

The National Museum of the Pacific War
Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

William Crook

LSM-294

October 8, 2018

This is Ed Metzler and today is October 8, 2018. I am interviewing Mr. Bill Crook at his home in San Antonio, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies Archives for The National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Bill, I would like to start by thanking you for spending the time with me this morning, so we can discuss your World War II experiences. If you would please introduce yourself. I need your full-name, date of birth and we will take it from there.

Bill Crook: My name is William C. Crook. I was born December 5, 1926 at Oak Park, Illinois.

Ed: What part of Illinois is that?

Bill: It is a suburb of Chicago. In fact, I was born in West Suburban Hospital.

Ed: What did your father do for a living?

Bill: He was working for Yellow Truck and Coach. After I was born, General Motors bought Yellow Truck and Coach and they moved the operations from Chicago to Pontiac, Michigan. My dad went to Pontiac to work and my mother took me to Mississippi, where she and my dad grew up. He got settled in and we ended up in Pontiac.

Ed: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Bill: I had a brother who was six years younger than I. I went into the 5th grade in Pontiac and my folks moved Birmingham, Michigan. There, I finished grade school and high school. When I was a Sophomore, I went to see the movie Thirty Seconds over Tokyo. I thought, man, I sure would like to fly one of those. Incidentally, I got to meet the guy that was Doolittle's Co-pilot. When I was a Senior, I was just sixteen, in late November, that year, I went to Pontiac to a college and took the written examination for the Air Corps. I passed it, but I couldn't take the physical until I was seventeen. I told myself that I would wait until after Christmas. I came back from Christmas and there were some boys there that had gone into the Air Corps. the previous year. They had graduated the year before.

Ed: This was 1944?

Bill: This was 1943. They told me that the Air Corps. had stopped the training and they were not going to go into pilot training as the Government had enough of them. I said to myself, "Ok,

maybe I will get into the Navy. In the V-5 Program (NAVCAD)". At that time, they were doing three semesters a year. March, July and November. Some of the guys went in during July, because they had turned eighteen. I thought I would wait until I could get into the November groups so I could still spend some time that summer. Then the V-5 program was shut down. I thought to heck with that, I will just join the Navy. So, I joined the Navy a couple of days before I turned eighteen. That was December 1944. They said, "Well it will be after Christmas, before we call you." They called me up the next week and the following Saturday, I was on a train headed toward Chicago to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. I finished Boot Camp and my aptitude was such that they sent me to a Service school there. It was called Basic Engineering. We learned to use various tools so you could go aboard a ship and be a Machinist Mate Striker. I finished that course and then they sent me to Gulfport, Mississippi for small Diesel engines. I finished that course and a few of us that ended up with the top grades were sent to Richmond, Virginia to study large propulsion engines, like they use on the railroads. I studied engines. They had an LST (Landing ship Tank). They had them on LSMs (Landing Ship Medium) as well. I presumed that I was going to be on an LST. I finished that and I had a 10-day Delay in Order to report to Shoemaker, California, to be sent overseas. I went home and visited my family and I took a train out to California. It was a Troop Train and it was a long trip. We got out there and I had Liberty. A bunch of us went to San Francisco.

Ed: Now where were you stationed, at that point?

Bill: In Shoemaker which was South of San Francisco. They took us by bus up to Berkley and across the bay to San Francisco and we went out and went to a movie and spent the night in some type of hotel for G.I.s and the next morning, I was on the bus going back and I read in the paper about the dropping of the first Atomic Bomb. When we got back, they told us we were going to Treasure Island, California. They issued us mosquito netting and stuff and I thought we were going to a South Sea Island somewhere. The next day, August 9th, we boarded a ship at Treasure Island. We had been at sea five days before they dropped the second bomb.

Ed: Was that a Troop ship you were on?

Bill: Yes. It was an APA (Auxiliary ship)

Ed: You had not been assigned to a vessel yet?

Bill: Yes. I ended up in the Philippines.

Ed: Did you go straight to the Philippines?

Bill: No. We stopped and anchored in Ulithi. I don't know why, but we were able to jump the Stern of the ship and swim. We finally ended up on the island of Samar. We were on the ship looking over and these little Filipino kids that were swimming there. They wanted money, so every body was tossing them nickels, dimes and quarters. One of the guys threw some pennies in and one of the little kids dived into the water and came out and said, "Penay. No good!"

