

Denny Rathbun

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Question: I was wondering if that what it was. I don't know if they carried them for shields or for what.

Answer: Hm.

Question: But they list them under prison camps, these different ships and then in caps it says "Hell ships".

Answer: Yeah. Well that expression is foreign to me.

Question: So the materials that you picked up, the rubber and the other stuff, it wasn't military?

Answer: Oh no. I mean, it wasn't part of the Red Cross supplies that they had received free passage on the basis of.

Question: But it was war material.

Answer: But that didn't, that didn't bother the state department. They wanted somebody hung for that job and that's why he got court martialed. But I got to chance to serve with him later on back in '63, four and five down in Charleston, he was a full admiral. I don't mean a full admiral, one notch above rear admiral.

Question: So you went, with your, the technology you had at the time you could only identify a shape, you couldn't identify friend or foe.

Answer: Well we did, trying to think, latter part of '43 or early part of '44, they started putting I-F-F equipment on submarines but you couldn't rely on it.

Question: So having radar on your ship then you tried to stay with surface attacks, you tried to stay with night attacks and you avoided daytime conflicts.

Answer: Well you couldn't, I mean if it was daytime and a convoy came through you would darn sure shoot 'em although submerged. Do your level headed best to get in front of 'em.

Question: Pretty hard when you're submerged though at the speed you could travel, huh?

Answer: We could only max, we could make for a half hour was eight knots and once you used up that eight knots for a half hour pretty soon the lights get dim. You have to do some battery charging fast.

Question: Did the ah, did you have a snorkel on?

Answer: No. Didn't get snorkels till after the war, after they got to dissect some of these German submarines that had snorkels.

Question: Do you know why they, when you sunk a ship why they decided that you need to pick up two survivors? Was there any particular reason why they picked two?

Answer: Well at least two so that you could, the interrogators could interrogate them and by separating them furthest parts of the ships from each other, the chances of them coming up with the same story are reduced.

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Question: So you wanted to find out what they were carrying, where they were headed that type?

Answer: Yeah. We didn't but the intelligence people back in Saipan did.

Question: So I assume sometimes in taking two survivors, one you couldn't take a lot of people on your subs 'cause you were already full up.

Answer: Full up, yeah.

Question: But I assume you had to leave people behind sometimes when you sunk a ship. Other survivors...

Answer: That was the only time, that was the only time we attempted to pick up survivors 'cause after that time we were too busy doing our business. It wasn't till later I guess, I don't know when that order became effective but it, it must have been sometime in '44 when they put out that word to bring in at least two survivors.

Question: Do you remember what the best day of the war was for you? Something that stands out that just was your best day?

Answer: (laughs) Goodness, that's a heck of a question. Yeah we were in rest camp in Midway, we got in there the 29th of July, '45, and we had taken one of the radios which you would listen to normal broadcast band out of the radio shack and had it mounted up in the barracks and somehow or another we got the word that the atomic bomb had been dropped, the first one, and so we kept that thing on all the time to see what was gonna happen. If the war was really gonna end or not. And when the second one went off, well it seemed almost a cinch but that was the night before we were supposed to pack up all our gear and move back on to the submarine and so we did that and we're going out to train the new members of the crew for that two weeks where you go out and fire exercise torpedoes at targets, and get 'em all indoctrinated. On the way in to port that day we got the word that yeah, the emperor said they would, what, capitulate, if they could retain the emperor's prerogatives and we didn't know just what that meant but pretty sure that the war was over. So we had a big party that night. I think that was one of the more memorable moments of the, my time on the wartime submarine.

Question: What was your worst moment? What was the worst day you had?

