

The National Museum of the Pacific War
Fredericksburg, Texas

Center for Pacific War Studies

John Rowe
USS Crockett
APA-148
Interview: 7, July 2016

Mike Zambrano: This is Mike Zambrano a volunteer oral historian with The National Museum of the Pacific War. Today, July 7, 2016, I am interviewing Mr. John Rowe by phone at his home in Belle Vista Arkansas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

How are doing sir?

John Rowe: I am doing well.

Mike: Can you please tell me when and where you born?

John: I was born on May 28, 1926 in Meridean, Wisconsin.

Mike: What were your parents' names?

John: My dad was Walter and my mother Geneva.

Mike: What did your father do for a living?

John: Dad was an Auditor. He worked for a company that went around and audited books of companies in Wisconsin and Minnesota. My mother was a homemaker.

Mike: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

John: I had an older sister, Francis and a younger brother Richard, both of whom have passed away. I also have a younger sister Geraldine and she lives in Monroe, Wisconsin.

Mike: Since you grew up during the depression, can you tell me what that was like for your family?

John: In retrospect, it wasn't a very pleasant time for us, but you know, at that time almost everyone in my hometown of Minomanee were poor by today's standards. I don't know what my dad's salary was, but at one time he brought home twenty-five dollars a week. At that time there were three of us kids and mom and dad. Of course, we rented and didn't have money which to buy. My

dad didn't buy a home until I was in the service in 1946. We got by ok. We always had enough to eat. We did eat a lot of spaghetti and stuff like that. My mom was a good cook and she could make all kinds of good stuff to eat. With our budget we had to do the best we could with what we had. She was quite a book keeper and she had it all worked out in a book that showed what the money was going for. I distinctly remember that fifty cents went into an envelope and that was for church every Sunday morning. There was always money set aside for new shoes the three of us when school started. There was always money for a jacket, which was really needed during the winter. One time it got forty below zero and my dad and I were outside chopping wood and of course working like that you stay kind of warm. We grinned and laughed about it. But, it was really cold. One thing that went on, with almost everyone else being poor, we all had the same things to do. We all played baseball and swam a lot during the summer time. We did a lot of things as kids that didn't cost any money. My dad did buy a bicycle for five dollars. We kids always had a bicycle to ride. My sister would use it certain days of the week and I would ride it the other days. I didn't realize we were poor, but now when I think about it, you bet we were poor. We didn't have a lot of the things. But, you know, we always had eleven cents each, to go to the movies. We had two theaters in town that would show cowboy movies and stuff like that. It cost eleven cents to go to the movie. My older sister Francis would always get eleven cents for each of us, from mom or dad, so we could go to the movie on Friday night. I think that was the only money I spent during the week. We never got an allowance and the only money I spent was to go to the movie. Those are pleasant memories I had as a kid. I was never sad. My sister and I did well in school. I enjoyed it a lot.

In 1942, my sister went to local college, Stout State University which was in town. Then I went and then my brother Dick went and then my sister Kerry went. All four of us graduated from Stout State University. It is now called the University of Wisconsin Stout. My dad was extremely proud of that. He had gone to school a couple of years after high school, to become an auditor. A senator by the name of Stout, from Wisconsin, founded that school in 1915 as a

manual training school. By the time we went it was no longer primarily a manual training school but it was a regular college with math, science, etc. We were qualified to teach when we graduated.

I had a good life. I enjoyed my friends in town, my family and we had a great time as we grew up. When I graduated from high school in 1944 and a week after I graduated, I joined the US Navy.

Mike: You were still in high school when the war broke out, weren't you?

John: Yes. Of course, the war broke out in 1941 and I was a sophomore at that time.

Mike: Do you remember what you were doing on December 7 1941, when you heard about it?