Ed: Now you were just eighteen at this time. You were just a kid.

Bill: We stayed there for several days and they finally took us over to Leyte. Now Samar was red mud while Leyte was nice sand. When it rained on Samar it was just gooey mud. We got to Leyte and an hour after a rain, you couldn't tell that it had rained. I was there a few days and they picked me up and took me to LSM-294J (Landing Ship-Medium).

Ed: Where was she located?

Bill: I was anchored in the bay, Leyte Gulf.

Ed: That is when you finally got assigned to a ship. Did you know anything about LSMs, at that point?

Bill: Not a thing. But I was familiar with the engines and the engine room and that was what I was there for. I had made Fireman 1st Class when I finished the first engineering school. Eventually I made Motor Machinist 3rd Class, when I was on 294. I was the "Oil King".

Ed: Tell me about that.

Bill: As the "Oil King", I had to keep track of the water and fuel oil and stuff like that. Every day, I would go back and open up the tanks and use a stick that I would put chalk on and I would stick it down into the tank and pull out. You could see how many inches was left and I had to record that. I did the same thing, for the water. We had to be very careful with the water, because we had an evaporator that would take in sea-water, boil it and condense it to steam and make water. We couldn't have regular water in the showers, so we had salt-water showers. I guess we had water for the lavatories. We could put the water in and take it over to a valve with steam and we could heat the water up. We could wash and shave.

Ed: How many are there in the crew of an LSM?

Bill: There were forty some odd. We were also the Group Ship for our Group.

Ed: Do you recall what the Group number was?

Bill: No. There were Officers and Enlisted men that were strictly for the Group and they were in the back compartment.

Ed: So, this was a Group of LSMs, or were there different kinds of vessels in the Group?

Bill: There were several LSMs in a Group.

We went up to Lingayan Gulf, with a bunch of LSMs and picked up some trucks. There was a young Lieutenant and he was white and he had a group of truck drivers that were all black. They rolled the trucks onto the LSMs and took them to another Japan.

Ed: Let me ask you, a couple of questions, before we start talking about the occupation of Japan.

Let's go back to when you were a teen-ager and it was December 7, 1941. What were you doing and how did everybody react to the news?

Bill: A friend and I had gone to the Birmingham theater to see the movie, A Yank in the RAF. We were walking home, after the afternoon matinee and we heard about. I thought those dumb Japanese. My only experience with the Japanese was with their crappy toys that were in the five and dime stores. I thought, man it won't last but a couple of months.

Ed: How did things change, when that happened?

Bill: We started saving grease and metal cans and we started saving newspapers. I was a Boy Scout and we collected newspapers and we would tie them up in bundles and sold them. I had a job working in a Doctor Bag factory. They were about eight inches high and eight inches and about fifteen inches long with two handles. They had curved tops that opened up and these tops had areas for storing things. We were having problems with getting wood and plywood so we started making the sides out of card-board.

Ed: Were you doing this after school?

Bill: Yes. We would get out about 3:45 and we would work until about 6:00. I don't remember exactly.

When I was a Senior a buddy and I went to an overhead door company, who wasn't making overhead doors but heavy wooden boxes to send to General Motors to send parts overseas. He and I worked eight hours every Saturday.

Ed: Now, you were assigned to an LSM, what kind of propulsion system did the ship have?

Bill: They had big Diesel engines. Twelve cylinders, V shaped. We had two engines and two screws and we had a fly-wheel that turned. It had a rubber tire like thing. We could inflate it and it would grab the fly-wheel and start turning the sham. It acted as a clutch. I operated the throttle and we would change the speed when they told us to. There was a little conning tower and they would send down a signal and we would signal it back, if it was a quarter speed or whatever. We would put it there and adjust the throttle.

Ed: So, these didn't have much of a draft, did they?

Bill: That is correct. I think we drew about six feet. They were flat bottomed and rough in the open sea. The ship would go up on a wave and then come down Wham, and the whole ship would shake.

Ed: Did you ever get sea-sick?

