

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

**Leo D. Wilcox
Houston, Texas
December 1, 2011**

**LCI (G) 70
20mm Gunner**

My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is December 1, 2011. I am interviewing Mr. Leo D. Wilcox by telephone. His phone number is 281-955-1182. His address is: 9122 Restover Lane, Houston, Texas, 77064. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II

Mr. Misenhimer

Leo, I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Wilcox

I appreciate that very much.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the Museum. "Agreement read." Is that okay with you?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

The next I would like to do is to get an alternative contact. We have found out that sometimes several years down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran and he has moved or something. Do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact if we needed to find you?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes. One of our daughters lives here in Houston, very close to us. Gayle Miller. Her address is 10007 Briarpark Trail Lane, Houston, Texas 77064,

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you have a phone number for her?

Mr. Wilcox

Her phone number is 281-970-8819.

Mr. Misenhimer

Leo, go ahead and start reading what you have there for me.

Mr. Wilcox

I was born in Savannah, Oklahoma on September 13, 1925. My family went to California and worked picking cotton and worked picking fruit for about a year from 1935 to 1936. Then we went back to Oklahoma for about two years and then back to California in 1938. We were in Bell, California where I went to school in the 9th and the 10th grades. After the war started in 1941, I left school and went to work for the Ream Manufacturing Company. Shortly after they started my brother who is five years older than me was drafted. My other brother Henry, who was seven years older than me, had a form of arthritis or some problem, but he was still working. He was in a lot of pain, but he received a draft notice to report for a physical. We didn't think there would be any chance for him to pass, but he did pass the physical and was drafted. He went into the Army about the same time that I went into the Navy in December of 1942. I went in on a minority cruise. If you were between 17 and 18 years old you would go in and you would get out on your 21st birthday. It was regular Navy, not the Reserves. That's how I went in. I went in December and I was 17 in September, so I was just 17 and about 3 months. I was in until my 21st birthday.

I entered the Navy on December 9, 1942 in Los Angeles. I left for boot camp in Farragut, Idaho on December 17, 1942. I was assigned to Camp Hill Company 170. Boot camp lasted eight weeks. Then I was assigned to work in the PX at Camp Hill for the next four months. I was then transferred to the US Naval Air Station Sandpoint in Seattle, Washington. I figured that I would stay there for the rest of the war. That's what I hoped because it was a very nice base. Actually I was only there for about two months. Then I got called. There was draft in August or September and they wanted 75 sailors to go aboard the USS *California*, the battleship *California*. It was in Bremerton for repairs from Pearl Harbor. It was damaged in Pearl Harbor. There was a draft of 75 sailors that were sent there. When we arrived we were told they only needed 50 so they took them alphabetically. So the last 25, which included me, were assigned to the Amphib. We were sent to San Francisco to board a ship for overseas assignment. I went aboard the *Manson*. It was a luxury cruise ship which had been converted to a troop transport ship. There were about 4,000 troops aboard. After about four

days of travel we ended up in Noumea, New Caledonia at a receiving station. I waited there for transportation to my final duty station. While there I went out on a working party. Usually it was to the ammo dump, almost every day. One day as we were leaving for our work station we were stopped to listen to the results of a court martial. Three sailors had been found guilty of sabotage. I believe one received six years, one two years, and the third one year. I'm not absolutely sure of these times. After three to six weeks I went aboard the LCI (L) 434 for Tulagi in the Solomons to go aboard the ship that I was on during the war, which was LCI (G) 70. This was an LCI that normally carried troops ashore but it was converted to gunboat. After I got onboard, in talking to the crew, I found out that those three people that I had mentioned that I had heard the court martial on, had come off the 70. The information that I have here is from books and articles that I have read and also from what I remember.

The LCI-70 that I went aboard was in Tulagi for repair because it had been hit by a torpedo. The torpedo had gone through four bulkheads. It hit about midship between the waterline and the top deck and ended up in the engine room and killed one man, but it didn't explode. I think the reason it didn't explode is that it had never hit the water. These were aerial torpedoes and they hit the ship before they hit the water so they hadn't armed. After the sabotage, what these three people did, they tried to scuttle the ship, they opened the seaport. They also put ball bearings in the reduction gears that completely ruined the propulsion system. So it went to Noumea, New Caledonia for repairs. While there they decided that they would convert it into a gunboat along with probably eight or ten other LCIs that were converted into gunboats. In the "LCI Item", the magazine that comes out for the members aboard LCIs, there is an article about it that tells about the conversion to gunboats. Admiral Halsey went aboard the LCI-22 for its shakedown cruise after it had been converted to a gunboat. The story, the article in the book "The Glory of the Solomons" that tells about the torpedo attack by the planes. There were a number of planes that attacked an LCI, the 70, and an LCT. I think it was LCT-48 and there was a torpedo boat. I don't have its number but it is in the book "The Glory of the Solomons." In the calendar of the "LCI Item" it tells about putting on rockets. Before I went aboard they had installed rockets on this LCI. I think they put on 24; 12 on each side. Then they took an

LCT, which was a landing craft tank. It was much smaller than an LCI, it's not a ship, it's just a boat that will carry one tank; and they put 48 of these rockets on that LCT, right on the tank deck and we went out and we tested those on a little deserted island. We completely obliterated the whole island. So they must have considered it a success. We came back and they took them off and then they started making what they called LCI-Rs instead of LCI-Gs for gunboat. LCI-R for rocket. I think they probably put 48 on those. I don't know if they ever put any more on LCTs or not, but they did convert some of these LCIs to rocket ships.

My first job when I was on there was to dismantle and take off those rockets that had been put on there. Also I did see the torpedo that hit the ship. It was in the warehouse there and it was about 20 foot long as I recall. It was still there.

I saw my first action not too long after I came aboard. We took on some troops and then we approached a beach head on the island of Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. We blasted the beach with our guns and then we put some troops ashore. Maybe two to four hours later, we took the troops back aboard. Then we bombarded the beach again and put the troops back ashore. This time they stayed ashore. I never did know if they were driven back or if they deliberately fell back to draw the Japanese closer to the ship to where they would be under attack from our guns.

The next action after that, we invaded an island called Green Island in the northern part of the Solomon Islands. Green Island is in the northern part of the chain of Solomon Islands. In the northwestern part of the chain are two larger islands, New Ireland and New Britain. The water between these two islands is called St. George's Channel. At the tip of New Britain is a base called Rabaul. That is where the Japanese main naval forces were stationed about that time. This was about the middle of the war. We did extensive patrolling in St. George's Channel along with another gunboat. I'm not sure what that other gunboat was. It was probably number 68 but I'm not sure about that. We would go in for three days and three nights. At night we would cruise along the coast and look for barges. We were trying to cut off communications between the islands and to keep the Japanese from shuttling back and forth and reinforcing their troops. Usually they used a little barge to do that. This is primarily what we were doing. In the daytime we would lay back out in the bay and

kind of cruise along about as slow as we could go and look for mines. When we would spot a mine we would break out the small arms and some of the crew would shoot until they hit the mine with small arms and blow them up.

