

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Keith Lea

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Interviewer: Ed Metzler

Mr. Metzler: This is Ed Metzler and today is April 18, 2010. I'm in Fredericksburg in the Nimitz Museum and I am interviewing Mr. Keith Lea. This recording is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. So let me start out Keith by first thanking you for driving up here from Kerrville to spend your time with us today telling us your story and let me get it started by having you just introduce yourself and then we'll take it from there.

Mr. Lea: I'm Keith F. Lea former lieutenant junior grade USNR [United States Navy Reserve]. I was born in Amherst, Wisconsin January 31, 1923. My parents were both school teachers and also dairy farmers so I grew up on a dairy farm and I graduated from high school in 1940, entered college and in my third year of college—

Mr. Metzler: Where did you go to college?

Mr. Lea: University of Wisconsin--Stevens Point.

Mr. Metzler: Stevens Point. Okay.

Mr. Lea: And in my sophomore year, during my sophomore year, they attacked Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Metzler: Well now what were you studying, what were you going to be when you grew up?

Mr. Lea: I majored in history.

Mr. M.: History.

Mr. Lea: I was going to be a history teacher.

Mr. Metzler: Uh-huh.

Mr. Lea: Okay.

Mr. Metzler: Now did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Lea: One brother.

Mr. Metzler: Older?

Mr. Lea: Older. Yeah.

Mr. Metzler: Was he in the—

Mr. Lea: Nope.

Mr. Metzler: --in the military as well?

Mr. Lea: No he wasn't.

Mr. Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Lea: Uh, anyway the navy had started a V-5 and V-7 program. Later they changed it to a V-12. And uh this was principally to train navy pilots and navy line officers. And so I signed up for the V-12. And—

Mr. Metzler: Now were you going to be drafted? Or did you—

Mr. Lea: No, I volunteered.

Mr. Metzler: Okay. And when was this? What year?

Mr. Lea: That was '42, late '42.

Mr. Metzler: Okay, so you were like in your second year of university—

Mr. Lea: Yes.

Mr. Metzler: —when all of this happened. Yeah.

Mr. Lea: And what happened then is, well, we took physical tests. I passed the test for line officer training and also pilot training. But they put me in the line officer training. I was supposed to be able to transfer back and forth if, but they needed line officers right then more than they needed (aviators?) so I stayed in line officer. Well they let me finish that college year and then they called me to active duty July 1, '43. And I reported to (unit?) at Lawrence College at Appleton, Wisconsin. And we were

scheduled there, it was a pre-midshipmen's school type of thing. We were there for three months and then we were shipped to Portsmouth, Virginia. And there we went through all the fleet schools at Portsmouth and navy, Norfolk navy yards [Norfolk Naval Shipyard], like torpedo school, mine school, gunnery, you name it. Torpedoes were interesting—we got to take them apart and put them back together.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: We did all the major weapons up to 16-inch, you know the breech and all that. Found out later this was very viable training. We had to take the tests just like the enlisted people would be taking. We (were)] enlisted at the time but we had to study and take the tests. And we passed tests all through chief and well that gave us a great understanding. We didn't really appreciate at the time how important this was going to be later. Well then after a period there they shipped 3,500 of us up to Northwestern University at Chicago.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah, Northern Chicago.

Mr. Lea: Yeah, we were in the downtown campus. We were across, bivouacked, berthed across from Tower Hall right across from the water tower. We did a lot of our classes—

Mr. Metzler: Right in central Chicago!

Mr. Lea: —near Navy Pier and some classes even at the planetarium and (?). And anyway the midshipmen school was really high pressure! They told us right off the start 3,500 of us that the navy only had 1,440 commissions that they were going to grant to this group. And so the rest of them were going to be “bilged out.” Well you got to remember that the minimum college was three years. A lot of them had four years.

Mr. M; And you had—

Mr. Lea: Three.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: So competition, academically, was pretty stiff.

Mr. Metzler: Right.

Mr. Lea: And we were tested in all subjects every Friday and if anybody dropped on any below, 2.5 or below, you were automatically sent to Great Lakes, it was forty-five minutes away on the north shoreline. And so they were bilging them out—

Mr. Metzler: So what would happen to those guys that would go up there?

Mr. Lea: They ended in regular fleet.

Mr. Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Lea: They went through Great Lakes and right in the fleet. I had one friend, he ended up on a hospital ship. I saw him in Okinawa later—anyway, all these burn cases. Well that's a different story. But anyway after midshipmen school we graduated. I got orders to report to LCI 762 [landing craft infantry]. It was being built at the Willamette Iron and Steelworks Yard in Portland, Oregon. My first assignment was—I got there about three weeks or months before it actually was commissioned, or launched. I ordered all the spare parts and the equipment. And meanwhile the rest of the crew was being trained at Solomons, Maryland

and were sent by train and navy buses to pick them up and bring them—

Mr. Metzler: What was your rank at this time?

Mr. Lea: Ensign.

Mr. Metzler: You were an ensign. Okay.

Mr. Lea: All right. Then so after we got it loaded and commissioned an officer came up, Commander Clarence E. Coffin, came up from San Diego. And he was, turned out we were going to be his flagship. He was going to be command, flotilla commander of a flotilla of thirty-six of these ships.

Mr. Metzler: Uh-huh.

Mr. Lea: And I should probably say a little brief about the ship. The ship was designed by the British and it was 157 feet long, 25 wide, and had about a draft of 5 to 6 feet depending on load.

Mr. Metzler: So this was the LCI—

Mr. Lea: LCI.

Mr. Metzler: Landing Craft Infantry.

Mr. Lea: Infantry. But what they found out early days of the Pacific that you could we were supposed to be able to land 120 troops off two ramps. They found out that one machine gun can wipe them all out. They were putting them all, too many eggs in one basket. So they changed the plan. They went to landing troops in little LCVPs [landing craft, vehicle, personnel] and LCMs [landing craft mechanized or landing craft mechanical]. One shell would only knock out twenty-five guys or so. Anyway, they converted us then to rocket ships and gun ships. And so we were, we formed up at (?) put the ship down the Columbia River to Astoria, down to (Coldston?) San Diego.

Mr. Metzler: Now is this still '42 or are we into '43?

Mr. Lea: '43.

Mr. Metzler: We're in '43 now.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. And so, uh, other ships were arriving and being built—
New Orleans, there were some built in New Jersey. Some in the
Great Lakes even came down the Mississippi. Anyway, when we
got all thirty-six of them there we were still up practicing
everyday.

Mr. Metzler: Now these were seagoing vessels though?

Mr. Lea: Oh yes.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah, I mean, okay.

Mr. Lea: Yeah, we had to cross the Pacific Ocean.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: Later on I changed my mind on that—they weren't that
seagoing! (laughter) I was in one typhoon. I'll tell you about that
a little later.

Mr. Metzler: Okay.

Mr. Lea: Anyway, we were heading down the—we did a lot of practice around the Santa Barbara Islands, like San Clemente and San Nicolas—

Mr. Metzler: Um-hm.

Mr. Lea: And San Catalina [Santa Catalina]. And we landed some marines and that stuff from Camp Pendleton. And then when we were all ready we were divided into three divisions, twelve ships in each division. So we had the flotilla commander that was riding our ship. And each one of those twelve had a division commander, usually a lieutenant commander, yeah or full lieutenant. And we headed for Pearl [Pearl Harbor]. At Pearl we got outfitted with five-inch rockets—

Mr. Metzler: Okay, at this point did you know that this was going to be a rocket launching fleet?

Mr. Lea: Yes.

Mr. Metzler: So had they trained you at all or told you about the technology and all that?

Mr. Lea: Uh, no. They did (harvey harvey?) end technology. I think it was maybe two sheets was all they had—

Mr. Metzler: That was it?

Mr. Lea: On the rockets. Meanwhile we had our twenty and forty millimeters, we had done a lot of practice with those. Well we got the rockets at Pearl. Along with them we got radar, we got radar jamming devices, so yeah all thirty-six ships would jam different frequencies. So Japanese radar is what we were supposed to be jamming. Well then we had infrared signaling devices too which was very new at that time.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: Top secret stuff. Anyway we did some firing out of rockets out of Pearl Harbor. Went out and, there's one little island off of (Kai Lua?) or something they use for target practice—

Mr. Metzler: Bombed the heck out of that little piece of real estate! (laughter)

Mr. Lea: Yeah! Anyway, from there, then after we got shook down enough we loaded up 1,500 rockets and load the hold full of

twenty and forty millimeter and we headed for Guadalcanal. We took, went on a route, technically we were told that we were too shallow draft to be torpedoed! (laughs). We didn't have any escorts. So that meant our forty millimeters was the only directional fire we had.

Mr. Metzler: The only defense you had, yeah.

Mr. Lea: And that was only good for two miles. And a Japanese sub of course had six-mile weapons on it. Anyway, they could have surfaced and shot us (?) (laughs) never, you know. But anyway, we made it, we got through. We went on not normal sea routes, a little off the beaten path. We made one stop at Funafuti because one of our ships was having engine problems and they needed to do some rebuilding. So we left them at Funafuti atoll.

Mr. Metzler: What kind of engines did these LCI's have?

