

Veteran: WILCOX, Lindsey “Zeb”
Service Branch: NAVY
Interviewer: Smith, Tabitha
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Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: **World War II; Aboard the USS *Indianapolis* when it was attacked and sunk by the Japanese**

Interviewer: My name is Tabitha Smith, and I am interviewing Lindsey Wilcox on April 26, 2002, at his place of residence in Baytown, Texas, at approximately 10:25 a.m. Are you aware that our conversation will be recorded and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library, and do I have your permission to do this?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: The purpose of this interview is to preserve the military experience from the perspective of the veteran and to gain a personal and adequate knowledge of the war experience as a student. Starting out, I understand that you were a sailor in World War II. What was your rank?

Veteran: Machinist 2nd Class.

Interviewer: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Veteran: I enlisted.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Veteran: 1942.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Veteran: 17.

Interviewer: How long did you serve?

Veteran: I was on the “Kiddy” Cruise in the regular Navy where you go in at 17 and you get out on your 21st birthday. Then I was in the reserves for about ten years.

Interviewer: What kind of training did you have to go through, like basic training or any other special training?

Veteran: I was an apprentice on the Missouri Pacific Railroad at the time I got out of high school, and I was a machinist. Then the war broke out, and I decided to go into the Navy—there were five of us. We joined and then went through boot training, and then went through a trade school in San Francisco. Then we were assigned to a ship.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed?

Veteran: Aboard the USS *Indianapolis*.

Interviewer: Where was your ship stationed? Were you in Germany?

Veteran: I was in the Pacific.

Interviewer: Can you describe for us what a typical day was like for a sailor?

Veteran: I’m going to go back to the ship. The USS *Indianapolis* was built in 1932, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt—that was his ship that he used to travel to foreign countries then. When the war broke out, it was the flagship of the 7th Fleet.

Interviewer: And what was your typical day like as a sailor?

Veteran: You didn’t have too much off time. It’s just according to the positions that are set by the skipper. You’d be on watch four hours and then you’re off eight, or you could be on watch four, and then you’re off twelve. In between being off, you had to relieve different ones on watch so they could eat, and things like that.

Interviewer: From what I’ve heard, mail from home was very important to a sailor or soldier. What was it like for you? Was it very valuable?

Veteran: Yes, the mail was very valuable. I imagine we received mail at least every 30 days.

Interviewer: Why was it so valuable?

Veteran: Well, we liked to know what was going on back at home. We were out at sea without seeing land, and we had wives and homes. A lot of them didn't have homes, though.

Interviewer: What was the food and the bunking quarters like?

Veteran: The food was OK. We had three meals a day. We had an ice cream parlor. But the bunking wasn't too good, because the ship wasn't air conditioned. When you left San Francisco, you normally had to sleep on topside under the stars, because it was too hot to sleep below the deck. Where I worked was over 100 degrees. There's air down there, but I was in the boiler. I fired boilers and things like that. It was plenty hot.

Interviewer: I understand you survived a tragedy?

Veteran: It's the largest tragedy in naval history. 880 lost their lives.

Interviewer: I need for you to describe for me what happened.

Veteran: I was on the four-to-twelve watch in the evening, which would be 1600 to 2400 watch, and I'd just been relieved. I was in the Forward Powder Room #2, and I'd just gotten topside and laid down on my blanket on the deck, and we had two explosions. The ship was 615 feet long, 67 feet wide. The first bomb knocked off, some said, 67 feet of the bow, and then the next one must have hit the power room that I was in or the magazine for the eight inch guns that we had. The ship sank in twelve minutes. We tried to get off an SOS for help. We didn't know it, but it did get out. The ship had turned over its side, and when I got off, there was maybe twenty to thirty feet of the ship left, and then it went straight down. I was in a life jacket for four days and five nights in the water. They've made estimates that as many as 500 went down with the ship, and then the rest of them more or less died in the water. From my group, there was about 150, and when they picked us all up, I'd say there was 60 or 70 had died from drinking salt water or sharks attacking them.

Interviewer: And they were hit by Japanese torpedoes in the Pacific?

Veteran: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember the year?

Veteran: July 30, 1945.

Interviewer: After losing so many men, what was the mindset of the unit after you all had been rescued? What was morale like?

Veteran: We were scattered over ten square miles. We were going to Leyte, in the Philippines, and we were gonna meet up with a battleship for gunnery practice. Actually when we left the shipyard, we had a test run out in San Francisco Bay, and the next morning, they loaded the atomic bomb—parts of it—on the ship. We had two kinds of atomic bombs, and as we pulled out, they looked over to the east, and we were leaving the day they tested the Manhattan Project. We were already on our way with the atomic bomb. Twenty-six days from the day we picked it up to when the war was over.