Before I go to the next part, I need to talk about what happened to my best friend. Let me mention a little about myself here. A short time before I enlisted, another girl that I had gone out with three or four times, we started corresponding. After I went into the Navy, I don't just how long, I proposed to her. Her name was Bernice Gibson. Shortly after I went aboard I got a letter from her saying that she had a brother that she thought was in the same area that I was in and that he was on an LST. She gave me the number and it just so happened that the same day I got the letter that LST came into the bay. It anchored in the bay and I swam out there and had lunch with her brother and met him for the first time. Then we went to Green Island. It was necessary to reveal a little of my background. I have always been a solitary person. I seem to always have just one close friend. In school that's the way it was, and in the Navy. At this time my very best friend was named Whalen. He was one of the seamen aboard the ship. We did everything together. We worked together. We swam together. We played cards. He planned to get married as soon as he got out of the Navy. He had shown me his ring that his girlfriend had given him. He was also engaged and as soon as he got out he was going to get married. We played cards together a lot and we didn't get paid regularly. So we would just keep books if we were playing poker or something and somebody owed somebody else a certain amount, we would just write it down and when we got paid we would pay. I don't remember how much we played for. I do remember that my best friend Whalen, one evening we were playing and he kept saying, "My luck has got to change." He had been losing quite a bit. I know that he owed me \$40. I don't know how much he owed any of the rest of the crew. He kept saying that his luck had to change. He was always talking about wanting to see some action. He always wanted to see some action. The next morning after we had been playing cards, we got a call to go out into the bay and investigate a Japanese barge that somebody had spotted. We went out there and we didn't find the barge but we did find an old water-logged dugout canoe. There were no Japanese around anywhere. We didn't have a small boat aboard so we decided that we would try to get that

dugout aboard our ship so that we could go back and forth when we were anchored out. Before we had to swim back and forth if we went to the beach. We spent a couple of hours probably getting this dugout up on the deck. It was waterlogged and heavy. We finally got it up there and Whalen and I decided that we would go swimming when we got back. When we hit Green Island for the invasion we had pulled up alongside a Japanese barge that had been destroyed and we had got some souvenirs off of that barge. All the time we were at Green Island we were docked alongside this barge. That day when we got back, Whalen and I decided to go swimming and we thought it would be fun to use that dugout so we pushed it off the bow. We were going to fool around with it. When it hit the bottom, when it hit the water, the bottom broke out of the dugout and it was completely worthless after that. So we just swam around awhile. When we pulled ourselves out of the water, just forward of midship on the starboard side, the water was clear and when we got out Whalen pointed out to me that there was a Japanese flare off of the fantail of the barge, in about six or seven feet of water. He said, "Look Leo, there is a Jap flare. Do you want it?" I remember my exact words. I said, "I don't have any use for it." I will always believe that it was the Lord and my mother's prayers that I wasn't interested because we all knew this flare had five or seven small parachutes like little silk handkerchiefs, and they made pretty nice souvenirs. I don't know why I wasn't interested but our Chief Gunner's mate had opened these up before and taken out some of these parachutes so we know what was in there. This package, this flare, was about three inches in diameter and about 8 to 12 inches long. It was solid black and it was in a waterproof canister. The Japanese used there at night to fire up over the bay, over our ships. When the flares were fired and exploded at the greatest height and released these parachutes, each had a piece of burning magnesium and it would light up the bay just about as bright as day time. I don't know why, but about that time I decided that it was so hot over there. I had been issued a blanket and a large overcoat that we called a pea coat. I decided that I was going to mail those back home because I didn't need them. I don't know how I thought I would get them mailed. I don't remember now, but I must have thought it was possible. After I told Whalen I wasn't interested in that flare I went down into the crew quarters and I got out my blanket and I folded my blanket up and was just getting ready to package it and I was standing at the foot of the

ladder going down into the crew quarters when somebody yelled down, "Whalen is hurt. I need a blanket." I threw the blanket up to him and went directly up the ladder behind him. The sight that awaited me, will burn in my memory as clear as the day it happened, as long as I live, there on the port side about midship lay Whalen, my very best friend, on his back in the very bright sunlight on a very hot deck. There was a hole where his left eye should have been. One hand was gone and two or three fingers were missing from the other hand. He was split open from the chest to the groin with all of his insides exposed. He was fully conscious and was saying over and over. "It is so hot. It is so hot." In just a few a minutes the paramedics arrived and took him away on a stretcher. Approximately one hour later one of the guys came back and yelled up, "You can tell your buddies that he has about a 50/50 chance of recovering." In about one more hour we all mustered on deck and walked a short distance over on the beach to where a grave had been hastily dug; which was already full of water. A short service was held and I don't think he was put in a casket. I think he was just wrapped in my blanket and put in the grave. The Chief Gunner's Mate, his name was Barrett, told me later that he found Whalen's finger with a ring on it on the fantail and he said that he just kicked it over the side. I would have loved to have that ring to send back to his girlfriend. I don't know if the Gunner's Mate Barrett was lying or whether he actually found that, I don't know. He liked to brag about how tough he was. One of my shipmates, Gilbert Ortiz, lived in California and I met him two or three times, told me that he made the cross that they put at Whalen's grave.

After we left Green Island we went to New Guinea. I think it was Hollandia, New Guinea. We stayed there while we were getting ready for the invasion of the Philippines. Sometime around July or August we left the Solomon Islands and relocated in Hollandia, New Guinea. Then we sailed north for the landing on Morotai Island. It is halfway between New Guinea and the Philippines. We made that landing on September 15, 1944. I don't recall any opposition when the troops went ashore. I don't remember if we fired on the island or not. I do remember that when we went in, there wasn't any opposition. There were a couple of things that happened while we were there. We were only there for three or four days. I think it was less than a week. There was a plane that came in every morning. We thought it was a reconnaissance plane. It would fly over at almost the same time every

morning. The first morning we went up planes to try and shoot it down but as always, the Japanese planes were much faster than our planes so we couldn't catch it. We decided that we wouldn't send up any planes anymore; they would just try to shoot the plane down from the ships that were in the harbor. I don't remember if our ship fired at that plane or not. I remember it coming in every morning and there was a lot of gunfire trying to shoot the plane down but we never did shoot it down. It never did anything but fly over us. We just assumed that it was a reconnaissance plane. While we were there, one morning I saw a plane. It looked kind of like a cargo plane that came in. I was watching it approach the island from some distance. As it got closer to the island I noticed that people were parachuting out of the plane. I know that it was one of our planes. I don't remember how many, it seems to me like it was eight or ten of the crew that parachuted out of the plane. They were all hitting the water except the last man that jumped. The plane, had by then, gotten close enough to the island that the last man didn't hit the water, he hit land. He happened to be the only one of the ones that parachuted that his parachute did not open completely and he was killed when he hit the land. As far as I know the others that hit the water, I think they lived. I don't know if the plane was damaged. We couldn't tell. I'm sure it must have been damaged or out of fuel or something. The plane just kept on going out of sight. I never did see it go down but I'm sure it must have crashed when it ran out of fuel or whatever.

Then we went back. I think we may have been there a week and then we went back to Hollandia. We staged for the invasion of the Philippines which was October 20, 1944. We invaded in Leyte Gulf. The beach heads were all called by colors, Red Beach, Green Beach, White Beach, and so on and so forth. I believe that we invaded Green Beach. There was absolutely no opposition to our invasion. The Filipinos came swarming out of the jungle when we came up to the island and they started running down the beach yelling, "No Japs. No Japs." They wanted to make sure that we didn't fire on them; and we didn't. I don't know whether the Filipino guerillas had run the Japanese off of that part of the island or just what happened but there were no Japs there at all. They just came down and some of them swam out to our ship. They were obviously very, very happy to see us. The town there is called Tacloban. That was the town there at Leyte Harbor. We stayed there for quite a

while. The night of the Leyte Gulf battle was a day or two after we first hit Leyte. We went out on patrol right after we invaded the island. I think this was the night of the Leyte Gulf battle and we were patrolling with another gunboat. We picked up on our radar, we picked up what we thought could be five destroyers and probably two cruisers, Japanese ones. We could hear the Japanese talking over the radio. We were so small that there was no way that we were going to engage those ships. There was a large rock or small island out from the main island there. The Skipper said that we were going to travel in between this small island and the larger island. If the Japs had come through that same way we would have abandoned ship. They came through on the outside so obviously we didn't abandon ship. We saw that evening, we saw, maybe 12 to 15 PT boats heading towards where we saw that part of the Jap fleet was. They were really loaded down. They were loaded with all the torpedoes they could get on there. I think there must have been 12 to 15 of them. From what we heard later, as far as we know, those PT boats were the only ones that encountered those five destroyers and two cruisers, if that's what they were. We never knew for sure. The next morning we saw the PT boats come back and there wasn't one torpedo on any of them. They had all unloaded everything they had. There was smoke on the horizon. Someone told us, or we heard over the radio, that one of those cruisers was burning. That's all that I know about that. That was the same time that the total Japanese fleet had decided they would come down. They had what was called the North and the South Fleet. They split up and they were going to bottle up all of those ships that were in Leyte Harbor. There were a lot of troop transports in there and a lot of amphibious ships in there. At the last minute; and this was also at the time Halsey was out searching for the Jap fleet. They had sent a decoy out and I guess Halsey fell for that. He raced north to meet the fleet and he was severely criticized for this because nobody really protected that harbor. The Japanese decided not to go into the harbor. That was at the time that their largest Jap battlewagons, at least one of them, was I don't remember the name of it, but they had two of the largest battleships ever built. They had 18 inch guns on them. At least one of them was sunk that night. (Editor's note: The *Musashi*.)