Mr. Lea: 250 horsepower, GMC's. Diesels.

Mr. Metzler: Diesels. Okay.

Mr. Lea: And four on quad mounts. Four on each shaft, each screw. You had all kinds of power but you didn't have speed because the hull prevented speed. They had a rocker-shaped hull, flat bottom with a prow share bow, theoretically it would jam into the beach and it would keep the ship perpendicular so it wouldn't broach in the surf.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: And on the way in you dropped a 150-pound anchor and you used a stern winch and when you pull on that stern winch, that rocker bottom broke that suction of the bow and you slipped off. And had all engines all back full and you were putting current under that hull, floating it off. It worked! It worked, but, anyway—

Mr. Metzler: If you want some water there's a bottle there you can open it.

Mr. Lea: Anyway, it was interesting. At Funafuti you could look off one side of the atoll right out into the Pacific on the other.

Mr. Metzler: (laughs)

Mr. Lea: I'd never heard of the place. It's in the Ellice islands. We had a secret airbase there, Catalina flying boats, they were all painted black. And they did surveying out of there.

Mr. Metzler: Probably a lot of night patrolling, surveying—

Mr. Lea: Yeah. And we had some New Zealand pilots, we furnished the planes. Anyway, we headed out of there for Guadalcanal and it was funny in mid-Pacific you don't have many clouds because it needs land to form clouds and so we saw this cloud bank and that was Pearl, or the Guadalcanal chain, Solomon Islands.

Mr. Metzler: Um-hm.

Mr. Lea: I'd say it was we were probably 150 miles, 200 miles out. and we could see that and we knew that that's where it was and at about 100 miles out we could smell the islands. It was like if you've ever smelled fermented silage, or rotting silage, that's what it smelled like. Before we could see them. (laughs). And we got there and of course it rains every fifteen minutes (laughter). We went to Tulagi anchorage. That's just across from (?) and it's right near (Savo?) Island where they had the two battles. And the thing that was most impressive to us was the

water was gin clear I think if I remember right was about ninety feet deep according to the depth finder and we could see our hull shapes, our ships down on the bottom there—

Mr. Metzler: Iron Bottom Sound, yeah.

Mr. Lea: And their ships too. Anyway we formed up there with other parts of this convoy. We were slated to invade Okinawa. We didn't know it at the time. We just knew that there was a big task force that was going to form there. Bougainville hadn't been taken yet, Choiseul hadn't either, just Guadalcanal and Tulagi. And when all these other ships assemble like LSTs [landing ship tanks], Landing Craft Tanks, that had tanks aboard, army trucks and artillery and it was probably between 100 to 150 of us in this one segment. There were three segments—A, B, and C. I forgot if whether we were the first one or the middle one or what, but anyway one night we took off and went up the slot and we passed Choiseul and then between Choiseul and Bougainville, there's a Bougainville Straits there. We cut out of there into the Pacific and headed up and the next stop was Ulithi atoll and at Ulithi we met destroyers, light cruisers, heavy cruisers, battlewagons, aircraft carriers and a British fleet of carriers and a battlewagon I think or two and cruisers and destroyers. And

there from Ulithi the Brits were going to take and try to neutralize Formosa, at least stop the planes from coming down to Okinawa.

Oh, it's funny after at night we left Guadalcanal, we were allowed to open our orders and we find out where we are going—

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: So we opened these orders and we said “Okinawa! Where in the hell is Okinawa?” We got these charts out and my God we saw how close it was to Japan. You know it was—

Mr. Metzler: It was the last stop before Japan!

Mr. Lea: That made you a little, take it a little more serious.

Mr. Metzler: Now this must be '45 now because Okinawa was June, I mean April, May and June—

Mr. Lea: Yeah, it was early in '45.

Mr. Metzler: Now had Iwo Jima happened yet? Had you guys heard about it?

Mr. Lea: Yes, we were at sea when Iwo Jima happened because I can remember the commander was disappointed we missed it (laughs). He said, "Geez we missed another one," and I thought, Well that's—

Mr. Metzler: We'll get over it (laughter).

Mr. Lea: Anyway, we passed, from Ulithi we passed—oh, at Ulithi we had one attack from there was a Japanese island, Yap Island, that had an airbase and they sent one bomber over but he didn't do any damage. He missed. And from there we proceeded past the Philippines right up off Okinawa and on the last day of March, 31st, we put an appearance in, the whole task force, put an appearance in, at the south end of Okinawa. And it was timed so it was just getting dark. And the Japanese could see this hellish sized fleet out there and they assumed we were going to invade the south end of the island—that was the purpose. And so after it got dark we turned 180 degrees and we went around into the East China Sea and we hit Okinawa right in the center and Marines were going to go north, take the north end, and the army was going straight across to Shuri the capital, and on to

Yonabaru and take Naha and the south end of the island. Well they just at daybreak when we, just before we started, when we were going to get the landing going our first suicide planes started coming in and they'd found us. And man, they kept coming, one right after the other. Well, while this is going on of course we were getting into our position. We had exact spots where we were to go in. And our plan was forty-five minutes before (landing?) LCI rockets would go in close to the beach and using radar we would know approximately—we wanted to fire up to two miles inland we could fire and we wanted to start right near the beach. So when we got, I was to get into position and then we fired two range rockets, watched them with binoculars, they went into target. We pulled our flags down and our other ships in those thirty-six they come in a tight circle right past us. And went, they went by on each side, they would fire all their rockets, all thirty-six of them, and then make a tight circle, reload, and do it again.

Mr. Metzler: So would you say kind of a continuous, rotating—

Mr. Lea: Yeah, uh-huh. It seemed to be working because according to our binoculars we could watch them go right in and explode.

Mr. Metzler: Now was this the first time that these rocket-launching platforms had been used in the Pacific War—

Mr. Lea: I think so.

Mr. Metzler: In combat?

Mr. Lea: They were the same rocket that was used on aircraft, flying, on Corsairs and as such. But as far as I know later on, well, they changed the design, they made spin-stabilized ones instead of these long fins—motor—and they were supposed to be more accurate. Never got to use those. We got those, we were getting ready for the Japanese invasion.

Mr. Metzler: Physically how large were these rockets?

Mr. Lea: Five and half feet. The projector was the same size, five inch thirty-eight, weighed fifty-five pounds if I remember right. But unlike a five inch thirty-eight that you fire out of a barrel of a gun and it has to withstand all that concussion and pressure. It has a very thick skin and a small core of explosive. The rocket's laying on the launcher like an arrow, no pressure. It had real thin skin and a huge amount of, so when one of our rockets exploded

right side of a five inch thirty-eight being fired in by a destroyer they were entirely different explosion. The five inch thirty-eight kind of spin (?) and air would spout up and ours billowed out and the concussion alone was supposed to kill anything at ground level for a radius of about 50, 100 feet.

Mr. Metzler: Wow!

Mr. Lea: And, so well while we're firing, the group, another flotilla on the left were coming in on flank position and we were so busy with our own we weren't paying too much attention to that. There was a hell of an explosion and one of those ships just disappeared. I don't know whether it was hit with shore fire or hit a mine. It was funny, on the way in we had to pass the battlewagons first and then the heavy cruisers, light cruisers, then the destroyers, and we were just passing the destroyers when one of the cruisers blinked us and we answered. And he said, "You are now entering water unswept for mines," and I thought, God, you know why'd you bother to tell us! you know.

Mr. M.: Now you tell us.

Mr. Lea: Yeah, we don't have any choice. We continued in, we didn't hit any mines but I think that one ship might have because anyway it was gone. Well, then another one there was an explosion. That was I think shore fire because it blew its mast off and it was hanging on the side and all that. But anyway, we didn't get any casualties at this time, yet, in my flotilla. But uh—

Mr. M.: Now where were you on the ship?

Mr. Lea: In the conning tower.

Mr. Metzler: Okay, so you had kind of a conning tower. This is at the rear or at the front?

Mr. Lea: Round conning tower. And, uh, up there would be a signalman, another officer—two of us—and, that would be about it. At general quarters.

Mr. Metzler: So how many total crewmen on one of these?

Mr. Lea: We had, we were supposed to have a crew of thirty-one.

Mr. Metzler: Thirty-one.

Mr. Lea: Four officers and then the rest were enlisted men.

Mr. M.: Um-hm. And they're doing everything from preparing the rockets to manning the forty millimeters—

Mr. Lea: Yeah, the twenty—

Mr. Metzler: Down in the engine room—

Mr. Lea: Yeah. We had, well on a small ship you get to do more tasks than on a large. Most of them were trained in several posts. And so they worked. I tell you we used to practice going to general quarters and time them. We'd go to general quarters and time them with a stopwatch. It would take two minutes before all guns were manned and ready. Well, just as soon as we were under attack they had those manned and ready in like half a minute.

Mr. M.: (laughs).

Mr. Lea: You know man does that ever—

Mr. Metzler: It's amazing what adrenaline will do—

Mr. Lea: Yeah, Yeah!

Mr. Metzler: --to speed up the body (laughter).

Mr. Lea: Incentive! And so then after the initial assault we were assigned various assignments and most of it was firing in close to the beach. With our shallow draft we could get in real close, so close that you didn't even need binoculars. We'd, troops if they had we could tell by their helmets (laughs) if they were—

Mr Metzler: Whether they were good guys or bad guys, huh?