John: Yes, I sure do. It was a Sunday and I was outside doing something with my brother and a couple of others from the neighborhood. When we went in, mom and dad told us that they had heard on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. It jarred me. I know what it meant to me. A Nation had attacked our great rich nation. I didn't know anything about Japanese history. I knew quite a bit about American history but little about Oriental history. Many of my friends, during the next few years, joined the service. It was always local News when one of the young people joined this or that branch of the service. When I was a Senior in high school and the war was still going on, there were six of us from high school who joined the Navy. We went to Milwaukee, which is about four hundred miles from Minnomonie. We went down and joined the Navy. We joined the Navy because the Navy had a plan at that time that if you were in high school and you joined the Navy. The Navy would allow you to stay in school until you graduated. Now that appealed to the six of us. We joined in April and were sworn in and then we went back home and graduated in June. That program the Navy had was pretty nice as it allowed us to finish high school. All six of us joined the Navy because we wanted to be in the Navy. Most of us had never been out of the state until that time. I wanted to be on either coast, which I was, and meet other people. The Navy was a good place to be at that time. I was never scared for myself during the two years I was in the Navy. We had

some brushes with Japanese submarines out in the Pacific, when I was our ship, but you know I was never scared. I guess I was too young or too naïve, being only eighteen years old. I never gave a thought about being injured or killed. Frankly, I had a good time. Our ship went to Hawaii and Saipan and Manila. After the war was over, we went to Honshu island in Japan and we went ashore one afternoon. Our ship docked there and about twenty of us went ashore to just walk around the village to see how the Japanese lived. We had an Officer with us and he was the only one that had a gun. He had a sidearm with him. There were no young men in village. When you walked down the street, you could see ahead of you that people were coming out to look at us but by the time we got to where they were, they had retreated back into their homes. So, we never got a chance to look at them closely, to see what they were wearing. It was an interesting afternoon we had and it was quite an experience to witness someone's culture other than our own. It was interesting; even though they had hurt us badly when they made a surprise attack on our fleet in 1941. I still regret that the Japanese did that to us. Because they did that to us on a Sunday morning, I think we kind of got even with them with some of the bad things we did to them. We were in the battle of the Coral Sea in which our Navy just decimated their Navy. It wasn't a bad thing. It was a good old fashioned Sea battle. Of course, the worst thing that we ever did was the dropping of the two Atomic bombs. That was tough for me to accept even though I was a sailor. On the day the war was over, we on the ship were very happy the war was over; even though we had killed thousands of people. It taught me something, I suppose, and that is that we live in a world in which things can happen.

Our ship was one of many that carried troops into battle areas. Our ship was the USS Crockett, APA-148. We had 500 hundred crew members but we carried 2000 troops, those being Marines or Soldiers. We would go up near the beach and drop small "P" boats. "P" meaning personnel. We had thirty of those on our ship and thirty soldiers would get in each one and they would go into shore. The front end of the landing craft would drop down and the troops would storm the beach. The United States was planning on invading Japan. Our ship was to be part of the invasion. We had trained a little bit for it. I can't tell you how

happy we sailors were when it was announced that the war had ended. We didn't have to go through that invasion. We might have all been killed. We were killing innocent people. Japan didn't have many men left in the cities. They were all women and children and they were prepared to fight. I have read that they had broom sticks and rakes and they were ready to fight to the end. Can you imagine our troops battling a bunch of women and kids? I surely am glad that it never came to that.

When I got out of the service, I read a lot about and still think about what could have happened. I am so sad that our country almost invaded Japan and a caused terrible situation for both sides. This is not to say that I really forgave Japan for what they did at Pearl Harbor. No Sir! I still harbor feelings about that: Attacking our fleet, killing hundreds of people and destroying our Air force and devastating our Naval Base at Pearl Harbor.

There was an article in the paper recently about all the Japanese people who were living on the West Coast were herded into camps by the US Government. .They were all put into camps because they were Japanese and the Japanese were our enemies, when the war started. It was a terrible thing, putting those families into camps like that. It was an inhuman thing to do but frankly it was a necessary thing to do. Our President and many others thought this was the thing to do. We did not want them to help Japan invade our country.

After we left Japan, we went up through the Panama Canal and up to Virginia where we dismantled our ship. We prepared our ship to join the "Mothball fleet". One of my jobs was taking the engines apart and putting grease into them to prevent them from rusting. I did this for several months and reached the status where I had enough points to be discharged. I took a train back to Milwaukee and that is where I was discharged on June 15, 1946. It was a joyful experience for me to see fellows I knew as a kid come home from the service. Some of the boys I knew in school didn't come home as they were killed during the war. Several months after I go home, I started college at Stout. I was under the GI bill and I got sixty-five dollars a month and they paid all of my tuition. I got my four year degree by getting sixty-five dollars a month from the

Government plus, I was living at home. It was a nice time for me. I was getting educated and I was living at home and understanding things better. In my Senior year, we were married. My wife and I were married and we went away to teach. I received a Bachelor's Degree in Education. I was eligible to teach Shopwork, English and Math in high school. I graduated in 1950.

