

OH04274aud Witmer, Donald

BRAINERD PARRISH: This is Brainerd "Bud" Parish, and today is November 18th, 2014. I am interviewing Mr. Donald Witmer. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas by telephone. Mr. Witmer is in Willow Street, Pennsylvania. This interview is in support of the Nimits Education and Research Center Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And Mr. Witmer, I'll start off by asking you where were you born, and when?

DONALD WHITMER: I was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, September 11, 1924.

BP: And what was the name of your parents?

DW: Miriam Witmer and Landis Witmer.

BP: And what did your dad do for a living?

DW: He was a carpenter.

BP: And did your mother work, or was she a housewife?

DW: No, she was I think, a housewife at the time of my birth, yeah. The women didn't work once they were pregnant, at that time. I think she had been a nurse, but I'm not sure which hospital she was associated with.

BP: OK. And where were you when Pearl Harbor happened?

DW: I was still at home, although I have to tell you that my mother died when I was 18 months old. And my father eventually married again, but not until I was ready to go to high school. So, there was a long time in there where my aunt and uncle and father raised me. We all lived in the same house at that time, and that was in Lancaster City. What was your next question?

BP: Where were you when Pearl Harbor happened?

DW: Well, I was just about ready to graduate from high school. I was halfway through my senior year in high school. I graduated in the class of '42, and when I did graduate from high school, I would have liked to have joined the Navy, but naval enlistments at that time were closed. My father had been in World War II, and he told me all the horrors of trench warfare, which I think were pretty bad. And I certainly didn't want to go into the army. I figured that if I went into the Navy, I would either have a good, nice, warm, [villa?] in the evening for sleeping, or else I wouldn't have anything and that's pretty much the way it worked out.

BP: I see, so when did you enlist then, in the Navy?

DW: At the beginning of -- I guess it '43. The first day of the year -- well, the second day of the year, there was an open enlistment for about 20 or 25 people for the Navy, and

I cut work that day. I had been working at Armstrong World Industries on an apprenticeship program for the electrical trade -- cut my job and went down to enlist, and there were maybe 35 or 40 people ahead of me, including the entire nearby town of Columbia football team. I thought, "Well, I'll never make this." But somehow or other, a lot of the football players weren't really in all that good a health. So, I was able to enlist early in 1942.

BP: I see. Where did they send you for your naval basic training?

DW: I went to Samson, New York. It was fairly new at that time. I think we might have been the first people to go through training on our particular barracks. There may have been earlier groups in other barracks, but I'm not sure what unit I was in. They were classified with alphabetical units, A, B, C, D, E. I think I may have been -- I thought it was G unit, but I'm not sure, anymore. And it was cold.

BP: And where did you attend basic?

DW: This was up in Seneca, New York, in the fingerlakes. And it gets pretty chilly up there. At least it did that year.

BP: Well, how about that? And do you recollect any experiences from your boot camp?

DW: It impressed me with their coldness up there why, when we swabbed down the deck, the water from the mop froze on the deck and we could slide halfway across the barracks.

BP: And where did you go after your basic training? Where did they send you?

DW: Well, I was selected for torpedo man. I had put down electrician, because I had some experience in electrical work, and I thought I would get that, but apparently they needed torpedo men, and that turned out to be serendipity, because the torpedo put me in good stead with the job which I returned to after the war.

BP: I see. And where did you go to torpedo man school?

DW: We went up to Newport, Rhode Island for the basic training, which I think consisted of two or maybe three months, after which we graduated and I was selected to go to advanced training school in San Diego, California. I can't tell you the exact date.

BP: And how did you get to San Diego from the east?

DW: We went via train. I had a short leave. I think I had a week leave at home after boot camp, and another short leave after graduating from basic training. And then I think a contingent -- I'm not sure -- I was in charge of a contingent, but I think that was coming back -- yes, it was. I went out on my own to San Diego. And after

graduating from San Diego, which was after basic training, which was pretty much like boot camp. Basic torpedo school was pretty much like boot camp. This was really something, because I was able to go on leave whenever I didn't have something that I had to do. At San Diego, the advanced training was actually going out and picking up the torpedos. Torpedos, of course, were fired to see how they work, and then recovered. They had a dummy warhead on them, which allowed flotation for the torpedo, and some flares, and lights, and so forth, so that you could find the torpedo bobbing around in the sea. Then you'd go out in a whaleboat, put a line on it, and tow it back to the ship, where you'd use a crane to pick it up.