Mr. Lea: Yeah. And then also most of the Japanese had leggings.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: And you know I thought sometimes when we were shooting these people with Jap leggings, or with leggings. I thought, My God what if something—you know GI's didn't have issue of these—I thought, My God if some poor devil is wearing those, you know, we'll shoot him for Japanese (laughter). But anyway

we, they'd asked us to do harassing fire. We supported, we were supporting the army and the marines a lot because where the caves faced the sea or partially they couldn't shoot into the caves. And then they had these dumb five-inch, or five-inch, I mean thirty-seven millimeter or fifty-seven millimeter howitzers. They shoot up in the air and down! They don't have a flat trajectory. You can't get into a cave with one of those things! You got to have a flat trajectory. And forty millimeters and twenties are flat. We'd fire into those caves until those explosions they'd puff out like puffs of smoke coming out. And anyway that was one of our main tasks and then also support the troops with fire power on the ground. I can remember one case they had a bunker, a Japanese bunker that was really reinforced. We'd, they'd shell that thing with five-inch thirty-eights and all, there were still, had Japanese in there you know. It was buried under probably ten, twelve foot of coral sand or something and a good bunker underneath there. Well poor army crawled up close enough so they could get a flamethrower into one end of that bunker and started shooting that jelly into there. And they started coming out the other end. They had, some of them were in their shirts were smoking, you could see they were burning. You know they had the burn jelly on them.

Mr. Metzler: And you could see all of this from your ship you were so close in—

Mr. Lea: Oh yeah we were right there. They were running right in, we were firing our twenty millimeters and mowing them right down that came out of that bunker. We were probably fifty yards, sixty yards.

Mr. Metzler: Wow.

Mr. Lea: And anyway, so we kept working. And then at night sometime we were assigned—the air attacks were so bad—there was constant fire. They'd try to keep the ships grouped around Naha (Hagushi?) anchorage there, they had 600 ships there packed.

Mr. Metzler: Um-hm.

Mr. Lea: And they'd send up all their fire you know—

Mr. Metzler: Now were these kamikaze or just traditional—

Mr. Lea: Kamikaze.

Mr. Metzler: —bombing?

Mr. Lea: Kamikaze.

Mr. Metzler: This is mostly Kamikaze.

Mr. Lea: Um-hm. They'd come in and usually they'd get torn apart on the way in and they'd start burning and that, they'd miss their targets. Some hit. But during daytime it was deadly. It was so full, every third one's a tracer. You'd load a tracer, high explosive, an armor piercing, and then tracer. So there was two for everyone you could see up there. And it was solid. So this would go on all day. While we're firing, we're also firing at the beach and targets and then we're in up above too. And uh—

Mr. Metzler: And launching your rockets all at the same time.

Mr. Lea: Well the rockets we couldn't really use because they're not directional enough. We used them once or twice. Went into a cane field. But anyway we would keep, oh we'd get us, I was going to say at night they couldn't see as well. These Japanese planes you could see them up there against the stars you know circling around there looking for a target. Well, they were harder

to hit. So they had the advantage at night. So they wanted to save the (capital?) ships. So they assigned us to smoke them. Like one night I was assigned to the *New Mexico*, Battleship *New Mexico*, it happened to be Admiral Raymond Spruance's ship, his flagship. I saw him once—

Mr. Metzler: Really.

Mr. Lea: Yeah and I also saw Admiral Nimitz a couple of times at Pearl.

Mr. Metzler: From afar or up close?

Mr. Lea: Real close. He was exercising and he had a little chain link fence around behind his office and he'd go out and walk on that crushed rock back and forth hands behind his back trying to get some exercise.

Mr. Metzler: Nimitz?

Mr. Lea: Yeah. He was skinny. Oh, he was thin. And he looked terribly old to us kids of course. He had white hair (laughs). Anyway, so did Spruance. Those admirals looked old and they tired. Well,

they didn't get any sleep. Nimitz with what battles were going on there he had to be awake so he was awake all night!

Mr. Metzler: He never got any sleep probably, yeah.

Mr Lea: No. And time zones. Well anyway, getting back to the smoking. It was hardly any breeze that night, that afternoon. And so the stiffer the breeze depended on how far you'd get away with your smoke generators. So we were going to be in close. We were at 150 yards off the battlewagon and she's firing at the beach with her sixteen-inch. And we pull up and I get upwind of her. They had 150 yards of (?) too. I have my smoke generators all warmed up, ready to go and I'm waiting for them, they'll tell us when they want to smoke. They want to keep firing at aircraft as long as they got good, so we're in position and all of a sudden a twenty millimeter right down below the conning towers, the cook, start firing. I follow the tracer out and my God here's a twin-engine Betty coming in. And he got it, he was hitting it. You could see little pieces flying off. The battlewagons started firing at it. They were going right over us kind of. And we're knocking some pieces off the thing. It did start to smoke. It went right over our mast between us and the battlewagons, 150 yards. It lost one engine and when it lost that engine the wing with the

other engine, heavy, went down like this. And, if it had only gone a little further down and hit the hull but it hit the, it crashed into all the open twenty and forty millimeter gun tubs on that battlewagon's fantail and just wiped them out. Well, I'm sitting there with my jaw hanging down watching that explode on the back of that battlewagon. I realized that our tracers still going on here. And this guy was another twin-engine Betty and he's coming in at a higher angle and we didn't get many shots at him and the battlewagon I don't think got shots at him at all. Well he came in and one wing sliced through our stack and the rest of the plane (slid?) into the bridge.

Mr. Metzler: All of this on the *New Mexico*?

Mr. Lea: Yeah.

Mr. Metzler: She took a beating!

Mr. Lea: Yes. Well that wing must have had gasoline in it because out of that stack was a solid column of fire. Well, we had advise radio contact. I just asked, "Should we commence smoke, advise?" And they just come back and said, "Just stand by." We said, "Will you need any other assistance?" and "Just stand by, stand

by.” So, uh, I’d say in about ten minutes they started asking for smoke. So we started smoking it and covering it with smoke but out of the smoke would be this column of fire going up just like a column. Well that lasted maybe a half hour before they got that out.

Mr. Metzler: Sounds like a pretty good fire there.

Mr. Lea: Yeah, I found out afterwards inside those big stacks there’s another little covered area, a ladder you can climb up and down. They had to put guys trying to go down there with hoses, down through there and get that fire out. That part of that wing must of had enough gasoline in it to cause a hell of a fire down there. And they finally got it out. Well, then their admiral—we knew their code so you could tell who’s talking— and the admiral, Bulldog Turner, was in charge of the whole invasion. He called the code number for Spruance and said he’d like to talk to so and so. (Anzac?) I guess his code was, something like that. Well they came back and said “Anzac is a little busy right now, he’ll get back to you shortly.” Well all that, they were just trying to find out if the admiral was still alive and he was. He had been in a side bridge. Well, anyway that was one of the incidents. Another

one I was (onsite?). I'd taken an officer from Bulldog Turner's ship and his ship over to—

Mr. Metzler: What was his ship?

Mr. Lea: It was called the *El Dorado*. It was a special built ship for just invasions. It had all kinds of radio equipment on it, radar and all, just command ship. It was built like, it was like a huge freighter. This officer was going over to Yonabaru and there was a light cruiser, the *Birmingham* and he was taking some kind of a message over, a plan or something, instructions or something. Anyway I took him over and went in there, pull alongside the *Birmingham* and just had the lines single and helped him, crew helped him get aboard the *Birmingham* and I was about ready to take off when a plane coming straight down! He came in, well you must of come in at 10 - 12,000 feet and he was drilling right straight down like that.

Mr. Metzler: It was a single engine or—

Mr. Lea: It was a Japanese suicide. So I thought, I'd better put some distance. (I gave overhead flying camel?) tell them that the line's gone. And I maybe got twenty, thirty feet from the site of this

stuff—I was tied up back towards the fan tail. So I got up about (a beam?) of this thing when this plane landed behind the second mount. They were eight-inch mounts if I remember right. And it had a delayed bomb on it evidently and it went down two decks and exploded. And the thing that really shook me up is that (laughs) the explosion was so damn close to us you know it almost blasted in our face. And parts of that plane actually ended up on our deck, little pieces. But a body of a sailor that was standing on that deck of that cruiser, blown right across my ship. It went right across about halfway up towards our (?) bow. He went through the air fairly slow and you could tell he was dead because his arms and legs were like just—

Mr. Metzler: Like a rag doll.

Mr. Lea: Yeah and plopped in the ocean and disappeared. And by that time I'd gotten out and I kept right on getting away from that cruiser because—

Mr. Metzler: Now how far were you from the *Birmingham* when she was hit, I mean, would you estimate?

Mr. Lea: Oh, fifty feet distance.

Mr. Metzler: That close!

