

The National Museum of the Pacific War  
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies  
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with  
Bill Merley  
Merchant Marine

Interviewed  
by  
John B. Tombaugh and Peg Van Meter

July 7, 2005

My name is John Tombaugh and Peg Van Meter and I are interviewing this gentleman on July 7, 2005.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Would you state your name and address please?

**Mr. Merley**

Bill Merley, 9608 Division Road, Akron, Indiana.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

When is your birthday?

**Mr. Merley**

January 3, 1927.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

What were your parents names and where were they born?

**Mr. Merley**

Dewey and Gladys Arter Merley. My parents were born just south of where I now live.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

**Mr. Merley**

One sister, Mary.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Where did you go to school?

**Mr. Merley**

Akron School in Akron, Indiana.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

When did you go into the Merchant Marine?

**Mr. Merley**

March of 1945 before graduation.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Where did you take your school for the Merchant Marine?

**Mr. Merley**

Sheepshead Bay, New York.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

There is two parts; one they got you introduced and the other was your training?

**Mr. Merley**

Yes.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

You enlisted as a cook?

**Mr. Merley**

Yes. The main thing when they got us out there, we had to be certified in lifeboat and swimming. These were the two things they pushed. We did have some classes on basics like starboard and aft but the main thing was to get a license to be in the Merchant Marines.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Did you try for any masters or officers rating like that?

**Mr. Merley**

Yes, when I came out I inherited; I didn't try fireman, oilier, water tender and wiper license. I inherited that before I ever saw an engine.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

You went in with somebody?

**Mr. Merley**

Yes, Ed Paxton.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

You were going to try to stick together and he got off on one thing and you another?

**Mr. Merley**

They took me out one day and they took him out the next day. I went to California and I believe he went to Louisiana.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

How long was your class in cooking?

**Mr. Merley**

None. I didn't even get KP, I was in a little over four weeks and they sent us over to the mess hall and I got officers mess and Ed was with me for that and we prepared breakfast one morning, my job was to strip bacon to put in the oven and his job was to squeeze orange juice. So the cook he was a real nice guy they put out a good breakfast for the officer and we also got a good meal. So went back for lunch and he said: "How would you boys like to have a steak?" That sounded real good and he was cooking pork chops for the officers that day. He said after the pork chops were cooked he would cook the steaks and it wasn't fifteen minutes after that the PA system came on to report back to your barracks. Clean out your lockers and pack your sea bags you are on your lway. We didn't get our steaks. In fact we didn't get lunch.

We were sent to what they called graduation station in New York City. We were there overnight and the next morning we were on a train headed for San Fancisco, California. Ed did not go. We spent

six days on that train, we set along the lake at Salt Lake City, Utah for about twelve hours. They unhooked us and put us on the siding and no place to go and the only thing you could do was get out and walk around the cars and pick up the salt. That's been all the way goes a while then get on the siding.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

While on the train do you rememberr the ladies in the towns taking mail and passing out donuts?

**Mr. Merley**

Not really, I think we hit one place that we had some donuts and coffee.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Do you remember the POWs working in the fields?

**Mr. Merley**

No.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

What was the food like on that trip?

**Mr. Merley**

Very little but eatable.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

How was the sleeping accommodations on the train?

**Mr. Merley**

We had a pullman on the train and everything you had was in the bunk with you.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Do you remember what you carried in that sea bag?

**Mr. Merley**

I had three pairs of dress whites and three pairs of underwear and three T-shirts, three pairs of socks, toiletries, everything was in three's. The bag would weight between 50 and 60 pounds. We were not allowed to have candy. Now once a week they would come in around 11 o'clock at night and everybody got up and they would inspect every locker and if you had anything in it that wasn't suppose to be, you gave it to him and if you had more than one carton of cigarettes you had to give them up.

At the graduation station there was nothing but the barracks and mess hall. You had no chance to buy a beer or anything else.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Did you have personal stationery set up?

**Mr. Merley**

No. I had a tablet and envelopes and we didn't get any stationery until we shipped out of San Francisco, California. The Salvation Army came around and this little blue thing it had postcards, stationery, envelopes, sewing kit and siccors and a candy bar. Everybody got one as we came out of graduation station to the ship.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where did you go then?

Mr. Merley

We left San Francisco and our first stop was Pearl Harbor and were there for two days. We went in on a high tide and the convoy assembled there and they went out on low tide and we couldn't we were stuck in the mud, so we waited for high tide and th convoy had already left and we had to sait for high tide twelve hours behind. I was on the Presidential Lines the Johnson and we caught the convoy the next day. We went from Pearl to Manila.

Mr. Tombaugh

Did you go ashore there?

Mr. Merley

No.