We came back and we stayed most of the time at Leyte Gulf after that. That is where I saw my first kamikazes. I was sitting there. We were in the bay and we were just looking and there were

three planes that came in and those three planes hit three ships that were in the harbor. That was the first time that I ever saw a kamikaze actually crash into any of our ships. While we were in that harbor, after I had lost my best friend Whalen, who was killed, my then best friend was the cook, George Presley. I think he was a Third Class Cook but I'm not sure. We had quite a bit in common. He was from Oklahoma, had originally been from Oklahoma, and I think he had enlisted in Los Angeles, as I had. We ended up being the gunners on the two 20mm on the fantail. I was on the port and he was on the starboard, on the 20mm on the fantail. One day, we weren't at general quarters or anything, we were just standing back there by our guns talking and we saw a plane coming in and nobody was firing at it. It had slipped in and there was no general quarters or anything. It dropped one bomb and we heard that it was a near miss to a net tender and there was one man killed aboard the net tender and that was the Skipper. The plane flew on over and flew directly away from us as it left the harbor. It was a perfect target for us. Presley and I were right there by our guns and we both started firing. I don't remember anybody else in the harbor firing. They may have been. I know there wasn't anybody else on our ship that was firing. It looked like a perfect target. He was flying directly away from us. We were both firing and it looked like they were going right in there and he started smoking and we thought he was going to go down and when he got out of range, he was still smoking. We were slapping each other on the back and congratulating each other for shooting this plane down when all of a sudden he quit smoking and he kept on going. The last we saw of him he was going over the horizon. We don't know if it was even hit or what happened. If it went down, we never did see it go down. The funny part of this deal was that the radioman, the radio shack was right by the conning tower, and the radioman told us later that the Skipper was standing there watching this whole thing and said when the plane kept on going, he threw his hat on the deck and stomped on it and said, "What we need on this SOB is some gunners." We heard about that and we got a big laugh out of that. We sure thought we had shot that plane down.

When we were patrolling St. George's Channel, right after the invasion of Green Island, we were patrolling one night and I was on the starboard forward 20mm, which was on the starboard side just forward of midship, just a little bit. I was the loader on the 20mm and the gunner was a Second

Class Gunner's Mate. When we patrolled, we would be on for four hours and then off for four hours. But the total time that we had to be at our gun; if we were off-duty we could lay down by our gun and sleep or whatever but we had to be right by our gun. So we would lie down on the deck by the gun and the loader and the gunner would take turns. One of them would be on for four hours and the other one would be off, but we would both be by the gun. One night I was on duty and the gunner was lying down by the gun and we were fired on from a barge while we were in St. George's Channel. Actually the gunner's mate that was lying on the deck had taken his helmet off and it was so dark. Everything was blacked out. He was having a hard time finding his helmet. So I was on the gun and I just started firing at that barge. There were some more guns on our ship that were also firing. I don't remember how many were firing at the barge. As soon as we started firing, the barge ceased firing. So we had no target. We were just going by the tracer fire. It looked like our tracers were going right into where those tracers were coming from. When we started firing, he quit firing. The Chief Gunner's Mate came by and he assumed that the gunner had been firing. He patted him on the back and said that it was nice shooting. The gunner said kind of sheepishly, "That wasn't me. That was Leo." The Chief Gunner's Mate didn't say anything, he just walked off. I don't know whether it had anything to do with it but shortly after that, this gunner's mate was transferred up to the 37mm on the bow and that is when I was transferred back and became a gunner on the 20mm on the fantail.

Back to the Philippines. I had said that we invaded Leyte on October 20. On December 15 we invaded the next island in the Philippines which is about in the middle. It was the island of Mindoro. That was on December 15. I don't remember any return fire from Mindoro either. I don't remember whether they returned fire; or if we even fired on Mindoro or not. We made that invasion on the 15th and on the 17th I think we just turned around and came right back to Leyte because we were in Leyte Gulf on the 17th when, what they called, Halsey's Typhoon hit. This was a very damaging typhoon that hit in that area and many ships were damaged. A few ships were sunk and many of them were damaged but we were in the harbor when that typhoon hit. There was a liberty ship in that harbor that drug anchor and rammed into us and broke our anchor. We were washed up on the beach; I'm

thinking maybe 30 yards up on the beach. Just high and dry. When the typhoon was all over we were up on the beach and we could get off the beach because normally when we pulled up on the beach we would drop the anchor before we went in and then because we had a flat bottom we would slide up on the beach and then when to get off the beach we would start our winch to pull the anchor and the anchor would be caught and that would help pull us off the beach and we would reverse the engines to get off the island. Well, we couldn't get off the island. We were high and dry and we didn't even have an anchor. We had to wait until the tide was in and everything was just right to be pulled off the island. While we were up there, maybe 20 or 30 feet from the bow there was a dead Japanese. I assume he was probably a pilot of one of the kamikaze planes. A mother dog was eating on his body and she had some pups. I don't know how many pups she had. But one of our crew members got two of the pups and brought them back as mascots. They named one of them Seven and one Zero. We had those two dogs for quite some time. There was a male and a female dog. The female was not housebroken but the male seemed to be housebroken from the start. If he had to go potty, he would go way back on the fantail but the female would just go anywhere. He could hold it two or three days it seemed like and when he got a chance to go on the beach he would get on there as fast as he could. I think probably one of the Boatswain's Mates got tired of cleaning up after her. She disappeared one night at sea. Nobody ever knew what happened to her. The male dog was really a good dog and very smart. He was on there up until the time I left. I will tell you more about that dog later.

The next invasion we made was Lingayen Gulf and that was on January 9, 1945. I think the landing was on the 9th but we always went in four days ahead of time. On January 5, 1945 we were on our way for the invasion of Lingayen Gulf. For some reason I had been transferred up to a twin 50 caliber gun that was on the gun deck right by the conning tower. There were two of those twin 50s; one on the port side and one on the starboard side, just amidship by the conning tower. The Chief Pharmacist Mate was the gunner on the starboard twin 50 and I was the gunner on the port twin 50. We were heading north for Luzon. Lingayen Gulf was off the island of Luzon. We were heading there four or five days before the actual invasion was to take place. On the 5th, it was in the afternoon. I don't know what time but I think it was probably 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, I saw a plane

heading south. We were heading north and it was heading south on our starboard side. It was probably a half mile away. It was exactly opposite of where we were. It was the only plane that I had seen in the area. We all watched it and as it came back it circled around and came directly at us from the fantail. As soon as it turned around to come in, it was obvious that it was headed towards us. We all thought it was probably going to drop a bomb. Every gun that could bear on that plane was firing. I was firing at the plane with my twin 50 but one of the guns wasn't firing. I had a lot of trouble. I had to keep cocking it and it would misfire. So actually only one of those twins was really working correctly. That plane kept coming in and as it got close enough to where I could see underneath it; I was expecting to see it open up underneath and for a bomb to come out and go right down my throat. When it got almost directly over us I kind of breathed a sigh of relief because I thought, "If it drops a bomb now it will miss. It will overshoot." I don't really know if he was deliberately trying to bomb us or if he was a kamikaze. He hit the mast about 10 feet over my head and cut the mast off. Then he nosed in on the bow and he hit the bow in the middle of the ship. That is where the 37mm gun was. The gunner's mate that I said that I was his loader on the 20mm on the starboard side. He was the gunner on that 37mm and he had two loaders. This was a much bigger gun and there were two loaders. He hit directly on that gun tub and blew that bow completely off. We never found any part of the three gunners that were on there. One of the loaders was my friend that I said had been on the fantail with me; my best friend that had been on the fantail with me when we fired at that plane that we thought we had shot down. He had been transferred forward and was now a loader on that 37mm. We never found any part of any of those three people. At the same time, there was one man in the three inch 50 gun tub named Ryan. We called him Paddy Ryan after the boxer. There was one man killed in that three inch 50 gun tub and the whole thing was engulfed in smoke. Paddy Ryan dove from that gun tub over the side. There were also four more of our crew that were on the fantail that were gunners and loaders on the fantail on the 20mms back there. They abandoned ship. They didn't know how bad we had been hit and they thought we were probably going to be sunk. They probably thought the ship was going to explode or whatever. They dove over the side. We had two steward mates. At this time a black person could not be a regular crewman on any of our naval ships. The