Mr. Lea: Yeah. And so then I got assigned to be in the entrance, Yonabaru, the harbor there. Later they renamed that bay. It was called Nakagasuku. Later they renamed it to Buckner Bay because Buckner was killed there. The admin killed it this time but in a few weeks (inaudible). Anyway, they assigned me to stay in the entrance because it was shallow enough so that a Japanese submarine couldn't come in without coming in the surface. And the (mone?) cruiser was in there with two destroyers and I'm out there and they're firing at the Yonabaru and the line. Shuri was hard to take the Yonabaru. So I'm in position and I'm watching and the signalman said a destroyer was coming in to help, additional, I think, two were assigned to come in to add to that little group, the light cruiser and the other two. Well my signalman is blinking them and they're blinking back and all of the sudden the signalman said, "Oh my God—look at that!" And I looked up and there were a couple suicide planes attacking. From above and then I didn't notice at first but then a couple were coming right along just the level of the water. Well one hit the destroyer right below her number one five-inch gun mount and the gun mount flipped on its side and it blew a

hole in the side of that—you know a destroyer has pretty thin skin—and that damn plane flew right into it and exploded. Well it left a hole, it had to be ten feet in diameter because, and the destroyer kept right on coming, he was going to have to pass me by 150 feet at the most if he could make it. And so his bow was going down. Then he, I think he was communicating to us if I remember right, something about he was going to try to beach it so it wouldn't sink. And he was going for shallow water but he was coming in past me. And when he went by, one officer, I can always remember he had lost his helmet and he's bald, partially bald, and he had suction holes, four-inch suction holes under his arm and they were loading him down with (?) and smoke is pouring out of this ragged hole in there and he's trying to shove this suction holes into that so they can start pumping you know. And I thought, and to get it in he took one hand hold of that jagged (?) like that and pulled (?) he was almost half in the hole. But they started pumping that thing and then the guy was shifting all his water and fuel to other tanks in the back. So eventually he was able to (laze?) the bow up enough so they could pump enough of it out and then they put a makeshift deal and in a couple of days he went back to (Kramereto?) to the graveyard.

Mr. Metzler: So they saved that ship?

Mr. Lea: Yeah.

Mr. Metzler: That's impressive.

Mr. Lea: That was repairable. A lot of them went to (Kramereto?) they never would repair, they were—

Mr. Metzler: Scrapped.

Mr. Lea: They claimed they lost over fifty destroyers there (?) damage.

Mr. Metzler: Oh I know, they lost a bunch.

Mr. Lea: Anyway, talking about destroyers. They had them on a picket line out. Well on one of these nights we also were sometimes monitoring those picket lines on our radio. We could listen to two circuits and, simultaneously I think if I remember right, and talk on either one. So we heard these two pickets out there, they were under attack and they said they took one plane like in the bow and another plane in the fan tail and after about three planes

he said, “I’m going off the air, I’m going off the air, I’m going off the air.” And so shortly it wasn’t five minutes after that I got orders to go out and try to pick up survivors. So I’d say they were ten miles out there maybe. So we (headed?) out there in the middle of the night. I had another ship behind me, following me. And we head for that location. And I get out there and the first thing we pick up were some empty lifeboats and debris in the water and we turned the lifeboats over to make sure there was no one clinging to them or anything and then we turned the searchlight on just for a minute or two, or less than that just to flash because of—

Mr. Metzler: Suicide bombers.

Mr. Lea: —and couldn’t find a single one. We circled and circled. We even shut the engines down so we could hear them—

Mr. Metzler: Listen, yeah.

Mr. Lea: And we yelled and everything and used the megaphone—we had an electric megaphone too. Anyway, we didn’t, that was done. The next one we could see up there, it was about two miles, it was still burning. We headed up there and that was off that end

of the island that hadn't been taken yet, it was still Japanese held. And the current was taking it towards shore and they discussed this, they said "We don't want to go on the ground," you know. There may be some (?) the Japanese, it was pretty damaged. Well we got up pretty close to it and it was just like looking into a forge. The hull (?) was burning so bad, all her fuel and everything—

Mr. Metzler: Now was this a destroyer?

Mr. Lea: Destroyer.

Mr. Metzler: Not a destroyer escort?

Mr. Lea: No a regular destroyer. It was so molten that the weight of the super structure was sinking right down into it. Well there couldn't be anyone alive aboard that thing and we circled it and they decided they'd send a guy from the next picket down. He'd come down and sink it so it wouldn't go ashore. Well they came down and they could have waited a little bit and saved ammunition because it would have gone in under its own but they fired a couple of rounds at it at water level. All these pieces of molten metal flew off through the air and down it went

sizzling in the ocean. Well we tried to clean the area and you know we never got any—

Mr. Metzler: Never saw any survivors.

Mr. Lea: No. So two ships—both crews gone, the whole thing. Yeah. Anyway, so did I mention about (silences?). Some of our ships would get assigned to pick up dead from the ships in the morning or before noon each day—

Mr. Metzler: Go ahead.

Mr. Lea: And they'd take them out into deep water and bury them. Like I've had destroyers out of control, you know they were so damaged they were just floating by and part of the crew was already sewing up dead ones in canvas on the fantail. They were still fighting fires forward you know. And the officers were gone, the bridge was gone. They were steering it from the fantail over the—

Mr. Metzler: A little mechanical rudder thing, yeah.

Mr. Lea:

Yeah and hardly any way. But anyway the assignment would be to pick up these bodies, go to certain ships, at burials, take out the dead and take them out into deep water—I think it was at least 300 feet or something—and bury them. This one of my sister ships had 80 one day. Eighty. That went on for three months. We left on June 30. We got orders to go back to the Philippines, Leyte. And we're pulling out, real thankful that we're getting the hell out of there and an air attack came in, probably six planes came in and destroyers were firing five-inch thirty-eights so bad and they had proximity fuses. That proximity fuse saved our tail a lot. What that would do is as long as it was coming distance between the projectile and the target was closing it wouldn't explode. But as soon as you were—it's pretty hard to shoot a plane down, hit a plane with a five-inch, you shoot past it. As soon as the distance started to increase it would explode. Well that shrapnel would get a plane within 100 feet then. Well, it would shred them. So they were shooting those down. So we came in under attack and left under attack three months later.

Mr. Metzler:

Yeah, I think Okinawa was the most, there were more naval casualties than any other battle in U.S. Naval history, I heard 10,000 killed.

Mr. Lea: The figures I got and it may not be accurate but it was over 12,000 killed. And 40,000 wounded. And that 2/3 of the dead were navy because of suicide planes. Most of your crew on a navy ship at general quarters, about 75% of the crew is exposed in gun tubs. In fact, we got new, when we got back to Leyte, getting ready, we were going to go to Japan, Kyushu was going to be. We got new rockets. They gave us different life jackets. They had a little thin armor plate on them because we were getting so much shrapnel wounds from the kids in the exposed tubs. There were supposed to be, reports I read, 110,000 Japanese troops on the island, 11,000 surrendered, and we killed the others. I read reports where they thought there were 50,000 to 70,000 Okinawans killed. I don't believe that estimate because Naha was 65,000 population and it just disappeared.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah, it was obliterated.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. So there had to be, I bet there was a quarter of a million Okinawans got killed one way or the other.

Mr. Metzler: And your ship never really got hit did it?

Mr. Lea: Well strafed (laughs). We had, left streaks in the paint and holes in some of our metal where it wouldn't ricochet. One of our kids was standing up—if there isn't a good breeze smoke from your barrel of the forty millimeter, you can't see past the smoke. So they would stand up instead of sitting in those little metal seats and they'd stand up and they could see above the smoke and see where their tracers are going. Well while he was standing up someone must have shot down from the cliff because he discovered he had a hole in his seat (laughs). Shot right through his seat you know. Luckily he wasn't sitting.

Mr. Metzler: Fortunately he wasn't sitting in the seat when the bullet, when the shell came through!

Mr. L.: And then I had this one guy come in strafing. I was ducking, behind me was a mast, wooden mast, I'd say it was twelve-inch diameter. And I could hear the shots ringing on the conning tower was kind of tempered steel like our gun tubs. You could hear them ringing on the gun tubs and you could hear them shrieking on the deck. And it quit ringing and I could hear chug, chug, chug above my head. It was putting them into this wooden mast!

Mr. Metzler: Now was this firing from on shore or from aircraft?

Mr. Lea: Aircraft. And another time they raked our deck and they were ringing on the deck and I could see them streak and then I heard this chug, chug and they were taking parts—we had life rafts right up on their edge—it would take a piece of balsa the size of your fist out of there, you know. But, luckily we didn't get killed. You know that's—

Mr. Metzler: Amazing.

Mr. Lea: Yeah, it was. One of our sister ships came along side me and for some reason her decks were (?) you know. And he was on his railing and I was on my railing and he had a khaki shirt on like I had and I said, "What the hell happened to you last night?" and he said, "Well we got hit a couple times." He said, "I've got three dead, and I think five wounded." His shirt sleeves were all blood, he'd been handling these wounded guys you know and—

Mr. Metzler: My word.

Mr. Lea: I think he had just taken them, the wounded to the hospital. We had a regular fleet hospital there. I can't remember if it was the *Hope*, or which one, *Comfort*. Then they took LCT's—LST's—and converted to hospital ships. I had this friend that I bilged out of midshipmen school and he ended up some corpsman on a hospital ship and I stopped to see him one day. I had a few minutes and I had the small boat—

Mr. Metzler: Now where was this?

