

*National Museum of the Pacific War*

*Nimitz Education and Research Center*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Interview with

**Mr. Lester Harrell**

Date of Interview: August 12, 2015

# **National Museum of the Pacific War**

## **Fredericksburg, Texas**

### **Interview with Mr. Lester Harrell**

Interview in progress.

John Fargo: Today is August the...12<sup>th</sup>, 2015. My name is John Fargo, and I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today I am interviewing Lester Harrell concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is taking place in Mr. Harrell's home in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the Educational and Research Center for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Okay, Lester, that's out of the way.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: And now we can get started. Tell me a little bit about your early years; what's your birthdate?

Mr. Harrell: Birthday is February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1921.

John Fargo: 1921. Where were you born?

Mr. Harrell: Dallas, Texas.

John Fargo: So, you're a native Texan?

Mr. Harrell: Yep.

John Fargo: What was your father's occupation?

Mr. Harrell: Uh, sales.

John Fargo: He's in sales?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Have any siblings?

Mr. Harrell: Yes, I had a brother and a sister; both are deceased.

John Fargo: Okay. You go to high school in Dallas?

Mr. Harrell: No, I went to high school...I graduated from high school...in San Antonio.

John Fargo: San Antonio? Okay...uh...

Mr. Harrell: Thomas Jefferson.

John Fargo: What year was that, do you remember?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah! 1938.

John Fargo: 1938. That was ten years before I did.

Mr. Harrell: Okay, (laughter).

John Fargo: Uh, you go to college from high school?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: What college?

Mr. Harrell: Baylor.

John Fargo: Did you graduate?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: What year?

Mr. Harrell: 1942.

John Fargo: So, you must have gone right from college into the Navy?

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: Did you get drafted or were you...enlisted?

Mr. Harrell: Did I get my what?

John Fargo: Were you enlisted in the Navy or...

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: ...did you get drafted?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, I enlisted.

John Fargo: You enlisted, okay. Uh, what was the year of that...1942?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: In light of the fact that...you were...a college graduate, uh, did they send you to OCS?

Mr. Harrell: Officers what?

John Fargo: Training?

Mr. Harrell: Uh...

John Fargo: Where...where'd you go to boot camp?

Mr. Harrell: Notre Dame.

John Fargo: Notre Dame?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, and I was there about six weeks, I think, and then I went to...to...(pause)...Midshipman School in...New York.

John Fargo: Midshipman School?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay, so...

Mr. Harrell: Columbia University.

John Fargo: What...what university?

Mr. Harrell: Columbia.

John Fargo: Columbia?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay. So, uh, when you graduated from...the Midshipman School in Columbia, were you an Ensign?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: Okay. And did you receive any advanced training after Midshipman School?

Mr. Harrell: I don't think so.

John Fargo: So what happened; where...where did you go after you graduated from Columbia?

Mr. Harrell: I went to the Nav...uh, to...let me think a minute.

John Fargo: Sure, take your time.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter), it's a long...long time ago.

John Fargo: I know.

Mr. Harrell: I'm...I'm older and I've had two strokes...what...what was the question?

John Fargo: Well, after you graduated from Midshipman School...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah?

John Fargo: ...where did you go? Where did they send you?

Mr. Harrell: (Pause), I don't remember.

John Fargo: Did you go...right to the ship? The [USS Canberra]?

Mr. Harrell: No, I went to the [USS] New Mexico, a battleship.

John Fargo: Oh, is that right?!

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: A battleship? Okay...that's...that's interesting.

Mr. Harrell: And...about eight months, and then transferred to the Canberra.

John Fargo: Battleship?

Mr. Harrell: Or as the English call it Canberrah (pronounced this way by the English).

John Fargo: Oh, is that how you spe...pronounce it? Canberrah?

Mr. Harrell: Canberra.

John Fargo: Canberra. So, how long were you on the battleship?

Mr. Harrell: About eight months.

John Fargo: About eight months. So, what was your job there? What was your job?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I'm trying to think. I was assigned to a...I think the starboard anti-aircraft, five-inch, thirty-eight...

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: ...anti-aircraft.

John Fargo: Is that the same job you had at the Canberra?