only thing they could be was steward's mates. They would take care of the officers or the crew, like dishwashers or something like that. We had two. One black person that took care of the mess for the men that worked. The other one took care of the mess for the officers. The one guy that was really well liked, tall, skinny, a lot of fun; he worked for the crew. He was illiterate. The other steward's mate that took care of the officers, he had to read the other guy's letters and write for him. Anyway, he was a lot of fun. We heard later that one of those guys that went over the side had taken him by the arm and pulled him and tried to get him to go over the side with him and all he said, "Ya'll boys are just crazy." And he would not go over. That ended up with five over board that had not been wounded or anything. We just kept on going because we didn't really ship any water so we weren't in any danger of sinking or anything. It was just the top of the bow that had been blown off and we had lost our radar that was on the mast and we lost that gun on the bow. There was a total of six men killed; the three on the gun that we never found any part of them. But the next day we buried three at sea. I'm not sure but I know one was in that three inch 50. I'm not sure where the others were located. We had a number of people that were wounded very badly. Just before dark that evening there was an old destroyer that was a World War I what we called a four-stacker destroyer that came alongside to take off the dead and wounded because we had no hospital. We had a pharmacist mate but we didn't have any facility to take care of anybody. The weather was very rough and it was very hard to come alongside another ship. We had trouble and our Skipper, the plane that had hit that mast, the Skipper was in the conning tower, so he was about the same distance from that mast that I was when it was cut off. I think his hand somehow or other, something had hit his hand and hurt his hand. He was pretty well shook up. It was kind of understandable. He had a hard time helping to pull alongside this other ship. I remember because I was right there. The Skipper on the destroyer had a bullhorn and I remember him yelling over to our Skipper, "Pull yourself together." Finally he said, "I am taking over both ships." He ended up giving the command to our engine room and to our helmsman and to his own engine room and helmsman to try and get us tied together to get the dead and wounded off. We finally did get alongside and I know they didn't get any dead off. They got at least two or maybe more wounded off. I'm not sure exactly how many they got off.

While we were trying to transfer the dead and wounded off to that destroyer we were attacked by a float plane that came in from the starboard side. Now we were a bigger target because we were two ships tied together. The other destroyer was probably ten times bigger than we were, so we were a bigger target. This float plane came in from the starboard side and he dropped one bomb and it was a near miss on the starboard side. One of our crew members, he was named John Reulet, was also a gunner's mate; and he was the gunner on the starboard forward 20mm at that time and he was hit by shrapnel from that bomb in the foot and wounded. It was not real serious but he was hit at that time. The plane flew on over going from our starboard to our port side and to tell the truth, I don't know where I was at. I don't know if I was down helping the crew but I don't remember ever seeing that plane for sure. Because we were on the starboard side of the destroyer and maybe the destroyer wasn't able to fire at that plane, I don't know, but we got credit for shooting that plane down because we shot the floats off of it and they knew it couldn't land. It kept going but the floats had been shot off so we got credit for it because they knew that it could not land. They would have to crash when they came down.

So we went ahead to make the invasion. As we came into Lingayen Gulf; this would have been four days before the actual invasion; as we came by, we came by a destroyer. It wasn't a four-stacker, it was a later model destroyer. We saw guys over there waving at us. It was the crew, the five of our crew that we thought were completely lost. We had no idea they were saved. We kept going and we were the last ship in the convoy. We didn't have any idea that they had been saved. This ship went back looking for them and picked them up just as it was getting dusky dark. They were all okay. I'm not even sure how many lifejackets they had between them. I think, if I remember right, they only had three or four lifejackets between the five of them. They were all fine. We didn't get them back aboard ship until completely after the invasion was over, which was four days later.

We went ahead and made the invasion. As we were going into the beach there was one of those rocket ships that I mention before; they had converted some of the LCIs to rocket ships, and there was a rocket ship behind us that we were all firing on the beach as we were going on. The LCIs would go in first, the gun boats, and then the rocket ships and behind them would be destroyers and

further out cruisers and battle wagons or whatever would be firing. As we were going in, this rocket ship fired two rockets. Instead of them hitting the beach, they hit one on each side of us. It was over so quick, now they have the range, so I didn't worry about it. I was sure they wouldn't fire anymore because I thought they had just fired the two, one from each side, to just get the range. Well, evidently they fired all 48 at the same time. Rockets hit all around us. They hit on each side. They hit in front of us. They hit behind us. But none of them actually hit our ship. I think there were two or three of the crew that got a little shrapnel from them but nobody was hurt seriously at all. We went on in and we were the closest ones to the beach. We had swimmers. This is what we always did when we made invasions. Swimmers would swim from our ship. They would be called SEALs now. Then they called them Underwater Demolition Team. They would swim in to the beach from our ship and look for any obstructions or any mines or anything that would be dangerous for our ships when we went in. Like I said, this would be four days before D-Day. We would be blasting the whole island for four days with all of the gun power that we could muster.

As we were going in on the day of the invasion, we were the closest one to the beach. The only return fire that we got was from a mortar that was sitting up in the hills somewhere. Since we were the closest to the beach, we were his target. The mortars were directly in line with our ship but they were falling a little short. They were falling maybe 50 to 100 yards from us. Evidently we were just barely out of his range so he quit firing at us. At that time the LCVPs (landing craft vehicle personnel) that came from the troop transports. The troops go in on these small boats. By then there were a bunch of these going in for the landing. As I said, they were called LCVPs and each one of these probably had 20 to 30 men, soldiers, that were going in for the invasion. When that guy with the mortar quit firing at us, now the boats were coming in, he started firing at them. He was very good. It was like he would take about one or two or three practice shot and then usually on the fourth practice shot he didn't miss. For the first boats that came in, he hit every one of them. I don't have any idea how many were killed but there were a lot of them killed. As soon as they got ashore and they got enough of them ashore, either they got up in the hills and silenced him or he saw the soldiers were ashore and he may have pulled back. I don't know what happened but he quit firing.

At this time, I was the gunner on the starboard 20mm on the fantail. I had been firing over the heads of these people that were going in so much that my gun barrel got so hot that my gun would not fire. We had practiced changing barrels. One of the things we did was to change barrels and it wasn't that hard to change a barrel but I guess nobody thought about it. When we were changing barrels in practice, the guns were cold. I had fired so much that my gun barrel was almost red hot. Not only that, there was a live round that had hung up in the breech of my gun. We couldn't get the barrel off and we couldn't get it to fire. I was afraid that shell would explode at any time. I had to try and get that shell out of there. So I had my loader; I opened the breech and he took a ramrod and he went in from the front and rammed that hot shell and I figured when he hit it with that ramrod it might explode but he knocked the shell out and I caught it and threw it overboard. It obviously didn't explode. So at that time there wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't fire because my gun was too hot. I was just standing there watching the beach, seeing what was going on. I happened to glance down at the gun tub and I noticed some chipped paint about halfway up. The shield for the gun tub is maybe four feet high and it just has one opening that you can walk in and then it goes all the way around the gun. It is a metal shield about two or three inches thick. It goes all the way around the gun and of course the gunner and the loader are inside there. I looked down and about halfway I saw this chipped paint. I thought, "That's funny." And I looked on over a little bit further and I saw another chipped place about the same distance from the deck. I found three of these and all of a sudden I realized that a round had come in and gone completely around this and because it had come in on an angle, it hadn't exploded. This was also a 20mm shell, the same as we were firing, so I'm sure it was from our own troops. It had come in and gone completely around us, ricocheted, and I found the projectile laying there. I picked it up and threw it over the side.

