

Tom English Oral History Interview

Larry Rabalais: This is Larry Rabalais, and today is May the 11th, 2011 --

Tom English: Twelve.

LR: -- 2012 I should say. And I'm interviewing Mr. Tom English. The interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, and it's for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And with that statement I'll turn the mic over to Mr. English and let him tell you his story of his participation in World War II. Go ahead Mr. Thomas.

TE: Ok, I'm on my way. My name is Tom English. I grew up in Manhattan. I have one brother and one sister. My sister is deceased now for three years.

LR: When were you born?

TE: Nineteen-twenty-six, October 17th. And we lived in Manhattan for most of our lives.

LR: Manhattan, Kansas?

TE: Manhattan, New York.

LR: Oh, Manhattan, New York.

TE: There is no other Manhattan except New York, Sir. Right. And we grew up in the streets of Yorkville. My father was

a doorman across the street from the Museum of Natural History. I worked in the tailor shop in the same building and had a wonderful relationship with both of them. We had a terrible time convincing Mom that she was an alien because she was born in the United Kingdom, and we had to bring her over to the Post Office to fill out the registration card. And she told us she speaks the king's English. And we said, "We don't have a king. You have to register, Mom," so -- we had a wonderful life. We had no family here.

LR: Where did you go to school at?

TE: I went to Saint Monica's on 79th Street, and then I went to Cardinal Hayes for two years. I was in my sophomore year, and my dad was in World War I and got gassed in Europe, and I had cousins that were in Dunkirk and got evacuated. And me sitting in school, thinking about all the things that were going on in the world in 1944, and I said, "I got to get out of here." So, I volunteered to go in the navy. I got rejected for a heart murmur.

LR: So what time -- What age were you? Were you about 17?

TE: Seventeen, yeah. Right.

LR: Did you have to have your parents sign off on that?

TE: No, because I didn't get in until I was almost 18, so...

LR: Oh, okay.

TE: But there was no effort on their part to stop me from doing what I wanted to do. So I went in, joined the Navy, and there for two years. I had a little animosity building up in my system because while I was away we had two English sailors that came over from one of the British ships that were in port. They bought Mom food and sugar and butter and stuff so -- my absence was not fond. It was filled by another visiting group.

LR: When they bombed Pearl Harbor, you were still relatively young in high school, maybe a freshman or something like that?

TE: Yes. We were running around Central Park, my brother and sister and I, and we used to try to hide and let my brother think he was lost. We'd come running into the house, and mom and dad met us at the door with a cup of tea on the table. I grabbed a cup of tea and didn't realize Mum had put rum in it that time and almost choked. And the first question I asked was, "Where is Pearl Harbor?" And I didn't know what they were talking about. That was the first time we found out that we were at war. So, that was 1941 and 1944. I was entering the service. So we had a busy, busy schedule. I went to boot camp at Sampson, put on the train when I come back from my one week's leave, land at Treasure Island, go the guard duty on that first --

LR: That was San Francisco?

TE: Yeah.

LR: Treasure Island, San Francisco?

TE: Yeah. -- so, I wound up got assignments from there, and I guarded the wave barracks, and unfortunately the first job we had was soon after two young sailors got on board the navy wave barracks for like five hours, came down slop-happy and lipstick all over them, and we were told, "Nobody, nobody gets in today." And I said, "Okay, fine." So, the first adventure I had was I looked down the road, and I saw this marine walking down the street. He looked a brick wall, about six-foot-four, 280 pounds, all muscle, and he went out with a young lady like five foot four and very pretty. And when they came home, they were talking about smooching on the steps, and the chief OD came walking by and looked them at the steps, says, "Nobody's supposed to be on there." And he made hands to enlist me to chase them away. So, I just signaled that I was five foot eleven and 138 pounds, and I wasn't going to tackle him, so...

LR: (laughs)

TE: He wanted to know what the hand signals were all about, and I told him that I was ordered to get him off the steps, but I wasn't about to tackle him. So he asked me if I wanted tickets to the El Toro Football game the next morning. I

said, "I can't. I'm on duty." I said, "Where did you get the tickets?" He said, "Oh, they give them to me." He says, "I was a quarterback for the Minneapolis something (inaudible)." He says, "I'm an old star." I said, "Well, and I was going to chase you off the steps, so..." That was the first step to me being a coward.