Interviewer: Let me understand you correctly. Your ship launched the atomic bomb?

Veteran: We had delivered it to a little island named Tinian.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first detonation at Hiroshima?

Veteran: No, the *Enola Gay* dropped the bomb. I met all the crew, but there's not too many of them living now—about three.

Interviewer: Are they in Texas?

Veteran: No. Tibbets was the pilot, and he named the plane after his mother, and he is still making speeches. The last time I saw him in 2000, that year he made 192 speeches.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any contact with local civilians?

Veteran: The ones that we met were people that worked on our ship, like shipyard workers.

Interviewer: Did you retire after the war was over?

Veteran: No, I retired in 1994. I was in the service from '42 to '46, and then I went back to the railroad to finish up, but I was still in the reserves.

Interviewer: Did you ever get to go home?

Veteran: One time. Sometimes they'd give you enough time to go home, because by train it took four and a half days either way. If you had only fifteen days, you didn't have much time.

Interviewer: After the war was over, were you allowed to go home?

Veteran: When the war was over in '45, I had enough points collected, but I still had to wait until February of '46, on my twenty-first birthday.

Interviewer: Were they still celebrating the end of the war?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: How would you describe the attitudes of the civilians when you got home? Were you all received warmly?

Veteran: Oh, definitely. Just like when we left, no one had to ask us to volunteer. We just went. The people felt like that was their duty.

Interviewer: Did you find it personally hard readjusting to civilian life?

Veteran: Yes, at first. When we left Guam and delivered the bomb to Tinian, and went back to Guam, which was an overnight trip, and then two days later we were supposed to go Lakeland(?) in the Philippines, we asked for an escort and they refused us. A cruiser cannot tell if a submarine is in the water. They're not equipped. The next thing they didn't tell us was that we would go across the shipping lanes that they had had ships sunk in. We were supposed to arrive at a certain day and they'd just have a board marked "Inbound" and then another board at another location marked "Outbound." The right hand didn't speak to the left hand, and vice versa, and on the inbound, on the day you were supposed to arrive, they just took your name showing that you had arrived. We were sunk and sent out SOS messages, and three different places picked them up. When you

received an SOS, someone sends it back for verification. When we were sinking and didn't receive the message back, there was another base that had received the SOS, and when the commander came onto the base the next morning he was told about it, but he didn't do anything. The other place was a base where they had seagoing tubs, and so the officer sent three of them out. The next day, the commander of the base called them back in. On this day that we were found, there was a pilot by the name of Wilbur Guinn who was testing out some new sonar equipment. That's a piece of equipment that you tie onto a cable, and you let it down just above the water hoping you can pick up sounds, like submarines. They were rolling this back in, and the cable broke, and so he flew back to his base and picked up a new one, and then he flew back out. The same thing happened, because his cable hung up. The co-pilot relieved him, and he then he went back to the back to see what was wrong, and he just happened to look through the bomb bay door and saw an oil slick. He figured they were gonna get a submarine, and so they dropped their altitude down to about 200 feet, and then he saw people in the water. He called that in, and then all those ships rescued us. We called him our guardian angel. The Navy court-martialed our captain, and to the Navy's defense, Ishimoto was the Japanese commander, and they had him flown over to be a witness for them. He testified that no matter what we did, he could have still sunk us, but the Navy still court-martialed our captain. What they did was take a hundred points away from him, and then they made him rear admiral and sent him to New Orleans to where by taking that hundred points away, he could never be commander of another ship.

Interviewer: Did you keep in touch with the survivors and other sailors?

Veteran: Yes, we meet every other year. Right now, there's 111 of us still living. In 1995, we had 77 survivors at the dedication of a monument. When we sat down to eat at a banquet that night, there was over 2,000 people there when we got our awards. I'm treasurer of our organization. We have our meetings at different places.

Interviewer: Did the high casualty rate from World War II affect you emotionally?

Veteran: Yeah, but not too much. I had a mechanical job on the ship. The Marines had a different job. It didn't affect me like it would have them. The first wave of Marines on Tarawa lost twelve hundred men. Over in Europe they fought a different kind of battle.

Interviewer: Did you find that when the war was over you had any ill feelings toward the Japanese?

Veteran: Oh, no. Ishimoto, the Japanese commander, his granddaughter lives in Indiana, and she comes to our reunions.

Interviewer: Do you have any additional comments or anything else you'd like to say?

Veteran: No. That's the way it happened.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}