

Admiral Nimitz Foundation
and
University of North Texas
George Gowen

Interviewer: Richard Byrd

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Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing Captain George Gowen for the Nimitz Museum and the University of North Texas Oral History Program. I'm interviewing Captain Gowen in order to obtain his recollections of the war in the Pacific during the Second World War. The interview is taking place on May 3, 1993, in San Antonio, Texas.

Captain Gowen, could you tell us a little about your background--when and where you were born?

Mr. Gowen: I was born in 1917 in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Byrd: Did you live there throughout your childhood--in Lansdowne?

Mr. Gowen: Yes, I did. I lived there from the time I was born until the time I left to go to sea on a training ship for the Pennsylvania Merchant Marine.

Mr. Byrd: When was that, now, when you trained for the Merchant Marine?

Mr. Gowen: Well, when I left high school, I was seventeen years

old. After leaving high school I went into a Merchant Marine training program on a three-masted schooner with steam power which was built for the U.S. Navy during the Spanish-American War period.

Byrd: Three-masted and with steam power.

Gowen: Three-masted, steam-powered, named USS Annapolis. We stayed on board for two years, and we either came out as officers who would be third mates and work with the steering of the ship and the deck force, or we came back out as Merchant Marine engineers. Because I was colorblind and I was interested in engineering anyway, I chose the engineering way. When I got out, it was 1937, and at that time I went into the Merchant Marine and had four different ships during the next period of time. By that time I was third assistant engineer on a ship.

Byrd: What would that job entail?

Gowen: Well, in this case it was a twin-propeller ship, a Navy tanker-type, and as third assistant engineer I had to assist and aid the first assistant engineer and do what he said, and stand watches in the engine room.

Byrd: So, you were to make sure the engines were working right at any given time then.

Gowen: Yes. We would travel from a place where we would get the oil, such as in Louisiana, and then take the oil up the East Coast and deliver it to a company or deliver it to some other port. When the war came, after I had been

working with the Merchant Marine ships for three years, the Navy came and took the ship I was on at that time. It was a tanker, built with Navy funds because it was ready to put on guns and take on ammunition, and it was an eighteen-knot ship and was a good ship for our Merchant Marine and a good ship for our Navy. They asked me to stay as an engineering assistant, so I did. I stayed on that ship from 1940, when I entered the Navy as an ensign, until they took the ship to make her into a small aircraft carrier.

Byrd: What was the name of the ship that they did this to?

Gowen: It was the Santee. The first name was a Merchant Marine name, the Sea Kay. The name of the company was Sea Kay, and it was a name which could be initials for the company's president. In any event, when they took the ship, they changed her name to the Santee, and I stayed on her from 1940 until 1942, when they went into conversion to make her a carrier.

After that I went up to Bath, Maine, to be an assistant engineering officer of a destroyer just being built. The destroyer was the Chevalier, and that destroyer was the one I went into the Battle of Vella Lavella on.

Byrd: Was that the first engagement that that ship was involved in? Is it a long way from Bath, Maine, I guess, through the canal.

Gowen: We went through the canal, but, first of all, we went over to the African invasion, and we were part of the escort force that took personnel into North Africa.

After that was completed, they wanted the ship I was on to go out to the Solomon Islands. So, we went down through the canal and out to Hawaii and then down to the Solomon Islands. We got into the Solomon Islands in late January of 1943.

Byrd: What was your first engagement there? Did you enter right into an action, or did you have to train, get together with a task force?

Gowen: We had no action at all going to Africa. There were submarines around, but we had no battles with any submarine. When we got into the area of the Solomon Islands, we joined with a group of ships, including the cruiser Chicago. The Chicago was with a group of ships going up toward Guadalcanal, when we were engaged by Japanese aircraft. They came in and put a torpedo into the Chicago, put a torpedo into another destroyer, LaVallette. It did not damage our ship, but we were pretty well engaged in that.

