

Gilbert Arbiso

Oral History

July 6, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with Mr. Gil Arbiso, Junior. He's a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota. The interview was conducted by Arthur Huseboe on July 6, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Now if you'll read your name and address, Gil.

Gilbert Arbiso: For the record, my name Gilbert-- called Gil--Arbiso, Junior, and I came from the city of Stanton, California, in Orange County, right next to Disneyland.

Huseboe: Your age when you enlisted?

Arbiso: I was eighteen.

Huseboe: How come you enlisted?

Arbiso: I had an older brother in the Marine Corps, I had a brother in the Army--he was in Patton's Third Army. In high school, I graduated before everybody else so I could join the Navy so I could make a threesome. My mother tried to put a halt to it, and said no, you don't have to go. I remember my mother crying, and I said, "No, Mom, look, everything is going to be fine." I ended up going to San Diego. The funny part is--I learned something out of life--you never go against your mother's wishes.

When I got to San Diego, they processed the whole crew, and I was the last guy. It took everything in my power that it ever took, to convince those guys that even though I wasn't five feet tall, because every time they'd tell me to measure up to the wall, I was standing on my tippy toes. They said, "You're a determined little cuss, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, sir, I want to join the Navy." That's all they could get out of me. I told them I wanted to go in the Navy. I thought about Mother and all that. so finally, I think they--instead of one medical staff, there was one over there and about four over there, and they was trying to find out--I could just sense what the conversation was about: "Y'know, that little sucker [he wants it]." They pushed me through. I wasn't quite five feet tall, a quarter of an inch short. They issued me clothing that was too long. I said, "Don't you have anything smaller?" They said, "Son, that's the smallest we've got." My sleeves were too long. My shoes were--I said, "How am I gonna walk in these things? They're too big." He said, "Well, do the best you can." I had to stuff them.

When I got back to the barracks, everybody said, "Did you make it, kid?" Yeah, why not? We gotta win this war, but you can't win it unless you have someone who knows what to do. So by that time it got evening, and lights out, maybe at nine o'clock. Lights out and I cried all night. I wanted to go home. I was homesick. I'd never been away from home. When I say I cried all night, I cried. Some of the older fellows said, "Look, son, you can't get out. You can't go home. You're in the Navy now." They said, "We'll take care of you, don't worry. Tomorrow will be a different day."

Huseboe: You told me you heard a few other guys crying, too.

Arbiso: Yeah, and you know, after you cry all night, and you're dried out and everything, and you're tired from crying so darn long, you kinda come to a halt. And you listen. The rest of the young kids were crying, too, because they wanted to go home.

But as it turns out, it was probably the best thing that happened to me in my life. You could probably say that for a lot of other kids that come back. In school I had been in the band, and I could march, I could drill--obliques, right, left, turnabouts and everything. So I

ended up being the right guide for the company. I led the whole--the little guy, put him in front of all these big guys, and you set the pace for the little guys in the back. So what happened--probably a lot of fellows come out of Tennessee, Kentucky, and them suckers knocked my shoes off. We stopped the whole company. After awhile you got excited, you got so wrapped up in all that. But when we graduated at the end of the training, we had won the pennant for drilling.

My mother used to tell my sisters and my brother, "This guy is going to be six-four. Y'know, I'm still waiting to grow to six-four. And then I figured, being an accountant, she didn't lie to my sisters or my brother. I figure sixty-four inches would be right because the tallest I got was five-four.

Huseboe: How long was the training?

Arbiso: This was at the height, before we started going to bombard all the islands. This is when the height of the war really started. And they needed men. I only had four weeks of training. They were pushing us through. I found myself going to Pearl Harbor. I got to Pearl Harbor in--

Huseboe: You remember what month it was when you got to Pearl Harbor?

Arbiso: It was early enough to hit the Marshall Islands. We went to Saipan, the Marianas.

Huseboe: You were part of the Marianas Turkey Shoot.