Mr. Tombaugh

Do you remember the sights when you came into Manila Harbor?

Mr. Merley

Yes.

Mr. Tombaugh

What were they like?

Mr. Merley

All the piers and stuff like that was all gone. There were 4 or 6 ships there and most of them were Navy. We unloaded the troops there all but 300 engineers. We then went up the coast about 70 miles to Batangas and we unloaded the engineers and supplies at Dagupan they made an air field outside of Batagas. Three days after we unloaded planes were coming in and out of there and we still had stuff to unload, we had to beat the barges they had no docks there, the only solid structure there was the church everything else was flat. The only other thing they had and it was canvas covered was a bar with warm beer and barrel whiskey. We had a fellow with us by the name of Bob Steel and he was from the mountain hills of Arkansas. Now his farther made white lighting, I wouldn't touch the stuff because of how it is made if I couldn't open the can I wasn't going to touch it.

The south east corner of the church had been blown out and it was made of concrete and rock and we walked inside and the most beautiful thing I ever saw it was probably 40 foot across the pulpit and behind was solid silver like a mass, all religious

scenes were solid silver.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Why didn't the Japes take it?

**Mr. Merley**

They couldn't find it because they had buried it and just put it back when we got there.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

How long were you there?

**Mr. Merley**

We were there a little over two weeks getting off loaded. We left there and came back to Subic Bay to get fuel and supplies. The navy was real good to us. We'll give you all fresh supplies. We want everything you have on there and our purser didn't know any better. We still had some fresh eggs on board as well as fresh beef and pork and frozen chicken. Not a whole lot. But we still had some oranges that hadn't turned purple yet. They were half a day getting everything moved out. Now here came our new supplies: powdered eggs, we had Australian mutton, two hundred cases of fresh eggs went over the side because they were rotten. The only meat we had that they didn't get was a supply of canned hams and the purser was smart enough not to let them go. So we had a lot of ham sandwiches. Now as far as the mutton went when we reached San Francisco, California we had about the same amount that we took on.

When we left Subic Bay it was quite a deal getting out. They had a mine net across the entrance and it went for a couple of miles, they would come out with boats and pull it apart and let the ships in and out. It was very closely guarded.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

While in the towns did you have a chance to get souvenirs or was there much there?

**Mr. Merley**

There wasn't much there. I wanted a Japanese sword and in the worse way too. We were in Batangas this one guy had a Japanese officers sword. It had dragons down both sides and a couple of gems in the handle and I was sheeling and dealing with him and had him up to a pack of cigarettes and we were just ready to close the deal and here come Bob Thompsom. He walked up now he had bought a T-shirt in Hawaii with a hula girl on the front and this guy liked that shirt and there went my sword. I tried to buy that off of Bob, but no way he was going to take that home. Now we were about five days out from San Francisco and that sword disappeared out of his locker we had no locks on the lockers, and nobody ever knew what happened to it, but I sure it wasn't anyone in our engine room.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Where else did you go?

Mr. Merley

We were just off the Mariana Islands; down there of course we were the largest ship and ran in the center of the convoy. We had no ideal what was going on and we were playing poker about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. All at once boom. The??? out there got ash cans did they get something or were they just practicing they did four or five runs there then everything got quite. The next day just a little bit late the sun was sinking in the west, it started again dropping ash cans always on the starboard side of the convoy and this went on for almost a week. Every time they went after him he would slip under the convoy and couldn't pick him up under the convoy. He got up twice and got torpedoes off but he never hit a thing. We watched one of them go clear through the convoy and never hit a thing. They thought for sure they were going to get him for the one they were right on top of him and get him before he went to deep, we never saw anything come to the top. Then finally we guess he left. The convoy had seven ships now this was in May of 1945 and we were on our way to Manila.

When we left Subic Bay we came back to Leyte. We took on a full load of troops that were suppose to be coming back to the states. We were still tied to the dock in Leyte this was in 1945. Just one more day and we would have been out, and we got orders to unload. So everybody that was on board had to get off and there was a lot of grumbling because we all thought we were going home. We got the troops all cleared off the ship and reloaded with fresh troops. They weren't headed for the states and nobody would tell us where they were going. We left and were out two and half to three days and I was on watch and it rang to stop all engines. We were in a convoy in the middle of the ocean. We probably set there for at least an hour before we went back into slow forward and so we ran on slow the next four to five hours. We still didn't know what was going on and our shift was over and they wouldn't let us in the charrt room and wouldn't tell us anything. We couldn't figure out what was going on the only thing we knew we were headed east. All at once they rang to go to half speed and we started making a port swing and made a complete U and came around and went into Leyte Bay.

Mr. Tombaugh

The war was over.