Byrd: This was on your way up to...

Gowen: On our way up.

Byrd: Approximately when was this then?

Gowen: January 29, 1943, was the occasion when we got there. After that was over, after the Japanese were forced to

retire from Guadalcanal, we continued to chase them for another six months or a year up through the Central Solomons. As they got into the Central Solomons, they began to starve to death, and they began to take them further north by coming in at night with what we called the Tokyo Express. They would then use their ships to take men off the beach and take them further north. We would go up and try to find them doing this, and then we would fight them.

Byrd: In what capacity was this destroyer then employed then?

Gowen: Well, the destroyer was part of a group which would have, as an example, three cruisers as the basis of it, and then there would be four destroyers that would be with it as escorts for the cruisers. The jobs we had to do were to go into these gulfs up there and find their shore establishment where they had their guns, start bombarding with our guns, and then take any ships on that came out and fight them.

Byrd: You could get in a lot closer to them with that destroyer than the cruisers.

Gowen: Yes, we could. So, that's essentially what we did from the time we got there until the time we got sunk. We fought this kind of a fight.

Byrd: So, you were working your way up to the Solomons.

Gowen: We were working our way up, and we would fight at night and try to sink their barges, try to sink their other

ships that were carrying personnel. Then we would retire in the daytime and go back up with another group, a different group--alternating.

Byrd: That went on for weeks and months.

Gowen: Yes. Right.

Byrd: You said your vessel was sunk. How did that occur? Was it a result of this kind of action?

Gowen: Yes. We were up there north of Vella Lavella, which is an island in the Central Solomons, and we were told by intelligence--were told by various people in the chain of command--that we would take three ships and go on up The Slot--we called it The Slot--and go north of Vella Lavella and find this Japanese force that was coming down to do as I described--take their men off the beach.

Byrd: When you say "The Slot," is this like a channel or a shipping lane?

Gowen: A group of islands on each side of a line, and that line was a 250-300-mile line, and you would go between islands and then find them. They used it to come down, and we used it to go up.

Byrd: So, you had plenty of room to navigate in this.

Gowen: Oh, yes.

Byrd: As opposed to ever bumping into an island.

Gowen: No, we weren't that close. The islands weren't that close to each other.

Byrd: I see.

Gowen: Well, on this particular occasion when we were sunk, when the Battle of Vella Lavella occurred, they were coming down to Vella Lavella with a Japanese force--the Japanese force we called the Tokyo Express. We were ordered to take three ships and go up The Slot to that area and find the Japanese coming in and destroy them. Well, here we were, a group of three U.S. Navy destroyers against nine Japanese destroyers and other Japanese ships which were used for taking the people off, and, oh, it just kind of frightens you to be going up there at thirty-three knots and going like hell to try to find them, and then go in and try to hit them with torpedoes and try to hit them with gunfire.

Well, this is what we did; we did find them. We did close with them to 7,000 yards--that's about three-and-a-half miles--and we fired our torpedoes first. Everybody in the three U.S. ships fired. One Japanese ship, Yugumo, was hit, and she stood her ground and stayed where she was because she couldn't produce anymore power. She was on fire, and everybody that went by her fired at her. So, they were all hitting her. We fired at her, and we got a hit. But then as we were traveling along, all of a sudden we got hit--our ship got hit--and it got hit by a torpedo from Yugumo, who was lying there now and on fire.

But she fired her torpedo, and it went into our port

side, up forward of the bridge, up in the bow section. When it went in, it penetrated into our ammunition location. We had two guns up there--two 5-inch guns--and right with the guns, down below, were these areas where we stored ammunition for the guns. When the torpedo from Yugumo came, it went into the ammunition area and exploded, and when it exploded itself, it exploded the ammunition as well. This explosion was a triple explosion--two ammunition places and one torpedo--so that caused the whole bow to go off, and it exploded out into the water. We had no bow. One third of our ship was gone, and we were making thirty-three knots without a bow.