LR: Did you go to any specialized school in the navy after boot camp?

TE: No. That was unfortunate because that affected my whole life. Yeah. I was picked out to become a radar operator by Doug Aitken, my commanding officer, who interviewed me. When I asked why I was being interviewed in the second division, instead of the first division where my name was logged. And, he told me I did so well on the test, I could any job I wanted. So, I said, "I'd like to be a radar man." I didn't know anything about it. Had no training. So, we went to our first meeting, and the second class sonar man took us up to the room and started showing us our duties. And I was standing closest to the air search -- had no idea what it was -- and the bridge asked how many planes were flying over the ship. And I was the closest the radar, and I looked. And, the second class radar guy says, "Any planes on the screen Tom?" And I looked, I didn't see any planes. So we waited another 10 minutes, and we were going

through the routines of what we -- We rotated all this work stations -- and then bridge called down again, "Any planes on the screen?" So, I looked at the same situation. I said, "No planes." He said, "I saw 50 planes flying over the ship. There's something wrong." So, the second class sonar man came over. Says, "Tom English, get over here." I says, "What?" He says, "You see these little dots?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "They're planes." I said, "I was looking for a plane." So, you know, so...

LR: (laughs) Now, okay. So, you were on board a ship at that point?

TE: Yeah, on the *Hadley*.

LR: You were already assigned to the *Hadley*?

TE: Right. Yes.

LR: Was that a new ship when you were assigned to it?

TE: Yeah, just being christened. It was being put into service in November and this was in December. Early part of November/December.

LR: Of '44?

TE: Of '44, yeah. So we left the states at the beginning of 1945 and made our journey to Okinawa eventually. Okay?

LR: Did y'all stop at Hawaii in between?

TE: We stopped at Pearl Harbor. We stopped at Ulithi, gathered the fleet together when they were getting ready for

Okinawa, and then we took off. And we paraded proud back and forth between Okinawa and the open ocean. We had the heavy cargo ships we were escorting because they had all the heavy artillery and the tanks and stuff, and they kept them in the waiting mode in case the Japs were just sucking us in. So, they didn't land all the heavy equipment immediately.

LR: So, y'all went with the initial fleet that was going to land. They had not landed yet.

TE: No.

LR: Okay.

TE: The Okinawa invasion was on April 1st.

LR: Y'all were providing escort?

TE: Escort, right. The ships back and forth. And one of the adventures was we saw a bright light on the horizon and Captain Mullaney was the one that didn't want anything to happen. He was in the control office, so we headed for the bright light -- toward another ship that had been hit by kamikazes -- and we got over the horizon and found out it was the hospital ship. And, he turned tail right away, and we ran for cover. And, unfortunately, about three months later, I was on the hospital ship going there, and realized at night, that all the lights were on and the Japs could get me again. So, I got a little reservations.

LR: So, the Japs had hit a lit-up hospital ship?

TE: They didn't, but we were afraid they might have. And we didn't want them taking any shot at us because we were observing.

LR: So, did y'all get assigned to near the beach initially, or did y'all go and pick a duty?

TE: We picked a duty immediately. Every second or third day we changed location.

LR: About 15 or 20 miles from Okinawa?

TE: Right. Yeah, we were up at 15 between Japan and Okinawa.

LR: Now, had you see, of course with the anchorage there, did you see any kamikaze attempts or did you see none until you got to --

TE: Oh, no. We saw them at a couple of the aircraft carriers that had gotten hit in the air. Okay. And we were aware of the damage that was done, and we had enough ships getting hit every other day at Okinawa, so we weren't naive enough to know that it might have happened to us. And...

LR: Were you all by yourself at the point on the picket, or did you all have an LSD?

TE: No, we had another destroyer with us.

LR: Another DD with y'all?

TE: USS Evans, DD-552. And we shot down 23 planes, and they shot down 19.