I held teaching jobs for thirty-five years and was Principal of the high school in Arlington Heights, Illinois, when I retired. From there, we moved to Belle Vista, which is a retirement village. We have lived her for thirty-five years.

Mike: You were inducted in Milwaukee, right?

John: That is correct.

Mike: When you finally went into the service, in about June 1944, where did they send you?

John: I went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station, Illinois. It was six weeks training upon going into the Navy. Prior to that it was twelve weeks. We learned about Navy tradition, got our uniforms and shots and learned how to march. After six weeks we graduated from Boot Camp and we were given seven days leave. I went back home. All six of us that went in together wore our "whites" and we were very proud.

After our short leave, I went back to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and went to basic engineering school. It was a school that trained to you work mechanics in the ship's engine room. I went to school for twelve weeks and it was a real good experience for me. I was mechanically inclined and I did real well. After that. I was transferred to the US Navy Yard in Philadelphia. It was there that they put the ship's together. Our ship was being built in the state of Oregon at that time and of course we were in Philadelphia. The ship's crew was assembled there including the cooks, engineers, etc. There was about 500 of us. We went to school there for about three or four weeks learning about our ship, the APA-148. After the four weeks, we went by train from Philadelphia to Portland, Oregon. We had berths on the train and our meals were served in the dining car. It took about six days to reach Portland and we disembarked from

the train and all five hundred of us were housed in a warehouse that the Navy had taken over. We were supposed to be there two days waiting for our ship which was supposed to come down the Columbia river from where it was built down to Portland. We were to board the ship and take a “shakedown” cruise. Well, there was a delay and we had to stay in that warehouse for about two months. We didn’t have anything to do. Our group which was the “B” Division had to pull duty with the boilers that supplied heat to the warehouse. We would work four hour shifts with twelve hours off. We had liberty almost every night we weren’t on duty. I got to know Portland, Oregon somewhat. Our ship finally came down the Columbia and we went aboard this brand new ship.

Mike: When you went aboard the Crockett, was that your first time aboard a ship?

John: Yes. It surely was. Boy when we first went from Portland to San Francisco, our got really sea-sick for three days. I was so sick, I couldn’t go on watch or anything else. After three days I began to get well. Once you are sea sick, you never get sea sick again, if you stay on board ship. I never got sea sick again.

Mike: What happened when you got to San Francisco?

John: When the ship pulls in there, you go ashore at six in the evening and you have to be back by twelve mid-night. There were several guys my age and I that that went ashore and we found a restaurant that served shrimp. I had never had fried shrimp when I was growing up. Boy, we had that every chance we got. In those days a dollar and a quarter would buy you a shrimp dinner. Quite often we would go to a movie. We went to a lot of movies. One I remember starred Ester Williams along with Van Johnson. It was called Thrill of a Romance. We were in San Diego for a while. Every night we had to be back on board by mid-night so we would catch a cab and be on board by curfew time.

On board we would pull our shifts which were four hours on and eight hours off. If you had the early shift in the morning that would mean that you would have the evening shift the same day as you would get off at noon, have eight hours off and go back on duty at eight in the evening.

Incidentally, I haven't said anything about mail. I wrote my mom and family almost every day. Every time we had mail call I would get eight or ten letters from my mom. We would only get mail when we got to a port so I would get quite a number of letters at one time.

It was a wonderful experience for me to be in the Navy. I was young enough at the time to let things not bother me too much and I had a good time.

Mike: When we originally spoke, you mentioned that you were a Watertender second class.

John: That is correct. Watertender. We operated with a group of fifteen men who operated two boilers. It was a process whereby water was put into boilers that was heated up producing steam. That steam goes to the engine room and the engine room runs the propellers to drive the ship. We were in charge of making the steam necessary to make the ship run.

Mike: Do you remember the name of your ship's Captain?