Mr. Lea: Off Okinawa.

Mr. Metzler: This was there off Okinawa.

Mr. Lea: I stopped and went aboard, asked for him. He was down in the hull. He came up and said, "I'll show you my ward." I went down, and my God, they were all burn cases. Wrapped—you couldn't even see some of their eyes. They had glass straws in their mouths—

Mr. Metzler: So they could be fed.

Mr. Lea: Trying to feed them. He said they were dying thirty-six hours at least. Twenty-four to thirty-six hours. They were burned too deeply. He had terrible duty, drove him almost crazy.

Mr. Metzler: I was going to say.

Mr. Lea: And anyway he says some of them were burned so bad that they didn't have any nerves left but those that did were suffering terribly. They wrapped them in, they put unmedicated petroleum jelly on sheets and wrapped them. That was about all they could do.

Mr. Metzler: So after Okinawa you went back to the Philippines?

Mr. Lea: Yes. We were getting ready to go, the invasion of Japan, they were getting us ready. We're getting new rockets.

Mr. Metzler: So you get the new rockets with the fins now?

Mr. Lea: Well, we're getting rid of those and we got spin-stabilized ones. The jets came out of them, it was a smaller motor in bulk and the jets came out at angles so that they caused it to spin and they were supposed to be more accurate. I think fire a little further

too. There my task was to—oh! While I'm at there, a word, I got a message, a very long message. ("here dat. pro rep. near nav. dis."?). That's "proceed and report nearest naval district U.S.," which meant that I had, according to their codes, I had twenty-four hours to leave the ship and get going, to head for the nearest naval district in the U.S.

Mr. Metzler: *You did?*

Mr. Lea: Yeah, I was being reassigned and it was signed (dupers?). I took it to the flotilla commander and said, "What the hell is this?" He said, "Well, you're getting reassigned. You're probably getting your own ship." And they make a fitness report on you, your CO's, every ninety days. And they have to evaluate your ability to handle a ship and gunnery, navigation, and the whole works. You don't, if it's going to be satisfactory you sign a blank form, you don't get to see it. If it's going to be unsatisfactory, you get to read it, and sign it, and then write your side of the story if you want to. Well, I never saw any of them. And I didn't know what they were checking me, what he knew is they were checking me that I was capable. He said, and then they flag your file and when there's a CO's position they pull your name and send you the message. He said it was coded, my name and the serial

number, deck officer, line officer, “L” limited. He said, “Didn’t you take a look at your code?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “There’s no ‘L’ on it anymore is there?” and (laughs). They never told you this stuff but he knew what was going on, he was causing some of this. Well then I was assigned, I got orders, I got back to Seattle. I got a ride on a, General (Hershey?). He was bringing a bunch of troops home from Biak in New Guinea.

Mr. Metzler: Was this after the war was over?

Mr. Lea: Just ended. Oh, no it didn’t end until I got into Seattle.

Mr. Metzler: Okay so it hadn’t ended yet, okay.

Mr. Lea: I got the orders that I was to report to a ship—LCI(R) 542. I was on (?) 762. Well anyway that was back in Leyte. I did get a thirty-day leave but then I had to ship back to Leyte for that and then I ran all over the Philippines. I was hauling army out, Philippine army home, Philippine civilians back to the islands. They’d fled from island to island to get away from the Japanese occupiers and they wanted to go back to their islands. That was a mess. And those inland seas are terrible to navigate—all coral reefs. The Japanese had mined a lot of those areas. We had just

swept certain channels and you had to know exactly where you were or hell you'd meander into a minefield. Well then storms would tear those mines loose and they'd end up floating—free floaters. You had to watch those all the time. I almost got one of them—God!—I was just able to change course enough and miss it—

Mr. Metzler: You could visually—

Mr. Lea: Oh yeah, he went right by me. When he got off the fantail I tried to sink him or blow him up with a twenty millimeter but I couldn't hit one (?). And then what they would do is they would go in and eventually end up on a beach somewhere and explode. Blow a hell of a hole in the coral.

Mr. Metzler: (laughs).

Mr. Lea: Anyway, this went on. Coming up one time from (Zamboanga?) or Mindanao across the Sulu Sea and that was uncharted. Most of it was just dots, dangerous ground, uncharted. Well I didn't have time I cut right across that thing but I was watching my depth and everything for coral. I saw some, I came across some

little islets that weren't on the chart you know but I was heading for Manila and I got maybe eighty miles down the (Mindoro?) coming up from the Sulu into the South China to get to Manila and a typhoon hit me. About 3 in the afternoon it got dark as night and the wind started coming up and fierce, waves—huge. They were—we had these air vents welded right into the deck you know, come up and curved down so the rain would go through them and suck air out. They're about twenty-four inches square, I think, in the deck. Anyway, it tore those right out of my deck and so it left me those big holes (laughs). I was taking on water. It was bending my ribs in too. And then you'd come out of the water and the pressure would go up and your skin would go out and when you went down it would go in. And it sound like a drum, you know. I had some deck plates that were {sweating?} welding. And I was taking on water—I had enough water in the (stern?) engine room so that when we'd lay over on our side like that the water would go up—the rudders were run with two large electric motors about halfway up the bulkhead like this, three or four feet up. Well the saltwater is what grounded those out. So I had to put two guys down there and do hand steering. Well I would (need?) when one of those big waves came, I was 157 feet long. I'd only get about halfway up one of those and I'd be losing the momentum all the way

because, and this thing you're hoping it would pass under you and you fell off, one way or the other, when you lost headway. Your rudders don't work on an LCI unless you got a current going past them so then I had, I'd end up in the trough. Now they would have to be forty-five footers because I could figure the height on the length of the ship. If you're up, you know (Mr. L gestures?).

Mr. Metzler: Whoa!

Mr. Lea: Then I'd end up in the trough and I would have to turn that thing away from the next one or into the next one or it would roll you like a barrel. So the poor guys on the hand steering I'd be at left fifty degrees rudder and I'd want *right* fifty (laughter) you know. So I'd use one screw (?) flank, the other all back full, you know to help turn her. Well I started in and it got bad by I'd say 4 in the afternoon. And I started burning out engines. The (motormack?) would get on the phone to me, "Skipper, you're burning these engines out." And I'd say, "Listen, might as well use them tonight Clark because I don't know if we'll ever get a chance to use them again." (laughter). So I burned out six of those eight engines. By the next morning, next day about 10 o'clock. Now this wind was so strong that it would get under my

eyelids and flap my eyelids—you couldn't see. You couldn't breathe in it either. And you had to look up above the conning tower. I used my megaphone and shoved the big part over my head like this (Mr. L demonstrates) and I could look out the small hole and I'd move it around and when the wind came down it was like a punch in the face (laughs). I had an engineering officer that was supposed, stand behind me crying like a baby. He thought, This is it, you know, we're gone—

Mr. Metzler: It's over.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. I kept fighting it—another bad thing about me I had nineteen army aboard that I was taking to Manila and they were all laying down in the inner mess hall area one deck below. And they had about six inches of water on that deck (laughs). As the ship rolled it would go right over them. They were laying on the deck, they were so sick, they were just like they were half dead. Technically, I should have had them all put in life jackets, put their jackets on, but I thought there's no use in panicking them, they're so goddamned sick and they wouldn't last out in that ocean six hours anyway.

Mr. Metzler: No.

Mr. Lea: Sharks would get them. So I left them go. I'd go down once in a while and check those poor buggers in the steering engine room. I didn't know if they would be able to stand. This one kid was, well he was *green* he was so sick. He was my head electrician too and the other one, and they were getting thrown around down there. You have a block and tackle to hold this big wheel. Once you get it turned the block and tackle is supposed to hold it. Those rudders (if a big wave?) move the ship sideways like that the pressure on those rudders would spin that wheel. Well man they were getting knocked around like hell down there and they were half drowned too, they were soaking wet because this water (laughs), it was like being in a half bucket of water, being sloshed around.

Mr. Metzler: Did you think this was it at that point?

Mr. Lea: Yeah. Well I figured. What saved our tail is that typhoon turned. Now island of Mindoro has maybe a twelve, fifteen-thousand foot mountain range down the center of it and that kind of broke that and I ended up in the lee I think because I could tell the velocity was dropping, you know it wasn't flopping my eyelids as much. It wasn't blowing the tops of the waves off either

(laughs). You know it would blow solid water just like a sheet coming at you—

Mr. Metzler: Horizontal water coming by.

Mr. Lea: I figured, by midnight, I figured we'd had it because I didn't have my engines. I was down to like three or four engines.

Mr. Metzler: Now how long did this last? How long—

Mr. Lea: From 3 in the afternoon to I'd say the next noon.

Mr. Metzler: Wow! Almost twenty-four hours.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. By that time I'm figuring we're going to make it by 10:30, 11 o'clock because the wind had let down. They had terrible waves but they weren't as bad and I was struggling over them so I'd gotten on the radio trying to raise Manila to find out the weather earlier by 3 in the afternoon the day before. Couldn't get any response from them. Course it's hard to get reception when your mast is laying halfway down half the time. They didn't know anyway.

Mr. Metzler: Now you were alone—you were the only ship?