BP: Did you ever have to open the torpedo and learn its part?

DW: Oh yes, that was the next part of it. We'd go out in the late afternoon and pick up torpedos, bring them back into the shop, and tear them down, and basically clean them up again, and get them ready for either service duty, or maybe another firing if something didn't go quite right the first firing.

BP: And after you attended advanced training there in San Diego, where did you go next?

DW: Then we took a group of people. I think I was head of it. By that time, I was second-class torpedo man. I think we

had about six or eight people that I escorted back to Norfolk, Virginia to form a nucleus crew for a yet unnamed destroyer.

BP: And what did you do then? How long was it before you got to the destroyer you were assigned to?

DW: I think we accumulated people for about two weeks or three weeks, or something like that. Probably not much more than that. At which time we were supposed to go to school, but it was unrelated. Something comes to mind. I was going to a hedgehog class -- hedgehogs were an array of rockets -- mostly destroyers escorts had. By this time, I was already assigned to a destroyer, and I knew the name of it, the USS *Twigg*. And I knew where it was being built, and that was at Charleston, South Carolina. And so I wasn't too interested in the hedgehog, so I pretty much cut those classes. I feel a little guilty about that, even today. But we never used them, and I never really -- I didn't really care about them.

BP: You mentioned that the hedgehog was on -- what did you say, a destroyer escort ship?

DW: Yes, some of the ships had these hedgehogs which were an array of small rockets, which they would fire presumably forward on the ship, and they were just small contact rockets. They formed a large circle, and then if one of

them would by some chance hit a submarine, which they already had a contact of course, they wouldn't just fire them indiscriminately -- they would know not only the place where the submarine was, but also the depth of the submarine, which was very important. And they could easily make a kill, then, on the submarine. I don't think they ever really worked out too well.

BP: So, how long did it take you -- did you go down to Charleston to meet the SS *Twiggs*, or how did that happen?

DW: Yes, we went down, and I think we had at least a dedicated car -- more than that -- of potential people for the USS *Twiggs*, which was DD591. We were there before the commissioning, and of course boarded at the commissioning.

BP: I believe the USS *Twiggs* was commissioned in November of 1943, so you were actually there before then.

DW: Yes, maybe a week or so. Not any more than that. I think there was building there at the naval shipyards.

BP: And what happened next?

DW: Well, we went through some routine training while at Norfolk, and eventually with the shipyard personnel aboard -- quite a few of them, and we eventually went on a shakedown cruise to Bermuda. That must have been pretty close to Christmas, because we had had a little incident at Bermuda in Christmas of '43, and New Year's of '44. While

we were there, I was I thought lucky enough to get leave on Christmas Day, but it turns out that Bermuda, which is not immune to a lot of tropical storms, has a hurricane set up on their shops, or did at that time. And they would just close up the shops and have it boarded over the glass windows. You couldn't even look inside the shops, which were all closed up on Christmas. So, Christmas turned out to be not really a good deal. We finally ended up at the USO, which was the only place in town that seemed to be open. We were anchored out in the stream, in the harbor, and we had to get a bumboat to get out to it.

BP: What's a bumboat?

DW: Well, a bumboat is you try and bum a ride out to your boat. They have their boats there, whaleboats generally, or maybe a little bigger, to take people out to their appropriate ships, but you have to kind of bargain with them, because of where the ship is located. Well, that wasn't any problem, but we got out into the area, and they suddenly thought they had an air raid. And of course, they didn't want any ships running around there, or any small boats. So, we had to go and sit alongside some ship. I don't know what one it was anymore, but we sat there well into the night until they decided there were no bogeys in the area, and it was all a mistake.

BP: OK, and after your shakedown in Bermuda, where did you go?

DW: After our shakedown in Bermuda, we went up to Norfolk, Virginia again. I say back to because we'd been there before. When I was there before, our crew nucleus never did go on board ship. But while we were up there, and we were getting accustomed to our ship, we trained other people on what we knew. So, there were some of the crews for ships that were to be commissioned after hours there at Norfolk, and we would regularly take them out. That was over a period of maybe the best part of a month. We did our thing, shooting at [slees?] and that sort of thing. I think we fired a couple depth charges. We didn't fire any torpedos. But otherwise we worked out the ship really more than we did on shakedown.