Mr. Harrell: No, on the Canberra, I was in the...plotting room at a...at a computer, and we took im...we took information from this...from the...people at topside.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And we computed the...(sss sounds)...computed the...(pause) information about the height...the way the...speed of the plane and that kind of thing, and that went into the computer and the computer sent this to the people who were managing the guns.

John Fargo: Oh, that's when you were...under attack?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay. Okay, so...what happens when you were just, you know, there were no enemy aircraft in the vicinity; what did you do...?

Mr. Harrell: Well, we stood our watch at...at the gun.

John Fargo: At the gun?!

Mr. Harrell: No, no, I mean, at the...at the computer.

John Fargo: Oh, at the computer, okay.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah.

John Fargo: Okay. What year did you join the Canberra?

Mr. Harrell: Well, I joined...(laughter), wait a...wait a minute.

John Fargo: Well, maybe I can...

Mr. Harrell: Well, you...I joined the Navy in...when?

John Fargo: You joined the Navy in '42; you went to...uh, Notre Dame, then Columbia and then you went on the...it must have been some time in '43 you joined the Canberra.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, must have been it, yeah.

John Fargo: Okay. Uh, so tell me a little bit about that ship.

Mr. Harrell: The Canberra?

John Fargo: Yeah.

Mr. Harrell: (Talking to another person), Lucille.

Lucille: Uh hum?

Mr. Harrell: Bring me that picture...bring...bring me the ship.

Lucille: Oh, okay.

Mr. Harrell: I got a...I got a minute...I got a miniature of...of the ship.

John Fargo: You do?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay, okay. It was a heavy cruiser, right?

Mr. Harrell: Heavy cruiser.

John Fargo: Oh, here it is.

Mr. Harrell: There you are.

John Fargo: Okay (looking at ship). So, these are the guns that you were plotting the ranges for?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: These are the bigger guns, the eight inch?

Mr. Harrell: Those are big...huh?

John Fargo: Are these the eight inch?

Mr. Harrell: No, those are the...I think eighteen...eighteen inch.

John Fargo: Eighteen inch.

Mr. Harrell: Uh, the guns that I was...I can't...I can't see too well, is this...are these...smaller guns...here?

John Fargo: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you got six of them. Three on each side...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...now here's seven...eight; you got total of eight.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And...those are six-inch guns?

Mr. Harrell: No, they're smaller than that.

John Fargo: Smaller than that?



Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I've forgotten my size.

John Fargo: Like fifty caliber...machine gun type things?

Mr. Harrell: Little bigger than that.

John Fargo: Little bigger than that?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay. And these are the big ones for...uh, bombarding...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah.

John Fargo: ...the shore?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, uh hum.

John Fargo: Things like that. So, you didn't have anything to do in...with bombardment of shore facilities?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: But you were the ones to...to tell these gun commanders what the...range was...

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: ...and everything...

Mr. Harrell: Right, right.

John Fargo: ...they'd be attacking...

Mr. Harrell: Attacking, yeah, yeah.

John Fargo: ...the Japanese?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah, and the speed and all that kind of thing.

John Fargo: Yeah. That's a nice ship.

Mr. Harrell: It is!

John Fargo: Yeah, (unintelligible)

Mr. Harrell: It's a beautiful ship.

John Fargo: Over a thousand men on this ship, right?

Mr. Harrell: About sixteen hundred, I think.

John Fargo: Sixteen hundred?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah, lot of...lot of people.

John Fargo: Alright. Okay, at the...at the time you joined the Canberra, you were an Ensign?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: So, you stood the watch on the...the plotting computer...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...during the whole time...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...you were on the ship?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Alright. Very good, very nice.

Mr. Harrell: Just put it right there, yeah.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I taught at Baylor for a while.

John Fargo: You mean before you...uh...

Mr. Harrell: Af...after I came back.

John Fargo: Oh, after you came back. Well, we'll get to that.

Mr. Harrell: But I was going to tell you about...I bought this...I bought this ship from the...son of one of the faculty members (unintelligible).

John Fargo: Was he on the Canberra?

Mr. Harrell: No, no.

John Fargo: He made it?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, he was a boy about...twelve or fourteen years old.

John Fargo: Oh, okay.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: And he made that? That was...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...that was nice. Okay, Lester, where were we? Uh, when you joined the Canberra, where was it? In New York?

Mr. Harrell: Uh, Boston.