After the invasion, we went back to an island for repairs. I'm not sure but I think it was a little island called Biak. I think it is just north of New Guinea or some of the islands in New Guinea. We went back there for repair. I'm not sure how long but it seems to me that we were there for two or three months. They completely removed the bow. I mentioned the dog earlier. There is an interesting story about the dog. It was always going ashore and if anybody was ashore, that dog was

ashore. While we were there we went either went to the movies, we went ashore where they held movies on the beach, or we had we had some ball teams. Each one of the ships that were in there made up a ball team from their crew. We did. The people from the island had a number of teams. It was all softball. We had a very good team. Our radar man, his name was Enos and we called him Fireball Enos because he was the best pitcher of any of them. Nobody could hit him. We won every game that we played. I don't know that any of them even scored against us, he was so good. I went to these games every night. I didn't play but I went over there and sat on the beach and watched the games. That dog would go with me. About the first time I went over, I noticed that somebody had flipped a lit cigarette butt there on the sand and he reached over and sniffed at it and he burned his nose. After that he went around and every cigarette but he found, cold or hot or whatever, he would push dirt over it with his nose. We won all of the games we played up until the last game. There were two different leagues I believe. We had won one, the leagues from the ship I guess; and they had one from the island. I'm not sure how that worked. But there was an all black team that was also undefeated that we were to play in the finals. They heckled our pitcher so bad that he blew up and they won the game. They heckled him so much and they actually beat us. I don't remember what the score was in the end. I don't know who the officials were, but they ruled that because of unsportsmanlike conduct by the opposing team they gave us the championship. I think if it would have been a white team it might have been different, but I don't know that. But anyway, we got the championship although we did lose to this all black team that had heckled us.

After the repairs we made the invasion of Borneo. On June 10, 1945 we made the invasion of Borneo which was the last invasion of the war. In the meantime, when I went aboard I went aboard as a seaman. I wanted to strike for some craft. I was told at one time that I was the leading seaman. There were three openings coming and that I could strike for any one of those three. One was radio man, one was a gunner's mate, and another was electrician. These jobs were all coming up. They told me that I could have any one of them that I wanted and I said, "I want the first one that comes vacant." They didn't tell me exactly when the openings were going to be but they were coming up shortly. The electrician's mate job came up first and I became an electrician's striker. Evidently when

we were in for repairs the electrician that I had been working for, he must have gotten transferred off. I don't remember for sure just when but that meant I had to do watch in the engine room so I was no longer on the gun. On the invasion of Borneo I was actually in the engine room. I remember that I was more afraid during that invasion than any of the others because I think you feel better if you are up on a gun and you can see what is going on. Me being in the engine room, I couldn't tell anything about what was going on. I remember sticking my head out of the engine room one time and looking up and thinking that the whole sky was covered with Jap planes. It looked like there were thousands of them. I couldn't believe it. I had to get back in the engine room. I just looked out and then I went back down. I got busy in the engine room and kind of forgot about what was going on. All of a sudden I thought, "With all of those planes I haven't heard anything. We haven't been hit or anything. I wonder what is happening." So I went up and looked again and what I had thought was planes were ack-ack fire. The antiaircraft guns when they fire, it explodes in the air at a certain level and leaves a puff of smoke. It was so far up there and I had just glanced up there and saw these dots and I thought they were planes and actually it was smoke so we weren't in any danger from that. As always the underwater demolition team swam to the beach from our ship and they did the same thing on the invasion of Borneo. We had three of these underwater demolition team members that were killed, not from the Japanese. We would be firing on these islands with our guns with the small ships in close and the larger ships behind. Also they would be bombarded from the sky. While they were bombing this island some of the bombs fell short and fell into the water and killed them. It was our own bombers and they killed three of these crew that were on the underwater demolition team going in. We talked to the others when they came back. They said that while they were in there they all saw Japanese in trees and hiding here and there, all over. They also said that they saw them get killed. This was the last invasion of the war. By then, before we would make an invasion, they would blast the island with everything they could possibly throw at them. There wasn't a lot of opposition when we went in because most of the ones that were waiting there were killed. I guess after the troops got further in there might have been some opposition. I did go ashore there in Borneo which was kind of unusual. We went in to some little villages. We went up a river and went ashore for just a few

minutes. The stuff, as near as I can describe it, was like Indian type villages. I'm talking about India-Indians. The businesses and everything seemed to be along that line. I was only ashore for just a very short time.

On the way back to Lingayen Gulf the officers said the fan in their ward room, it was dinnertime one evening and their fans had gone out. Usually they used brushes and we had made our own parts. I had to take carbon out of flashlights and make brushes for different things. I had made brushes for the fans. We didn't have any in the crew's quarters but the officers had these little bracket fans. There was no air conditioning. They were wanting me to come in and repair this fan before they ate. I was in there working on the fan and putting these brushes in and all the officers were just standing around waiting until I got through so they could eat. I was just kind of kidding with the officers and I said, "When I get back to Lingayen Gulf I'm leaving you, so I might as well just say goodbye now." The Executive Officer looked kind of funny and he said, "Is that right?" I said, "Yes, you've got my orders in your desk and you're just waiting to give them to me when we get back." I thought he looked kind of funny but I had no idea because there were a lot of people on the ship that had been there longer than me. So I didn't really have any idea that I would be getting off the ship when we got back. I was just kidding them. Actually, when we pulled into the harbor at Lingayen Gulf the Executive Officer handed me my papers and said that I was being transferred back to the States. He apologized. I guess he thought I really knew about those papers but I didn't. I had no idea. I was just kidding about it. He apologized for not being able to send me back sooner. After I became a Third Class Electrician they gave me a striker to work with me and they said that they didn't think that he was able to take over the electrical part of the ship and that was the reason they had held me over.

I got off as soon as we got back and went to the receiving station there. I think I was there about three weeks if I remember right, waiting for transportation back to the States. I do remember just before I left the ship, I asked the Executive Officer if he would recommend me for electrical school when I got back to the States. I don't remember if he said he would or not but a few days after I was on the beach, someone came and told me that my name was on a roster there and I was

scheduled for an electrical school back in the States. I went and checked on it and it was true, I was. So obviously he had recommended me and they had accepted me. While I was at the receiving station there they dropped the first A Bomb. That was on August 6, 1945 on Hiroshima. Then on the 9th they dropped the one on Nagasaki. On the 15th I got on a ship back to the States. I think it was the *President Jackson*, if I remember correctly. That was the day that Japan surrendered. It was my first night on the ship. We were listening to the radio and we heard that Japan had surrendered. The next day or two we listened then to the radio where they signed the peace treaty on the battleship *Missouri* that had gone in to Tokyo Harbor.

On the way back this was a large troop transport ship so there was always a long chow line. I remember being in this chow line and seeing a sailor walk by with his tray and he looked like the brother of my girlfriend. I forgot to mention that I had gotten one of those "Dear John" letters (Laugh) while I was in the Philippines. My fiancée had married. I told you that I had met her brother on an LST. It just happened that he was on the same ship going back to the States. I didn't want to get out of the chow line to go look for him when I saw him. Later I found him. I thought, "This is either him or he looks an awful lot like him." It turned out to be her brother.

When I got back to the States the war was over so I transferred to San Diego to the station there. I ended up in a real small station, I don't remember where but it was close to Camp Pendleton at San Diego. There was a small crew. In the meantime, I had bought a car when I got back and I had been driving back and forth to Long Beach, or Bell where I lived. It was close to Long Beach. It was about 120 miles or so from San Diego. I would go back and forth almost every night. One day after I bought the car, I had gotten transferred to this real small station. Most places, like at the regular receiving station there at Camp Pendleton there was no place to park your car; but where I was at I even had a garage to park my car in. I had eleven more months to do for my duty before I got discouraged because I was only 20 on my birthday. I had a year to go and I thought I would spend it all there in San Diego. One day I had a dental appointment at Camp Pendleton. I drove in through the gate at Camp Pendleton for that dental appointment and the guard, I don't know how he knew who I was, he stepped up to me and said, "Are you Wilcox?" I said "Yes." He said, "Turn around; go back

to your camp, load your gear. You are heading out.” That night I was on LST 611 heading back overseas. What we did was to go to New Guinea with the Seabees to decommission some bases in New Guinea. I spent the next year on that LST over there and then when I was getting close, around August before I was to get out in September, the Skipper on the ship said that he was going to fly me to Guam. I had some work that he wanted done on the ship. He said that after I got that done he would fly me to Guam where I would be flying back to the States. He was lying to me.

