

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Clifford Ashby

Date of Interview: March 6, 2007

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Interview with Mr. Ashby

Interview in progress.

Interviewer: This is Ed Metzler. Today is March the 6th, 2007. I'm interviewing Mr. Clifford Ashby. This interview is taking place in the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Let me start out, Cliff, by thanking you for spending the time today to share your experiences. And why don't we have you go ahead and introduce yourself; when and where you were born; that kind of thing.

Mr. Ashby: Okay, excuse me (cough), I am Cliff Ashby. I was born in Effingham, Illinois on the 11th of June, 1925. Grew up there; I was raised by my grandparents; I was one of the early children of divorce which is so common nowadays. I guess the important thing for the narrative is that early in high school I got interested in amateur radio, and got my amateur license and was just starting to...to operate as an amateur when the stations were all closed down by World War II. Well shortly thereafter I graduated from high school and went to Chicago in the draft; turned out to be 4F. I have one eye and they were not too happy with me so I was not going to serve and I was just dying to be a

hero. So this...this went along until I had a letter from...I've forgotten what off...office it was from but they wanted radio operators.

Interviewer: Now...now this was what...how far into the war?

Mr. Ashby: About '43.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: Uh, '43...they wanted radio operators for shipboard. Well, I...real quick...crammed...crammed up and got my Commercial 2nd Class License. They were very happy to have me and I got on a train and went to San Francisco...well to Oakland actually and then the ferry across to San Francisco at the time. And I had never seen the ocean before, so it was a big shock...knew nothing about ships; nothing about telegraphy really. Took the one day cram course in it...in operation and how to send an emergency signal and that sort of thing; flunked it cold; one of the few examinations I ever flunked, and signed up as the...as Second Radio Operator on the S.S. James B. Francis and we took off.

Interviewer: Okay, so the James B. Francis was what kind of ship?

Mr. Ashby: A Liberty.

Interviewer: Okay, one of those old girls.

Mr. Ashby: One of those old girls designed in World War I and not much improved after that...and 10 knots at top speed. Very clumsy ship but they turned them out at great rate.

Interviewer: Yeah, they made a ship a day or something in...in the shipyards, I think, yeah.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: So what was...what was your station then on that ship when she departed?

Mr. Ashby: I was...I was Second Radio Operator.

Interviewer: Alright, and did you know where you were headed?

Mr. Ashby: Well, no we weren't told but we put into Port Hueneme down the coast from San Francisco; then took off for Hawaii; landed in Honolulu. I suppose they...general cargo. There was a story on that ship...the trip before I had gotten on, the West Loch at Pearl Harbor had blown up...it was the ammunition section.

Interviewer: Oh yeah!

Mr. Ashby: And they had blown up all sorts of ships. Well, my ship was lucky enough to get out...out of there alright.

Interviewer: So this happened right after you departed from...from Pearl or what?

Mr. Ashby: No...before I got to Pearl. This is the story from before when I got on the ship.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: So we got to Pearl Harbor; went to West Loch which is the...the ammunition section and started loading the ship crammed full with the defective ammunition. And we filled up and took off and about two days out of Pearl Harbor Port Chicago blew up...the area in San Francisco Bay there which was the ammunition...it was an incredible explosion that killed thousands of people...it wasn't reported. So there we were with the cargo of...of ammo and no place for it. So they sent us and the cargo to Prince Rupert in Canada. It's a place in B.C....a very small town, and what they were going to do with

this defective ammunition up there I have no idea. Came back and loaded general cargo.

Interviewer: So you disposed of the defective ammunition at...what did you say Port Rupert?

Mr. Ashby: Prince Rupert.

Interviewer: Yes, sorry.

Mr. Ashby: Prince Rupert is as I say a very small town or was then.

Interviewer: Most of the towns are small up there...up the coast in Canada, yeah. So just unloaded it and then came back, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Well then we...we went down to Tacoma or somewhere in the southwest...put on a...a cargo...I'm trying to remember where we sailed next. One of the islands...but I cannot tell you which one.

Interviewer: In the south Pacific?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah. We had...before I had gotten on...the ship had facilities for hauling troops...certified to set to haul 199 troops. Well it got condemned as a troop carrier but it still had the troop-carrying gear on. So we got somewhere...and I can't remember that first trip.

Interviewer: So were you carrying troops then on that first trip?

Mr. Ashby: No because it had been condemned as a troop carrier.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: But once we got out...in...in one of the islands, they revamped the troops hauling stuff for 199 troops and put 500 aboard! (laughter)

Interviewer: Well that's a...everybody sleeping really close...close by, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Yes it was. Hum, I'm drawing a blank on...memory now...we were hauling stuff from here to there...we hit island after island you know.

Interviewer: So were you hauling general cargo then?

Mr. Ashby: General cargo and we had one cargo of ammunition...just huge amounts of ammunition which we took to Guadalcanal which would be about '43, I guess. The island had been secured but...still one of the ammos...we sat there in the harbor and swung on the hook for a couple of weeks.

Interviewer: That's a long time!

Mr. Ashby: That's a long time with ammo in the hold!

Interviewer: So this is...I'm sorry...which specific harbor was this down in Guadalcanal?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah...uh, Guadalcanal.

Interviewer: Okay, just...in the straights there, huh?

Mr. Ashby: I guess...I don't know but we were running hoses on the deck trying to keep the deck cool so that the ammo would stay cool.

Interviewer: Yeah, let's keep it cool!

Mr. Ashby: Well one morning smoke came billowing out of the hold. And it's amazing to see a harbor clear out, you know, every ship that was near us was gone!

Interviewer: I guess so!

Mr. Ashby: Every ship was *gone*! And...

Interviewer: What did you guys on board do?

Mr. Ashby: Well not much we could except someone went down to see what it was and couldn't find out. We found out later a smoke cylinder had heated up and

corked off. So it was only a smoke cylinder and putting out all that smoke.

But I...sure looked like the world was coming to an end! (laughter)

Interviewer: You thought it was anyhow.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, we...they came out...the Harbor Master came up and said, "Well, we'll unload you in a week to 10 days." And the Captain who was an old Norwegian said, "You will unload us now or we're going to dump it in the harbor." So we went over to Tulagi was...which is just a few miles across and unloaded the cargo there.

Interviewer: Now tell me about this Norwegian captain. I mean, this I...I'm not sure...are we actually in the American Armed Forces here or...?

Mr. Ashby: Oh yeah, yes!

Interviewer: Okay, so are we in the Navy or the...?

Mr. Ashby: Merchant Marine.

Interviewer: Merchant Marine, I'm sorry, okay, good. Well anyhow, tell me about this Norwegian captain.

Mr. Ashby: Well he was an...an old Norwegian who'd grown up in the sailing ship days really as a...a cabin boy on a sailing ship; name was Thomas Sorensen...S-o-r-e-n-s-e-n, I think, who'd grown up and spent most of his life sailing what...what they call the steam schooner. They went up and down the coast from California to Washington and back again with local cargo. He retired and got called back out of retirement to man a ship.

Interviewer: So he was an older fellow then?

Mr. Ashby: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: He was...he was older. One point you might mention in here...when we were in Guadalcanal, we were...the Merchant Marine had a...a bad reputation, I guess, and were forbidden to go ashore.

Interviewer: Well tell...tell me about this bad reputation you guys got.

Mr. Ashby: I don't know.

Interviewer: Just being rowdy on leave or...?

Mr. Ashby: Rowdy on leave, I think is...is the main thing. People who go to sea have pro...probably people who sail all their life you know...not the Boy Scouts like me...but the...old timers were...a lot of them drank...a lot of them drank too much, you know, so...

Interviewer: And a whole lot when they went on shore! (laughter)

Mr. Ashby: Well you couldn't hardly drink on ship because whatever they had was consumed by the first week out and then they would make Raisin Jack. You would take raisins and throw them in a keg or a barrel or something and throw in some sh...whoop! Well I don't think we even had thrown in sugar but you could...could ferment it and...and make it kind of alcohol from it.

Interviewer: So was that a tasty concoction?

Mr. Ashby: I don't know I've never tried it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: But what I was going to say...being confined aboard ship, we were of course on deck and looking at what was going on. Well a crane was loading a...a truck into a hold; it tipped over; crashed down and killed a man who was

standing there watching. And there was an investigation and one of the questions I was asked was, “Were you allow...allowed to go ashore?” and I said, “No.” You know, so I think they were planning to loosen the rules a little bit so that you wouldn’t have people standing around on deck while a...work was going on. So we took the...we were allowed ashore at Tulagi and we went from there...oooh...I say, all of these islands start to blur, you know.

Interviewer: It was a long time ago, too.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah. We were in Melbourne for awhile; we stopped up in Brisbane. We were hauling troops a good part of...part of this time.

Interviewer: So when you went down to Australia you...what did you do...pick troops up there and bring ‘em back or was that R&R or do you remember what took you down to Australia?

Mr. Ashby: I think we...think we picked up troops there and in Brisbane and then hauled ‘em somewhere north. There were a lot of...oh, the...we were on the edge of the typhoon I recall that with these long lazy 20-ft. swells you know. And these poor si...soldiers down in the hold, bunks 4 high, and of course it’s always the guy in the top...top bunk who is sick you know. So that hold was...oh God, it smelled awful down there.

Interviewer: Did you ever get seasick?

Mr. Ashby: Uh-uh.

Interviewer: You know, it always amazes me...some people just never been on a ship in their life; walk on a ship – I don’t care how rough it is never get ill and other

people just the thought of being on a ship (unintelligible). I wonder what the difference is?

Mr. Ashby: I have no idea.

Interviewer: Well, tell me about your experience with the Australians. What was that like? You said you were in both Melbourne and Brisbane.

Mr. Ashby: Melbourne was marvelous town and people were friendly. They viewed the Americans...they hated the Brits...but the Americans were really cool, so it was marvelous down there for about a week. Our...our ship had to be fumigated; it was full of cockroaches and...and everything else. We tried to land some flour for...we thought for cattle feed and they wouldn't let us land it. Well in the meantime we were eating bread you know. But at the start no one would eat the bread 'cause those weevils went right through us too.

Interviewer: Really!

Mr. Ashby: And no one would eat bread and then for awhile you'd hold it up to a light and pick them out.

Interviewer: Oh come on!

Mr. Ashby: Then you would stop doing that you know, you'd just eat it...you'd just eat it.

Interviewer: (unintelligible)...poppy seeds or something in there.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: My goodness. You said Melbourne was a marvelous town; what was marvelous about it? What...what impressed you the most?

Mr. Ashby: Oh it's a kind of a small town friendly feel to it. I know I went to the...zoo there and one thing I was dying to see was a...a platypus, you know, well...it

wasn't showing hours. They were only out a few hours a day and I said to someone, "Oh gee, I can't come back...my ship's sailing," and so the keeper went and hauled him out...threw him in the tank for me! And I thought, you know, gee that's nice!

Interviewer: That's going the extra mile, isn't it?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah...no...uh, marvelous people.

Interviewer: I wonder why they didn't like the Brits. What...what's your speculation on that?

Mr. Ashby: Stuffed shirts.

Interviewer: But the Americans were kind ea...more approachable and more friendly...

Mr. Ashby: Casual.

Interviewer: And casual.

Mr. Ashby: Great deal like the Australians.

Interviewer: And so now...let's go back to that typhoon that you were talking about. You've kind of skirted around the edge of it, is that right?

Mr. Ashby: Yes.

Interviewer: And when you were out on the sea...were you...was...was your ship alone or were you in convoys...or how did that work?

Mr. Ashby: I was thinking about. For the most part...it's amazing, we sailed those seas all by ourselves with no escort and nothing. And as I read the books, apparently the submarine menace had almost been wiped out by then. We sailed in convoy a couple of times, but for the most part...well there was an island called Morotai which was...well Halmahera where there's a great big C-

shaped island and right in the middle of this C-shape was this tiny island of Morotai.

Interviewer: And...and where is this located? Which...?

Mr. Ashby: Well it's somewhere over toward...well it's northwest of New Guinea...that's as close as...

Interviewer: Okay, working up towards the Philippines (unintelligible).

Mr. Ashby: We sailed there. All of Halmahera...this big island was Japanese held. Morotai...this little tiny island was half Japanese. They had only kept enough space cleared for a landing strip. So there were Japanese everywhere and us all by ourselves just sailed into the harbor, you know! There were air raids probably four and five a night, you know. They would fly Betty over and drop a few bombs and we would watch. I...I know one night we would see these planes coming over the rear of our plane landing and they all had light signals which told you...(unintelligible). Well one flew in with strange light signals flashing and we all looked out and a few minutes later there was a...tracers flying all over the place because it was a Japanese plane.

Interviewer: Had an imposter there, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, but for the most part...we left Morotai hauling a map outfit to...to Manila.

Interviewer: A map outfit; tell me more about that.

Mr. Ashby: Well, they were apparently very...very important. They got...buildings were very scarce in Manila at the time and they got the cream of the building

because they had to have a clean place to operate and some kind of air conditioning and so...so they were the chosen few around there.

Interviewer: So they were generating...?

Mr. Ashby: Maps, I guess.

Interviewer: Maps for...used by the military, I guess.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: So how many of 'em were there? I mean was this a...just a small group?

Mr. Ashby: Oh 300 or 400, I think.

Interviewer: That many?!

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: And so you went up to Manila harbor then, is that right?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So had Manila been liberated quite a while ago or was this just recent?

Mr. Ashby: Yes, this was...it was quite safe there. I was there the day that Roosevelt died. It was...

Interviewer: So this is April of '45 then, yeah.

Mr. Ashby: Really? Okay, yeah maybe...I...I...

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean that may have been when you were there.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah I was there because everyone was just stunned, you know. And the reaction was, "Oh my God, that's Truman, you know."

Interviewer: What...what was the general feeling about...a) loosing FDR and then b) having Truman as...?

Mr. Ashby: Well, they'd had FDR for so long it was hard to imagine him not being there. No one had the slightest faith in Truman, you know.

Interviewer: Really?!

Mr. Ashby: Well he was a *ward politician* from Missouri and...

Interviewer: I mean like...he used to run a haberdasheries store or something like that, I think.

Mr. Ashby: One more thing...you were speaking of convoys...we ran a convoy up to Lingayen Gulf; it was the first invasion of...of Luzon. And that...for that...that...we towed LCTs, Landing Craft Tanks, behind us.

Interviewer: How many?

Mr. Ashby: Well, I guess one per ship.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mr. Ashby: But ours, the front ramp had broken off, you know, and there was just seas washing in on him...well he cut loose and pulled up alongside and then the sea wasn't very rough then, but there was still waves coming in on him and I don't know what happened to him after that...I assume they sank the ship and picked them up. But we were sail...sailing in convoy. We arrived at Lingayen at D+10 and I...I thought for sure we were in trouble...but not much...very calm actually.

Interviewer: Did you have any war ships that were escorting you at all or were you guys out there on your own?

Mr. Ashby: Oh, on the convoy?

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Mr. Ashby: Yes, we had plenty of D.E.s and destroyers around the convoy on that. There were 40 ships I would say in the convoy.

Interviewer: My goodness; all Liberties...or most of 'em?

Mr. Ashby: Most of them; a few of...of Victories which were a vast improvement over the Liberties.

Interviewer: Did you have any other people on board the ship that you kinda got close to, you know, became buddies during the war or anything like that? Or was there a constant change over or how did that work on the crew?

Mr. Ashby: No, on those ships the crew was fairly constant. I made friends with a Pharmacist's Mate who'd been a...a Chiropractor and got drafted, and he was a real nice guy. And then various ships I (unintelligible) with various people.

Interviewer: And did you stay in touch with them after the war?

Mr. Ashby: For a year or two, yeah...but have faded out.

Interviewer: And what about your commanding officer and his staff, you know, the officers...were they...you...you mentioned the old Norwegian earlier...did...was he there the whole time or did you have different people?

Mr. Ashby: He was there on the James B. Francis, then the...after that I took a shore leave and came back as Chief Radio Operator on the Benjamin Grierson.

Interviewer: And she was a Liberty also?

Mr. Ashby: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: So was that a better ship or couldn't tell the difference or what compared to the James B.?

Mr. Ashby: About the same. Of course on a Merchant ship you have your Captain and then you have First, Second and Third Mates. And those really are all the officers. Well, the Engineering staff, of course.

Interviewer: Right. And I guess these...this crew come...they come from all over the U.S., I guess, but they were...they're all U.S. guys, huh, as opposed to people from elsewhere?

Mr. Ashby: There was one Greek...I...the only one that I can recall; he was a Second Mate on the Grierson, but there were only four of them that I recall.

Interviewer: And all different ages? Got older guys...younger guys?

Mr. Ashby: Uh-hum.

Interviewer: And how old were you when you first went on the James B.?

Mr. Ashby: Well, let's see... '43...19, something like that.

Interviewer: Yeah you were just a...you were teenager still.

Mr. Ashby: Being a radio operator was nice because you messed with the officers and you were regarded as...someone. But we had a Mess Servant and table clothes and we ate extremely well.

Interviewer: I was gonna ask you how was the food?

Mr. Ashby: Oh God, it was...one ship especially... it was just great!

Interviewer: Which one was that?

Mr. Ashby: Uh, the James B. Francis. The Steward had been a Sous Chef on the Luling before the war. The Lurline and the Mariposa were the big ships between Hawaii and...and the States there. But he was a Sous Chef...Sous Chef on there and liked to cook. And God the food was good!

Interviewer: Steaks?

Mr. Ashby: Anything you want....wanted. Fresh vegetables ran out.

Interviewer: Boy you were lucky; I've heard many a story of the food not being good on the...some of the...some of the warships and stuff.

Mr. Ashby: After awhile the vegetables ran out and after awhile the eggs...they'd have to break the egg and look at them...(unintelligible)

Interviewer: Visually check them, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Throw it away.

Interviewer: I guess you ran out of raisins too, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Right! I'm afraid so. (laughter) But...God, we ate well, you know. But there was something also I might mention called the U.S. Maritime Service; you know about this?

Interviewer: No, tell me more.

Mr. Ashby: Well, it was kind of an honorary status, I guess. You were in the Merchant Marine and after you were in for six months, you could...could apply for a commission in the Maritime Service. This is U.S.M.S., and I applied, of course, and they supplied me with a free uniform with a...the stripe on the sleeve of which I was inordinately proud at the age of 19. But so...that's about it until...oh, what was it.. ten years ago, they decided...decided to make a Merchant seaman honorary veterans.

Interviewer: Well that's good; you deserved it!

Mr. Ashby: So I...I applied and got...it was important because...counted for my retirement time. So I applied for it that and was discharged from the Coast

Guard. I don't know why, but that's how it was phrased. So I became all of a sudden, an honorary veteran, you know. And I heard from the V.A. and I heard from the American Legion and the VFW and everyone who would...wanted to serve me or have me join and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: So how'd you feel about becoming an honorary veteran?

Mr. Ashby: Oh, alright.

Interviewer: Wasn't a big deal, then?

Mr. Ashby: No, the thing is...and I...I understand why everyone would be jealous was...we got paid huge amounts of money.

Interviewer: Especially compared to, I guess, people in the military.

Mr. Ashby: Oh God, there was a bonus system. When you were in a war zone...I can't recall how much the pay was, but...but the salary doubled. You got twice as much in the war zone.

Interviewer: And you were...you were getting good pay to begin with by...for those days, and then you got double that.

Mr. Ashby: Yes and then you had no place to spend it, you know.

Interviewer: So what did you do with all your money?

Mr. Ashby: Well I came home with lots of money, you know. I had thousands of dollars...and that was...for that time a lot of money.

Interviewer: Yes sir. So you didn't get caught in any of those poker games on board, huh?

Mr. Ashby: No, I...later after the war, I went back to sea for a couple of trips and I played poker then but I was smarter by then, so I...played pretty good poker.

Interviewer: Yeah, you weren't victimized as a 19 year old then, huh?

Mr. Ashby: No, so I...a lot of dumb poker players in the world,you know that?

Interviewer: That's true.

Mr. Ashby: So I...I could make money playing poker and did.

Interviewer: Well, were those Liberty ships armed at all? Did you have AA?

Mr. Ashby: We had a 3 inch gun in the bow which...which could fire into surface...or...or (unintelligible) airplanes. There were four 20mm guns on the flying bridge and then on one ship there was a...a 5 inch gun on the rear... was left over from God knows where because it couldn't possibly...elevate high enough to take an airplane, so it was just mainly ornamental.

Interviewer: Must have been for surface bombardment or something if they ever needed it, I guess.

Mr. Ashby: Well...

Interviewer: Did you ever need those guns to protect the ship or ever get attacked?

Mr. Ashby: Well we had orders to not fire. There was always ground...the Army...pardon me...Air Force had their own things and I know on Morotai especially, the...3 inch gunners were just slathering to fire off a few shots but they had strict orders not to, you know. So we had these planes flying right over us, you know. They were far more concerned with the Air Corp...uh the airport than with us, so they would just fly over us and ignore us and then go attack the airport.

Interviewer: Well I guess it's good to be ignored in that case.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: What about communications back home during the war when you were at sea there in the Pacific, I mean, did you write letters; did you get care packages from home; did you hear what was going on on the home front?

Mr. Ashby: Wrote a lot of letter and got a lot of letters. There was a special kind of receiver they put on those ships called the Scott. I don't know if you have encountered this...

Interviewer: Called what again?

Mr. Ashby: Scott was the...company name. S-c-o-t-t.

Interviewer: Okay, so Scott, yeah.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, they were supposedly would not radiate radio signals that people could...that the Japanese could hear and track us on. Actually they... one of the biggest cost plus boondoggles I have seen. I mean they had these huge cadmium-plated screens in there and knurled knobs to hold them down. It was as though you start to build something the most expensive way possible. And we could...could get short wave on those. So we...kept up on that.

Interviewer: So you could...so you could communicate...what?...just pick up signals from back in the U.S. or from other ships or...?

Mr. Ashby: Well, U.S. and also a lot of the island sta...the islands have their own stations...some of them quite good. One...well, that's one more story...we're hopping from here to there.

Interviewer: That's okay.

Mr. Ashby: Last...last ship I was on...we started out and went...we were supposed to be on the invasion of Japan and we're out...out in the middle of the ocean of the

Pacific when the bomb fell. And here we were...all primed for the invasion and they...general cargo and no one knew what to do with this. So about 40...40 Liberty ships pulled into the atoll of Ulithi which I think was an atomic bomb test site, wasn't it?

Interviewer: I'm not sure.

Mr. Ashby: Well, it was about a 30 mile ring of islands and we pulled in there and we sat there for three months...*three* months!

Interviewer: Now this is right towards the end of the war, wasn't it?

Mr. Ashby: Well, it's...it's after the war.

Interviewer: Okay, so after the bomb and after...

Mr. Ashby: After the bomb, peace was declared; there was no invasion of Japan. What do we do with all these (unintelligible)?

Interviewer: So you sat there for how long?

Mr. Ashby: Three months.

Interviewer: Goodness gracious! And then what?

Mr. Ashby: Well, I don't know if it had an affect or not but you were...censorship was off; so I wrote my Senator in Illinois and said, "If you..."...everyone was screaming for...for ships to bring the troops home. So I wrote my Senator and said, "If you want to know where 40 ships are...doing nothing...I can tell you."

Interviewer: Yeah, we're in Ulithi!

Mr. Ashby: Uh-huh, and shortly thereafter my ship sailed; the other...the other 39 stayed there and we headed for home.

Interviewer: You think that's a coincidence?

Mr. Ashby: I don't know; I often wonder if I actually had an effect on that! (laughter)

Interviewer: You may have been even more powerful than you thought!

Mr. Ashby: Well, I don't doubt that the senator said that, "Hey, you've got some ships out there and one of these guys is complaining and he is my constituent...and of course he isn't old enough to vote yet, but..."

Interviewer: But will be!

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, and so I don't know if that's why, but we sailed before any of those ships left and brought the same cargo back we had before.

Interviewer: You took it back...what...to the...to the mainland?

Mr. Ashby: To San Francisco, yeah.

Interviewer: I'll be darned. So how did it feel to get back home? Sail underneath the Golden Gate after all that time out there in the Pacific.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, felt good...it felt good. I...I was going to college then and looking forward to a...a new life...and including, I would always have money...the way I had then. Of course it didn't quite work out that...

Interviewer: Didn't work out exactly like you wanted, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Oh I was so flush you know...

Interviewer: Did you go back to Illinois?

Mr. Ashby: No, I went to a small school in Portland, Oregon – Reed College. Then went from there to Iowa and then to a whole series of schools.

Interviewer: Let me go back to before the war started when, I guess, you were still in...in high school, I believe. And of course, we all know about December the 7th

and what happened then. Tell me how you found out about that and what the reaction was of the people that you were with or what your reaction was when the Pearl Harbor attack happened.

Mr. Ashby: Well I was listening to the radio at the time. Of course as a radio amateur I had this turned on all the time; and I got the news broadcast and I couldn't believe it, you know. And then when it finally settled down it was sort of a feeling of, "Hell, we'll take care of them in two weeks!" I mean you know, "Who do those people think they are?!" And then gradually it...it soaked into us that we were losing you know, but that took a long time to soak in. It was simply...obviously going to be only a question of time, but our...our troops would mobilize and go out and take care of those people.

Interviewer: Just took a little longer than we thought.

Mr. Ashby: Just a little! And I was so scared of the Japanese. I went to school in Chicago then, I skipped my senior year of high school and started into Illinois Tech. And the first summer I was there, I was in a...a graduate housing facility. Of course, I was a freshman...wasn't even quite a freshman.

Interviewer: Weren't even officially a freshman, were you?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah. But the houses there...well there was a...a Japanese kid there and when he came in the dining room, I had trouble eat...eating. I mean I just had this physical reaction to the fact that he was a Japanese, you know.

Interviewer: Even though he was a Japanese American?

Mr. Ashby: Oh yes, yes. And there was also in the same place a...a Chinese student who had been through the Rape of Nanking and had all sorts of credentials and it

took several weeks to realize that the Japanese was a very nice guy and this Chinese fellow was a Grade A Son of a Bitch.

Interviewer: Seems like a reversal of roles.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, but I...coming from a little town where there were no Negroes at all and oh a few Jewish merchants, but nobody...and all of a sudden being exposed...Illinois Tech was in the black part of Chicago then...so had all these black people, and then these Japanese and Chinese. And gradually I learned that some people are good and some people are not...and it doesn't depend...doesn't depend on...on their racial extraction. But it was a real...a real shock to find that happening.

Interviewer: Now this...this Chinese, was he Chinese American or was he...?

Mr. Ashby: No he was Chinese.

Interviewer: So was he in Nanking, then?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah.

Interviewer: What did he...what stories...?

Mr. Ashby: I don't know; I...

Interviewer: You never really...

Mr. Ashby: Never heard.

Interviewer: Never talked with him about it?

Mr. Ashby: No, you couldn't talk to him; he was...he was an arrogant bastard.

Interviewer: Oh, that's right...that's right.

Mr. Ashby: And the Japanese kid became a good friend of mine actually, but...

Interviewer: Did he go into the military, do you know?

Mr. Ashby: Not as far as I know. When I came back...I...I saw him again. Engineers were so...so prized at the time that I'm sure he found a job in engineering somewhere.

Interviewer: Now let's go back to when the first atomic bomb was dropped. How...what was the reaction by you and everyone else when you heard about that or did you know what to make of it?

Mr. Ashby: Well it was...the first reports were...I don't know...they came in from various scientists as to how long this effect was going to last and how long the land would be poisoned and when they could go in and how many people were killed and I was posting...news statements from the radio as they got...got it in. And nothing much happened. We...we were supposed to have gunnery practice; they dropped something off the gun tail and then shoot at it. But there was a ship coming up behind us so they called off gunnery practice. And I know one guy...over the statement there...

(end of tape 1, side 1)

Mr. Ashby: We weren't really on the radio there.

Interviewer: I guess what I'm saying is you were monitoring the air waves.

Mr. Ashby: (unintelligible), yeah.

Interviewer: Did you ever pick up Tokyo Rose?

Mr. Ashby: No I don't think so. No, I don't recall that at all. I'm sure if I had, I would have tuned...turned past her. Generally our job was simply to sit there. We had the S.O.S. of course, that the ship had...was foundering or something. And then there was the 4S signal...which said that submarine attack...and

then the 4As would be airplane attack. And every...I think every hour the Mate on Watch would bring the...bring the position into us so that we could send this if there was trouble...and there were trouble. So we sat there not having hell of a lot to do and having to maintain radio silence. Except very occasionally we'd have to reply to a message...acknowledge receipt of...you know, like the change of course to Prince Rupert, we had to go through the...the N coding process of putting this...the Gunnery Officer had this big fat book...code book, you know, was a system of false subtraction that you...

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm not familiar with that...tell me more.

Mr. Ashby: Well there are five...five numerals (unintelligible) signal and then your code allows you to draw a line and then subtract one from the other and then look up that number in code book. I recall when he was looking up Prince...Prince Rupert...it was so (unintelligible) you have to be wrong about this that (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Must have...must have missed...missed subtract it out or something, huh?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, we were convinced it was something wrong...but we checked and checked but aside from that we just sat there hour after hour after hour.

Interviewer: So how did you while those hours away? Was it...your mind wonder... old days at home or what?

Mr. Ashby: You read a lot and you wrote letters. That's one reason I wrote all the letters I did because I was locked in a room with a typewriter. (laughter)

Interviewer: Yeah, for hours and hours!

Mr. Ashby: Yeah...

Interviewer: In between good meals.

Mr. Ashby: Hard to avoid writing.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So do you feel like that experience out in the Pacific during the war changed you as a person or I know you were still in the process of growing up...you went out a teenager and came back...how were you different?

Mr. Ashby: Well I don't know where I would be if I hadn't...if it weren't for the war. Of course the possibility of coming back with money was really great because I was so anxious to escape the home town and...

Interviewer: Why were you anxious to escape the home town?

Mr. Ashby: Oh, well, I was smart for one thing and for another, I was kind of an oddball and I...I didn't play basketball which was the only sport really.

Interviewer: (unintelligible)...if you didn't play basketball.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, so I don't know, I...I was just a very unhappy young man and gradually I found my place. Went to various schools; got an M.A. and finally a PhD and taught at Tech then for 40 years.

Interviewer: I'm sorry; the PhD was in what field?

Mr. Ashby: Theater...Theater History...I was going to Stanford.

Interviewer: That's one heck of a good school. How interesting.

Mr. Ashby: And I got my M.A. from Hawaii which is also...

Interviewer: Kind of a...well are there any other experiences that you remember from that wartime period that you would like to share with us...anything that was humorous or anything that made you feel sad or worried or what have you?

Mr. Ashby: Well, as I say, being a radio operator is not a very active part of the...of the ship, you know...you're off in a room and that's it. But one...we used to see every now and then hospital ships.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Mr. Ashby: Sailing around with blaze of light, you know, I mean everything lit up...

Interviewer: Including the cross, so that they wouldn't be attacked, they hoped.

Mr. Ashby: Yeah...everything lit. And one time I picked up this S.O.S. from a hospital ship saying, "Bombed and strafed." And I never heard anything further about that and I've often wondered what ship it was and what happened.

Interviewer: Well I have heard that they, the Japanese, didn't differentiate very well between...

Mr. Ashby: This was fairly late in the war, you know, and you wouldn't expect that. But there they were. Oh one thing...I don't know...I listened to the talks from absolutely everyone around here and from what I know is...

Interviewer: Here at the Museum, you mean?

Mr. Ashby: Yeah, extremely accurate. There's...there's one thing I question...that is the...when a corpse...their two dog tags...the person handling the narration said one dog tag was sent in and the other was pinned to them. And my understanding was they put the second dog tag in their mouth.

Interviewer: Hmm, I don't know. They may have done both or either, you know.

Mr. Ashby: Well it seems to me it makes sense because if you put them on a piece of cloth, the cloth is going to mold and decay and everything else. Where if you have it in their mouth...even if you're down to a skull, you still...

Interviewer: You're still there.

Mr. Ashby: Uh, still there. So I...I don't know if the narrator was being nice or...but I guess you could check that. But aside from that...good for the Museum! I think everything runs extremely well. I was here ages ago; I think I said one week...the...when the Nimitz was kind of a store front museum here, but gee, it's marvelous what you've done here.

Interviewer: Well they're going to expand it again here, so...so it's a...yeah...a great place. Well, once again, Cliff, thank you for sharing your stories with us and your experiences. We don't have that many tapes of people who were in the Merchant Marine and I think it's a portion of the war and the people in the war that doesn't get a whole lot of press, so I think hearing your experiences is a nice addition to our...to our archives and I appreciate you taking the time today. So anything else before we...

Mr. Ashby: Well, I...I think you could put in that we were kind of resented because we were not controlled in the way the armed forces are and also because we got paid so bloody much money.

Interviewer: You ate well; you got paid well and you didn't have military officers telling you exactly what to do all the time.

Mr. Ashby: Uh, huh, and it turned out if you weren't happy on the ship you were on...you got off and you got on...on another one. They were so hard up for merchant seamen that they would let people out of the Army to go serve on ships.

Interviewer: Really?! 'Cause they could always get some more folks, I guess, for the Army but people...experienced seamen were few and far between compared to what they needed, at least. That's an interesting observation!

Mr. Ashby: Well there was shortage, I mean...

Interviewer: Okay, well that...thank you very much, Cliff.

Mr. Ashby: Well thank you; I have enjoyed...

(end of interview, tape 1, side 2)

FINAL copy
CD – #1783– Clifford Ashby
Transcribed by: K. Matras
Houston, TX
August 12, 2013