John Fargo: It was in Boston?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: So, is this...were you the first crew members?

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: The first crew members.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And they sailed the...from Canberra, or from...Boston all the way to Hawaii?

Mr. Harrell: Yep. Went down the Panama Canal...

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: ...and out...to Hawaii.

John Fargo: To Hawaii. Uh, how long of a trip was that?

Mr. Harrell: I have no idea.

John Fargo: Okay, were you...part of a convoy?

Mr. Harrell: No, to Boston...down to...Panama Canal...through the Panama Canal then out...out.

John Fargo: Were you by yourself? The ship was by itself?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay, no convoy?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: Uh huh. Okay, now Hawaii was the first destination; what'd you do in Hawaii?

Mr. Harrell: I bought souvenirs. (laughter)

John Fargo: (Laughter). You still have them?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I got (laughter).

John Fargo: (Laughter). Okay. Okay, from Hawaii then you started getting involved in combat...act...operations, correct?

Mr. Harrell: Yes. Well, we...we (unintelligible)...now you're getting to a point where I can't remember everything, but I...we sailed out to join the...Task Force 58.

John Fargo: Okay, was that with the...the [USS] Yorktown, the carrier Yorktown?

Mr. Harrell: I don't think so...I don't (unintelligible).

John Fargo: Or was that the [USS] Lexington?

Mr. Harrell: I think it more likely the Lex...Lexington.

John Fargo: Lexington?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And that was your first combat exposure?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Uh, I was in nine combat...had nine combat experiences.

John Fargo: Nine?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. We got a star for each (unintelligible), and I have a...something up here that says...nine...

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: ...nine...

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: ...nine stars.

John Fargo: Nine stars?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: So, you were with the Canberra throughout the entire history of the ship?

Mr. Harrell: Except for the...for...for the first eight months...I was with the New Mexico.

John Fargo: Yeah, but...but...you joined the Canberra as it left...Boston.

Mr. Harrell: Boston.

John Fargo: So...for the South Pacific.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: So, you were on it for...quite some time.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: You were on it for about...five year...four...four year?

Mr. Harrell: No, three or four years.

John Fargo: Three or four years.

Mr. Harrell: It...it was torpedoed...the Canberra was.

John Fargo: Well that's how you got hit.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Yeah.

Mr. Harrell: And...it came back to the States, and I...and when we got back we were...we were transferred to other...other...places, and this was near...near the end of the war. And I went into a...LSM. You know what an LSM is?

John Fargo: No.

Mr. Harrell: Landing Ship Medium.

John Fargo: Medium?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, it's the...they're a small ship, and that was a real good experience for me because I was commanding officer (laughter).

John Fargo: Oh really?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Well, let's back up before we get to that.

Mr. Harrell: Alright.

John Fargo: Uh, let's talk a little bit about some of those combat experiences in the South Pacific.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: Uh, is there anything specifically you remember about that?

Mr. Harrell: Uh...

John Fargo: Any...one operation that sticks out?

Mr. Harrell: Well, one operation is that...we were...at one point...every...every...I'm...I'm having...I'm having to recall these things now. Uh, at one point the airplanes out to meet the Japanese...and they were shot down or the planes were, and went around and picked them up. And...we on that...we...we won that skirmish...I don't remember...

John Fargo: Which one that was, huh?

Mr. Harrell: No, no.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: Uh, I have an autobiography over here, but I don't think it had that...that information in it.

John Fargo: I've read a lot about it before today, before I came to you...on the computer, yeah.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: So, you were in six or eight different combat operations?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah, uh hum.

John Fargo: And during all those operations you were in the plotting room...

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: ...by the computer?

Mr. Harrell: That's right.

John Fargo: Is it pretty chaotic...

Mr. Harrell: No...

John Fargo: ...in there?

Mr. Harrell: ...it's not...chaotic, but we would...got...we had pressure to...to...pressure to perform.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And I stood in front of a computer that was...I don't know how big it was, but it was bigger than that chair and not as big as...big as that sofa...

John Fargo: Really?

Mr. Harrell: ...and we would...they...they weren't really computers like we talk about computers now; they were...computers....like we had then (laughter).

John Fargo: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Harrell: But...

John Fargo: Did you see on the screen little blips for the airplanes?