Mr. Lea: That's right. Well see what I did is I went in. I limped into Manila Bay. Manila's eighty miles from the entrance of the harbor to downtown Manila and normally I'd go up the Pasig River and tie up, right downtown. They had up to the first army bridge, the bridges had all been blown up. But when I passed Corregidor Island I had the urge to jump over and swim ashore and say, "To hell with this thing, I've had it!" (laughs).

Mr. Metzler: Yeah, I need some land under my feet!

Mr. Lea: But I went into Manila and I then I got, I asked for availability in repair. So I went around to Subic Bay at (Olongapo?) and they spent two weeks trying to put it back in shape.

Mr. Metzler: So did you lose anybody on the crew in that storm?

Mr. Lea: No, no. Sick.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah, sick as a dog.

Mr. Lea: I had I'd say, well that's amazing some of those guys functioned that were so sick that was, they normally wouldn't have been able to function but only they figured that was it.

Mr. Metzler: It's function or die.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. The poor engineering officer never did—I transferred him afterwards. He—

Mr. Metzler: Never the same, huh?

Mr. Lea: No.

Mr. Metzler: How was he different?

Mr. Lea: Well, I don't think, well he just, he didn't want to be a sailor anymore! (laughs). He'd had it. That was too much for him. He was a nice gentle fellow anyway. Young.

Mr. Metzler: Now he was what, your—

Mr. Lea: Engineering officer.

Mr. Metzler: Engineering officer.

Mr. Lea: He wasn't really, he didn't know his engineering either. I wasn't supposed to be an engineer but boy when you have to you learn your engineering.

Mr. Metzler: Real quick! (laughter).

Mr. Lea: And you know in retrospect—oh, you know I had to sail that thing back to the United States. Ten of us we went back to (?). From Leyte Gulf to Gulf of California took me fifty-seven days. Course that's going about halfway around the world. And Pearl, we stopped at Pearl, well no—

Mr. Metzler: Now was this on your ship?

Mr. Lea: Yeah.

Mr. Lea: So you got her repaired at Subic Bay?

Mr. Metzler: Oh yeah. They should have left it in the Philippines, they could have used it for scrap. You know the ribs would never be the same again. Structurally the decks would not lay flat. The bow

was back like a foot and a half, bent back. You can tell them but they don't listen. Ten of us we stopped at Guam and refueled. Luckily I put, I used a tank that was empty, almost empty, and refueled. When we got out of Guam three or four days I switched to that tank, turned out it had salt water in it and it started wiping out my injectors. So I notified the others, I said, "If you switched to any tanks you picked up at." You know normally you have a day tank—you drain your fuel into a 500-gallon day tank and then it's got a deal on the bottom of it so that heavier salt water can go down there and you can drain it off.

Mr. Metzler: Separate it out.

Mr. Lea: But if you're in fairly motion seas it always gets turned up and we didn't have calm seas. So we were short on fuel. So then we got about halfway to Pearl from Guam and they started having engine trouble. I towed a ship for two days. In fact, I had a motor machinist that was outstanding, he really could rebuild one of those. Lot of them didn't have those high skilled—we'd lost a lot of our experienced people through point system. I put him on other ships, he'd repair their engines. Well, towing puts some more strain on your ship. I lost a main bearing. We had to readjust fuel. Some of the ships that had been towed hadn't been

using fuel. At one time I think it was four of us towing. There were only two on their own that were being towed. We went into Wake. When we got close enough to Wake so that we could raise them on the radio, I think it was 150 to 200 miles, we radioed them and said, "We're coming in," and they said, "Don't bother, we have no harbor." (laughs). We said, "We're coming anyway." They said, "Well, our anchorage is ninety feet deep and it's open to the sea." But we had no choice. We went in and we nested them side-by-side. And then I could see my anchor down there like a fob in ninety foot of water. Also you could see all kinds of barracuda going through and sharks—

Mr. Metzler: Really!

Mr. Lea: Flying fish. We netted flying fish there. Well there we worked on our engines. We readjusted our fuel, got our engines back working. I changed that main bearing which was supposed to be a navy yard job. The way we got it done, I had some very ingenious motor machinists. One said we didn't have a bearing bar. He said, "We'll make a bearing bar (?)." (laughter). So he took bolts and cut them and welded them into the rings and then we took a chain hoist and we went and we'd pull and sometimes those bolts where he welded had crystalized that ring and they

would pop, break out. Well then that didn't work too well so they had three rings we had to get out of there. So I said we're going to have to cut them out. So the head motor machinist Clark said, "There's one thing we have to be careful of, we can't damage so the trace goes around it. I know how we can do that Skipper, I'll use the cutting torch very carefully. You take a (CO2) and you shoot that on there and keep it cold with that." And that was a mess too but we got it done. The guy when he's cutting now he's laying on his back in the bilge. There's a little water that's always in the bilge and a lot of oil. And every once in a while a hot piece of that metal would land on his belly or something and I'd hit him with the CO2 (laughs).

Mr. Lea: Cool him down! (laughs).

Mr. Lea: Boy I wrote him a beautiful letter, "To Whom it May Concern," when we got separated. Yeah he was terrific, invaluable.

Mr. Metzler: Did you ever stay in contact with any of your crew after the war?

Mr. Lea: No. I did on the first ship. I'm sorry I didn't in a way. I did with the—

Mr. Metzler: What was the number of the second ship?

Mr. Lea: 452. Oh no, 542. 542. 762 and 542.

Mr. Metzler: Now did they put an “R” in there, did they call them “LCIR’s”?

Mr. Lea: Yes. And then “G’s” for gunship. You know in retrospect I was in high school during the late ‘30’s, graduated in ‘40. There was always a constant debate going on about rearmament and FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] knew trouble was coming, he was trying to get prepared. Congress was passing neutrality acts and blocking every—the National Council of Churches preached every Sunday, “Don’t rearm, if you have armaments you’ll use them, if you don’t have them you won’t use them.” (laughs). It was obvious I think to most of us, we watched the Japanese beating the hell out of the Chinese and nothing was stopping them. We watched the Germans running over everybody in Europe. Mussolini first going into Ethiopia and he got away with it. So Hitler, well the Japanese, well the German subs were sinking ships off our east coast right in sight of land. And you know it was just a question of—and so when Pearl Harbor came and (?) got shot up and they said, “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition.” But we started that war with airplanes the

Japanese could fly right around us, so could the Germans. Japanese destroyer would run one of ours right down and sink it. They had more firepower, longer range. One of their companies had about two times the firepower of one our infantry or marine companies when we had 1903 (?). We started World War II with World War I weapons. I kept thinking about that old saw in history. If you don't know your history, learn from your history, you're bound to repeat it. Looking back, World War II was really the last war we won. And when I think I heard on the radio MacArthur gave his farewell address to a joint session of Congress and in that he said, "Gentlemen, there is no substitute for victory." It was a grim war, it was going into a stalemate. And you know I think that's probably one of the most accurate statements made in this century. But then I also think this: basically, eighteen-year olds are hell of a lot cheaper than armaments really if you've got some manpower to waste. We could have taken some of those places with a tenth of the casualties if we had had the equipment. I had a cousin, an eighteen and a half year old cousin who was in the armed guard and he got stuck in Anzio, the invasion of Anzio, and he was on, I think they were carrying troops or ammunition, one or the other, on a twenty-millimeter gun. The German bombers came over, high level bombers. We didn't have any air cover. They're

doing a major invasion without air cover! Unbelievable. Because we didn't have the air cover and the Russians were begging for help to take the pressure off. So what happened was these high level bombers, they dropped a bomb right in his gun tub. Blew him and the gun right over into the water. And if we had had air cover.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah. What do you think about the Japanese, after having engaged them in combat? What's your feeling?

Mr. Lea: Well, they're just as human as we are and just as intelligent. They had the disadvantage of being in a system where the average Japanese didn't have any say in anything. If he stepped in front of a Samurai they had the authority to lop his head off with a sword no questions asked. He had to follow instructions. If he thought for himself or did something on his own he was risking death you know. And they fought—oh, they were tremendous fighters. Gutsy. Well they were—

Mr. Metzler: Fanatical.

Mr. Lea: They were taught—

Mr. Metzler: They were raised that way.

Mr. Lea: You're going to go join your ancestors. You can't surrender. They were, I can't think of anyone that would be tougher opponents. They were quick to take somebody else's invention and improve on it. Funny, their torpedoes worked. Our torpedoes didn't go off. It was late in the war before we got—

Mr. Metzler: You figured out the torpedo problem. And what did they call theirs—long lance torpedo I think is what it was called, it was really a good torpedo.

Mr. Lea: Yeah.

Mr. Metzler: Were you in contact with your family at all? Did you get letters, send letters?