BP: And so, what did you do next after you left that assignment?

DW: We were assigned to escort the Big Ben -- that's the aircraft carrier Benjamin Franklin -- down the Atlantic and through the Pacific. We didn't really have any thing of any major importance.

BP: What was your experience? Did you go through the Panama Canal?

DW: Yes. That was the highlight of that particular trip. We ended up back in San Diego again, so I'm retracing my

steps, more or less. We went through the canal; the Big Ben just barely made it. They built it so it could go through there, but they needed a shoehorn to get it through. The destroyer didn't have any problem getting through there, of course. But the highlight of that particular trip was getting into Lake Gatun, which is a lake that lies between the Pacific Ocean. And that's freshwater, and we broke out the fire hoses, and sprayed all the salt off the ship, and I think sprayed each other too. But we had a fun time going through there. We were supposed to have [livery?] -- I can't remember the name of the town anymore, Pacific end of the line -- Balboa, I think it was. Somebody came up with the measles, so we were quarantined. We couldn't go ashore. We went on then through to the destroyer base at San Diego.

BP: And at that point, what did you do next?

DW: We did a few exercises in that area, operating with the Big Ben. I think there were a couple other destroyers along with us, although I don't know their names. Then eventually we took off for Pearl Harbor and escorted Big Ben into Pearl Harbor.

BP: Were you there in Pearl Harbor for very long?

DW: Well, we were there -- it might have been a week or two. I don't really know. We had enough for livery once or twice,

or maybe more than that. And we again, did more exercises and training. And eventually, I don't know what happened to the Big Ben after that. That's the last I think we saw her. I don't think we escorted her to Eniwetok. That was our next point of call.

BP: And what was going on at Eniwetok?

DW: Well, Eniwetok had just been secured, and I think we were one of the first ships in there, because I remember that when we came into Eniwetok, the water was so clear that you could look down the anchor chain, and see the anchor laying on the bottom. Well, that was fine for about two days or three days, when -- and we were in there pretty much alone, and then we rendezvoused, and then other ships started coming in there. And it wasn't too long before you couldn't count more than one or two chains in the anchor.

BP: So, it really got muddy fast?

DW: Yes, those were the days when you pumped the sewage overboard. I don't think they do that anymore. I know they don't do that anymore.

BP: Well, what did you do? Did you operate out of Eniwetok, what did you do?

DW: Yes, we went up to Saipan, and Guam, and I think they were newly secured. There was still fighting going on, but it was pretty much over by the time we got up there. I think

that most of the fleet came back from there, although I really don't know. While we were in Eniwetok, there was an incident. Like I say, we were one of the first ships in there. There were others in, but of course we were one of the first. There was a Japanese two-man submarine stranded on one of the sand spits, and a couple people from our ship had the bright idea of going over there and checking it out. Well, they brought back souvenirs. It didn't take them too long to find out that that's a no-no, you don't do that. So, I think they had to take everything back and put it back where it was. So, I wasn't part of that, but I understand that's what happened.

BP: What did you all do next after that?

DW: I think after that we went down to -- well, I guess that's about the time we crossed the equator, and we had our little -- we crossed the equator not too far from [Truck?], which was a major stronghold for the Japanese, but it was pretty well neutralized. But of course, you can't be sure of these things. The Japanese were certainly there, but I don't think they had that with which to do much.

BP: So, when you crossed the equator, I guess you went through that ceremony of crossing the equator?

DW: Yes, that was a highlight. Becoming first year a pollywog and then you're a shellback. It's kind of hazing sort of

thing. I don't know whether they still do that anymore, but in order to become a shellback, you have to cross the equator. They would ask you whether you're a shellback or a pollywog, and if you said anything by pollywog, why, they'd give you a wack. And there were such things as climbing through a greasy target [slee?], and kissing the knee of somebody there. I don't know who it is. This was kind of a hazing event, and we all survived it.

BP: Where did you go next?