Arbiso: We were the focal point. The South Dakota was really the flagship for Admiral Halsey. That's what it was built for. When I went from Pearl Harbor to the islands to catch the ship, I was assigned to the South Dakota. When I first came aboard--I have to laugh because I could see the expression on the fellow--gee, we must be losing the war. You've seen a sea bag, how big it is? I used to be on a boxing team, between my two brothers and myself, we had the high school championship for nine straight years. We were good athletes. My older brother was captain of the varsity track team. So we were always athletic. So when I'm walking up the gangplank with my sea bag, look at the little guy underneath there. The guy said what are they sending? Boy, we must be losing the war. I was so darn small.

The one thing that impressed me all through that, and I will never forget is that the first fellow I ran into was a guy by the name of Blulender (?), he was from New Orleans. He was tattooed all over. He was a big fellow. He was a lot older than I was. He put his arm around me. Now this is my chicken. Nobody mess around with the guy. Don't give him a bad time. Don't pick on him. I'm gonna defend him. See, because the older guys would look after the younger ones.

Huseboe: Where was the ship located when you went aboard?

Arbiso: In the Marshall Islands. That's where the battleships were. Later on, we moved to another island called Ulithi, which was a lot bigger.

Huseboe: What was your assignment on board ship? Were you on some of the guns?

Arbiso: No, I couldn't reach a gun. They couldn't use me there. When I first came aboard, I guess they said what do we do with this guy? I never swabbed a deck. They put me up in the conning tower as a lookout. Then after they read my--I could type, I knew office machines and all that--they stuck me in the supply office, for the rest of the war. I became a storekeeper. I used to take care of the title ledgers. I was pretty well educated then. I'd requisition from Pearl Harbor for ships at sea, materials. We had deceased; I'd have to forward the personal belongings. That was a sad part of it. At times, I'd help disburse the crew [pay], but I was always in supply. As a matter of fact, that's where I slept, in the supply office. I was well taken care of.

The supply office was a contained office where we had all the equipment--title ledgers, and I used to take care of the nonexpendable items, in case something happened to the propellers or the heavy equipment. I'd inventory all that stuff. But most of my time was--every day routine--was in that office. If I'd type requisitions requesting materials, I'd go down to the supply officer, and I'd have to get him out of bed or whatever, I need your signature. The guy was always in bed.

Huseboe: What about other supplies, like medical supplies?

Arbiso: That came directly from the medical department. If they needed morphine or something like that, they had to be pretty familiar with the medicines, so they took care of that.

Huseboe: So they had regular pharmacists on board.

Arbiso: Yeah, we had a regular hospital onboard. Most of my work was administrative, because I was good at the machines, and typing and all that. Now in battle stations--when I first went aboard, they assigned me to the--right underneath the captain's bridge you got a starboard--which is the right side--and port, they're magazines. In those magazines they have ammunition for the forty millimeters--they come in clips. So we're on our way to Saipan, we got attacked by kamikazes. We'd bombarded the island. We'd put the clips in the chute, and outside, the handlers would pull out and they'd be firing all the time.

Huseboe: So you were helping to supply ammunition for the forty millimeters.

Arbiso: Except in the--there was a big explosion. We heard the noise, but we had no idea what was happening, because we were enclosed in the magazine. So after awhile a chief boatswain mate, Chief Sneed from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he was regular Navy. And there were some other personal that were regular Navy--they had experience. But for the rest of us young kids, we'd look up and we're looking to see what the reaction--I mean, you're all confused and what have you. You could see a little smoke or something coming toward us. Smoke--so we got panicky. Someone said why don't we just open the door to the magazine and see what's happening? So we did that. And the first thing was, there was all kinds of liquid coming in. but it was all red. All these guys had been killed, blown over the side and all that. So now was the time to be a little concerned. What we saw was, if you looked where the bomb went in, you could see the bottom of the magazine, and you figured within a few inches or so, if that had hit, our magazine would have blown up.