Answer: Hm. Had two of 'em. One of 'em after we'd, they pulled us off of this patrol station up there, west of Kyushu on the first run I made, for lifeguard duty of off Nagasaki. Evidently we're bringing some B-29's in from China and they wanted us to be on the surface to pick up any downed aviators. So we're about 15, 20 miles off the beach and we're, we're in a trough, we're going back and forth and the boat is rolling like this and we, I was fortunate in getting to stand most of my watches in the accounting tower like I said and whenever you go on the surface you had one periscope up at least and if we were going less than 12 knots somebody would be on the sonar stack there and the other one would be on the periscope and we'd alternate every half hour. When you're on the high periscope you can see a lot further than the lookouts can, the OD up on the deck. So anyhow we had, I was on, I stood watch with the chief pharmacist mate and I don't know whether it was my cup or his cup but it was one of our coffee cups that came flying, because we were rolling so bad, it came flying off this desk and went down number one periscope well. Well as chief electrician who was the chief of the boat, the senior enlisted man on the boat, evidently heard about it and said, "You two

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guys go down there and get that cup out of that periscope well." Well they had a pedestal at that, this time these periscopes were raised and lowered by electric motors with cable about that size going down and hooked on to this collar on the bottom of the periscope and it wind the cables up and raise it. But if you were being depth charged you could put slack in these cables so the periscope sat on a rubber bumper right on the middle of this well. Well this periscope well is the same thickness as your outer hull in case you flood the accounting tower you could still go to test depths without taking water into the rest of the ship. So in order to get that cup out of there we would have to take this inspection hatch which is about that wide and about this tall with bolts that size, had to take all these nuts off these bolts and move that plate and go in there and get the cup fragments out. And this pharmacist mate was probably about your size and I'm a little skinny 170 pound dude and I get to go down in the bilges between the ribs. There was a locker standing there and had too many spare parts to take the locker out of there so I had to slither on my stomach down under that locker into where I could get at the periscope well and the doctor, pharmacist mate, we called him doc, handed me the tools and I got to take all these nuts off these huge studs and go in there and get the coffee cup out. And all this time we're on the surface and we might get attacked at any minute, you know, and there I'd be out of action (laughs). It was kind of a sticky, it did ah, I tell you I got in there and out in record time. And the other time was, the heck, I had it there just a minute ago. Whew nope I forget what I was gonna tell you.

Question: Were you glad the war was over when you heard it was over? Was it a big relief that you didn't have to go out on another patrol?

Answer: Yes indeed. It was really. A huge relief, 'cause I don't know you, you have a lot of faith in the other members of your crew, I mean, a supreme amount of faith that they're gonna do their job and therefore keep your hide in one piece so you don't worry about that. But ah... and that gives you a lot of comfort when you're not worried about somebody not doing their job. I don't know if you can find that anywhere else in the world other than on a submarine. Course I'm prejudiced (laughs).

Question: It sounds like a pretty amazing team. I mean, the people that you served with and ah, basically had to trust each other with your own lives and their lives and...

Answer: Yeah. I've got a piece at home by Robert Ruark, you remember him?

Question: I don't know.

Answer: Pretty famous columnist during the war and after the war. I can't remember when he passed away but he wrote this article and I can't remember what magazine, I saved the page out of the magazine where he labels a submarine crew a true democracy. I could get a copy of it for you if you care to have it.

Question: I'll research it, I think I could probably find it on, we'll type that in now that I've got his name so.

Answer: R-U-A-R-K, Ruark.

Question: Did you wear flashers on your uniforms back then? Do you know what I'm talking about? The name of your boat on your shoulder?

Answer: No. Uh uh.

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Question: Yeah, we did for a while when I was in the Navy but right after I got in they banned the use of 'em, 'cause like mine would've said USS Brewton and the reason they banned the use of 'em is 'cause if we all went into the club or into a bar and there was someone from the USS Knox there and you were drinking and they say something nasty about the Brewton and the next thing you have a big brawl so they, the Navy finally said you can't do this anymore, you gotta get rid of these things. Did you ever have anything like that go on when you were in the Navy?

Answer: Nope. Um um. No I never did.

Question: We had too much free time on our hands.

Answer: Didn't label ourselves.

Question: So you were pretty proud of the boat you were on.

Answer: Absolutely. It was the greatest experience of my life.

Question: Have you ever had friendships again similar to what you formed in the Navy with that time on that sub or is that a once in a lifetime?