Mr. Harrell: No. They...I've forgotten now. I think we...we got information from...the comp...or was it from the...people in the...

John Fargo: On the bridge?

Mr. Harrell: Not the bridge, but...the towers.

John Fargo: Yeah.

Mr. Harrell: What do...what do you call those towers up there that...?

John Fargo: Towers up here?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. Not these towers, but...anyway, (pause) there'd be a few officers...up in the...up...up here some place (laughter)...

John Fargo: Uh hum.

Mr. Harrell: ...and they...and they would...they would communicate with us, and...and give us information and we would put it in the computer (unintelligible).



John Fargo: And then...what did the computer do? It...?

Mr. Harrell: It told us...where the plane was.

John Fargo: Speed?

Mr. Harrell: Speed...height.

John Fargo: Altitude?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And you relayed that to the gun commanders?

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: How did you know which commander or which gun?

Mr. Harrell: Well, we were connected...to a starboard or a port gun.

John Fargo: I see.

Mr. Harrell: And not to a person, but to...but to the...gun itself.

John Fargo: I see. Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: It was...it was...it was real...

John Fargo: Real scientific, huh?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah, but...

John Fargo: Do...do you have any idea how successful the gun crews were using your information...in shooting down any airplanes?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: They never told you that?

Mr. Harrell: No, 'cause I...I was down below, so I...I couldn't see what happened.

John Fargo: Right, you couldn't see, but they didn't tell you afterwards?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, they did, but I...I've forgotten now.

John Fargo: (Chuckles), okay.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter), except one time they says, "Torpedo is headed towards the Canberra."

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And that's when we knew that they had...Japanese had...dropped...dropped the torpedo; it was headed towards the ship and then hit...(pause)...some...somewhere in here (showing location of torpedo hit).

John Fargo: Almost in the middle of the ship, huh?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, (unintelligible).

John Fargo: But below...

Mr. Harrell: But...below the...the...

John Fargo: Yeah, I know what you mean. Uh, down in the...uh...

Mr. Harrell: Below the...uh...

John Fargo: The sleeping quarters and all that...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah.

John Fargo: ...of the ship?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Alright. Okay, it was pretty...pretty good hit on the part of the...the Japs.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, it sure was. It...we had...two...two...machine...uh, two engine...two engineering rooms, I guess, you'd say and two boiler rooms, and it hit...so that the boiler rooms and their (unintelligible) engineering rooms were destroyed, so we were dead in the water. Didn't sink the ship, but it was dead in the water.

John Fargo: I understand twenty-three sailors got killed, huh?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Any...any other...injuries?

Mr. Harrell: Oh yeah, there...other...injuries. I...I don't remember how many but...quite a few.

John Fargo: How far away from...that...explosion were you?

Mr. Harrell: Uh, I was close enough to feel the shaking of the ship, but I...not...I didn't...I didn't experience anything...other than just a thud.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And (unintelligible).

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I don't how far I was.

John Fargo: So, no one in your immediate vicinity...was...injured...

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: ...as a result of this?

Mr. Harrell: Well, the ship was...six hundred and thirty feet long.

John Fargo: Right.

Mr. Harrell: And...so there was quite a bit of space...(laughter)...space in there.

John Fargo: Yeah, I can imagine, sure. And that torpedo was not enough to sink the ship?

Mr. Harrell: No, no. No, no.

John Fargo: So, what happened after...uh, the torpedo hit? You call...the Captain call for general quarters?

Mr. Harrell: Oh, we called for general quarters...long time before [that]. We called for general quarters when the Japanese showed up.

John Fargo: I see.

Mr. Harrell: You know, their planes were flying around.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: They were all at...we were all at general quarters.

John Fargo: I see. Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Gosh, you're asking me to recall...a lot of things that happened...how many years ago?

John Fargo: Oh yeah, yeah. I understand.

Mr. Harrell: Long time ago.

John Fargo: So, the...the ship was...hit.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: What happened then? What did you do? What did they tell...what was your...well, you had some kind of a...another job to do in a case like this?

Mr. Harrell: No. The...the bomb...the bomb...the torpedo hit down near the engine rooms.

John Fargo: Right.

Mr. Harrell: And not...not...not when...not where we were. And of course, these ships were...were built so that they had the...water-tight doors, you know?