Huseboe: And where was that, at Saipan?

Arbiso: Yeah, Saipan.

Huseboe: From a Japanese plane.

A: Five hundred pound bomb. So the other thing is, that I tell everybody, from there on I became a Christian. You know why I became a Christian? Because I learned prayer aboard the battleship. If you'd asked me these questions six years ago, I'd be crying right now.

Huseboe: You told me that. You couldn't talk about it.

Arbiso: So anyway, they had twenty millimeters also, along the side of the ship. Just like in the movies. You don't have time to be scared. You're so busy--I can see where the training comes in, the discipline. Here comes that dit-dit-dit. There was a young kid, Erhardt (?), from Iowa, he was blond, not much bigger than I was, but he was chunky. I says, "Okay, Erhardt," and I picked up a can and put it in and I says "Try her!" He says, "I can't reach it!" I said, "Here, move out of the way." Dut-dut-dut. I fired at it. But I was firing tracers. That thing was firing at us, and we didn't have any sense to duck. When we were firing, we were in the

middle of whatever. So anyway, you go back to think about that, and I said, "Dear Lord, thank you." My prayers were, "Lord, let me get to be twenty-one."

Huseboe: Did somebody else take over the gun then?

Arbiso: No, no, no, we did it. By that time now--we shot all those planes down.

Huseboe: What kind of a plane was it?

Arbiso: Just a regular kamikaze plane. It was the same kind of plane that dropped the bomb. Anyway, you're so involved and so preoccupied, you have no idea what's happening because everything's happening so fast. It's just like in the movies. After you think about it, you're so--you think, God, you could have been killed.

So after they sounded all clear, you know we have to pick up the fellows, the damage, and everything. And what a lot of us picked up was this guy, Blulender (?). God, I thought that was--we knew it was him because of the tattoos. The guy that was gonna look after me. I was--you were in shock, most of the time you were in shock.

Huseboe: How many were killed at that time?

Arbiso: Quite a few. Cuz I remember we buried them at sea. It was so sad I can't really tell you. They were really just torn to pieces. No head, no nothing. You don't think about it before. You sit in your bunk after that--and the funny part about it, we hadn't eaten all day. Time out while I get a little emotional here.

Huseboe: That was about as hazardous as any action you went through, at Saipan?

Arbiso: We was always under attack. You ever see in the movies, like the locusts, you can't see the light because there's so many? That's the way the planes were. There was so many. They threw everything at us. Every plane they could muster was up and--sometimes two hundred, two hundred fifty. There were so many planes you couldn't count them. It's pretty hard for an individual to look at it and go back and reconstruct it. I could never do that. I'm too emotional.

Huseboe: You were at the Marianas campaign, so-called Turkey Shoot, where a lot of the combat was carried on by F-6Fs.

Arbiso: No, we had F-4Fs, too. I was a lookout. I knew the Japanese Bettys and all this, because of the contours. I had training of what to look for. On our ships, we had to learn the fighters from the SDB Dauntless, the dive bombers. We had to know all that. And you know that from silhouettes. Y'know, you go back and--I never could tell my family, my kids, when they would go to the movies or see the History Channel--how come Dad never tells us about it? The South Dakota was on there. One time one of my boys says, "Dad, look here." "Yeah, Rodney, I'm right in there."

Huseboe: There were a lot of Japanese planes shot down at that battle. Were you in on the bombardment of Japan?

Arbiso: Oh, yeah, we were still in the war. We bombarded the coast of Japan. I don't know whose idea it was, but we got close enough to hit the islands. Nobody said anything about it, but probably the admirals themselves said, "Guys, you gotta do something other than running around being scared all the time. So let's lob a few shells in." We shelled the coast of Japan before the war was over.

At that time they were talking about the ships at sea, they were shelling Tinian. And Tinian was the island where the base they established to fly the Fortresses to go bomb Japan. The Indianapolis carried the--we didn't know at the time. Everything was top secret. And would you believe, the Indianapolis, after it delivered the bomb, got sunk. It got torpedoed.