I did go to Guam. I didn't fly. I went to Guam by ship. In Guam I stayed at the airport trying to hitch a ride back to the States. A Marine plane came in and I flew back on that plane to Honolulu. There was a big waiting list so I was told that I could catch a ship back sooner and so I decided I would come back by ship. But a couple of days after I signed up for the ship there was a number of planes that came in and they took a lot of people. I went back over and talked to them and I said, “I understand that some planes came in for a lot of people that had been waiting.” They told me that was true and so I changed back and told them that I wanted to fly. So I did. I don't know how long but I was only there for about a week, I think. I flew back and I got into San Francisco and I got on a bus that was going to Treasure Island for discharge. But I didn't really have any orders. I told one of the officers, “I don't have any orders so I don't know whether I am supposed to turn in here or go to San Diego or what.” He said, “I can tell you what you are supposed to do. If you don't have orders you are supposed to go into Treasure Island here at San Francisco for discharge.” I got on the bus and there was another sailor that I met on Guam and his birthday was the same day as mine and he was on a minority cruise so he was to be discharged the same day I was. So we had travelled together. We were on this bus headed for Treasure Island. The attendant came around to pick up the fare and when he came to me I said, “All of this is on Uncle Sam.” He said, “No it's not. This is a commercial bus.” I told my friend, “I think I will just get off.” He said, “Let's do it.” So we got off and we hitchhiked back to San Diego and turned ourselves into San Diego and didn't say anything. They didn't say anything. So I was discharged there from San Diego and nobody ever said anything.

That is my experience. I did go back in. I got married not too long after I was back. I got married in January. I actually got out on my birthday but I had leave accumulated so actual discharge

date shows about a month later. I think I told you that I was injured in the Korean War. My wife and I got a lumber truck and we had a hard time finding work and we ended up in Oregon and I sold the lumber truck up there. We stayed up there for a while and then decided to come back. I had bought a house in the Los Angeles area. We came back and in the meantime my best friend and my brother, who had got out; he was the one that was drafted. My older brother was killed in Germany, the one that was drafted the same time that I went in. He was later killed in Germany. My other brother had got out almost a year earlier. He got back about the same time that I was leaving, going to New Guinea. He had joined the Naval Reserve and my best friend had been in the Navy. He was best man at my wedding and we were in the Navy, but not together. We had been schooled together. They had joined the Reserves and they were meeting aboard a destroyer that was a training ship in Long Beach. They told me that I could probably get a job on that ship. It was kind of like a civilian job only I would be back in the service but I could quit anytime I wanted to. I went back into the Reserves and went aboard that ship. It was a destroyer, the *Wedderburn*, DE-684. I was actually on a training cruise in Panama on my way to Ecuador when the Korean War started in 1950. I stayed in for a couple of years, a year or so after the Korean War started aboard that ship. It was decommissioned. They only used it as a training ship. My brother made one trip with me on that ship to San Francisco. Then they commissioned the ship, the destroyer *Wedderburn*, and it was sent overseas. I was transferred off on to a destroyer escort that took over the same type of training. I was on there for a few months. In the meantime, I had made Electrician First Class. Then I decided that I either had to stay in the Navy for 20 years or I should get out. My wife and I talked it over and I decided that I would get out. I got out in 1952. That pretty much ends my story I think.

Mr. Misenhimer

I have several questions for you. What town were you born in?

Mr. Wilcox

Savanna, Oklahoma.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about boot camp. What all did you do in boot camp?

Mr. Wilcox

It was in Farragut, Idaho. I was there for eight weeks. You just did regular training; standing watch. Of course it was in the dead of winter. I can remember walking guard duty when it was 24 degrees below zero. We had two guards. One guard would be on duty and walk a certain post and the other was in the boiler room. It was so cold that I would stop in the boiler room to warm up and then go back out and walk. I happened to be in the boiler room one day when our commanding officer came in. He caught me in there and I thought I was going to be in real trouble. It was 24 degrees below zero. He said, "It is too cold out there. You just stay in here." (Laugh) He was a real nice guy. He was a Chief Petty Officer. He was our commanding officer or drill instructor; whatever you call them now. When we graduated, I remember he cried when we graduated because I think he knew a lot of these guys were not coming back.

Mr. Misenhimer

In boot camp did you have a lot of knot tying?

Mr. Wilcox

Not a lot, but we did learn different knots. That was one of the deals. I know we had to swim and most of the drilling. Farragut, Idaho was on Pend Oreille Lake. We would walk on hikes up around the lake and back. Drilling just in the drill halls. I remember one day we were to drill in the drill hall and we were told to not wear a sweater. But it was so cold outside that I had a sweater on. I suppose it was because the temperature was fairly hot where we were drilling. I remember I was standing in line and the drill instructor had walked by. He was explaining some kind of a drill or something. As he walked by I fainted and I just fell to my feet. I knew what I was doing but I couldn't help myself. I fell in right behind him and was just staggering along. Two or three guys in the line grabbed me and set me down. I think the reason I passed out was because I was wearing this sweater.

Mr. Misenhimer

In boot camp did you have any kind of weapons training?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes. We had to qualify on the .03 or something. I'm not sure. We had to qualify but we didn't have a lot of training with it. I remember I went out to qualify. Growing up I was pretty used to guns so I didn't think I would have any problems. But when I fired the first shot, the drill instructor was watching and he realized that I wasn't looking through the right sight. I don't know how far I missed the target but I didn't realize just how the sights worked. He showed me and then I qualified immediately after that.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was that what they called the Springfield '03?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes, that's what it was.

Mr. Misenhimer

A bolt-action rifle?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes it was.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was the armament on the 70?

Mr. Wilcox

I didn't go into details on that but the reason they made these gunboats is because PT boats had been patrolling normally in between these islands. They were made out of plywood and they didn't have very heavy guns or anything so they were being blasted out of the water. That's the reason they made these gunboats. We had the largest guns. There were a number of gunboats but ours had a three inch 50, which is the biggest of any of the gunboats. It was sitting just forward of the conning tower. Then we had a 40mm, that was our next largest gun and it was on the fantail. We were the only ones of any of them that had a 37mm. This 37mm that we had on the bow, that I mentioned was blown off. This was a gun that I think came off of a B-24 that was probably shot down. Our Chief Gunner's Mate got hold of that gun somewhere and had it mounted up there. So we were the only one that had a 37mm.

Most of them had a 40mm on the bow but we had a 37mm on the bow, a 40mm on the fantail. We had the three inch 50 (a big gun). Then we had four 20mm's. We had at least two twin 50 caliber machine guns. I don't know how many but we had a number of 30 calibers. I'm not sure how many. I think some of the officers sat around the rails and used some of the 30 caliber guns. We were very heavily armored for as small of a ship as we were.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is the length of an LCI?

Mr. Wilcox

About 150 feet.

Mr. Misenhimer

What happened to your friend Whalen?

Mr. Misenhimer

He got that Japanese flare and was opening up. We were alongside another ship and he was trying to open it up and get these little parachutes out for souvenirs and a guy told me that was on the ship tied up next to us; he was watching it and said that he had that flare in a vise and was beating on it with a hammer when it exploded. I know the Chief Gunner's Mate had opened those up but he knew what he was doing. He was well familiar with them and he could do that. I don't know how he opened them, I never saw him. I did see some of the little flags, or silk parachutes that they were using for souvenirs.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many men were in the crew on your ship?

Mr. Wilcox

On the gunboat we had 50. On a regular LCI that took troops, they had about 21 I think. If I remember right, we had four or five officers. We had a Captain, an Executive Officer. We had a Gunnery Officer and we had an Engineering Officer. I don't know if we had a Communications Officer or not but I know we had four and probably five officers.

Mr. Misenhimer

That Japanese mortar that was hitting those LCVPs, why couldn't we knock it out?