Byrd: You were taking on a lot of water then, I guess.

Gowen: We were taking on a lot of water and started to dive underneath. I was engineering officer in the forward engine room, and the skipper sent word down with another officer, who told me to stop the ship and prevent her from sinking. So, I reversed the turning of the propellers, so we were going astern. As we finally overcame our inertia going ahead, we then stopped in the water. The O'Bannon, another one of our destroyers, came up behind us. She was in the rear of our formation, Chevalier was in the center, and another ship, the Selfridge, was up in the front. Anyway, O'Bannon rammed us and cut our oil off going aft and damaged the side of

the ship and the lower part of the ship.

Byrd: Did it wreck the hull, and were you taking on water on both ends then?

Gowen: We were taking on water on both ends. So, we lay dead in the water, and she lay dead in the water. She stood by and got her boats and rafts over to us. We lost fifty-three men and one officer. All the other personnel that we had went on board O'Bannon for our rescue.

Byrd: During this time was the Yugumo still firing at you?

Gowen: No, she had done one firing, and our skipper said he was going to fire some more torpedoes because he had only fired half of his torpedoes. So, he told the torpedo officer to fire the remaining torpedoes at Yugumo and hoped to get a hit and knock her off, because she had damaged us so bad that we were going to sink. So, we fired four torpedoes at her, and one of them hit, and she went down.

Then the Selfridge went up, trying to fire on the Japanese, and they did force the Japanese to go out of the area and go north. But, in the meantime, the Japanese hit her in the bow with another torpedo, and she lost her bow. We lost our bow. O'Bannon, who had come in and rammed us, had her bow all fouled up and opened up, but she did stay around, and she did take all of us that were left and all the wounded back down to Tulagi, and eventually we left from there to go on back home.

Byrd: What were all the rest of these Japanese ships doing? I mean, were they evacuating their folks and just went on?

Gowen: They did have some success in going into Vella Lavella after the fighting was over and pick up some of their men, go north with their people. But there were a lot of their people in the water.

Byrd: And you and the rest of the crew, the ones that were not killed in the fighting, were all evacuated then. You didn't leave anybody behind.

Gowen: Nobody was left behind.

Byrd: When the Chevalier sank, I know the O'Bannon was close by, but how long were you actually in the water, or were you in the water? Did you get on one of the boats as quick as possible?

Gowen: I got in the water after the captain put the word out: "All hands abandon ship!" I got in the water and stayed in the water for, oh, perhaps twenty minutes or so until I was able to get to a raft and climb on a raft.

As an amusing anecdote, I was swimming toward this raft, and all the guys in the raft started hollering, "Turn out the light! Turn out the light!" I didn't know what they were talking about. Then, finally, I turned my head, and I saw this light on my back. I had a four-cell flashlight in my pocket, and it was shining a light up over my head into the sky. I just didn't know it was doing this because it was the water then that short-

circuited the switch to cause the light to come on.

Byrd: They thought you might be drawing attention to them as a target.

Gowen: Yes. They had an aircraft up there--a Japanese aircraft --and they were looking for flares. Well, anyway, they agreed then to let me come on board the raft, and we paddled the damn raft over to O'Bannon and got on board.

Byrd: How about the Japanese from the Yugumo? Was there anybody there to help rescue them, or were they on their own essentially?

Gowen: As far as I know, none of them were rescued by any of our ships that we were in, but they did look for them, and eventually, the next day in daylight, they found some.

Byrd: I was just going over the scenario here. There were nine of their ships to three of yours, and they went ahead and abandoned their own people from the Yugumo then.

Gowen: They did. They did abandon them.

Byrd: Were there any other American vessels or air power in the area?

Gowen: There were other vessels that joined after we sank. Not after we sank, but at the time we were going to be sunk. In fact, our ship was finally hit with a torpedo fired by LaVallette, which was our ship, also.