LR: So, y'all did have kamikazes come at you shortly after you got on picket duty?

TE: Yeah, right. Yeah. And we had just been converted to a combat air patrol ship, so we had planes responding back and forth.

LR: Y'all were doing communications too? You all had a protective -- supposedly protective -- screen of fighters over you?

TE: Right. Yeah.

LR: But they came at you anyway?

TE: Oh, yeah. Right. 150 planes they sent down.

LR: So, they kept coming at you. Now, what was your battle station during that time?

TE: I was as far down in the hole of that ship as could be, loading a 54 pound projectile into the hoist.

LR: Oh, into the five inch...? Right. Now, was the five inch a two part shell?

TE: Yeah.

LR: There was the shell itself, and there was the case.

TE: Kind of a magazine, yeah.

LR: Were you handling the case, or...?

TE: No, the 54 pound protector.

LR: Shell themselves, right.

TE: I was 138, 5 inches 11, right?

LR: Way down in the -- that was the magazine then?

TE: Right.

LR: Underneath. Was that that the front turrets or the rear?

TE: Yeah. Number one. (inaudible)

LR: Number one turret.

TE: Right. Swing fives.

LR: So, then what was that like? A cabinet and then a chain hoist that would take it up?

TE: Like an escalator in reverse. A little shuttle that we throw the shells in, and the shells will clank with noise. Of course, they were always doing that.

LR: Were they fast, fairly fast, firing?

TE: Oh, yeah. They were going.

LR: Boom.

TE: Boom. Yeah.

LR: Boom.

TE: Alright. There was so much action going topside, okay? And then when the ship got hit, I don't know what happened, okay? Except, that I wound up on the floor -- on the deck -- pitch black, no sound and we'd been firing for --

LR: So, it was like a big shock, and it knocked you down?

TE: I assume I was thrown into the hoist because my head was cracked, my knees were bloody, and I couldn't move my feet

because the 54-pound projectiles must have fallen all over my legs. And it was pitch black and --

LR: I wonder where that hit was on the ship?

TE: We got three hits, -- Okay? -- and one 500-pound bomb, and I don't know which one caused the damage. All I know is --

LR: And they mostly tore the stern and mid-ship or...?

TE: All over.

LR: All over the ship?

TE: Yeah.

LR: Okay, so after you came to --

TE: I was topside on the deck, stretched out.

LR: You went topside on your own or they carried...?

TE: No, they carried me. I don't know how I got up there. I don't know. The ship was abandoned, and I was already -- Everybody was in the water when they got me topside, so I don't know how long I was unconscious.

LR: Oh, really?

TE: I don't know how long I was sitting there.

LR: So, somebody carried you topside?

TE: Two guys. A chief gunner's mate found me. Wanted to know I was doing there. I said, "I want to get off the ship," and he said, "We've abandoned ship already, and 50 guys are trying to save it."

LR: They had already ordered abandon ship?

TE: Oh yeah. If anything had happened, I would have never known I was gone.

LR: Well, did the ship sink?

TE: No. It was towed back to the states, but it was in very, very bad shape. They did a tremendous job salvaging it, because they were throwing everything off that could get off there landed off. And then --

LR: So it was taking on water and had all kind of damage, but they were able to throw stuff off to lighten the ship somewhat --

TE: Torpedoes went, the depth charges went, the guns in the battle, anything they could get rid of okay went.

LR: So, after that attack, where y'all hit like three different places and all, did the quit trying to attack y'all or did --

TE: Oh, yeah. Everything was gone. We were in -- the Marine Corsairs stayed with us, okay, and kept after them. As a matter of fact, they're written up in the history books because they said, "We're out of ammunition," and they continued to chase the zeros because they had the propellers, and they would sneak up and try to --

LR: Really?

TE: Right. Yeah.

LR: They actually really tried to do that?

TE: And there was a message sent to us that we're out of ammunition, but we're not going to leave you.

LR: Now the Corsairs especially had these great, big propellers.

TE: Right. Yeah.

LR: And I think it's like a 14-foot propeller, -- or something like that -- and the Japs zeroed. They're pretty flimsy, right?