DW: Then we were on our way down to the Admiralty Islands, where we were gathering the invasion fleet for the Philippines. And while we were there, Mt. Hood, an ammunition ship, blew up. I don't think it was -- well, I guess nobody really knows, but I don't think it was due to enemy action. It probably was some mistake somebody made. Anyways, it blew up in Mannis Harbor. It was as close to an atomic bomb as I ever want to see. Someone said that some of the pieces as big as the boiler were flying over our ship, and we did have some shrapnel come down on the ship, but it didn't do any harm to anyone, or damage to anyone, or damage to the ship. So, we were quite a distance away.

BP: From Mannis, where did you go?

DW: Well, from Mannis we went up to the invasion (inaudible).
That was in October, I believe, was it?

BP: I think it was in October of 1944, something around there.

DW: Yeah, I think so. And we were there for over a month. We weren't actually in the [night surface?] action that took place on the Surigao Strait, but we were one of three destroyers who were guarding the landing ships at [Lady?], which would have been an excellent target for the Japanese that came through Mindanao Straits. That Japanese task force bumped into three baby carrier groups -- small carrier groups, CVLs. I think there was three or four of those. They had a bad time for a while, and we were sent out to reinforce them after their ordeal was over, so we didn't actually contact the Japanese there at that time. Of course, we had air raids during the invasion of Lady, and from time to time we'd have kamikazes hitting ships near us, but it wasn't nearly as bad as what it was later on. We engaged in the invasion of [Pana?], I think it was, and also some other island which I can't name at the moment. And during one of those invasions, a carrier was hit and eventually one of our counterparts had to sink it. We took on survivors and brought them back to one of the battleships, I believe. I just can't tell you which one, but we had quite a few personnel from the carrier onboard.

We had standing room only for a while. I don't know how many were lost in there, I don't believe the percentage rate was too awfully high, but there were quite a few people lost there. But there were a lot of survivors too. After that then we brought them back to somewhat safety, and we would return to the invasion fleet then. After that we went back to -- I can't think of the name of the place -- which was another island, or something in the eastern Caroline's, but I can't tell you the name of it right now. That was unsecured, and as far as I know, I don't think they ever really sent a force to secure the island. The Japanese were living there, but they couldn't do very much against us.

BP: So, it was kind of like the hopping strategy, where they hopped some of the islands that...

DW: Yeah, they didn't even bother to invade it. So, that's the way the war was run.

BP: And where did you go from there?

DW: From there we grouped up to go to Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima was really a bad place. That was pretty rough for the marines. I understand that every time you stood up, somebody shot at you. It was pretty bad. I think it was supposed to take three days. Well, it took a lot longer; it took 27 days or something. And Iwo Jima is not that big a place. I think

on the second night or so, the marines put up the flag on top of Iwo Jima, and I happened to be on the bridge. My battle station for the most part was on the bridge, but for anti-aircraft battle station, which we had most often, I was on the third loader on the 40-millimeter gun. But all my watches stood on the bridge. And the executive office said, "There's quite a sight over there. There's Old Glory on top of Mt. Suribachi." So, of course we all took a look at that. And I guess there's not too many people who saw that flag still hanging around. But I saw it. We pulled in one evening in the first day or two, we turned on the search lights on Mt. Suribachi because a Japanese counter-offensive during the night, and I know I was uncomfortable about that. And the next morning I found some spent ammunition on the deck. They were trying to shoot out the searchlights, but of course by the time -- we were so far offshore -- by the time they were able to hit us, whatever they were firing at us was spent. It looked like a 50-caliber projectile. It didn't do any harm.

BP: Any other incidents there at Iwo Jima?

DW: Well, we had one incident where apparently this plane was coming target angle zero right for us, and we didn't fire at it. We never fired at it because it was nighttime, and we didn't want to give away a position. So, I think it

tried to suicide us, but it didn't do a very good job, because it splashed in the water beyond us. We later found out that our truck light came on, and that's what he was aiming at. He was too high.

BP: And the truck light. What is that, and where is that located?

DW: That's on the top of the mast. It's a navigational light which should not have been lit. It was a short circuit I think, somewhere in the cabling. And it'll turn these lights on, and we didn't know it. Apparently you can't see them too well from the ship, but you can see them when you're away from the ship much better. I think one of the fellows told me that he had to climb up the mast and repair that. Just a minute, I'm going to...

BP: You want me to put it on pause?