The reason I learned a lot, my battle station was in what they call C-I-C, Combat Information Center, that's way down, all the way down. I was TBS, transmission between ships. I used to type all that information in code, and I could receive and respond. The admiral said, in so-so time, the fleet will shift. The ships themselves had code names. It was all transmissions in code. I could see all the ships at sea on a big plot. We knew where they were at. That's where they used to have me. And then I'd be down where they fire the computers--you could fire the guns from three different locations. In case something was damaged, what they called fire control, one. You could fire down in the bottom. Sixteen inch guns can be fired with just a pistol.

Huseboe: They could aim them by radar. Were there fire direction officers?

Arbiso: We didn't have that much radar at that time. It was fairly new at that point. But they'd radio in estimated range and stuff like that, and the computers would take this all in, and they'd say, "Fire." That's all they'd have to do to fire. And then there was another one in case the ship was disabled, from a different part of the ship. That's why, a lot of times, you can't tell the general public everything. Because the first thing you know, they tell everything, they undermine a lot of things.

Huseboe: Did you have reporters on board?

Arbiso: No. We're fighting a war. It's my personal feeling, observation, I've always been a proponent of military conscript. At the age of eighteen, at least eighteen months, a year and a half of doing--not building another Germany. It's just a fact that--we fought everybody in the world, and one thing is, those wars have never come to our shores where our kids have been kicked around and tortured, and women raped and everything. We haven't had that, but in these modern times, some of these countries have the--the answer to how they can get a missile over here. And be destructive. So this is why it's very important--I'm not one to advocate being in a war. I'm not a warmonger, but a safe nation is a strong nation. I was very instrumental in voicing my opinion during the Clinton years, they don't want a big Army, they want a social program. Social programs are good to a point. The main thing is, we want a safe country.

My two brothers and I--we all came back pretty heavily decorated. I've got eleven battle stars, and that doesn't include three more. One each for the battle of Philippine Sea, second one for Leyte Gulf--that's the second battle of the Philippine--

Huseboe: Leyte Gulf, where there were three Japanese forces.

Arbiso: Halsey was chasing the Japanese fleet. We had a reunion in Biloxi, Mississippi, and I was talking to some of the guys from the old battleships. And they just hated Halsey, because they felt that Halsey had left them unprotected. The old battlewagons was with the jeep carriers. We felt safe because we had the rest of the fleet. We always carried, like the South Dakota, the Indiana--they were all the new ships--the Wisconsin, the Washington. And then we had four-five-six big carriers, destroyers, cruisers, and they all congregate and it's all one defense. So anyway, when Halsey went through San Bernardino Strait--South China Sea--following the Japanese fleet--well, these guys got attacked over there, and they harbored that bitterness. I said, "We were fighting a war. You can't really condemn the guy." He was determined to get the Japanese fleet. Some of the old battlewagons still had fourteen-inch guns. We had sixteen-inch guns. But it's nice to be liked.

Huseboe: What was your reaction to the threat of submarines? Was that a concern for you?

Arbiso: It's always been a concern. But you see, a battlewagon--they have armor below the water line, but it's only so thick. The first thing you guard is your aircraft carriers, because they've got all the planes. And outside that line there's the battlewagons, and outside the battlewagons, there's your cruisers. And outside the cruisers, you'd have destroyers and destroyer escorts. We'd have picket ships. You'd feel pretty comfortable. Not comfortable, but safe.

Huseboe: And part of your duty was communications?

Arbiso: This was only on battle stations, when we were under attack. I'd go down to my station and put on my phones and all that, and I'd see the fleet and everything. Whatever communications came on, I'd give it to the people in charge. They would make those decisions. My job was to keep track of where the fleet was at, and if there was any instructions. Receive and transmit, that's what I would do.

Huseboe: How about bad weather?