Mr. Merley

It was over. We unloaded those troops and reloaded the original ones. We left in convoy. Two days later we running in the great convoy. We broke convoy and headed home. We had the fastest ship in the convoy, the Johnson. She had scotts boilers coverted over to oil and they guarantee those to blow up at 235 pounds. The firemen were carrying 235 pounds all the time and we were turning anywhere from 76 to 80 rpm's. They were over-working them a little bit and we got back to Pearl Harbor and refueled. We were there for four days and as we were coming out the closest ship behind us was just coming into Pearl Harbor. Those liberties, we never did see them.

We left Pearl Harbor and went to San Francisco and it was close to Thanksgiving. After we got to San Francisco it was nine days before we could get transportation out to go home. We tried bus, plane, train. We didn't care what it was, we just wanted to come home. This guy down at the bus station checked you when you got in. We'd drove him nuts. We would go down there three or four times a day just to heckle the hell out of him. We went down there one day and he said; "Not you guys again!"

We said; "Yep."

"Okay," he said "I'll tell you what I got. I can send you up through Seattle and across to Chicago."

We took it. We caught the bus and it took five days from Seattle to Chicago on that bus. From Chicago we caught the South Shore train to South Bend, Indiana. We got home in time for Thanksgiving and I didn't figure they would miss me so I stayed home until Christmas.

By the time we got into San Francisco I was sleeping with two blankets and freezing to death because I was used to that heat in the engine room. When I finally got home it was only 35 degrees.

New Year's Eve I was in New York and it was zero. I was ready to go home or anyplace it wasn't cold I was ready to go. So I hit the Matson Lines and went to Tanolan, Italy (it is still classified as war area because of mines). We passed really close to the Rock of Gibraltar. We went through one afternoon just as I got off watch. The coast of Spain is beautiful with everything painted white.

This was a freight run and we were there two weeks. While we were there we ran into a fellow that had gone back to Italy just about two months before the war. He had been a barber in Boston, Massachusetts. I don't now why he took a personal liking to us guys. He became our guide while we were there.

Now the burial is completely different than ours. The crematory is right there in the cemetery and looks like a mound of dirt and little railroad tracks with a flat car which has a solid steel bottom and a slight curve to put the body on and they push it in and turn the gas on and on each side they have a viewing glass. The fellow that does the cremation has one on his side and on the other side was for the family to watch. They had just started one when we were there and he wanted to know if we wanted to watch we said: "No didn't care anything about that."

Less than a quarter of mile was a big hill and you looked up and it looked like apartments in the side of it. It was all honey combed rooms into the rock and the whole side of it was blown out. He explained to us 34 or 35 days and nights they bombed that place and that was all that was left when they got done bombing. He showed us a place that maybe had a 10 foot hole in a solid wall that ran around the cemetery, which was made of marble and at one place 10 foot wide and 3 foot deep at the top was knocked out and that was the only bomb that came close to the cemetery.

I traded cigarettes for a cameo and bracelets to take back home; it cost me a pack of cigarettes.

When we came back from there I was home for three weeks. Then went to New York and signed on with the Matson lines again and went



to Le Havre, France.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Le Havre is a wonderful place.

**Mr. Merley**

We didn't get to see too much of it. They had at time what you call the GI a day over there: they wre finding one dead GI everyday in Le Havre.

There we had German POWs that were stevedores and that I will never forget. We went in at night and you went out on deck and you held your hand in front of your face and you couldn't see it because of fog. You have a pilot that takes you in and we were standing out there must have been 11 o'clock. He shut the engines down and dropped the hook had no idea where we were at you couldn't see any light or nothing. We stood watch until four in the morning and walked out on deck and the sun was shining nice and bright, we were about 500 feet from the dock we were going into. He had it against the dock that close. He put her right in place there we had a lot of mail and supplies on board. We were there five days. Like I said we had German stevedores and I will never forget this one kid. I gave him a cigarette one day and he was my friend from then on. I got talking to him and he could speak enough English and I could get the drift of what he was saying. He was telling me he was thirteen years old and walking down the streets in ???? they grabbed his arm and gave him a gun and put him on the front line. This was near the end of the war.

He said: "The first US solider I saw I threw my gun down and my hands up and kept right on walking."

No guards. They came down there on??? well drilled and they were a tacky bunch the uniforms were well worn and ragged such as that. But he didn't want to go home as he was getting three meals a day and I believe he said a dollar. He wanted to stay there and work, he didn't want to go home because there is nothing at home.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

What happened next?