Mr. Lea: Oh yeah. Sometimes it would be a month and a half. I'd get a whole bunch of them. That was funny when we got mail call. You know you could tell the morale of the crew (laughs) went along with the mail. It would be real good after we had mail for a week or two, but a month would go by without mail and they were getting grumpy. Good friends were getting at each other's

throat. And one time—one mail call I always remember this. It was funny at first, it wasn't at the time but I had one kid was from Minneapolis and the other one was from St. Paul. They got their mail, everybody had three or four letters and everybody is opening and reading them and this kid from Minneapolis started to laugh. He's laughing and chuckling and his buddy from St. Paul said, "Did you get good news?" "Yeah," he said, "I just heard from the folks, you know what they're going to do? They're merging the twin cities. They're going to name them Minnehaha—"Minne" for Minneapolis and "ha ha" for St. Paul." And jeez the kid from St. Paul got up and slugged him! (laughter). I broke up the fight, I said, "What the hell's the matter with you fools! You're good buddies." Well, it wasn't funny to the kid at the time. Afterwards they could see but anyway it was that kind of stuff that, I don't know. We uh, some of it was unreal really. I had on my last ship, I had, I was in the Philippines and my cook a letter came through a big packet from the admiral up in Manila and it was his cover letter to me said, "Read this and take action—it's up to you." If you can get along without this sailor you know it's up to you, you can send him home. I read the packet. His father was in Kansas. His father—they had a wheat farm—and his father had had a heart attack. And they wanted the kid home by April 1st to plant

I guess. Anyway, they had a date in there. And it was about a month away. And they had affidavits—the Red Cross had helped—they had affidavits, they had them from his pastor, the family doctor, all these, so it wasn't any hoax. So I thought, well, I'm not keeping him. He was the only cook but I had mess cooks. I could force somebody else to cook, I wasn't going to hold him up. So I called him in and said, "Start packing. You're going home." And I showed him, "Read all this stuff." I said, "I'll call for the jeep and driver and I'll take you over to transportation on this island (Tualow?) up in a place called (Diwansamara?), one arm of Leyte Gulf. And where that was our operating piece out of there. So he got his gear and said goodbye to rest of the crew, I got him in the jeep and told the driver, "Go to the transportation officer, " but I had the bosun that was in charge of our ship service I had my own bottle of, I opened up my drawer and took out a bottle of scotch whiskey. And I had him get me a case of beer out of our supply and took that along because I knew that transportation officer would need to be convinced. So I get over there and I said that I had this kid's orders, I'd written release orders for him and I said, "He's got to get back. His dad's has a heart attack and he's got to get planting. He's got to—" and they were flying out I think one or two planes a day and they'd be C-47's, not that large. I think

take five, six passengers, that was all and some freight and stuff. He said, “Hell we, look at this! Here’s the list. It’s going to take two, three weeks for me to get him on the list. Look at these. They’re all commanders, captains, colonels.” And I nodded to the driver of the jeep, could he bring it in? And he brought in the case of the beer and the fifth of whiskey and I said, “Now listen if this isn’t enough I can bring you more but this should put this kid right on top of that list. He said, “I understand,” and he put his name back on number one (laughter).

Mr. Metzler: It didn’t take long to get to the top of the list!

Mr. Lea: Yeah, he went out that afternoon.

Mr. Metzler: It’s amazing what a little bit of booze will buy you!

Mr. Lea: Yeah. I used to get spare parts that way. They couldn’t find them or didn’t have them, but boy you’d come up with a case of beer. I’d use it for trade goods too. If we’d go—one thing I always took care of myself is supplies because you were rationed. For every twenty-five pound, twenty-five pound I think they were of frozen meat, beef, you had to take two twenty-five pound frozen hamburger. And the cook was always complaining. You know,

he had hamburger running out his. I would take some beer along, I'd go over there going to get a 1000 pounds of meat at least and I'd say to a probably a second-class storekeeper, that would be, we'd go from Quonset to Quonset. I'd say, "You know, it looks like you haven't had a beer for quite a while." "No sir, I haven't." "Here! Here's a beer." So I'd give him one, might as well have a beer or two while we're loading this stuff up. If he was, most of the time they were sympathetic. I'd say, "Look, the cook complains about all this hamburger. Can't we have roasting and frying instead of hamburger," which would be steak and good roast. "Yes," he said, "I can do that." I'd say, "Well the rest of that case of beer is yours then." I'd say, "Let me see that requisition." Instead of 1000 pounds I'd take 2000 pounds. (laughter). I'd go out of there with steak and that. That was I think probably my only enjoyment in the whole thing.

Mr. Metzler: That was the best part of the war for you!

Mr. Lea: Beating the system, yeah.

Mr. Metzler: Do you ever think about the war years after you were out of the war? Do you ever have nightmares? Dreams or—

Mr. Lea:

Well, not really much anymore. I think about it once in a while. Something comes up. But for a while after I came back after Okinawa I was home and I was tired all the time, I was sleeping on the damn porch. And I'd have a recurring dream. It would be you're heading, you're always watched. I had a compass like this and I had down in the (pound?) house the helmsman was steering at a course that I'd given him and he was going by his compass and I could see it up on mine and if a wave moves you over so swings your stern over so you're like three degrees to the right of course. You bring it back to course. The next wave or two does it again and you go three to the right and you bring it back. After twenty-four, thirty-six hours of that you're quite a bit to the right of your course. You've got to come back three to the left, then come back to center each time you know. So you watch that kind of stuff. A standard phrase would be—I had a voice tube in front of me and he had a voice tube right above him. So all I could communicate real quick was, I'd say, "Watch your heading! Watch your heading!" I had these recurring dreams that they couldn't hold that dang ship on the proper heading, it's going off, going off. And I was sleeping on the (davenport?) and my mother happened to walk in the room and I'm sound asleep and I say, "Watch your heading! Watch your heading!" And she jumped (laughter). And I woke up and I

realized what was happening. But I can still vividly picture that stuff, it's like shooting this, this one poor Japanese jumped in a foxhole. He didn't think we saw him. He'd built up in front of his foxhole a wall of stones. You could see it was manmade, it wasn't natural, it was all a rocky area there. I could see his helmet in there. He's looking around the edge like this and so I'm standing behind this twenty millimeter and I see him, he pulls his rifle around at me. He's bringing the rifle around to take aim at us and we're, he'd maybe have a fifty-yard, sixty-yard shot. I emptied that magazine right in there and just blew his hole much bigger, just blew him to pieces. Another two guys I saw bobbing up behind this flat rock and I'm standing there relieving the gunner you know because their heads ached from the smoke and the shake and all that. I had my binoculars hanging here and I saw those heads and I thought, What the hell are they doing? That rock was like a tabletop and they'd probably be chest high to it. I saw them put something on top of the rock and I couldn't see with the naked eye what it was and I raised the binoculars and it was a wire tripod. I thought, Oh! And then up came the machine gun on top of it. And the other guy's going for a belt of ammunition. And I just took the twenty and I went back and forth across that rock and just blew

everything to smithereens. Those poor devils were probably just full of shrapnel.

Mr. Metzler: So how far offshore were you when all of this was going on?

Mr. Lea: Oh, 100 yards.

Mr. Metzler: You guys were right there!

Mr. Lea: There was only one place on Okinawa on the south end (?) the south end was better. There was one place where that, there was a coral reef that we had to watch out for, otherwise you could get in pretty close. I went ashore once and there was a little old dock coming out that'd been blown up. There was a narrow gauge railroad on it, and our shells had blown the dock up but had (arched?) those rails. Bowing them up. And I need to get ashore to contact the naval gunnery license officer. I didn't have any radio contact or anyway to contact him. So I put the bow of the ship up there and I went carefully over these rails, I didn't fall in, it wouldn't have been that deep but real jagged rocks down there. I got ashore, but I would say we were in twenty-five feet of water. A couple of places the beach shallowed out. One time I was in (make?), I made a mistake. We were supposed to

broadcast with a loudspeaker and a Japanese interpreter that was born and raised in Honolulu, army sergeant were carrying, trying to get these civilians to surrender and they were massed and I'm heading right in towards the beach and we're broadcasting to them—they're all listening. Course the poor devils they had no way to get out there. I asked the navy for a small boat and they said, "No, you'll just get them killed." While we're talking there I'm kind of (laid?) too but I'm perpendicular to the beach. The Japs had dragged up a five-inch mortar. They put a spout of water up side of me on one side and then on here the other side. And here I couldn't give her (all ahead?) flank because I had to turn. You can't turn an LCI that easily. I get her all back full and as soon as the stern would kick like this I knew she'd keep on swinging and then I gave her (all ahead?) flank and he put his third one right in my wake. From that time on I never stayed perpendicular to shore, I was always in a position where I could change speeds quickly. I could have got the whole crew killed.

Mr. Metzler: You could have lost your whole ship. Bang!

Mr. Lea: And just by my not figuring it out. That was one thing I disliked about the fact you never went back hardly ever to the same place you'd been before except San Diego or Pearl Harbor. It was

always new harbors. And half of the time there wasn't in the Philippines any navigation aids so you were—

Mr. Metzler: Flying blind.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. You know I get a kick out of—and another thing. You read these books and you see these films on WWII and they, of course I'm a librarian, and the tendency in writing is to romanticize it. The Hollywood versions of the war from my experience is way off. I chuckled the other day I heard on television I was watching that Tom Hanks announced he's going to do a film on WWII in the Pacific and it's going to be on racism. Racism—my Lord! You big dummy! Our most important ally over there was the Chinese! How are you going to get something racist out of World War II? But I think it's like he said in that movie, "Stupid is as stupid does." (laughs). And that might be his excuse. It's too bad. We have all these navy historians right there and army historians. They're doing an accurate record. Those are available in most libraries. So they could get some real accurate accounts, not just of one observer but of dozens of observers. And the reports of twenty company commanders about the battle and so if they wanted to do a real serious job they could do an accurate one.