John Fargo: Yes, yes.

Mr. Harrell: So, noth...nothing really happened close to me. It all happened out...

John Fargo: So you continued to work your work?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Do your work?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And I'm sure there were other planes in the sky and you were continuing to plot those and pass the information on.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, that's right.

John Fargo: Okay, okay.

Mr. Harrell: It was...

John Fargo: How long before the Captain...did the Captain ever say, "Abandon ship."?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: Never...never came close to that?

Mr. Harrell: No, no, no. That's a big ship.

John Fargo: It sure is.

Mr. Harrell: And...the way...I don't think we ever got close to...having to abandon ship.

John Fargo: So, how did he get out of the area? You...you couldn't...uh...you didn't have any power.

Mr. Harrell: The US...I've forgotten now...and you asked...(pause)...there was another ship; I've forgotten whether...what's the name of it was...I used to remember the name; it may be in my book here, but...one...another ship came along and...and towed us out.

John Fargo: USS Wichita.

Mr. Harrell: Right (laughter). Where...where'd you get that?

John Fargo: I got that from the computer.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: The USS Wichita.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Let me see what it says here. “Took Canberra undertow for a rendezvous with a tug.”

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...USS Munsee.

Mr. Harrell: A sea-going tug.

John Fargo: Sea-going tug. And they put a salvage crew aboard.

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: And these guys were trained in how to repair...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...these kind of...instances.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Now, I read somewhere, Lester, where one of the officers of that salvage crew actually went down into the water, into the...where the engine rooms were...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...and he got injured down there and he died. Did you hear that?

Mr. Harrell: I didn't know he went down and died. I...I knew that one of the guys...died.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I wonder...wonder why he did that?

John Fargo: I...well, he...was probably going down there swimming to see how...the...extent of the damage...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...you know? Uh, “The salvage officer from Munsee,” that's the tug...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ..., “died while diving in the cruiser’s flooded engine room...to make temporary repairs.”

Mr. Harrell: And he died then?

John Fargo: He...yeah. They must have sent somebody in to...drag him out.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: So, twenty-three (buzzing sounds in the background)...United States sailors died in that attack.

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: Okay, the next question I had...and it wasn’t answered in everything I read...the crew remained onboard the ship all during the time that the tugs took the ship back for repairs (buzzing sounds in background).

Mr. Harrell: Yes.

John Fargo: Right straight through till Boston?

Mr. Harrell: Well, I don’t know; I didn’t go back to Boston. Seems like to me I was transferred...transferred to something else; I don’t know. (Unintelligible words).

John Fargo: How...how’d you get off the ship?

Mr. Harrell: I have no idea (laughter).

John Fargo: You don’t remember?

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: And you don’t remember where you went...

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: ...at that point?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Sorry.

John Fargo: Well, let me...let me tell you what I read here. Uh, went to some island called Manus and then went back to the Boston Navy Yard.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: Okay. So, as far as you're concerned, you had no more job. I mean, there was no need for your job while the ship was being towed back.

Mr. Harrell: That's right, that's right.

John Fargo: So, that's probably why they took you off.

Mr. Harrell: That's right. That...I don't...my next assignment was on an LSM.

John Fargo: LSM, where...and where did you join that LSM?

Mr. Harrell: I have no idea (laughter).

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Sorry.

John Fargo: No problem, no problem.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: So, what was your job on the LSM?

Mr. Harrell: (Pause), well, I'm glad you asked, but I be...I became the commanding officer.

John Fargo: Commanding officer, yeah (laughter).

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, that was a real...ego...strengthened (laughter).

John Fargo: What was...what was your rank at that time?

Mr. Harrell: For your Ensign, Lieutenant, Lieutenant JG, I guess, Lieutenant JG.



John Fargo: Well...

Mr. Harrell: I...I didn't go very high.

John Fargo: Lieutenant JG and then Full Lieutenant. Were you a Full Lieutenant?

Mr. Harrell: I may have been; I...I don't know.

John Fargo: Probably were...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...to be a commanding officer of...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...a...LSM. Now I don't know of LSM; is that bigger than an LST?

Mr. Harrell: No, it's smaller.

John Fargo: Smaller than an LST. What did it carry?

Mr. Harrell: Medium tanks.

John Fargo: Medium tanks?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, two...two of them, I think.