**Mr. Merley**

After we got empty and was ready to start back they put a colored regiment on board. Around three hundred of them and they got number one hole. Now when we lifted anchor it didn't get all the way up by three or four foot. So we left LeHavre before the storn on a little liberty ship. We were going over water and under the next one and I was in mid ship and that thing sounded like a big drum all the time. Well those guys were up there and they were getting all the pitch and everything up and everything down they didn't come out to eat. They would carry the food down to the door and that was as far as the cooks would go, that was the stinkiest place you ever smelled or saw. One colored solider got out and I hollered at him.

He said: "Man, you know this is too far to swim and too deep to wade."

I laughed till I thought I would die. They rode that thing all the way back. Now we hit that storm the second day out and five days later we had lost about twenty-three mil it was pushing us back instead of forward. Now between hatch one and five we had a mast and one was loose and it had to be secured. We had this little guy on board he was a steeplejack by trade from New York. He volunteered to tie it down so he went out and one of those waves hit and he disappeared, we thought he was gone pretty soon seen something bobbing around out there and he went down between those hatches and when he came up he had the line in his hand and he got it tied down. When he finally came back in he was beat up but he had got the job done.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

When were you married?

**Mr. Merley**

I married Catherine Sands on May 4, 1947 in Silver Lake, Indiana.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Your children names?

**Mr. Merley**

Charles Jr.; John; Mark; Brent.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Did you get your shellback?

**Mr. Merley**

Most of the officers got initiated for shellback but not the crew.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

Let's go back to th Atlantic and that crossing in the storm how many days did it take you to cross?

**Mr. Merley**

From the time we left France until we got into New York was thirteen days. I didn't lose any weight but got into trouble. The reefers on those liberty ships was on the second deck from the bottom just off the engine room. There was two of them and you walk in they had canned ham and eggs and other things in those reefers. But the cook on there wouldn't cook because they couldn't keep anything on the stove. So they served sardines and crackers for breakfast, lunch, supper. Open a can up and get yourself some crackers, well we spent one day down there in black gang and that was too much. So we went up to check the reefer and had a big padlock on the reefer, we had a crowbar about five foot long and popped the lock off and get stuff out of the refrigerator and then we would go in and there was ham and rows of eggs. We had a hot plate down in the engine room and one of the guy stole a skillet out of the galley and we fried eggs, ham and made toast we were

doing alright. A couple of days later the head messman found out that it was open and he goes running up to the old man about it. They replaced the lock and that night that lock fell off again. We got ham and eggs all fixed up again and had a coffee pot down there, now the deck gang was going hungry they were just getting sardines and crackers. The old man got a hold of the first engineer and said, "We can't having breaking that lock off again."

1st engineer said; "Then don't put one on." He was eating down there to.

It just so happened about the third night we were doing it down there all of a sudden I looked up and here come the old man down the ladder. Oh, God we are in for it now. We had a big pile of ham and eggs fried up and he come over and said: "Where are the plates at." He was down there every night until they started cooking.

I learned to sleep on my belly with my arms crossed it was the only way you could stay in the bunk. We were lucky we only had two men to a side and wooden bunks and drawer underneath.

It was surprising down in the Pacific how many guys would volunteer to clean up the mess hall and things like that, they would get a free meal out of it. Always had a line for something like that and the messmen had it made on something like that because they would set back and watch them do the work. I saw a meal they put out on the Johnson and that ham sandwich would have mold all the way around the edge and an orange ready to turn purple and eat it because that all there was. Course we had fresh drinking water on board when we started it ran all the time you could go to the fountain and they could fill there canteens take a drink and evrything was fine. Some of the guys didn't like to shave in the salt water so they started shaving in the fountain, now all that water from the fountains came back into the boilers that soon ended they shut the fountains off. They would be on for thirty minutes in the morning and also in the afternoon and that was all, so you had better get your canteen filled up or do without.

Another interesting thing going down we had troops on board we had the first airborne on board and they had just got back from Europe and don't know how many jumps they had made over there they were all seasoned jumpers. They thought they were going home, they brought them into New York and transfered them from a ship to a train and they were on board with us. You talk about a bunch of guys hard noses and hard to get along with there wasn't a happy one in the bunch. When we were at Batangas the first day we were in there Japs were not very far from us, the army was suppost to be there but they were running a little behind time which happened ever so often. The next morning we watched the 101st Airborne jump, they got to Manila one day and the next day they jumped and needless to say I don't think it lasted long over there the way it sounded.

All disputes on that ship were settle back on hatch number five. We had a boxing ring back there and the chaplin took care of the gloves and he was the refree and if you had any disputes that is where you were going to go.

When I came back from New York and came home and was ready to go

back the teamsters were on strike and I never went back.

**Mr. Tombaugh**

What would you say to the young people today of your experience?

**Mr. Merley**

Something good to happen but not give a dime to do it again.

-END-

10 hours