Bill: You know, down in the engine room, with all that diesel oil, you sure could get sea-sick. When we were underway, all we had to do was take readings every hour. We had two main propulsion engines and we also had two generators and we also had an electrical panel which would send the electricity where ever it had to go. I would take my jacket and go lay down on that rubber mat and spend an hour laying there and then get up and take the readings. We generally didn't change speed.

Ed: What kind of armament was on an LSM?

Bill: We had some 20 Millimeters on the side and up on the Bow, we had a Quad-40. My job, was first loader on the 40. I remember we steamed into Tokyo Bay to go to Yokohama. All the way up there were hills and I thought if we had been forced to make an armed invasion, it would have been a tough job.

Ed: How long after the surrender, did your ship go to Japan?

Bill: It was no more than three weeks.

Ed: Now, tell me about going to Japan.

Bill: It was not too rough. For some reason, I don't remember much about the first trip. I do remember when we went to Wakayama, we had to go to Wakanoura. It was like a village. There were little shops around and I guess that they got some Japanese Yen aboard our ship, so we were able to trade some money. Three of us went into a small photo shop and he took our picture. It was on one of those glass plates and we didn't have time for it to be developed, but our Skipper was an amateur photographer so we took the plate to the ship and he developed it. I have copies of a couple of those that I want to give to the museum.

Ed: How did you feel when you first landed on the mainland of Japan? How did the Japanese treat you guys?

Bill: They were very humble. When we would dock at Yokohama, we would go right up to the shore, open up our Bow doors and drop our ramp and if we had some extra food, we would take it out there and people would come and get some of it. They would stand down there and say "B-29!" And they would point to the sky.

Ed: They understood the B-29, didn't they?

Bill: They really did. As I said, I was the "Oil King" and a bunch of LSMs were tied there and they sure didn't want to be running their evaporators in that cruddy water. We found that there was a hydrant with a fire-hose connection and we got our fire-hoses together and we stretched them out and tied them together and we brought water aboard. We did something to the water to purify it.

Ed: So, you didn't run it through the evaporator.

Bill: That is correct. We just ran it right into our tanks. The funny thing about it is; the Japanese valves were backwards to ours. I went out one time and the Army came by one time and told us we could not tie onto the water. So, I turned the valve and little did I know, but I turned it on rather than off.

Ed: Do you get a chance to get out into the countryside?

Bill: Yes. We would take the electric train into Tokyo and there was a Japanese Opera House that was taken over and was renamed the Ernie Pyle Theater. In the basement, they had Red Cross

ladies with coffee and doughnuts. Up in the theater part they had movies and stage shows. They were first run movies. One time when I went there, there was an all-girl orchestra.

Ed: This was all for the occupation forces?

Bill: Yes, for the military. Not only that, not too far from there was the Japanese Imperial Hotel which was the top hotel there. Every day, they would serve lunch to G.I. s that came in and we had silver, finger bowels and printed menus and everything was first-class.

Ed: Did you have to pay?

Bill: No. It was no-charge.

Ed: Who was paying for all of that?

Bill: The U.S. Army.

Ed: Tell me what Tokyo looked like.

Bill: it was a building and then rubble and then another building and then more rubble. That was on the main drag there. They had bars there, where you could go in and get Japanese beer.

Ed: So, the city was in rough shape.

Bill: It was terrible. I was there with some guys from my home-town that the Red Cross lady, who was also from our home-town, got us together, so we went to movies and stuff. One day we went over to the Japanese Diet and it was open and we walked up and down the aisles. It was just like our Congress. There were things on the desk and we found it very interesting.'

Ed: You were never actually stationed in Tokyo. You would just go up and visit?

Bill: Oh, no. We were always on our ship. We would also take the train South to Okusha which was the Japanese naval base.

Ed: Tell me about that.

Bill: They had big cranes there and all types of repair equipment.

Ed: Were there any ships of the Imperial Navy left there?

Bill: I don't recall. I do remember one time when the USS Iowa was there. We could go down there and you could get four cans of beer for five Yen. It was Shaffer's Beer from New York. We

bought cigarettes for five cents a pack and we could sell them to the Japanese for up to thirty Yen a pack. The current rate, at that time, was fifteen Yen to a dollar, so guys were selling cigarettes and taking the Yen and sending money orders home. That was September, then in October, you couldn't send any more money home than what you were paid.

Ed: Do you have any buddies that you hung out with the whole time and got to know?