DW: No, I'm all right, but I'm going to put you on speakerphone. Can you hear me all right? My ear was getting tired.

BP: Yes, I can hear you.

DW: All right. We came in pretty close to the island on several occasions. We supported the landing. I think we went in further. When the landing craft encountered the resistance that they did, we went in pretty close to shore and supported the landing craft, closer than what we were

assigned to do. The previous two invasions, we were there three days ahead of time, and we bombarded the place with naval guns for three days, plus the fact that the B-29s flew over, and there was nothing left but a cloud of dust, I couldn't see how anybody could survive that, but I suspect very few people were killed or hurt there. There certainly was plenty of the opposition left. So, I think that's all.

BP: Well, after Iwo, where did you go?

DW: Well, then we went on back to some area, I'm not sure exactly where. We fell back the staging point for the Okinawa invasion. I didn't realize that Okinawa was really a part of Japan proper. I thought it was something that they took over -- well, it was something that they did take over, the Okinawans and the Japanese were somewhat different. But at that time that was the province of Japan.

BP: What was the duty of your destroyer, *USS Twiggs*, at Okinawa?

DW: Well, most of the destroyers were assigned to radar picket duty around the island of Okinawa, and of course the worst station, the station that got the most traffic was [Roger Peter?] two, which was pretty much I the direct line from the northern islands of Japan to Okinawa. We were on that

patrol for about two or three days. What you did was you stood between the landing beaches and the -- I should tell you about the landing. We were there about a week before the invasion, and we again bombarded the place, and we had some pretty close misses there. We weren't actually hit, but we had some close kamikaze -- several splashes right close to us. They were trying to get us, but they didn't. We were pretty lucky. One of the destroyers, I believe, went aground, and we tried to get it off ground by charring back and forth with out -- at top speed to make a wave, to maybe get it broken loose, but it wouldn't happen. I think we tried to pull it, but we couldn't do that either. They finally got the tug in there to pull it off. I can't tell you what the name of it was anymore, but that's one of the things we did. But mostly we were on radar picket duty. Okinawa was pretty hard on destroyers, I think it was about 6 or 8 ships anyways, that were sunk there. I can't tell you the exact number, but it was quite a few of them. And almost countless ones were damaged one way or another. As I said, we were assigned to Roger Peter two, radar picket station two, and we were able to get off of that the first time without any casualties, but the second time our luck ran out, and we got a hit. I think we probably could have missed that one, but the wing tip of the aircraft caught

out whaleboat [davet?] and it was enough to swing him toward the ship again, and when the bomb which he was carrying went off on contact with the water, it blew a pretty good sized hole into the starboard side of the ship. My counterpart on the 40-millimeter [third loader?] was killed in that action. He was on the starboard 40 millimeters forward, and I was on the port 40 millimeters forward.

BP: So, your job, when they had general quarters or whatever they did when they...

DW: Aircraft general quarters.

BP: Oh, I see. What was on the destroyer?

DW: What was that?

BP: What was it on the destroyer you were getting ready for battle?

DW: Well, you had several different battle stations.

BP: I see. That's what I meant to say. What was your battle station?

DW: You have to identify them. I had one for anti-aircraft, which was the fourth loader on the 40-millimeter, and then we had one for night surface action, which I was on the port director -- torpedo director -- which we never had to fire our torpedos in anger, by the way. Thank goodness. Then I had another station which was similar. I would

still use the same headset for the anti-submarine anti-aircraft. I believe that was the three major ones that we encountered. I don't think we had any more stations. That was it. And two of them of course were on the bridge. I was the [JU?] talker firing K-guns and (inaudible) charges. K-guns and the ash cans off the stern rack.

BP: Where did you go to get repaired after that kamikaze?

DW: There was a (inaudible) there, which we took previously to the main landing and they used that for repair facilities, the tenders moved in there. And I don't know that they anticipated that there would be so many ships damaged, but fortunately they had such a place available. It saved a lot of ships that would have been destroyed if they hadn't had a decent place. Some of them, I don't think, could have survived going back to the states, or going back to Pearl Harbor, where they had better facilities. I don't think they could have survived the open seas. Some of them were really bad. Some of them had to be towed back, and so forth. So I don't know how many ships were hit, but there was a lot.

BP: After you were repaired, did you go back to picket duty?