Byrd: Was that another destroyer?

Gowen: Another destroyer. She was told to fire and destroy the Chevalier, which she did.

Byrd: Was that to keep maybe the Japanese from recovering...

Gowen: That's right. We didn't want to...

Byrd: ...equipment or maybe use some of the electronic equipment?

Gowen: Electronics, yes. We wanted to get her down.

Byrd: Did you have radar aboard or something that was still classified?

Gowen: Well, as far as we were concerned, it was. I don't know how much the Japanese had, but we weren't going to give them any of it. So, they did arrange with the LaVallette to fire a torpedo and sink us.

Byrd: That was to finish it up.

Gowen: Yes.

Byrd: What was your duty after that? What happened now that your ship is gone and you've gone back to Tulagi?

Gowen: Well, I was the senior officer who could walk among the group, so I had my hands full for a number of days, arranging for transportation for our personnel to go back to the United States on the Matsonia, a Matson Line ship out of Hawaii. Matson Line was the ship's company. We got all our people that could travel, who were not in the hospital, on board that ship and sent her to San Francisco.

Then I was sent back on an aircraft out of Noumea, New Caledonia, to Hawaii. When I got to Hawaii, they put me on a Pan Am clipper, and I went to San Francisco.

Then I got a ride back to the East Coast, to the New York area, on a train.

My wife, who was not my wife at that time, was waiting for me, and three days later we got married. When we got married, we had some time off around Christmas, and then we had to go down to Mobile, Alabama, where I was to be the engineering officer of another destroyer being built there.

We did build her, and we did take her out to sea. We did go back into the Pacific, stayed in the Pacific, and were in the Guam/Marianas Campaign.

Byrd: Doing the same kind of duty now?

Gowen: The same kind of duty. We were in the Seventh Fleet, escorting carriers. We were in various engagements there.

Byrd: Were you doing that same kind of close-in shore firing, or were you still out there making a shield around the carriers?

Gowen: We were out in deep water, but we did every now and then go in close to Saipan, Tinian, Guam, and fire on the Japanese installations there until we forced them off those islands.

Byrd: Were you looking more for aircraft or submarines or for both?

Gowen: For both. For both at that time, but most of our action was against aircraft and submarines, not against surface

ships because the Japanese were losing them. They were all going back to Okinawa and places like that, waiting for us to come back there.

I got off before that time and went to Cornell University to teach the students there marine engineering. Then I got to be the officer in charge of the U.S. Navy's engineering school up in Newport, Rhode Island. We would take a ship's crew from the place that it was being built, and we would train the ship's crew on how to operate their boilers and their engines. That was my job for two years.

Byrd: That was in Newport.

Gowen: Newport, Rhode Island. Then I went back to Ithaca, New York. I hadn't had a college degree, and they weren't going to give me a college degree there either, but they were trying to get me into a position where, as a Regular Navy officer now, I would be able to compete with other people who had graduated from the Naval Academy or from an ROTC program. So, I went to Cornell for about two-and-a-half years as a student. Then I went to the General Line School of the Navy in Newport, Rhode Island. It was a training program to build the students' knowledge up to where they could compete with Regular Navy officers for promotion.

Byrd: What was your rank at this point?

Gowen: Well, let's see. When I was first down into the Solomon

Islands, I was a lieutenant junior grade. During that period of time, after a few months down there, I was made a senior lieutenant, and I was made engineering officer instead of assistant engineering officer. As I left down there and went through this procedure of schooling, I became a lieutenant commander.

After being a lieutenant commander for a while, I was selected to command a destroyer--the Ingersoll. The Ingersoll was then going over into the Mediterranean for duty over there.

Byrd: What year was that?

Gowen: [Looks at personal papers] Let me change the rotation of some of this information. In September of 1947, I received orders for training in Cornell, which was completed in May, 1949. This was followed by ten months of training at the Navy General Line School. Upon completion I was promoted again to lieutenant commander, named executive officer of a destroyer that was going to the Korean War from Norfolk, Virginia. I went to the Korean War as the "exec" [executive officer]. When we completed our tour in Korea and came back home again, we completed a round trip around the world.