John: Yes. It was Captain Bagshaw. I do not remember his first name. He was a Commander. I met him several times and he was an older man. He was a nice man. I liked all of the guys I met and those I worked with. You might get the idea I had a good time while in the Navy. I have to tell you, I learned a lot. It was the first time I had been out of the state of Wisconsin. I was in the Pacific and talking with guys from other parts of the country. I was very pleased with my time in the Navy. Our ship never got hit; although we got boomed a couple of time off of Okinawa.

Mike: When you are at sea like that, what are your sleeping arrangements?

John: In the compartments there were single canvas berths that were strung around a frame and they were five or six high. When you got into one, you hear was only about a foot from the bottom of the next berth up. That is where all of the ships enlisted crew lived. We all had a small locker where we stored a few personal items. We didn't have any padlocks as there just was not any stealing.

Also, I remember you had a very thin mattress, one pillow and one blanket. The compartments which held about 150 men were scattered about the ship so if you got a hit the whole crew would not be involved.

Mike: I recall reading that your ship went to Samar and carried a Naval Construction Battalion. Do you recall that?

John: I sure do. We went to Samar. As I recall we picked up some troops and took them to another island.

Mike: I read somewhere that after Samar you picked up some troops and sailed to Ulithi Island on the way to Okinawa.

John: That is correct. Ulithi Island was an island that many of the ships would go into for three or four days to give their crews a break. There were all kinds of ships, Battleships, Cruisers, etc.. when we went there, our ship had some beer on it. We all got two cans of beer each day for relaxing purposes. That was a place that our government developed as a rest area. After that we went to Okinawa. As you recall, that is when the Kamikaze came into being. They would dive into any ship that they could hit. We never got hit, but we felt the explosions from other ships in the area that were hit. I don't recall how long we were there and I don't even remember what we did there. We survived all those Kamikaze attacks. This was near the end of the war.

Mike: Now, I know you were below decks, but did you ever actually see a Kamikaze.

John: No. At General Quarters, I was below decks and I never go topside during one of the battles, so I never saw one.

Mike: What exactly what were you supposed to do when the ship was at General Quarters?

John: My place was in the Engine room was between two boilers. I was standing by for whatever was needed. Sometimes General Quarters would last three or four hours. They would come over the PA system and say that General Quarters was over and we would return to our normal duties.

On several occasions we would pick up some of the troops and return them to the US. The one thing I remember that most of these seasoned veterans would get sea sick. We brought troops back on several occasions. On one occasion, we did pick up troops at Manila and took them to Japan for occupation duty. When we were in Manila a group of us took sort of a tour around the city and it was quite destroyed. I would like to go back there and see what it is like now.

Mike: Do you recall where you were when you heard the atomic Bomb had been dropped?

John: I was on our ship and when we heard the Atomic Bomb had been dropped, we almost celebrated. One of the guys said, "let's have coffee and celebrate." We were in the engine room and we all sit down and had a cup of coffee. We didn't realize what an Atomic bomb was and what devastation it could cause. We knew that the attack was similar to what Japan had did to our country. Of course Japan surrendered several days later. Then we sit down again and had more coffee and rejoiced in the fact that we did not have to invade Japan and we would be returning home in some months and return to our normal life. I remember saying a prayer thanking the good Lord for watching over me and my shipmates.

Mike: Did you make some good friends aboard ship?

John: I did. One of them was Harry Palanoto who I met sometime after the war. He was from Harvard, Illinois. Marvin Wray was another young man. He lives in Ohio. I never saw him again. Pete Peterson was our Chief and head of our boiler room crew. I never saw him again. Over the years I have wondered about my buddies on our ship. We never had a reunion, so I don't know what happened to my buddies.

Mike: When your ship returned to the US, where did you land.

John: We went to the West Coast first and then we went through the Panama Canal to Virginia where we prepared the ship for "Mothball fleet".

Mike: What did you think of going through the Canal.

John:

That was a great experience. Did you know the Panama Canal runs North and South? Our ship went through it very slowly. It is about thirty miles long. Eventually you reach the Atlantic side. It was a wonderful experience for me. We went through the Canal and we stopped at the town of Cologne. Then we went up to docked in the York river. There were about four ships like ours that were tied together in the middle of the river and were there to be de-commissioned.

I got enough points by then so I got on a train to Milwaukee and when I got there I was discharged. That was in June of 1946.

Transcribed by: Floyd C. Cox
February 21, 2020
San Antonio, Texas