TE: Flimsy, yeah.

LR: From what I understand.

TE: Well, I had the privilege of after the war, okay, we went our ways, and I kept looking for reunion news about the ship. And after about 6 or 8 years, I said, "Well, the ship was so small, we wouldn't have a reunion." And then I found an advertisement in the daily news, and I got to talk to Doug Aitken. And, that's when I started, and we went to Colorado Springs. And, that was my first reunion. I met friends that I was buddy-buddies with, a couple of officers that I --

LR: I was going to say that you had made quite a few friends there on board ship --

TE: But it was staggering because we only put the ship in commission 11 -- We'd gone in May, and, you know, when

you're out at sea, you have rotating shifts, so you really know the people that you're with, that you deal with.

LR: Now, after your injury there, you were in the water, you say, for a while?

TE: No, they didn't put --

LR: Oh, they didn't put you in the water?

TE: No, it was all stopped, ready to go, when an LCS pulled alongside and saved me, so I didn't have to get wet. But I left with no clothes and nothing, that's why I stayed --

LR: So, did you go then to a hospital ship?

TE: I went to an APA first. He did the corrective surgery, and then they put me on a hospital ship. I --

LR: What were your injuries? You say...

TE: Crushed foot --

LR: Crushed foot.

TE: -- and my head was cut, and my knees were cut, but the foot was the primary problem that kept me in the hospital for six months. They couldn't get the swelling down.

LR: So then, from the APA, you were transferred to the hospital ship.

TE: Hospital ship. Then, I went to Tinian, then I went to Pearl Harbor, then I went to Oakland, then I went to San Diego --

LR: And that was a hospital in all those places?

TE: Right. And then I went to Saint Albans in New York, where I lived, and then they transferred us to Asbury Park in the middle of winter, -- which is a summer resort -- and then I wound up going back to Virginia for my final assignment, loading the USS Leyte, and then I became ship's company.

LR: What was the Leyte?

TE: Aircraft carrier.

LR: Oh, it was?

TE: Yeah. Went in commission, and then I became a store-keeper at the naval base at Newport News in Virginia.

LR: So, when were you released or discharged?

TE: 1946, almost 2 years to the day.

LR: So, what rank were you then probably a...

TE: Seaman first class

LR: Seaman first.

TE: Yeah.

LR: Okay. Alright. So, you kept up with some of the guys, but not until later, when you went to the reunion. You found there actually was a *Hadley* --

TE: Reunion group. Right.

LR: Let me ask you this, if there was a significant number of guys killed?

TE: Yeah, there were 30 killed.

LR: 30 killed?

TE: Thirty-two killed and 75 wounded.

LR: In that attack?

TE: Right? On both ships. The Evans, just about the same as us.

LR: And that other one was the Evans?

TE: Right?

LR: That other ship was the Evans DD...?

TE: 5th fight.

LR: 5th?

TE: 552, I think it was.

LR: Now, the turrets, were they dual gun turrets or single gun turrets?

TE: Dual.

LR: Dual gun turrets.

TE: Three-deal.

LR: They all had two, four, six --

TE: Five inch.

LR: -- slide.

TE: And my first battle station was the quad 40s, which is on the starboard side aft, and they moved me from there to the --

LR: So, you all had quad 40s and, I assume, some 20s maybe?

TE: Twenties, yeah. Right. I think four 20s. But the first kamikaze hit the quad 40s, and that would have been my first battle station.

LR: Oh! So that probably wiped them out.

TE: Yeah. Right.