They sent me orders to take command of Ingersoll in 1951. I took command and went to sea with her and stayed in the Atlantic, in the northern Atlantic and down through the Mediterranean.

I was relieved of command there to go to a job in Washington, DC, in the Pentagon. After I left that, I went to a new destroyer as commanding officer. This destroyer was one of our largest, new, fast destroyers--the John S. McCain--named for the Admiral John S. McCain, who was very famous in our air warfare with carriers.

Byrd: So, was this a nuclear-powered ship, or was this just turbines?

Gowen: No, it was turbines and boilers--oil power. They didn't have the atomic-powered ships at the time.

I left that ship after we transited the Panama Canal and went out into the Pacific. I was over in Hong Kong when I got orders to go to the Naval War College. They relieved me in Hong Kong with another officer, and I went back to the East Coast of the United States and went to the Naval War College. The Naval War College was a one-year tour, but it trained me quite well in managing the ammunition and other parts of the program to give help and assistance to foreign governments. So, I was in charge of the program for the Navy and the Marine Corps in the Pacific.

Byrd: I see. Roughly what year was that? I'm not sure we got that.

Gowen: That was in 1958, and I was made commanding officer of the Aludra, which is the name of a star. Ships with the name of a star were replenishment ships at sea. We would

go into a formation, and the combat ships would come to us and get ammunition and fuel and food.

I was made then a senior member of the Board of Inspection and Survey in Charleston, South Carolina, and our task there was to go to sea in new ships that had been built or ships that had been converted and find out whether they needed something more, find out what the material condition of the ships was. We would take ships out on trials, and not let the Navy buy one unless we said it was good. We determined on trials what kind of overhaul she would need, what was important to her being able to do her job before she went into the yard.

Byrd: So, you were like quality control kind of personnel.

Gowen: Yes. We'd take a submarine out to sea and have the crew crash-dive it and go through all kinds of maneuvers that we wanted them to be able to do. It was an interesting and kind of a frightening situation sometimes.

Byrd: I imagine. When you say crash-diving, was that a sudden, just an immediate, dive?

Gowen: Well, it would be traveling along, say, at fifteen knots or twenty knots and then ordering them to dive--dive and crash down to a certain level. It was frightening if you were not a submariner and didn't know much about submarines (chuckle). You had submariners on your staff.

Byrd: What if it started leaking, or whatever happened at that point?

Gowen: Yes. Right.

Byrd: What do you do then?

Gowen: Well, fortunately, the captain of the ship knew what he was doing, and he had key members of his crew who would know what they were doing.

Byrd: Did you take any of the manufacturers' representatives along with you (chuckle)?

Gowen: Oh, yes. Sure. After that, I was named to be the chief of staff to the admiral in the Southern Command based in Panama, and our job was to plan with the South American and Central American navies and marine corps how to fight a war, how to fight a specific war. I was down there for about three years.

Byrd: Who was the admiral in charge there of this command at this time?

Gowen: You want to stop a second?

Byrd: Yes. Okay. So, you said that you were working for Admiral George Koch.

Gowen: Yes, that's correct.

Byrd: And you were there for three years?

Gowen: Yes. Then, I was sent to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to take command of the Navy's portion of testing atomic weapons in the Pacific area. Eventually, before I retired, I was made the commander of the entire command. It was a joint command in that it had Army, Navy, and Air Force components.

Byrd: And you were what rank at this time?

Gowen: Captain.

Byrd: Captain.