Mr. Wilcox

I have no idea. You couldn't see it. It was out of sight, up in the hills. I don't know why it wasn't knocked out when we shelled it. But it was quite a ways back. When we were shelling it, it may have been underground. I don't know.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did it hit any of the UDT men? I'm talking about the swimmers.

Mr. Wilcox

We didn't lose any swimmers.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is the number of that LST that you go on after the war?

Mr. Wilcox

611.

Mr. Misenhimer

What fleet were you in there in the Pacific?

Mr. Wilcox

I don't remember. I think it was the 7th Fleet. I know we were under MacArthur. It was between MacArthur and Nimitz. Nimitz was a Navy Admiral and MacArthur wanted to come back to the Philippines and they gave him command of the Philippine area. We were under his command but I'm not sure what the fleet was.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get to that electrical school when you came back from overseas?

Mr. Wilcox

No I didn't get to go. The war was over and I guess they decided they didn't need that. So they shipped me back over. While I was on the LST, I made Second Class. I made Third Class on the LCI on the 70 and I made Second Class on the LST and I took a fleet exam while I was on the destroyer

for First Class and actually before I got the results back I had been transferred to the Destroyer Escort the *Butler*. I made First Class Electrician.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you flew back to the U.S., what kind of plane did you fly back on?

Mr. Wilcox

I don't remember. I don't have any idea what it was.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you got out, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Wilcox

Not a whole lot, I don't think. I never boozed it up or anything like that. It did affect me some I think but as a general rule, I don't think I had near as much trouble as a lot of them did.

Mr. Misenhimer

What would you consider your most frightening time?

Mr. Wilcox

I guess the most frightening time was when we got hit by that plane. But I was really more scared when we went in on the invasion of Borneo. I didn't really think that I was going to come back from that. Things happened so fast. Just like when that plane came over and I thought it was going to drop a bomb and then when it didn't I felt pretty safe. I didn't have any idea that it was a low as it was. I never even thought about it hitting our ship but it was a lot lower than I thought.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was the morale on your ship?

Mr. Wilcox

I think the morale was very good. I don't recall any morale problems at all.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Wilcox

I brought back a few. On that barge that was next to us on Green Island; I got a Japanese helmet off of that and I wore that helmet all during the war but I didn't bring it back. After I got back, for the rest of the time instead of my regular helmet, I wore that Japanese helmet. I didn't mention that I was hit by shrapnel in the shoulder. It didn't do any damage, it just bruised my shoulder a little bit. We were firing at some planes and I don't remember exactly what the deal was; but you know when you are on a twin 50 there is a lot; they use gun belts and they have those clips that go between the cartridges to hold them together. All of that is falling as you are firing, plus the empty cartridges; so when you are firing a lot, a lot of that brass is on the deck and you are stumbling around and over it. Usually a seaman or somebody walks around and sweeps that stuff over the side. I was looking in the air. I had been firing at planes. We were under attack. All of a sudden I got hit on the shoulder and really I thought somebody was sweeping the cartridges away and I thought he had hit me in the left arm, in the center of my shoulder. I thought he had run that broom into my arm. It hurt but not real bad but I just thought he had jabbed me. I wheeled around to give him a piece of my mind and there was nobody there. I got to thinking about it and all of a sudden I thought, "I've been hit by shrapnel." I looked down and I picked up a pretty good size piece of shrapnel that had three jagged sides and a flat side. I guess the flat side hit my shoulder. It just bruised it. It didn't break the skin. I brought that home as a souvenir. I brought back some pieces of that flare that had killed my friend. I had some pieces of that. I think that is about all I had. They've been lost. I don't know what happened to them. They've been misplaced or lost; I haven't seen them in years.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes I did. We would hear her pretty frequently.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you think about her?

Mr. Wilcox

We just laughed about it and we enjoyed the music.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you crossed the equator, did you have any kind of a ceremony then?

Mr. Wilcox

Not during the war but after I got on the destroyer. I never went through the ceremony to be a shellback. We didn't do that during the war. When I was on the destroyer we went across the equator and we were initiated. I was a shellback and I initiated the other ones that hadn't been across. I was the Royal Devil. I was an electrician then and I had a pitchfork that I had fixed up with an electrical charge. I would probe the guys. They had a slop chute. It was a canvas deal that they poured all the slop on and they made the guys go through that. Then they came down in to a tank of salt water. When they came out of that, I would take that probe and probe them. But because of the salt water on their back, they weren't even getting a charge. (Laugh) So it didn't do much damage.

Mr. Misenhimer

Since you've been out, have you had any reunions?

Mr. Wilcox

Yes. I hadn't met anybody that had been on an LCI until I came here to Houston. At the church I met a guy here and I found out that he was on an LCI. He was on the 455. It was also a gunboat but it was in a different theater of war over there. He was at Okinawa and Iwo Jima and that area. He told me about this LCI Association that I joined. I contacted the man and he sent me a list of the crew, as near as he knew, all the crew on the 70. I contacted a number of those and one of them lived in San Diego. He passed away this past year. I met him once. Then Gilbert Ortiz lives in Anaheim. He lives close to my brother. I visited him three different times. I met with him.

Mrs. Wilcox

The man in San Diego; we didn't know he was in San Diego until after we came to Houston so that's why we only got to meet with him once when we went back out there for a visit.

Mr. Wilcox

I had met Gilbert Ortiz but I didn't really remember any of these people real well from the ship. Gilbert Ortiz lives close to my brother in Anaheim and I had met him three times and then I had talked to him on the phone and written him a few times. I got a letter form Joseph Ortiz one day. It really scared me. I told my wife, "I'm afraid to open this, maybe Gilbert is sick or has died or something." Well, it was from his nephew. He lives in Texas. He told me that he was an artist and he wanted to do a painting. He had heard of the 70 from his uncle and he wanted to do a painting of that. He contacted me because Gilbert told him that I could probably give him more information than anyone else. I was in correspondence with him for quite some time. He would send me sketches. He wanted to do a painting of the kamikaze attack. I gave him all the information I had. We corresponded back and forth. He ended up doing the painting. Then he came to Fredericksburg. He was going to give that painting to the museum in Fredericksburg two years ago on December 7th when they dedicated the George W. Bush part of that. I'm sure you are familiar with that. I met him, this nephew – the artist- at the museum two years ago on December 7th. Together we presented this painting to the museum. I have copies of it and he sent copies to a number of the crew. He also had this painting put on some cups that he sent us. I have that. And one of the crew members lives in Baton Rouge and I saw him twice on the road. At the reunion this year, just a few months ago, we had a reunion in Nashville, Tennessee and he was there. John Reulet is his name. He is the guy that got wounded in the foot from that float plane. He is a few years older than most of us. He is 88 now I think. His son and daughter were there at the reunion. The one that I think contacted you about me was Roy Wetzel. I think he was there. I talked to him but I hadn't met him until that reunion this year. We met for the first time after 65 years. There is supposed to be a picture come out in the next LCI newsletter, magazine, that they put out, called " LCI Item." There is supposed to be a picture of us in that and a little article about meeting for the first time in 65 years.

Mr. Misenhimer

What medals and ribbons did you get?

Mr. Wilcox

For the torpedo attack, which I wasn't in, and for the kamikaze attack we got the Presidential Unit Citation. If you were in both of those you got that medal with a star. I was only in one so I got that one. I got the Philippine Liberation medal. I got the Good Conduct medal.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many battle stars did you get?

Mr. Wilcox

I think three. Along with those souvenirs, I lost my ribbons too. I'm not sure. But we got the Presidential Unit Citation. There were about four or five ribbons.

Mrs. Wilcox

He got the Combat Action Ribbon retroactive to January, 1945 for Lingayen Gulf. President Unit Citation – two: Bougainville and Lingayen Gulf. The American Campaign Medal. Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal. World War II Victory Medal. Philippine Liberation Medal.

Mr. Wilcox

But I didn't get the Bougainville ribbon.

Mr. Misenhimer

On August 15, 1945 when Japan surrendered, did you have any kind of a celebration then?

Mr. Wilcox

We were on the ship on the way back. I don't remember any particular celebration.

Mr. Misenhimer

Leo, that is all the questions I have. Is there anything else that you recall from your time in World War II?