Bill: Yeah. There was a tall seaman who was on the same Troop Ship that I was. He was from Eastland, Texas. He had graduated a year before me, because back then, Texas only had eleven years of schooling. He spent a year at Texas A&M College, before he joined the Navy. He and I were good buddies. We got together, after the war and I spent New Year's Eve in Eastland, Texas with him.

Ed: Did you communicate with mom and dad much, when you were overseas?

Bill: Yes. I wrote letters all the time and they wrote me. Before I left, my dad came up with a piece of paper that had the various islands on it and he set up a code for us to use that would enable them to know where I was without me spelling it out, which would have been censored.

Ed: I have heard that sort of thing from other veterans. That their families had devised some type of code so they would know where their G.I. was.

Bill: The Atomic Bomb saved my life and a whole bunch of others.

Ed: It sure did. Have you ever had any second thoughts about the question of whether we should have dropped the bomb?

Bill: Non what-so-ever.

Ed: I am sure you have heard about how the Japanese acted during the war, although you never witnessed any of it; what do think of the Japanese, looking back on that experience?

Bill: They were terrible of course it was the military. I don't know the citizens were like during that time; however, I think that they were just people trying to live, I guess. I found them friendly. We would go to little dance clubs and there be little Japanese girls there and we would dance.

Ed: Speaking of Japanese ladies, did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Bill: No, I never did.

Ed: Who was your Officer?

Bill: I can't remember his name. He was a pretty nice guy. The thing that I observed as I was on the ship for a while was; that all of the Officers were Ensigns and Lieutenant Junior Grades. All of them were either college graduates or had some college. I was more or less a mediocre student while I was in high school. If I liked the course, I would make an A and if I was' interested in the course, I would just get by. I thought to myself, "when I get home, I am going to college and I am going to show people I can do good." And, I did. When I went to THC and took the I.Q. test, I was in the top 97 percentile. I realized that all I would have to do is get off my butt and do the work. So, I did and I did really well.

Ed: How long were you in Japan, before you came home?

Bill: I was there for nine months.

Ed: So, it was mid-1946, before you came home.

Bill: I left there in June and I arrived in July.

Ed: Did you come home on an LSM?

Bill: No. We were on a really neat Troop Ship. I think that it was a luxury line which had been converted. It was really big. We had fresh-water showers. It was like living in a hotel.

Ed: Did you hear anything about General McArthur and how he was stepping into his Governorship of Japan?

Bill: Not that I recall.

Ed: Did you hear anything about Admiral Nimitz?

Bill: No. I didn't learn about him until after I was discharged and was in school. I didn't even realize that he was from Fredericksburg. I didn't know much about Texas, at that time in my life.

I remember driving down-town, Dallas and I saw all these Hispanic people and they looked Oriental to me. I thought, are they Chinese? Then I saw a Texas flag and I wondered if it was a Chinese flag. Later on, when I found out how screwed up, I was, I couldn't believe it.

Ed: When you came home, where did you land? San Francisco?

Bill: Yeah.

Ed: How did it feel to go under the Golden Gate Bridge, upon coming home?

Bill: I don't remember. All I remember is going with a bunch of guys out to dinner. Let me get a picture that we took.

Ed: So, this is a picture of your group. You hadn't been discharged yet had you?

Bill: No, not yet. They let us go and we had to come back and go through the procedure, the next day.

(Looking at photo). Here I am and this fellow is John Brim. He was from San Antonio, but I never made a connection with him again. Since I moved here, I have tried to find out something but nobody could tell me anything.

Ed: Now this says, These sailors from the LSM 387.

So, you were reassigned to LSM-387.

Bill: Yeah. I didn't have enough points and LSM 294 it went back to the United States. I went aboard LSM-387. I guess I spent three or four months on that ship before I left Japan. I later found out that instead of going to San Diego, they went through the Panama Canal to Norfolk, Virginia and they to de-commission her. I came home in July and in August, I went back to Michigan to visit an old friend and I stopped in Chicago. While I was there, I called a guy I knew who was on the 294 and I told him, "This is Bill." He said, "How did you know that I just got home?" They had just gotten out. So, I beat them home, even though I thought that they would be home before I was.

Ed: When you were aboard ship, were there Poker games and other gambling going on?