DW: Well, we did a couple of times, but I don't think we ever went back to Roger Peter two. We were hit in April, and were sunk in June.

BP: Tell me about the sinking in June.

DW: I understand that we were supposed to go back to the states to be repaired permanently. We had a temporary repair, which is about all you could do when you're out on the line. I understand that we were supposed to go back to the States. Of course, I wasn't privileged to any inside information, but I sort of believe we were, and I understand that the skipper decided that rather than unload the ammunition from our ship -- no sense in a ship going back with a whole load of ammunition on it -- rather than unload the ammunition, he would fire at the beach and make it easier for us who had to manhandle the ammunition on and off the ship. So, we were getting set up to fire up at the beach on the 15th of June, and all of a sudden I was just getting settled down in my favorite spot, which was sitting on the [flag?] bags where I could keep a pretty decent watch, and still be out of the way in case people needed to get around the bridge in a hurry. No sense in tripping over my phone line. We would set condition watch which entailed people on the fantail to take the depth charges off safety, in case we had to drop some depth charges in a hurry. And the number one torpedo tube, we always manned that one because you had a little shelter from the rain that fell on the fantail -- you didn't have any shelter,

and I didn't need the bridge, either. So, we were all in the same condition. I shouldn't tell you there was a blast shield over -- there's a round blast shield because number two gun could turn around and fire close enough to the torpedo that it could cause some damage to the people (inaudible). So, they built a blast shield over that. It was number three gun, I'm sorry, not number two. It was number three gun that was the middle gun of the three five-inch 38s that represented the main battery on the destroyer. That was the one that had the doghouse on it, or the blast shield. Where was I?

BP: The June 15th and 16th is kamikazes...

DW: OK, I had just settled down and the chief signalman came running around where I was out of the way. He said he dropped something, and I think the officer of the deck was there, too. And the next thing I know, it sounded like a coal slide, and apparently that's when they hit number two magazine and really, really did a lot of damage. The ship was already on its way to sinking. There wasn't a loud explosion, or anything. At least it didn't sound like it to me. It was just more like a coal slide. And the next thing I know, I probably was not conscious for a little bit. I don't really know. But when I collected my thoughts, it turned out the officer of the deck and the

signalman were not too far away from me, and they both kind of burned to death while I was with them.

BP: How did you get out?

DW: When the blast took place, it must have thrown me into the captain's cabin, or captain's head. And my right leg went in the toilet, my left one was outside of it over the raised hatchway, which the door was raised off the ground by about maybe a foot, so in case water sloshed around there wouldn't be any water either coming out of the head, or going in it. I don't know which way they ever protecting. That was pretty much the case with most of the hatches that were [dogged?] down over time. This raised portion broke my femur, and I didn't know that at the time. I knew I couldn't move my foot, and I couldn't get free. Eventually, I figured out what was happening, and I was able to -- I couldn't lift my leg up on its own, but I could reach around and grab my pant leg and pull my leg out from over top this hatchway, and then I was free to go. I could squirm out, which I did, because by the time I got free, the officers [on the?] deck and Chief [Sableman?] were dead. I think maybe the water from the toilet might have kept me from being burned, because I wasn't burned too badly. I didn't have any real burn. But the other fellows did. Anyway, I was able to finally squirm free, and just

about the time I got out from underneath all the wreckage, which they tell me -- one of the observers said that the wreckage was up as high as the mast from the bow of ship. Now, I don't know whether that's true or not, I couldn't tell. Anyway, there was a lot of wreckage until I finally got out to number one torpedo, which I could finally identify where I was. There was a fellow there, Hugh [Malloy?] and I put him down as being one of the heroes of the sinking. He helped me get down. He wanted to take me back to the fantail, where he said we could get a boat and go back to one of the other destroyers, which were standing by. But when the plane that dropped the torpedo on us flew over, he circled around, and came back, and suicided us in the after part of the ship near the number three five-inch 38. Anyway, he started to fire back there, and the 40-millimeter lockers which were near the number three gun started cooking off. They were firing and exploding. And I thought, "I don't think I want to do that," so he got me a life preserver from somebody who didn't need it anymore, and a (inaudible), and I wanted to go in the water and he finally agreed that I should. By the time I got down to the main deck -- which he helped me get down the ladder from the torpedo deck to the main deck -- the water was pretty much level with the [gunnel?]. You didn't have to