Mr. Wilcox

There is one little incident that happened that I didn't mention. It didn't amount to much but I had a boil under my arm that really bothered me. I think it was under my left arm. I don't know why I didn't have the medic lance that; I don't remember why. This boil was really bothering me. I was loader at that time on the port forward 20mm. We went to general quarters one day. I remember that I

just had on dungarees and a white undershirt. If you remember the Navy undershirts they have partial sleeves. That is what I was wearing and we went to general quarters and to cock a 20mm you have a cocking lanyard. This was a rope about four feet long and it was braided and in the middle it opens up. They spread the braids and they slip that down over the barrel. We stand the gun straight up and the loader stands on one side and the gunner on the other and on the count of three you pump down and then on the count of three you cock. You go all the way down to cock this gun to pull this spring all the way back. Then when you fire it each time, it re-cocks itself. Then at the end, when it is all over, when you take the shells out, you hold on to this while you pull the trigger and ease up on it and take this off. You don't leave that spring compressed. We were under general quarters and in straining to cock that gun I burst the boil and it really felt good but it bled all over my shirt. There were guys on the ship that thought I had been hit because they saw all that blood. That was kind of funny.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you use your GI Bill for anything?

Mr. Wilcox

I bought two houses on the GI Bill. I quit school halfway through the 10th grade and went to work and then went into the service. After I came back, I don't think I used the GI Bill but I did go to night school and got my high school diploma. I used it for at least the first house and I think it used it for the next one.

Mr. Misenhimer

Leo, thanks again for your time today and thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Wilcox

Thank you so much for taking an interest. I do appreciate it.

Mr. Misenhimer

We will stay in touch and we will talk to you later.

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The following are some things I forgot to tell in the telephone interview.

- 1) Sometime after we invaded Green Island, together with another gunboat, probably L.C.I.(G) 68, we went for a little R&R to a small island named Stewart Island. This was an island in the Solomon Islands. The natives there were more Polynesian – they were very beautiful people. The Japs had not bothered them because of a coral reef about a quarter mile offshore that reached all the way around the island so ships could not get any closer than that to the island. So it wasn't a good harbor. We had to anchor out and swim ashore. The natives were all (men and women) naked to the waist and children all completely naked. The women all had the same tattoos on one arm. One little girl, probably 9 or 10 years old, held my hand the whole time I was there (about two hours) and she showed me all over the island. When I was ready to go back to my ship three men from the other gunboat had a rubber boat and they wanted me to help them launch it. Because of the surf and the reef it was almost impossible to get it back past the reef. After a number of tries and having that boat turn over and come back down on my head, I gave up and just swam back to my ship. (They were going to take me back if we could have launched their boat.) I don't remember how they ever got back.

- 2) I already told about being fired on from a barge while patrolling in St. George Channel, but what I failed to mention was that we were patrolling with another gunboat (here again, probably LCI 68). I also didn't mention that when we were on patrol we were under the P.T. (P.T. boats) command and we always patrolled with another gunboat, and it seems our skipper was always in charge of both boats. This time he radioed the other L.C.I. and said, "You go in and investigate – we think it's a trap." We turned tail and got out of there as fast as we could. (More about our brave Skipper later.)

- 3) I mentioned that when we were on patrol at night we had to stay by our guns all night, four hours on the gun and four hours off. You could lay down by the gun but you couldn't get much sleep on the deck. I, together with the rest of the seamen, thought it wasn't fair that we would work all day and on virtual watch all night, so we decided to talk to the Executive Officer about it. I was the spokesman and I told him our complaint. The regular tradesmen (Petty Officers and Strikers) were free to do what they like after their work was done. Happily, he agreed with us and said from now on we would just have to work in the morning and could have the rest of the day off. We were very happy about that.

7) Robert Cole was a Chief Pharmacist Mate and when my gun station was on the port twin 50c (my gun station when the plane hit us) he was on the starboard twin 50c next to me. One night there was a Bogie in the air (our name for a Jap aircraft) over the harbor and many ships in the harbor were firing at that plane and they shot it down. The plane was on our starboard side, so I couldn't bear on it, but Cole was firing at it. When the plane went down Cole was ecstatic, claiming he had shot it down. But when our officers would not give him credit he was very upset. They told him that many guns were firing and no one could even tell which ship had shot it down. He wanted me to swear he had shot it down, but I agreed with our officers

8) I don't think most of the crew really respected the officers like we should have. I know I didn't. I have asked the Lord to forgive me a number of times since the war for that reason. On the whole, I think they did a very good job. We thought of them as 90-day wonders (I believe they trained for three months to become officers). But they were there in most cases doing the best they could under the circumstances. There were exceptions, however, and I believe our captain was an exception. The captain when I came aboard in December 1943, up until around December 1944 or January 1945, was an officer that I don't think most of the crew of the 70 liked or respected. We, or at least I, thought he was a coward and a blowhard. I have already mentioned a couple of incidents and there are more. At times he would have us get underway, man the engine room, helm, etc., just so he could sit back on the fantail and fish. During the typhoon he bragged about how he saved the ship by his maneuvering, etc. Actually, there was nothing he could have done. I mentioned we were under the P.T. command. So before going out on patrol he would report to the P.T. Commander to get our orders. As I mentioned before, the night of the Philippine sea battle he said if the Jap fleet came through the channel where we were, we would abandon ship (probably the right thing to do), but the Coxswain that took him to get his orders from the P.T. Commander said the Commander told him he hoped his report would be negative. (That is, he hoped we would not encounter the Japs.) He told the Commander, "That's where you and I differ. I hope we run into something." (We just about did.) In the last part of December 1944 our Skipper went into complete meltdown or shell shock. He just sat in his stateroom with his helmet and life jacket on and shook. He was taken to the beach or hospital ship somewhere and was relieved of his duty as Skipper. After his return from the hospital to the ship he gathered the crew and really raked us over the coals. He said he was sick and while he was gone someone stole his whiskey. (I don't know if this was true or not. If it was I sure didn't get any of it and I never heard of anyone that did.) Our Executive Officer then took over as

- 12) Once we came alongside another LCI that had a female dog aboard that was evidently in season. Our male dog took out after her while our whole crew stood and cheered.
- 13) One of the LCI's had a monkey as a mascot. Rumor had it that the cook and that monkey did not get along. One time we were alongside that LCI and I was standing close to their galley talking to that cook when the monkey appeared above the galley hatch and pee'd on the cook. He grabbed a meat cleaver and took off after the monkey as it headed for the mast.
- 14) One day while working as an electrician I pinched the tip of my right index finger. I kept bumping it and it was bothering me so I put a large bandage on it. Later I was walking down the deck and saw the Executive Officer coming toward me. As we passed he asked, "Willie, what happened to your finger?" I just held up the two index fingers together sliding the one with the bandage back a bit and said, "Oh, I cut it off" and kept walking. A short time later a call came over the PA system for me to report to the Executive Office. When I went in he said, "Now I want to know what happened to your finger." So I explained the whole thing to him. He just said "We don't want to treat these things too lightly." That was all that was said.
- 15) I was working in the engine room one day and the phone rang. I will stop here and explain our phone system. We had what was called a "Sound-Powered Phone System." All the phone lines throughout the ship were all tied together and the power was provided by your voice. But to call from one station to another there was an electric buzzer system. When you pushed the button from one station there was a buzzer at some other station. When you pushed the button in the engine room it rang a buzzer in the wheelhouse and the conning tower. But the button in the wheelhouse and conning tower only rang the buzzer in the engine room. I was really busy when I got the call in the engine room and it just kept ringing before I could get to the phone. It made me mad so before I picked up the phone I pushed and held my button down for a while not realizing or thinking it was ringing in two places. So when I picked up the phone I said, "What do you want?" The person on the other phone said, "I don't want anything, you called me." I said, "I didn't call you," and hung up the phone and went back to work. The buzzer rang again. Being still mad, I pushed the button again, picked up the phone and said, "What do you want?" The voice came back, "I don't want anything, you called me." I said, "That's a crock of _____!" and hung up, not knowing that I was talking to an officer. Later that officer said to me, "I want to tell you something. If I said I didn't do something, whether I did it or not, it is not a crock of _____!" I said, "Yes, sir." I found out later that a signalman had been in the