LR: I think it blew two guys in the water. Everyone else was killed, so...We had the job of locating 225 or 250 sailors that we couldn't locate, and I had a friend, [Charlie Carmel?] -- his wife is here now -- and he had a phone disk. He would forward the names to me, so I would write letters and thousands and thousands of letters looking to find the people. Okay? I had some luck and some bad luck, and I got one letter one day -- My wife and I were very busy doing all this work, and we'd go home after we got the mail and separate the letters a good bit. And, "Yay! I'm the one!" Okay. -- And I got one that she says, "You're not getting this letter. I says, "What do you mean I'm not getting this letter?" She says, "I'm not giving you this letter." I says, "Give me the letter." She says, "No." I says, "Why aren't you giving me the letter?" She says, "I don't want you to have it." I said, "Whose name is on the envelope?" She says, "Yours." I sad, "Well then, give me the letter." She says, "No." So I waited. After 50 years, you know you don't fight with them anymore. So she

put the letter aside, and as soon as she did, I grabbed it. I started reading the letter, and I was laughing hysterically. It was a very simple letter. It said, "No, I'm not the one you're looking for, but I'm an 86-year-old spinster, and if a man is looking for me, I'm ready."

LR: Ha! (laughs) That's why she didn't want you to see the letter.

TE: The letter. Right. Yeah.

LR: Well, that's interesting. Did they put the *Hadley* back in operation?

TE: No. They towed it all the way back to the states, and it got caught in a typhoon. The lines parted nine times, and one of the guys that was on the two ship is with us today. He's come to almost every reunion I've gone to. And by the time they brought it back to the states, it wasn't in the condition to be repaired, so it was scrapped.

LR: They scrapped it.

TE: It became razor blades.

LR: Razor blades. (laughs)

TE: Yeah.

LR: About *Hadley*, -- I'll look it up on the internet, but -- that's probably about a 2,000 ton destroyer?

TE: Yeah, 2,200.

LR: Twenty-two-hundred. Somewhere in there.

TE: Yeah.

LR: They're pretty good size. Because at the beginning of the war, the destroyers and DE were pretty small.

TE: Eighteen, nine-- Yeah.

LR: Twelve- to fifteen-hundred tons. Something like that.

TE: Yeah. We got a wonderful website: USSHadley.com.

LR: Oh you do?

TE: Yeah, we have a website, a webmaster that set it up beautifully.

LR: Because I'm going to look that up.

TE: Well, if you're careful, you can see me at 18, with hair.

LR: With hair?

TE: Oh yeah, with hair.

LR: (laughs)

TE: Elvis personally had nothing on me.

LR: Well, I can relate to that. I'm follicly [sic] challenged also.

TE: (laughs)

LR: My dad went in, when he was later in life. He was 29, when they were desperate and they were drafting right at the end of the war. So, he was already starting to lose his hair, even when he went in. So, he ended up in Austria. There he was from the south, and of course he ended up in the mountains of the Bavarian Alps in Austria in the winter.

TE: What a wonderful place to go right? (laughs)

LR: And then they trained him in tropical gear.

TE: Oh God!

LR: And he went over there with tropical gear, naturally. A little snafu.

TE: Right. Yeah. My father was in World War I. He got gassed, so he was well past the outer ring.

LR: But he was from England, then?

TE: Yes. Right. Yeah.

LR: Do you still have relations in England or...?

TE: Yeah. I've got cousins, and they come over here occasionally. My brothers and sisters have gone over to visit them. I haven't been over there yet.

LR: Have you been able to understand him with the king's English? (laughs)

TE: Oh yeah. Right. I was exposed to it so long, it's --

LR: Yes, I know.

TE: -- second nature.

LR: Especially with a last name with English. Okay. And then what kind of -- After the war did you go back to school any?

TE: Yeah. I finished high school, and I went to [Gordon?] for four years and got my BS. I was going to be a teacher, and was in the final years and was going to do practice

teaching. And, I got a good promotion to run the transformer shop and had 225 people work with me, so that stopped my career. And then everything went fine for a while, and then the Korean War ended. Defense business went down the drain. And we --

LR: Now, they didn't call you up during Korea, did they?

TE: No. -- and then the company got consolidated. And we had to get rid of half of the people, and I was one of them. Then I went to work for an instrument corporation. We made aircraft instruments, and I left for --

LR: Is that still related to sort of what you were doing in the Navy in terms of radar or not really?

TE: No, not really at all. I mean, I was doing application. I was a production control manager and made sure parts flowed and organization stuff, tools and stuff. Then I stayed there 15 years. Then I went to General Instrument for 17 years, and we made electronic warfare systems. So, I was pretty involved in all aircraft industry work.