Mr. Metzler: Have you seen any serious movies about World War II where you said, “Ah, now that is accurate.”?

Mr. Lea: It was not really about the war, it was about them home. (March?) took one of the leads in it. I’m trying to think of the title, it escapes me now. But it was very accurate, it was what happened to them. It really aged you. I was a kid when I went in there. Boy you come out old!

Mr. Metzler: So that is how that experience changed you. You went in a kid and came out an old man. Two years, three years later.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. There were some benefits. I didn’t want all that command responsibility. They wanted us to sign over when I got to San Diego the last time. They wanted us to sign over and make a career in the navy. “Your command’s waiting for you on the east coast.” I said, “Where will it be going, the Mediterranean?” “No, no probably down to Gitmo.” (laughs). Yeah, they didn’t know anymore about it than I did. All ten of us they tried to sign up and none of us signed. It was ten skippers coming in. One time I had to go aboard a battleship, I can’t remember, the *Tennessee* maybe. It was to deliver—they

had a 175 group message for us and it would be easier for us to pick it up by hand then to have them send it by blinker. I pulled up to their quarter, their instructions, I can't remember—port or starboard, quarter. Crawled over the side into this mammoth ship and headed for the officer there—their commander—took me up to the bridge. I was in the khakis. We'd been doing a lot of smoking. I hadn't probably shaved for three or four days and my uniform was oily and my skin was all oily. That oil, that smoke left everything oily. So I was a real mess and these guys were in starch. This commander that acted as a messenger, guide, took me up there. He said to a full commander, "He's for this message." He turned and said to like a lieutenant, a full lieutenant, "Proceed to get this message for this skipper." And he turned to a lesser rank—same thing. Finally, a chief got the typed message for me. While I'm standing there looking over these guys groomed to, right out of a band box you know. They could have stood parade. Inspection anyplace. This guy, officer said to me, "Can you bring that ship along side?" And I thought, "Oh now what the hell's the (bitch?). I said, "Yes, why?" He said, "You're getting remarkable experience. I was a lieutenant commander before they even allowed me to handle a destroyer and that was just for a (?)." He said, "You're getting wonderful experience." I didn't tell him (laughs)—

Mr. Metzler: What did you want to say? What did you really want to say?

Mr. Lea: I would have said I'd rather not have it. Somebody else could have it. (laughter). It was, I hauled an interesting fellow from Manila down to (Iloilo?). The army had some tugs, they had given them some tugs. Big tugs. And their crew didn't know how to operate them and burned a boiler down. Burned a boiler out. They had arranged for a guy to come. He'd been a navy, he'd had a twenty year career in the United States Navy—he was a chief. I think chief bosun or quartermaster. Then he went in the merchant marine. He couldn't get out of the merchant marine because the war started. He was past retirement. They assigned him, the army asked for some expertise. The merchant marine told them to get them a crew. He had a Greek engineering officer that would go with him and he'd form a crew when he got there, the Filipinos, to go down there and get this tug started. Well, he was beat up. He should have been in a nursing home I thought. I picked him up in Manila. He came, he's dragging, he'd been drunk all night the night before and he came in and asked, "You're going to Iloilo?" "Yeah and on to other—why?" He said, "Could I get a ride down there? I was supposed to go down there. Here's my orders. I got to go to this

stupid tug and start it for the army.” And I said, “Oh, c’mon aboard.” I sent him to the cabin and told a steward’s mate to get him some coffee and a lunch. After he had a little lunch and some coffee he said, “You mind if I lay down and sleep for a while.” And I said, “Get on a bunk and sleep.” So he goes, slept like a log. Finally, I’m just about to leave. A guy, an officer with a jeep from the navy headquarters there in Manila—I’m tied up on the Pasig River in downtown Manila. He came and he said, they called me and said there’s an officer out here wanting to talk to you. So I went out on the deck and he said, “Do you have any unauthorized passengers aboard this ship?” And I think I maybe had a dozen army. I said, “There’s—you can have those if you want them.” He said, “Oh, no, no, no.” He said, “We were told you had unauthorized,” and I thought, Uh oh, they’re after that poor devil. I said, “No,” and turned around and went back in my cabin. Well then I took off in a half hour I dropped him down to ship (laughs). I never thought I’d ever see him again. And maybe three weeks later I come into (Iloilo?) and his stuff is still there. I immediately get a blinker signal:

“Is Mr. Lee still skipper?”

And the signalman: “Affirmative.”

“He’s invited to dinner with all the trimmings as my guest.”

And it was this guy.

Mr. Metzler: I'll be darned.

Mr. Lea: I went over there and he said—oh, he had the best scotch whiskey, steaks—he said, I said, “How’d you get all this stuff?” He said, “I know how you deal with the army.” He said, “This colonel comes at least twice a week and says ‘When are you going to be ready with this tug?’” And he said, I told him I said, “I’ll tell you, as soon as I get any smoke out of this stack (come over?) I’ll be ready to go.” (laughter). Another thing, he had some of the Filipinos had their wives with them, that were, he was training his crew. The Greek engineer was doing much of the (brain?) work. He said, “I told that colonel, ‘Listen, before we start talking any kind of business I want two cases of scotch, and good scotch, and I want steaks,’” and he gave him a whole list of stuff. And he said, “We’re not discussing anything until you deliver that.” And he said, “Colonel was livid he was so goddamned mad. ‘Who’s this guy?’ But you know he didn’t have any control over it, no authority.” He said, “The guy produced the scotch and the steaks and we’ve been drinking scotch and eating steaks ever since.” (laughter). He finally got it going but it was a tug that was big enough to pull a, well a

battlewagon even. He said he couldn't figure out what the army was going to do. They were going to pull a whole bunch of rafts with these. It was kind of something new all the time.

Mr. Metzler: Well what did we miss on your written document there? Did we miss any high spots? I told you we hit most of the places.

Mr. Lea: I don't think so. I've added a couple of things I wouldn't have normally added (sound of rustling paper).

Mr. Metzler: Is that an extra copy?

Mr. Lea: That's for you.

Mr. Metzler: Great. What we'll do is we'll attach that to the transcript when we do get the transcript.

Mr. Lea: I think I'm really finished, other than I still keep track of the military and they've done wonders I think. We've got equipment on some of our ships, these missile firing ships—

Mr. Metzler: Amazing isn't it?

Mr. Lea: Yeah, and our torpedoes that will home in and all that stuff. You fly over in a plane and drop one it will go in concentric circles until it—

Mr. Metzler: Until they hit, yeah.

Mr. Lea: So we really have (better?) equipment. They're keeping it going, I hope they keeping it going. You wonder, what amuses me is stuff like this. We got to get out of Iraq, got to have a deadline. Got to get out of Afghanistan. Well what about Bosnia? We've been there for fifteen years. What about Korea? We've been there fifty-five, sixty years. What about Germany?

Mr. Metzler: We're still there. We're still in Okinawa.

Mr. Lea: Yeah. I think their policy probably when it was set up to keep a stable force in Europe. To keep civility in the long run and to keep the Germans, or the French, or the Russians from running over their smaller neighbors like they had in all the centuries past, periodically. You know it has worked. But those smaller countries, they don't have to spend a lot for national defense. U.S. taxpayer is picking that up and has. And you know it's a question of whether we can police the whole world. I think we

could if we use the right methods. You got to use cheap methods, like one missile in there, blast their whole infrastructure to bits. And then you got fifteen, twenty years before they can rebuild and be a threat again. And you could take (?) and take care of part of the world that way, rather than having all these troops on the ground. And I think this is the neatest thing when they can fly these drones in. That's so much better than the poor boots on the ground.

Mr. Metzler: Yeah. Technology has got a huge potential. Well let me go ahead and end this here Keith. Just to let you know, we're almost exactly at two hours.

Mr. Lea: Wow.

Mr. Metzler: So that's how good your stories are. I've been sitting here listening to these and I've been fascinated and I want to thank you for spending the time to share those with us. As I told you on the phone before we got together, we don't get stories about the rocket launching LCI's and so this is a great addition to our—

Mr. Lea: If I can find the 8 X 10 glossies I have of them back in Wisconsin I'll bring them down and you can make copies of them.

Mr. Metzler: That would be great!

Mr. Lea: I always wondered when I went through here. I think my first trip in through here was about twenty, '97. Well, no twenty-seven years ago. No, '87—1987. And you didn't have any amphibious pictures then either, hardly any, no LCI's.

Mr. Metzler: Well I bet you we've got them. The problem is even with the new building we don't have room to display all that stuff. I mean we have a warehouse full of stuff. I'm sure we've got stuff like that in there but we'd love to have pictures of those LCI's. Well let me end the tape by thanking you again for the time and also thanking you for what you did for our country during World War II. I think that's something our generation doesn't do enough of so I wanted to thank you.

Mr. Lea: It was my turn I guess.

Mr. Metzler: It was your turn (laughs). Okay, we'll end it here then.

[end of transcript]

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