John Fargo: Did you ever go on an operation with...with them?

Mr. Harrell: No, no.

John Fargo: Where...where did they send you? Where...where did the ship go after you joined it?

Mr. Harrell: I don't know (laughter).

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: Okay, so shortly after you were made the Captain of that ship...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...you must have been re...uh, discharged?

Mr. Harrell: (Pause), I'm trying to remember. I was discharged somewhere in California.

John Fargo: California?

Mr. Harrell: But I don't remember where.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I have a picture of me...on that...on that LSM as a commanding officer. (Pause), I don't have...my picture, I have...not only do...not only was it a long time ago, but I've had two strokes in my brain.

John Fargo: Yeah, I understand (unintelligible words).

Mr. Harrell: And it damaged.

John Fargo: Well, you...your memory is still pretty good.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: Still pretty good. So, then you were discharged in...about 1946?

Mr. Harrell: I think so, yeah.

John Fargo: And...you went back to Baylor?

Mr. Harrell: No, no. I...(pause) came home.

John Fargo: To Dallas?

Mr. Harrell: San Antonio.

John Fargo: San Antonio.

Mr. Harrell: And...from there, I went to graduate school, the University of Minnesota.

John Fargo: Minnesota (laughter)?

Mr. Harrell: That's where I got my PhD.

John Fargo: Oh, is that right?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Minnesota, why...why Minnesota?

Mr. Harrell: Well, let's see, I was married by that time and Lucille and I...just...we had...we...I...I was accepted at graduate school in...Iowa State, Iowa, Iowa State I guess...and two or three other schools, but Minn...Minnesota just appealed to us so we picked Minnesota. And we are so glad...we did because those...Scandinavians were real nice to us.

John Fargo: Really?

Mr. Harrell: And we were from Texas.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And that was new to them.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And we had a ball!

John Fargo: Well, that's great.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: So, you got your PhD from...Minnesota (buzzing sounds in the background)?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay, and then what...where did you teach?

Mr. Harrell: I left there to go to...Trinity University in San Antonio.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: My mother got me my first job.

John Fargo: She did?!

Mr. Harrell: She called out to the...let's see, called Trinity. Trinity was kind of new; it...it had...it moved from...Waxahachie, I think, to...to San Antonio.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: She called out and the dean said, "Yeah, we need two psychologists." So, I applied when I got...and I got one of those (unintelligible).

John Fargo: Is that right?! So, you taught psychology?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: And how...how long did you stay at Trinity?

Mr. Harrell: Three years.

John Fargo: Three years? Then where did you go?

Mr. Harrell: I went to Baylor as a...faculty member up there; taught psychology and was head of the...head of the counseling center (buzzing sounds in the background).

John Fargo: Head of the what?

Mr. Harrell: Counseling center.

John Fargo: Uh huh, uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And I stayed there for six years. And then a friend of mine came down to Austin to be...head of the Commission of Higher Education and so I came down to be his assistant. And he left after one year and I became...Director of the Commission on Higher Education.

John Fargo: Well, was...was that a State job?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: I see. So, you retired from the State?

Mr. Harrell: No, I just (chuckles), I was...I was there just about...three years.

John Fargo: Uh huh. And you went back to teaching?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I went back to the University of Texas as a...teacher on the faculty.

John Fargo: I see.

Mr. Harrell: Teacher and...uh, I did something else; I've forgotten now what I did. I think I had a...I had a...(pause)...I think it was...admin...administrator job...

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: ...part...partly then.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: You're going way back!

John Fargo: So, you had a great career?!

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: In education.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I did.

John Fargo: Yes sir! Yes sir! Uh, so, you had about...four years total active duty in the...Navy?

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: Had four years and...uh, looking back on that, now, I really that's a long time ago, but...how could you...summ...summarize your feelings about those four years in the Navy.

Mr. Harrell: They were good years. Uh, I was never in...in danger of being torpedoed or hurt, injured or anything, but it kind of, you know, when you're twen...when you're twenty-two years old, you're real...these things are exciting.

John Fargo: Yes.

Mr. Harrell: So, I don't think I remember any of the danger.

John Fargo: Uh huh. Oh well, you were...you were in harm's way.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, not...that...I...I wasn't aware of it so much.