LR: Have you been going pretty steadily to the reunions?

TE: Oh yeah. Yes. This is our 19th, and I think this is the third or fourth one I've done, so...

LR: We had -- earlier this year we entertained for the very last time -- actually late last year, December -- the Pearl Harbor survivors, and that was going to be their last one.

They just stopped because they were older. They were four years older generally speaking. All those guys are in their early to mid-90s. So, they figured it was time, that they just couldn't go back and forth anymore, so --

TE: Well, we're at that stage again too.

LR: You all are relatively young, though. Towards the end of the war.

TE: Well, I'm 86. I'll be 86, so you know. We're all 86 to 90s. Okay?

LR: Yeah, even the young guys like you that went in are getting there.

TE: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

LR: Well, I guess that concludes this interview. I really appreciate you sharing with us. The picket destroyer duty is not that well known to a lot of people in history, how important it was, and how brutal that assignment was. Like Laffey and those that were just really, really messed up. They didn't sink too many of the larger ships. They did sink some LSDs, I believe and some other large ships that were with the DDs, but there just wasn't -- The description I read was that the Japanese planes were relatively lightly built, and they didn't have enough mass --

TE: To do good damage.

LR: -- to penetrate like they should, unless they carried a bomb with them. Like in your case, I think that was probably what the big shock was.

TE: Yeah. And he got the firebomb and then hit us. But we got very upset. I think it was Admiral Spruance. He was talking about taking the glory for shooting this -- putting two destroyers there because too many destroyer guys were being killed because there wasn't enough power to defend themselves. So, he added a second destroyer and sent them out two at a time, but then he was asked, "If you're doing that, why are you sending out those smaller LSTs with only 20 millimeter guns?" He said, "They're not adding any power to what you're trying to defend yourself." And he made a very simple statement that got me very, very upset. He said, "They're the pallbearers."

LR: What?

TE: "They're the pallbearers."

LR: Oh, ouch.

TE: I thought to myself, "Well, that doesn't sound so good."
(laughs)

LR: Well, and you're right. Early on, especially, they would send one DE or one DD with either an LST or an LCN or something like that, as supposedly the support ship, but about all they could do was pick up bodies.

TE: Right.

LR: In terms of firepower --

TE: They had none.

LR: -- they didn't have very much at all.

TE: They had none.

LR: And they sank quite a few of those smaller ones because they were more susceptible to sinking.

TE: Well, when I was in the hospital at Pearl Harbor we had a wonderful little Irish nurse, [Eleanor Mooney?], and when I got to the hospital she came and asked me where I was from. I said, "New York." She says, "Oh, I'm from New York too. I'll come right back." So, when she did come back, okay, it was to talk to me about -- She came up from -- oh, near Albany -- Glen Falls. So, I said, "Oh, one of the officers on my ship was from Glen Falls." She was, "What was his name?" I said, "[Tom Dwyer?]." She says, "Oh, was he a tall, skinny blink?" I said, "Yeah," I said. So, she said, "I went to school with him."

LR: Oh!

TE: So about 30 years later, Tom had come to a couple of our reunions. It dawned onto me, okay, that he still might be in touch with her. So I asked him to check and see if [Eleanor Mooney?] was still alive. She's a wonderful wonder. (inaudible), the movie actor, was in our ward, and

he was never around, never did what he was supposed to do, and she's always chasing him. So, he came back and called, and he said, "Tom, I have bad news." I said, "What happened?" He said, "We waited too long." [Eleanor Mooney?], but she's got an advanced case of Alzheimer's, she won't be with us.

LR: So sad. Well, anyway, thank you so much Tom. On behalf of the National Museum of Civic War, here in Fredericksburg, we'd like to thank you for sharing these details of your experiences during World War II with us, and this will be put on the records. A CD will be sent to you in the near future of this interview, and we really appreciate everything you've done to give us an insight of the little details of the war that the individual had. Thank you so much.

TE: I'd like to thank you for all the work you guys are doing here. We were here eight years ago, and the ways that this has expanded is a beautiful, beautiful opportunity to see the world as it is now. Thank you.

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