Gowen: Yes. As an example, in this period of time, we were working to try to come up with a weapons system that would be effective against incoming missiles from the Russians, and the first job we had, that I was part of, was a job of building a warhead that would--using X-rays --put an incoming missile out of commission. The X-rays were so powerful and so dense that once it went off...it was an atomic weapon that would go off in the sky as the weapons system from the Russians closed our country. When it went off, the X-rays would take care of all the control systems for the Russian one and stop her.

Byrd: So, this would actually be detonated in the upper atmosphere.

Gowen: Yes. But we didn't do any tests in the upper atmosphere. This is what it was designed to do. We dug a hole in the Amchitka Island in the Aleutians, about three or four miles deep, and put all kinds of controls and instruments down there to record. Then we put the weapon down there, the head, and then we all got on board ship--I had an aircraft carrier, and I had three destroyers--and we would then have this thing set off down there in the ground. Then all the instruments that were in the cave that we had built would send those reports back up

electronically to recordings on the ground. It turned out that the weapons system we were trying to make was effective--it was good.

Byrd: It was a forerunner of Star Wars.

Gowen: It was.

Byrd: When was this testing going on?

Gowen: That was in 1970, I think it was, or 1969. We then followed with another system. What we had just fired was the warhead for an incoming ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile]. What we had to do now was to get an effective means of transporting this into the atmosphere to make it hit, or make it in a lethal range of incoming missiles, so that when we fired ours, it would destroy theirs. We fired a weapons systems warhead toward us. We were at Johnston Island, 800 miles southwest of Honolulu, and they fired from an Air Force base in California. They fired this incoming missile, treating us as though we were the West Coast of the United States. They fired this missile, and it came down over Johnston Island, and we fired a Thor missile at it. When it got within a certain range, it had a whole series of strobe lights in our warhead that we were firing, just to prove that it would work and would get us within range--and it did. We fired. The Thor got close to the incoming missile, lighted all these lights, and we proved that we could, first of all, build a missile that was effective

against them with X-rays, and, secondly, we had a system to get it up there.

Byrd: When was this thing at Johnston Island, now, roughly? Was that about the same time, like, in 1970 or so?

Gowen: Yes. I retired after thirty years of service in 1970, and this would be about six months before that.

Byrd: So, that daggone kind of technology was working quite a few years ago.

Gowen: Yes. Then we had a big conference with the Russians, and we agreed with them that we would not test-fire any of these missiles. So, even though we had the ability, I don't know how much they did in the way of building this weapons system.

Byrd: Were you a part of the meetings with the Russians?

Gowen: No, no.

Byrd: I guess that was Nixon, who was President then.

Gowen: I was just in command of the joint group--Army, Navy, and Air Force--and their aircraft and their ships. I was riding a carrier.

Byrd: Which carrier was that?

Gowen: The USS Princeton.

Byrd: Well, I don't know if there's anything else that you want to talk about. If you could care to elucidate any further on anything, I'll give you this opportunity to speak to your Navy career or experiences.

Gowen: I can only say that, in retrospect, it was the best time

of my life, and I could never have had a more successful career that I just would never have had otherwise. It just was a very strange thing. The war came along quite fast, and without the war having come along, I would never have gotten into the Navy, and perhaps I would be a Merchant Marine engineer right now, today. But I just enjoyed it so much that they had to kick me out the gate when my thirty years were up. And, my wife as well. She loved it, too. And we have two boys and one girl. My first boy is in the Foreign Service of the United States --in Paris right now. My second boy became an engineer in the Navy and became a lieutenant commander and served twenty years. He is now retired--working with the Navy still, but as a civilian. My daughter married a naval officer and lives here in Texas. She no longer is married to him, but she is living here in New Braunfels.

Byrd: So, this trip here, you're hitting two birds with one rock.

Gowen: That's right.

Byrd: You're visiting with your daughter, also.

Gowen: That's right.

Byrd: Well, Captain Gowen, thank you for taking time out to reminisce with us. I sure appreciate it. It's been a personal pleasure for me.

Gowen: Oh, thank you for doing it. I appreciate having you invite me to come down.