John Fargo: No, being where you were...onboard ship, but...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...the very fact that the Canberra got torpedoed shows you how close you were to...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. Yeah, I was...in here some place; I think the torpedo hit back here some place.

John Fargo: Yeah, yeah. But there could have been other...planes that hit the Canberra, you know?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: There was a lot of activity going on.

Mr. Harrell: The planes were flying all around.

John Fargo: Right.

Mr. Harrell: 'Cause the guys were up...up here...on the phones telling us what was happening.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And it was a lot of excitement.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: But we weren't experiencing it because we were...four decks below.

John Fargo: But *they* were.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. They were up there watching all of this.

John Fargo: Yeah. Did any of those fellows become casualties?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: No? So, the only casualties that the ship had was as a result of the torpedo attack?

Mr. Harrell: Right, right.

John Fargo: In all those campaigns, no other casualties?

Mr. Harrell: No.

John Fargo: I see. The ship was very lucky then.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, it was.

John Fargo: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Harrell: We...we came in...do you remember...Guadalcanal and some of those (unintelligible)?

John Fargo: Sure.

Mr. Harrell: Well, there were some of those...this was...this was a...cruiser, heavy cruiser.

John Fargo: Right.

Mr. Harrell: But some of those like the [USS] Salt Lake City...they were lighter cruisers.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: And they weren't as thick of...not only torpedoes but just (cough) ship to ship guns.

John Fargo: Yeah.

Mr. Harrell: We got...we...we... (unintelligible), and we...I got in right after all of that, see?

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: So, what...we...we...we didn't have to...steam close to ships and they just...leveled their guns and shot at us and we leveled our guns and shot at them, but I didn't do that; I was lucky.

John Fargo: What happened to the New Mexico? You ever heard what...what happened?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, during...I...I've forgotten now what happened exactly, but I remember that...that the New Mexico was involved in...in a...battle near...near the...end of the war...somewhere in the Pacific...around...the Philippines Islands, I believe.

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: The New Mexico and some of the other...older ships were in a...in a...confrontation with the...the enemy, but that's...I don't know much about that.

John Fargo: Uh huh. I mean, it survived the war.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: It wasn't sunk or anything?

Mr. Harrell: No, no.

John Fargo: Alright.

Mr. Harrell: I don't know what happened to it.

John Fargo: So, if you had stayed on the New Mexico though, you were...you were on those guns...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Right?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I guess.

John Fargo: Your job was (chuckle) a little different...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.



John Fargo: ...on the Canberra.

Mr. Harrell: Sure was.

John Fargo: Yeah. Okay, Lester, well, is there anything else you want to share with me...about the war?

Mr. Harrell: Well, if I think of something, I'll...I'll tell you.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: But the war was...a great experience. I met people. You know I was from Texas; I wasn't a country bumpkin at all, I was from San Antonio.

John Fargo: College graduate.

Mr. Harrell: And I've been to...school. But just meeting people from all over the country was a real experience for me. That's...I guess, that's one of the most ex...enrichments that I've had 'cause these guys from...from Yale, Harvard, California, Oklahoma, you know, they're from all over the country...about...about a hundred and fifty officers on this Can...Canberra. And I learned to play cribbage (laughter)...kind of like cribbage and bridge, so I learned a lot about people and a lot about...games; I enjoyed it. And we ate well.

John Fargo: I was going to ask you...how was the food?

Mr. Harrell: Well, you know, we...we elected...a mess officer and he bought the food and we gave him, I don't know, forty or forty-five dollars...each month. And with two hundred and fifty...uh, a hundred and fifty officers, that was a lot of money. And they...that...that mess officer bought the food, so we ate well, too.

John Fargo: Where did he buy the food?

Mr. Harrell: I have no idea. Uh, but we weren't at sea...constantly; we were at sea for six weeks sometimes, but we would come into ship,...uh, shore...

John Fargo: Uh huh.

Mr. Harrell: ...and there would be...other...there would be other ships around that would...that were battle...they were not...battleships. I mean, not...horse ships, but ships that would furnish food and things like that.

John Fargo: What kind of quarters did you have? Two to a room; two officers to a room?

Mr. Harrell: Two...two...to a room, yeah. You had a...double...mat...double...mattress; it was...it was very comfortable.