Bill: No. Some guys might have played Poker but a lot of them played Bridge. I didn't know how to play Bridge, so I didn't join in.

When I was up in Birmingham, in August, I stayed with my buddy who lived down the street from me. For some reason we were in a drug store, on the West end of Birmingham and we ran into a lady that he knew. She was the mother of a fellow that was right behind me. He introduced me and she said, "We don't even live in Birmingham any more. I was just here visiting." I said, "Where did you move to?" She said, "To Texas." I said, "Well that's were my

folks move to. Where do you live?" She said, "Dallas." I said, "That's were my folks move to." She asked me where in Dallas did, they live. I told her that I didn't know but come to find out they lived right down the road from where my folks lived. We lived closer together in Dallas than we did in Birmingham. Her boy was still in the Army in Germany. He got out around 1947.

Ed: Now when you think about the time you were in the Occupation Forces in Japan, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think back to those times?

Bill: Seeing all the stuff that we brought back. We and other ships had brought up all this equipment, comprised of bull-dozers, cranes and stuff like that. We started picking it up and taking it up to Yokohama, where they were stockpiling it. They brought up all kinds of equipment up there. I learned later that they took a lot of that stuff out and dumped it into the ocean.

Ed: Have you ever been back to Japan?

Bill: No, I never have.

Ed: What else would you like to talk about, concerning your World War II experiences?

Bill: There is one experience that I have written about. I call it "The LSM Saga in Strange Channel.

Ed: Tell me about that.

Bill: There were about a half-dozen or more of LSMs and we had to tow some LCTs up to Wakayama and leading us was an LST. An LST does not go as fast as an LSM.

Ed: But it is much larger.

Bill: Yes. It was leading the group for some reason and we went around a Peninsula and we headed up into the bay that went up toward Wakayama. The water was rough and one of the Bow doors of the LCT came off and water flooded into the deck and they had the hatches open and it flooded and the ship started sinking. All the sailors came out and got their life jackets on and jumped overboard. The Clare had become disconnected from the tow ship so they were just floating out there. The LST came over to pick the sailors up but the water was flowing up the bay but they dumped the life-rafts over the side and they just floated around the ship. It was quite a fiasco. After about 45 minutes they got them picked up and then they had this LCT bobbing up and down out of the water, with the Stern down under the water.

Ed: Did it finally sink?

Bill: Yes. They made five or six passes with their 44 Millimeter Quads, pumping shells into the ship trying to sink it. They finally did sink it. We stayed there for awhile and then they decided we could go again. That was about 7:00 at night. They had lost several LCTs. Now, I was on the throttle of the Starboard engine and the skipper of one of the ships wanted to get his men off. The water was going up and down and the sailors would jump across and the ships would bang into each other. They finally got everybody aboard and they decided to untie it and let it drift back. The cables between our ship and the LCT snapped and there the LCT was drifting in the sea. They had us circle it all night long. We went around and around until the morning. Then a Coast Guard ship came out and towed it off.

I wrote my mother about it and she saved all the letters. When I went to a Convention in 1994, I sat down with a man who was the Captain of the 392, which was also involved, and we talked about it. Years later he gave me a copy of his report concerning the incident.

Ed: What else can we talk about.

Bill: Before Christmas, I rode the train way North of Tokyo for a football game between the Air Force and Army. That was something different.

One time we had unloaded a transport ship and it was filled with boxes of Australian stew and our cook arranged for us to confiscate some of it.

Ed: Did you guys eat the stew?

Bill: Yes.

Ed: Did you smoke, back then?

Bill: No.

Ed: Did you bring back any souvenirs from over there?

Bill: I had a set of periscope binoculars and a steel box that they were set into with a lock. I got home with it and I remember my dad and I sit it up on top of a ladder in the back yard and we would look at the moon. These were very powerful. I took them to my Physics teacher, to show him. He said that he thought they would be worth at least a thousand dollars.

Ed: Did you keep them?

Bill: I had them at my folk's house, in Pennsylvania. A number of years later, I asked my mother where the periscope binoculars were as I wanted to take them back home with me. She told me that my brother told her that I had given them to him and he sold them.

Ed: I appreciate the time you have spend with me and thank you for your service.

Transcribed by:
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