP: Yes.

CM: And did lots of kids in high school just jump up and join up and --?

CP: There were a bunch of them that, you know, were -- like the w-- the seniors, they went ahead and got their diplomas early. Of course there was -- some of my friends joined up, and then, -- but I wasn't old enough then. I only turned 18 in November of 1943. Then, Uncle Sam (inaudible) in January of 1944.

CM: Did -- like I say, what's your general impression of the service? I mean, as it scary, or did you enjoy it?

CP: Well, it was a job because we were in war. I didn't want to give up my home. I didn't want to give up my land or my home, and I was doing my duty. As an American, I felt like it was [all that?], so I didn't [push Uncle Sam too awful much?]. I just told him, "Aye, aye, sir," and went to work. I went in in January, 1944, and was discharged May 26th, 1946. So it was quite an experience. It's something different. I had never done that before.

CM: Do you still keep in contact with any of the guys you were (inaudible) with?

CP: I had one shipmate, [James Whitmore?]. He moved from Texas to Washington State. He and I talked back and forth on the telephone, but I haven't heard from him in quite a while, so I'm just assuming that he passed away. Outside of that, I haven't been in contact with anybody else. Of course, when you get out of the service, you kind of scatter like a covey of quail, and you lose contact with them, and they don't -- you know, you don't run across them anymore because they live so far away. James was from -- he was from Texarkana, Texas. And he was transferred [to 990?] the same time I was, so we kind of became friends.

CM: Now, did you run across him all during your service time?



CP: (inaudible) -- only on the way back to the United States, because -- when he came -- when I went to 990, he went to 990 from another ship somewhere else. So we weren't really together long enough on the way back to make real good friends. Except he and I, we communicated quite -- several years after we both got home. We found out -- I was still around; he was still around.

CM: Well, anything else you want to put in here?

CP: No. It was an experience that -- you know, I think it was a good experience. I was scared to death about half the time when we were in battle, but, you know, that -- I don't think that's a shame, being scared in a -- being in the war.

CM: No probably not.

CP: But we still -- we were scared but we still did our job.

CM: Mm-hmm. OK. [This should?] probably do it. I appreciate your taking the time and I do appreciate your service.

CP: Not a problem, Sir.

END OF AUDIO FILE