John Fargo: Uh huh, yeah. Now, actually your job...you...you had to perform watches even though there were no enemy aircraft...

Mr. Harrell: That's right.

John Fargo: ...in the vicinity, right?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: In the computer room. What did you do...during that time?

Mr. Harrell: Well, read books (laughter). We would...we would have practice, you know, the...

John Fargo: Oh, you would have practice?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, the...uh, (pause)...we...talked (chuckle); shot the bull, I guess.

John Fargo: How many in that room, how many officers?

Mr. Harrell: About eight.

John Fargo: Eight officers?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah. There are two...two computers...and there were four or five men...around each computer; we had phones, and...so we were standing there talking to each other...practicing, you know, that type of thing.

John Fargo: Uh huh. And the screen on these computers were real big?

Mr. Harrell: No. Trying to see some around here is...no...

John Fargo: Like a TV set?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, more like this desk over here.

John Fargo: Okay. That...that width?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: That...that wide?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Uh huh. Were they on the wall?

Mr. Harrell: No, they were just...they were...just standing there (laughter).

John Fargo: Standing on the floor?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: On the...on the...?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Okay, well, it sounds like you had a...a good experience.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I did.

John Fargo: You're a...a die-hard Navy man, right?

Mr. Harrell: Right (laughter).

John Fargo: (Chuckles).

Mr. Harrell: I enjoyed it.

John Fargo: Enjoyed it.

Mr. Harrell: I was at sea the whole time; I had four years of sea duty.

John Fargo: Four years of sea duty?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, I...I...when we'd come into...port, I...we were in the Pacific, so we...come into San Diego, sometimes San Francisco, but only for a...a day or a few hours or maybe for a weekend, but most of the time, I lived on that ship.

John Fargo: Uh huh, yeah. Yeah. So, you became a Captain of your own ship?

Mr. Harrell: Right. That was the height of my experiences (chuckles).

John Fargo: (Laughter), how'd you get chosen to do that?

Mr. Harrell: I wasn't chosen, I was assigned to that ship and the commanding officer...was from St. Louis. Now, this was in...during the end of the war when you had to have so many points to get out?

John Fargo: Yes.

Mr. Harrell: And he had the points just like that, so he...when I got there, he cashed in his points and went back to St. Louis and I took his place.

John Fargo: I see.

Mr. Harrell: So, I wasn't promoted to that job.

John Fargo: Okay.

Mr. Harrell: I got it by default.

John Fargo: And you...you held that position for...six months?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, something like that.

John Fargo: Yeah. Okay.

Mr. Harrell: And we came back...one of my experiences was on this LSM that...that...I'm telling you about and when we...we came back from...Hawaii or some place, there had been a...(pause)...trying to think of...a...a storm, Doris, in the north...Atlantic, uh, not north...north Pacific, and these big swells would come through and the ship would go up on a swell, shudder and then go down, and that...that was a real experience.

John Fargo: That...that's a flat-bottom...

Mr. Harrell: Right.

John Fargo: ...ship, right?

Mr. Harrell: Yeah, yeah. So, we would go up on that...and then we'd go...uh, uh, uh, and it'd come down. And then...but when you were in bed sleeping, you might be thrown...up...up from the mattress, you know, just coming up and...but we were all twenty-two, twenty-three years old.

John Fargo: I was on an LS...T...

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: ...and an LSD...dock.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Landing Ship Dock.

Mr. Harrell: Yeah.

John Fargo: Yeah. I don't think I would like to cross the Pacific in one of those though.

Mr. Harrell: (Laughter).

John Fargo: Some people...

Mr. Harrell: So, where...where were you?

John Fargo: Uh, this was in Korea.

Mr. Harrell: Korea?

John Fargo: Yes, yes, during the war.

Mr. Harrell: Seemed like we were close to Korea one time. Has it always been called Korea?

John Fargo: Yes, yes, always. I don't think you were; I don't think you were close to it.

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: Anyway, Lester, unless you have anything else, I think that...would conclude...

Mr. Harrell: Okay.

John Fargo: ...our...our interview.

Mr. Harrell: Alright.

John Fargo: I want to thank you for the time today, but most of all, I want to thank you for your service.

Mr. Harrell: Thank you for...thank you for coming.

John Fargo: I...my pleasure!

(end of interview)

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