Arbiso: We had two typhoons. It's unbelievable what happens--how strong water can be in a typhoon. It's pretty to describe. Water has a lot of force. Our ship, as big as it was--I've never seen a ship go up and come down--the whole ship would sink. There's no time for experimentation. I'm a great believer now of training. At that time, we'd go through an obstacle course. I'd been a mile runner in school. There was older fellows I felt sorry for. Here's a poor guy, 35-40 years old, having a hard time pulling over this. But at that age, I was a mile runner, I was a good athlete, I was in condition. But this is why I say it's always good to have that kind of training. The other one I've always been very concerned about, if you have these guys in some kind of training; it's discipline.

Huseboe: It's amazing that the South Dakota was in service such a short time.

Arbiso: Here's something that the average individual doesn't understand. Everything in our society involves politics. But at the time we anchored in Yokosuka--see, the Missouri didn't come into the war until later on--but don't forget Truman was our President. The Secretary of the Navy said Truman's from Missouri; let's honor the President. The other guys were all upset. I didn't care. I wanted to go home. I was still crying. I hate to say I'm a crybaby, but I went through all these things. It doesn't make me less of a man, but I'm just very emotional. I wanted to go home.

Huseboe: What did the men think about the next phase, which would be invading Japan? Was there much talk about that?

Arbiso: About invading Japan, I want to tell you something. All these years I've been trying to face what I've seen and what I went through. Before I wasn't willing to face it. I remember when we anchored in Yokosuka Bay, I went ashore. I was in the supply office as a messenger. Me, myself, a .45, a satchel, and they put me ashore, and I had to deliver the message to the base commander. I'll tell you how bad Japan was at that point. I was barely--I'd grown--now I could have been five-one or something like that. I looked down--it was all these little guys. Man, I felt like a he-man, I felt so big. That was what was left of the Japanese people at that time. They were soldiers, caps and everything, little bitty guys, I never knew they was that small. I felt humungous. I said leave me here, I'll fight the war all over.

Huseboe: But I was thinking about before the surrender.

Arbiso: They had assigned some responsibilities, how you were going to take maybe certain men off ships and put in a unit together. But you know you don't just go and invade a country. They had already surrendered. What is there to go in and do? The flagship--Halsey was already aboard our ship. The surrender was going to be signed on the South Dakota. But after

the news came down, the Missouri, everybody is all upset. All the old guys. Me, I just wanted to come home.

I was at Pearl Harbor three years ago, at the Memorial. I got a call from the admiral in San Diego to go represent the ship and the crew. I didn't have time to say let me think about it. I said, "God, I'd be honored." There were three other guys representing other ships. We were part of the ceremony. You had diplomats from all other the world--Japan, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, China, everybody. It was broadcast all over to the Armed Forces. That's be three years ago this September. That's the last time I was aboard the Missouri. The Misery.

Huseboe: What was the reason?

Arbiso: They made a memorial out the battleship Missouri.

Huseboe: That's what should have happened to the South Dakota.

Arbiso: I'll tell you what. They were in a hurry to dismantle that ship. But if you look at the records, that ship was the most decorated ship in the fleet. Even though you had a carrier with I don't know how many hundreds of planes on there, they knocked a lot of planes down, and the carrier will probably get credit for all that. Well, we knocked tons of planes down. Sixty-eight Japanese planes. We knocked down planes to save our ship.

Huseboe: Anything you want to add?

Arbiso: I've been to the reunions since the first one in 1970. At that time, there was Nancy Gatch, the skipper's daughter, her husband, Tom Gatch, the skipper's son--tried to go across the Atlantic in a balloon; he got lost and they never found hm. We said we were going to get together and have a reunion every three years to commemorate the ship and honor the men who didn't make it back. That was the whole concept. But after the third year, we found out so many people had passed on, so we moved it to every two years. After 1975, we've been meeting every two years. I'm done, as far as I'm concerned. I'm glad we fought the war. I'm glad we won the war.

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