jump in the water or anything. I couldn't jump with a broken femur, anyway. I kind of eased myself into the water, and the water really felt good. I felt that maybe I'm going to make this after all. So, I got in the water and I knew the ship was sinking, so I paddled away from it as far as I could, and about the time when I thought I was a safe distance, sure enough, there was another explosion, and the ship did sink fairly quickly. That left only some burning patches of oil which were coming my way, and I was covered with fuel oil. At boot camp they told you how to protect yourself in case you were in burning water, and I'm here to say that that works pretty decently, because there were fires burning all around me, and I splashed and waved my hands around in the water -- splashed the water away from me, and that seemed to work pretty good. The fire was close but it never touched me and finally burned out. But at that time, everything was black. I mean, I couldn't see anything. I was paddling around in the water and (inaudible). I felt we were kind of floating toward the beach. We had been setting up to fire at the beach. And of course, that was still Japanese territory. I wasn't too happy about that, but I don't really know whether we were or not. At any rate, I suddenly see a ship loom out of the darkness, and it's headed right towards me -- I mean,

really right towards me. And I yell, and the ship got so close that I could see the people standing up on the forward part of the ship, and they were looking -- I could see them trying to peer out to where the noise was coming from, and suddenly I said, "No, not out there, down here." And somebody spotted me down below them, and somebody threw me a line, but the line was maybe a foot or two from me, and I could not reach it. And the ship was coming closer all the time, and in the meantime I could hear the officer of the deck say, "Hard right rudder," and he drew the stern of the ship away from me, because I would have gotten sucked in by the propellers, I'd expect. The ship drifted off into the night, and I never saw it again. I'm sure they tried to find me again, but the Pacific is pretty big. Then I was pretty sure that we were getting in closer to land, but like I said I wasn't too happy about that. But after a while, I heard the unmistakable sound of a motor whaleboat off in the distance, so I started yelling again, and I could hear them yelling for me, and I yelled back to them, and they finally zeroed in on me. They finally picked me up in the ship.

BP: Where did they take you?

DW: Well, I went to -- they wanted to set me up on one of the seats. By the time I got in the ship, my leg was starting

to not feel too good. Originally, it didn't seem to hurt that much, but now it's starting to -- "Let me just lay here." So, I laid in the (inaudible) of the whaleboat until we got back to the USS *Putnam* -- was one of the ships that were standing by. There were two or three other destroyers, and they had a cargo net down, and somehow or other -- with help I guess -- but somehow or other I climbed up the cargo net over the top and onto the deck, and lay there on the deck. I guess the medic officer of the *Putnam* asked me, "Well, what's wrong with you, sailor?" I said, "I have a broken leg." He says, "How do you know you have a broken leg?" I said, "This didn't always bend in the middle." I didn't mean to be smart about it, but it was laying at a crazy angle, and I thought he could see that. Maybe he could, I don't know. Anyway, they must have figured I was one of the ones that were hurt the worst. They picked up and took me down into the captain's cabin of the *Putnam*. They put me in the nice white bed and I know I was covered with oil, and I protested about that. I didn't think that was the thing to do, but I think some of them relished putting me in there, I don't know. Anyways, they put me into the captain's nice clean bed. After that then they transferred me to an ambulance type ship. They had an [Ellis Landy?] ship; I don't know what

it was. A small ship that they had converted into being an ambulance. And they have a little operating room there and everything. They put a cast on me, but it was just a leg cast, and that wasn't really very good. And eventually they transferred me to the -- I think it was the USS *Rescue* that was picking up wounded personnel. And there they kind of sneered at the work that the other people did, and they put a different cast on, and eventually after about a week we went to Saipan. I went to the naval hospital there at Saipan, and they sneered at the work that the *Rescue* did so they put a new cast on. And then I think we had a flight back on the C-54 something that was converted into a hospital type ambulance airplane. And went back to Pearl Harbor, and they put a new cast on. I was at Pearl Harbor for maybe a week. And then we flew into [Okinell?] in Oakland, California at the naval hospital there. And they put another cast on. Finally, after all that time, and it had been at least a month, somebody finally washed my head, and I finally felt like I was living again. I was kind of in limbo all that time. But anyway, that finally happened, and nobody seemed to care about all those greasy pillows I'd left a trail of across the Pacific.