Answer: Well I've still got a lot of friends still living and we get together once a year or try to. Started that in 1989. They'd had submarine veterans of World War II organizations since, goodness, sometime in the '50's and I hadn't bothered to join it because I thought it probably be a drinking club like we did during the war and I gave that up about 24 and a half years ago. And, but anyhow, this friend of mine, chief warrant officer retired and had been chief of the boat on the Queenfish for the last two patrols. Lived over here, retired from Keyport. And he convinced me that I ought to join and go to this reunion down in Sparks, Nevada

Answer: So we all three went charging down there and we had a, I mean a real, real reunion. We had, there must have been maybe 30 of the original crew members including the original skipper. Unfortunately, the original executive officer had passed away by then but yeah, we had about maybe four officers from the original ward room and 30 crew members, counting them it totaled about 30 and it was just something else. And, oh we had reserved two rooms in this hotel, adjoining rooms, so that the wives could stay in the one room and the husbands could all sell sea stories to each other in the other room and of course the door was open between the two. And set up a bar in there and various members practiced tending bar when we couldn't get a hotel type to do it. Our skipper, I can't remember how old he was by then, he must have been about 76 or 77, but at any rate when we were all in the room there the first evening he said he wanted to address the crew so the wives could come in and listen too and that was a jammed room let me tell you. And this court martial he had occurred on Guam after the patrol and ah, course the crew, we were all over at this rest camp, Camp Deeley on the south end of the island, and after the court martial was over he left the ship and this had been bothering him all these years that he hadn't gotten the crew together before he left Guam and congratulated us on a great job 'cause we got a presidential unit citation for the first three patrols and he just never had an opportunity or he was too flustered or too dejected to think about it so he made that address and told us how much it had bothered him all these years and.. Oh man there wasn't a dry eye in the house. And we got it on video tape. My wife at that time took it and darn if he didn't go home to Annapolis and passed away on Halloween night and this reunion had been the first week of September. And I'd a kicked myself for life if I hadn't a made that reunion.

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Question: Strange the way things happen isn't it?

Answer: Yeah, yeah, so anyhow we had let's see, '89 it was in Sparks, in '90 we had it in Orlando, in '91 we had it in San Antonio, and '93 I think we had it up at this Chief Warrant officer's house over here by Keyport where about 20 people showed up including the second skipper, and subsequent to that there's a ensign that was, I don't know, he probably retired as a JG but he lives in South Carolina which is pretty close to King's Bay and he's arranged to have reunions down there at King's Bay the first week in November. That's where those pictures that I showed you were taken. And ah, I think there was 30 of us this last year, I mean in November, on the fourth, fifth, and sixth of November, counted that many at dinner but that counted wives and couple of visitors so, dwindling away.

Question: So when you think about that and ah, you see the American flag go by, what do you think about that? The flag and what you did. How do you feel?

Answer: Pretty temperamental. Means a lot. It'll always mean a lot. Yeah I get a lump in my throat whenever I see a flag pass by in a parade.

Question: Was it worth the fight?

Answer: Yeah. Absolutely.

Question: So you're friends that um, you lost still come to mind over at times. Do they?

Answer: Oh on Memorial Day.

Question: You see 'em, see these young 17 or 18-year-olds. It's pretty hard on Memorial Day isn't it, when you're a veteran and everybody gets Memorial Day off and you think, jeez, they don't know what Memorial Day is.

Answer: Unfortunately, that's the case I think.

Question: Like on Veteran's Day when I worked a lot of jobs where I didn't get Veteran's Day off but other people would and I thought I'm the veteran here.

Answer: (laughs) Yeah. I can see where you would.

Question: I think the country's coming to appreciate veterans plus I think World War II veterans more.

Answer: I don't know, I guess I'm amazed at the lack of teaching of our history in the schools these days. I think it needs to be emphasized to a far greater extent than it is.

Question: And that's what this whole project is about though is, is that was part of the, Karl can explain it better, the memorial, the Veterans Memorial Committee was to address the problem of World War II not being taught in the schools.

Answer: Hm.

Question: In fact they say it's one of the wars that got forgotten. I mean, it happened in Korea too but World War II history wise and kind of where this came about was one of the World War II veterans was talking to high school class and it was a half hour into his presentation before he realized they thought he was talking about Vietnam and then he said

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no, no I'm talking about World War II and these kids, it was just amazing, and in an educated culture.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Had not the faintest idea of what World War II was. And that's where it's ah, um, you know we get into the political correctness BS and all of that.

Answer: Right.

Question: You know that was even a big debate when we were trying to get this project going people were saying you're glorifying war. I'm not glorifying war. War was, war is, war happened. We want to understand what war was, we want to understand what the freedoms were that I have because of what you did. And so that the future generations, great grandchildren that you'll never meet understand what the time was. What it was, that it's not a, it is whatever it is. You know, and I can't define what it is, I can only listen.

Question: You know what they want is, one of the things is that the humanize it so that when you're talking about seeing your friend who had perished on a submarine and he was young with straight blonde hair, the tape's supposed to transmit that idea to them, that these were young people just like them not your grandparent, you know, 'cause you look at, you know my nephew looks at grandpa and grandpa's 78-years-old, he's a little tiny guy, but in World War II he was on a PBM flying up and down the coast you know so. 'Cause they're too distant you know, right now if they read about it, it's a textbook and there's no human side to it to see the sacrifice and the country, the whole country coming together so do something, this great endeavor.

Answer: Yeah, it was fantastic the way everybody pulled together and got in there and did their part. Civilians and military.

Question: That's the amazing thing. I think that's the biggest, common thing that I've heard over and over again talking to vets. I mean movies and history books give you one concept and they dealt with war and yet when I talk with the veterans they talked about a job and a duty and it's very, a lot of times very factual, it was, we wanted to go do our job, we believed in what we were doing, and we wanted to come home.

Answer: Yeah. Quicker the better. Like Admiral Flukey he said in his address down there when they were dedicating this hall, he, one of reasons he went to the great lengths that he did to sink everything and shoot everything up that he could was he had a wife at home who had diabetes and he wanted to get that war over and get back there. He did a fantastic job.

Question: You went to Pearl Harbor en route to the atoll.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: What was that like going in Pearl Harbor? Was that the first time you ever seen Hawaii and Pearl Harbor?

Answer: Yeah. I'd had an English teacher in sixth or seventh grade down there in Shelton that had, she was addicted, and she had been to Hawaii I guess, and she was addicted to Hawaii books and after lunch hour for the first 20 minutes or half hour she'd read out of one of these books about Hawaii and I had visions of this Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea mountains being real mountains. And you drive in there on a ship and you see this mound coming out of the

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water and there's no peak on it and usually there's no snow, I can't say all the time there's no snow, but it's just jungle. I was disappointed, I had, she created visions in my head of what Hawaii was like that were not all related to reality.

Question: You, where did, you were coming in on a passenger ship were you?

Answer: A tanker.

Question: A tanker. So were you coming into Ford Island or Bravo Pier?

Answer: I'm trying to remember where we tied up, I think it's...

Question: You tied up in the inner harbor though.

Answer: Oh yeah. Between the shipyard and the receiving station there on the right hand side, that long wall.

Question: Uh huh. So you didn't tie, you didn't get, you were close to Battleship Row then.

Answer: Well it was off there five miles to the west, three, four miles to the west.

Question: Was that, did you go in and see Battleship Row or what was left?

Answer: Uh uh.

Question: Had no interest to see what was...

Answer: Seen it in the movies (laughs).

Question: Oh really.

Answer: Or someplace.

Question: Yeah I was stationed out at Pearl Harbor, we were at Bravo Pier which is just right across from the Arizona

Answer: Pretty hard not to look at it when you go and come.

Answer: Right.

Question: You always dip your flag coming into the harbor out of respect for the Arizona

Answer:

Answer: Right.

Question: Yeah, pretty devastating. Was that when you heard that Pearl Harbor, when you were sitting in the, at Grand Coulee and you heard that on the radio, was it real shocking to you that the Japanese had done that?

Answer: Yeah. I guess I was too busy being a senior to pay that much attention to what was going on in the world and that sure brought it home like right now.

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Question: How old were you when the war ended? Were you 21 yet?

Answer: I was 21 about two weeks later, on the fifth of September, '45.

Question: So you got out and fought a war and done all that before you could even ah, go for a drink legally.

Answer: Yeah (laughs).

Question: Well thank you very much, it was a pleasure.