BP: How long was it before you recovered?

DW: Well, I went up from Oakland we went up to Seattle. Of course, they ask you where you want to go. I put down Philadelphia, St. Albans, and several other places on the east coast, but they sent me up to Seattle, which was all right. Anyway, I was up there four to six months, I don't really know. They had the cast cut off again, and hopefully my leg had headed but at Seattle one of the doctors -- the war was over by that time, of course, and most of the doctors were not too interested in their cases. They were more interested, as I would have been, to get home. They wanted to get home; they wanted to get out of there. But I finally got a doctor that paid a little attention to me, and he had them put a cast on there so that I could get up. I had been flat on my back all this time, after the leg didn't heal properly. He said he wanted me up and moving around, that's probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I did get around and I even went out on Liberty a couple times with a body cast on. One time a friend of mine was in the next bed with me -- we were up in Seattle at the time, and a friend of mine was from, I think, [Pealla?] Oregon -- I think it's in Oregon, I know it's Pealla. Anyway, he took me to his place on Liberty one time, and he wanted to drive the car. Well, he was in a body cast, and I was in a body cast. And

I had my left leg available, and he had his right leg available. So, we drove the car -- he used the clutch and the brake, and I did the gas. It was really something. But we didn't go out on the highway or anything, but we drove around the farm. They lived on kind of a small farm in Pealla, and we had a high old time. And then eventually they sent me east to Philadelphia Naval Hospital, and I guess around the latter part of May, I was mobile enough to be discharged from there.

BP: OK, so you were discharged there at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. You mentioned that your schooling in the Navy helped you in your career after the Navy. What did you do when you got out?

DW: Well, I had already been an apprentice, so I went back to the apprentice program again. At first I didn't realize that it did help me so much -- the torpedos in those days were pneumatically driven, and I got to be pretty well schooled in how pneumatics work. The torpedo is driven by compressed air and steam. Mostly I think the steam from the torpedo is used so that when the high-pressure air is used on the turbines, it doesn't cause a freezing problem. That's mostly what the little boiler on the torpedo is for. So, it's mainly driven by compressed air. If they didn't have the heating of the air, when the air expanded, it

would form ice and I would think, cause problems. I went back to my job at Armstrong World Industries and my apprenticeship. Armstrong made floor coverings, by the way. And they used resins and so forth. In some cases cork, in some cases asphalt, and so forth. Many of which were hazards for ignition. A fire could be a serious problem. At that time, the petrochemical industry, which Armstrong was part of, was not checked out to use electrical or the electronics. There were electronics at that time. Pretty rudimental, but we did have some. The insurance companies did not check out petrochemical industry until some time later. Most all the controls were then used pneumatics. All of that was right down my alley, so I did have a leg up on that, and I advanced pretty well at Armstrong, I think.

BP: What did you feel about the Japanese when you got back?

DW: Well, some people seemed to be -- I never -- hey, it wasn't my argument. I never held anything against the Japanese, even during the war. I guess I started on the path of pacifism some time ago. But I know that when we were at Okinawa, one of the island groups there was Ishima, which was a fairly good-sized island adjacent to Okinawa. Incidentally, that's an island named for -- one of the major war reporters was killed, Ernie Pile. Anyway, we were assigned to bombard the island. There were some

military outposts there, I guess. But the next thing you know, we're shooting at some guy who is plowing the field up there. Nobody said anything, but I could see they were shooting at him. I didn't think that was right. But, I think war does bad things to good people.

BP: How did the war change you, or did it change you any?

DW: It certainly made me want to prevent war whenever possible. I'm not at a peace at any price person, but I certainly think we ought to do everything we can to not kill each other.

BP: Well, I want to thank you very much for your service, and this interview. This concludes the interview. Is there anything else you want to add?

DW: No, I don't think so.

BP: Well, I just want to thank you, Mr. Witmer, for this interview and your service to the country. I just hope you have a good day, and it's not too too cold out there where you are, but I know it is.

DW: I'm going to stick pretty close to the hearth.

BP: OK. Thank you, sir, very much.

DW: All right, thank you.

BP: Bye-bye.

DW: Bye-bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE