

Oscar T. Arnold

Oral History

July 6, 2001

Harry Thompson: This is an interview with Mr. Oscar Arnold, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Harry Thompson on July 6, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. State your name and place of residence, please.

Oscar Arnold: It's Oscar Arnold in Camarillo, California.

Thompson: Could you tell us something about how it was you came to enlist in the service?

Arnold: I was working in Death Valley for awhile, back in about 1939. I was called for induction shortly after the inductions started. Before the war started. When Franklin Roosevelt pulled these names out of a fishbowl, I guess. I had my first physical up in Lone Pine, and about a month or so after that, I was called down to Lone Pine to be sworn in to the Army. But I was turned down because of a hernia. I went back and worked in Death Valley. I worked at the Furnace Creek Inn. It was quite the interesting experience there, because at the end of the season at the hotel, Death Valley Scotty invited us to dinner up at his castle. After that, I went to work for General Petroleum in their office somewhere in Vernon, near Los Angeles.

Then somebody told me the Navy was recruiting yeomen as second class if they could do shorthand and typing, and would take them down to the Naval Hospital and upgrade them. So I took them up on that. I went down and enlisted, and ended up--after my boot camp, my first duty station was at the Naval Ammunition Depot up in Bremerton, Washington. I was there for about two-and-a-half or three years. And the last couple years I was working at the Naval Barracks, which was kind of a secondary little station up there. Incidentally, Sigrid Anderson was my executive officer, who later became governor of South Dakota. Which was coincidental because I later became a member of the ship.

I met a WAVE, a beautiful lady, up in Everett, Washington, who was one of the first sixteen WAVES who came to Bremerton. They were some handpicked girls. I happened to meet one in an ice cream parlor there in Everett on liberty. She was out visiting some friends. Someone introduced her to me. I had transferred to the Naval Hospital, because I was a yeoman at the ammunition depot. We walked in, and he saw this lady he knew from the hospital, and he introduced me. She happened to have my mother's maiden name--Espinosa. A short time later, he had to go, so I asked the ladies if I could sit down and have a Coke with them, and they said yeah. So in the conversation, we learned that she was also at the Naval Hospital as a second class corpsman. So we agreed to go back on the bus that night together from Everett. As we left the ice cream parlor, she asked her friends if they minded if she invited me to dinner since we were going to go back that night. And that was the beginning of the end. In three and a half months, we were married, ended up with five children, fourteen grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. But I lost her January 1, 1999. She passed away from having fallen--she fell and broke her hip--and then after the stroke she had shortly after, complications rose.

Now you asked me how I happened to get aboard the South Dakota. When I was up there, I had one child, about six months old, when I was still at the Naval Ammunition Depot, so I requested to go to sea duty. I happened to have a CO I didn't particularly enjoy working

under--why a man with a wife and child would ask to go to sea duty--I must have been very unhappy with my service. Nevertheless, she seemed to agree, no problem.

My orders were a little unusual, at least they were to me, because I was to be transferred to the Commander, Service Squadron Ten, for further transfer to any ship that needed my rate. So I didn't know where I was going, until I got there. The first stop was Hilo Scott (?).

We ended up Ulithi. We hadn't been there more than a few hours, when most of the crew that had managed to escape from the USS Franklin when it was hit some fifty miles off the coast of Japan--they were all coming aboard. We could see the ship from a distance, with a big heavy list on it. They just limped in with it. These fellows were all meeting each other, from different rescue ships. It was like a bunch of parrots because none of them knew who had survived, you see. So we were there, and nobody could sleep because they were talking all night in the bunks. At midnight they announced, everyone from USS Franklin, we're going back aboard. We're going to take the ship back. So that was my first little incident where I could see what was going on.

Then I went aboard USS Cimarron, which was one of the tankers. The purpose was go out on any ship that needed my service, when they were doing the refueling, they'd put us across in the breeches boy. And what happened, I was transferred to five different ships. My duty on the Cimarron was to take dictation from the TBS between ships. That was a great ship and great commander--harmony throughout the entire ship. I was up on the bridge and I saw five or six officers around a great big net about four feet long. I said, "What's that?" "Oh, that's Okinawa. We're going to land there on Easter Sunday." This was about five or six days before. So on April 1, 1945, I turned my radio on above my head--had nice accommodations--they're landing on Okinawa. For once I heard what was going to happen before it happened.

They still had me on board ship until I went from there to the Monongahela. That was like going from heaven to hell. You can't imagine the difference. There was just a difference in harmony aboard the ship. The captain was swearing out loud at all the guys on the ship, and the whole damn ship's morale--it was zero. And I'd just left heaven. Then I went to the Chikaskia. They put you in a breeches boy whenever they had to go load up with fuel again. So I kept going across from one ship to the other on this breeches boy. I think the Cimarron Monongahela, Chikaskia, the Manatee, and I believe the Chicopee was the last one. They were all named after rivers.

They were alongside the South Dakota, and they needed my rate, so I got in the mail sack and went across. I don't remember the man's name, but I was a chief yeoman at the time, and he was a first class, and he had been aboard since commissioning. And let me tell you, he greeted me, because he went through all those early battles. He introduced himself, said hello, glad to see you, and he jumped in the sack, and he was gone. I still don't know who he was.

I was aboard that ship about forty-five minutes when general quarters--"number two turret fire." I didn't give it too much consideration. I was on a fighting ship, and they were having a fire drill or something, see. I soon understood differently. It was a very serious matter. I think there were three men down for the--powder bag exploded in the magazine, and then it asphyxiated about eight corpsmen up above. So that was my introduction to a fighting ship, the first day. They buried about eleven men at sea that night.

About five days later--that was the 6th of May--on my brother's birthday, May 11th, I just had breakfast and was walking down the port side of the ship, and saw the Bunker Hill out there, maybe five or six hundred yards away, looking beautiful and going along with us--

we were all in formation--and I stepped into the office and heard "General Quarters--Bunker Hill on fire." I went back out, and there is was, just one ball of fire and many personnel jumping off into the water. In very short order, the ships that had been launching airplanes--they came back and appeared to be dropping little smoke bombs where all the fellows were. Destroyers came along and scooped them out with what looked like a big long net. Quite a few of them were brought over to our ship. They put them in a stretcher and brought them on breeches boys. Any of the larger ships that had hospital facilities were taking on these injured persons.

When it happened, I think that was about 9:30 in the morning. A kamikaze hit it from the port side. About 4:30 in the afternoon, everybody was still moving around. The Wilkes-Barre went alongside by the bow--it's amazing how you can remember all these things--whatever its purpose was, I don't know, but that seemed to be pretty much the end of the episode.

Thompson: Continue with your service aboard the South Dakota.

Arnold: That was in May. A few months later, we heard about the atomic bomb and the surrender. So then we all went into Tokyo Bay. You could see the guns where the shore guns were aimed down. And guys jumped in and went swimming. The next morning we weighed anchor and went into Tokyo Bay in single file. We were behind the Missouri. The thing that was very historic to me, when Halsey came aboard our ship. He left the Missouri and came aboard to greet Admiral Nimitz. Because Nimitz was flying up from Hawaii to get involved in the festivities. So, he looked, and there was nobody around, and he just walked around to the other side, with his little garrison cap. And then, all of a sudden, there were two big Catalina flying boats coming in. So somebody yelled up and said "Signal 57." Our ship. So he did. One landed aft of the ship and one across the bow. And what was kind of fun, too, was for a week or two, officer's fellows were shining up the admirals' launch. It was beautiful, a white-looking launch as I recall, with five gold stars. Boy, these guys in whites, they jumped into that ship and went out to get the admiral, and a crash boat went out for his aides. So who comes back with the admiral but the crash boat. Cuz nobody knew which one he was on.

When he came aboard, there I was, about fifteen feet above all this. And there was Halsey greeting Admiral Nimitz as he arrived. Then I believe there was an Admiral Kelly Turner. There was several heavy gold braid. That was very historic to watch all that--all the men in whites standing at attention and everything.

I was informed that I was eligible for discharge, and I could go home on the Missouri or I could stay on the South Dakota and go home. They weren't sure when it was going to go back, if anybody had thought, the war's over, so it's not going to be very long. Me with a child and my wife at home waiting for me in Joliet, Illinois, I thought I'd better go home on the Missouri. That was a mistake. Because when the Missouri pulled into Hawaii, they weren't sure what was going to happen, whether we were going to stay there for awhile or go back to the States. I got off and was going to hitch a ride home, and I'll be darned if somewhere they seemed to want to keep us to help discharge people. I was a yeoman and some were storekeepers. Unbeknownst to me, a bunch of the guys got together and called Congressmen or Senators or whatever, and about four o'clock the next morning--oh by the way, I'm up having a drink at the Elk's Club there on Waikiki Beach--sitting there looking at the water and having a drink one afternoon, and here I seen a big old bow coming out. I knew before it came out, it was the Missouri, because it got longer and longer and longer. And there was the Missouri, and I was one sick guy because I didn't know when I was going to get back.

But that night about four o'clock in the morning, there was an order to get up, you're going home on the USS Blue, a destroyer. So we went aboard that. So I came in a little early, but I felt so sad because our neighbor learned that the South Dakota came back shortly after, and if I'd stopped to think, since the Missouri was going home, Halsey was not going to be on it, obviously, and that he would probably be on the South Dakota. Anyway, I missed all the festivities, and I regret that very much, but you can't make that do over again.

But I made it back. I got a room at the Fairmont when we got in--I filled the tub with water about two and a half feet, and I got myself a magazine and a pillow, and I sat there and enjoyed soaking in that tub. From there I went down to San Pedro and was discharged.

So that's the extent of it.

Thompson: You mentioned before we started the interview that Captain Momsen [Charles Bowers Momsen 1896 – 1967] was someone you remember aboard the South Dakota in terms of command.

Arnold: As soon as I went aboard--I don't remember seeing a captain but I must have because I was on there until the end of the war. I was well aware of the Momsen lung, and I knew he was a submarine man. I didn't give it much thought. But three or four months ago, I got a phone call from a fellow who was an agent--I had my own real estate office in Camarillo--and he asked, "Did you read my book yet? I sent you a book." It was *The Terrible Hours*, written by Peter Maas. It was describing Momsen's rescue of thirty-four men from USS Squalus. It was a new submarine in 1939 and was taking its first test dive and it was flooded. Some admiral back in Portsmouth called on Momsen. The whole book is about this rescue and about his salvaging the ship.

Until I was all through reading the book, and I'm a pretty slow reader, I finally read the epilogue. In the epilogue, it states there how--I believe it was sometime in early '45 when Admiral Ernest J. King called for Swede Momsen--they called him Swede--to come back to Washington for something. When he got back there, Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations, said, "Swede, you see that pile of mail over there in the corner? Every goddamn one of them is from some Senator or Congressman as to our U.S. mail, how lousy it is, and I want you to get that straightened around." He thought it was a joke. "No," the CNO said, "Swede, you take care of that for me, and you won't be sorry." It took him about three months to straighten that out. At the end of the period, [the CNO] said, "Swede, I have another little job for you. To command the mighty South Dakota." So that was when I first learned why the man even sent me the book. That confirmed in my mind who he was. In this, it tells all the accomplishments Captain Momsen did. He died somewhere down in Florida; he was a vice admiral.

Thompson: Do you remember anything about the command, the discipline aboard the ship at that time? You seem very sensitive to the tenor of a ship's command.

Arnold: On my birthday on the South Dakota, it was May 15 in '45; we had to go into Guam to dry-dock, because I believe during one of the refueling, I think a destroyer must have hit a screw, so we went and got that fixed, and we went to Leyte after that.

I got one incident I should tell you about. In the office, we were avoiding a typhoon one time, and I was making coffee. [The coffee pot was on top of a file cabinet filled with service records.] It just so happened that the coffee pot--when the water got to the top--just about the time the ship would lean in that direction, and the water was up there, it tipped over, somebody had forgot to lock the top drawer, the drawer slid open and that whole coffee pot fell on the service records. What a mess. But I never heard a word about it.

Thompson: How about your duties aboard the ship? You said you were a yeoman first class?

Arnold: Chief yeoman. That's interesting how I became chief. This one captain, that I told you I didn't agree too much with, but at one time he was--when we started in the ammunition depot, it was January of '42, and we were working seven days a week. So I got pretty astute at watching all the ALNAVs. I was second class, and became a first, and I was trying to put up with this other little sub, which was still under this Captain Rankin--but nevertheless, this was another command, and the skipper came out and he said, "Why don't you write yourself a letter of recommendation, to give me authority to advance you to chief?" I said, "Fine, I'll do that, Commander." So I wrote myself a heck of a nice letter, and it was a requirement to have six month's sea duty to become chief. So I said in there, "Request the six-month requirement for sea duty be waived in case of subject man, and I be allowed to advance him to chief yeoman, active appointment." We had to send it down to this Captain Rankin, who was back from retirement. He'd graduated in 1905, I think. He was fairly aged; he'd been around for awhile. So we sent it down to him for an endorsement to send it to the Bureau of Naval Personnel. After a day or two on his desk, he signed it and sent it in. So that's how I became chief yeoman.

Thompson: And your duties as chief yeoman aboard the South Dakota?

Arnold: I was like the captain on the Cimarron. This guy had been there--I don't know if he was a second class--but he'd been on the ship for a tremendous long time. He did his job and I let him do it. I just oversaw, and everything went along as normal. I really didn't do a heck of a lot onboard the ship. I did an awful lot more at the ammunition depot. Lieutenant Biker was the personnel man. He was the go-between between me and the executive officer. So everything went along quite normal. I didn't stir things up too much.

Thompson: When General Quarters would be called, what did that mean for you?

Arnold: I was to go down in the CIC--Combat Information Center--where I was to transcribe the information between ships. Blackjack was Admiral Halsey, so that was the code name. We were the first, I think, to bombard the Japanese home islands. About midnight we went along this--Kamaishi [Ka-my-ee-shi] was a steel mill along the coast--at midnight, I was down there two or three decks below, but when those sixteen-inch guns went off, man, the whole ship would just slide about ten or twenty feet, it seemed that way, across the water. They'd all go off at the same time. Then one day at noon--first it was Kamaishi and then Hamamatsu--they were both steel mills--we bombarded them. No incidents, nothing seemed to happen; nobody ever shot back. It was pretty much near the end of the war.

Thompson: When you were transcribing messages that were coming in, do you remember anything of any importance?

Arnold: The scout planes, the little sea planes that these guys would go out in, they would be announcing whatever--I guess whenever the gun would fire, somebody would yell splash. Spotter plane, I guess, would let them know how far off they were from the target.

Thompson: You said earlier that this is your first reunion with the South Dakota crew.

Arnold: Yes, I picked it up on the Internet about a year ago. I just wish I'd known about it before, because I would have enjoyed coming.

Thompson: You've been in the real estate business for--

Arnold: I was in the home improvement business for awhile in Illinois--I went back shortly after the war. Well, I went back to Los Angeles and went back to work with General Petroleum and I was there about a year and a half. My wife went back with our two children--

we had another child by that time--to see the relatives in Wisconsin. She learned we could buy a house there for \$4,750 if we would do the finishing work. So I just packed up and moved everything back there while she was still there, and I was there from 1947 to 1964. I was selling storm windows and doors, and I was very successful at it, but I had a brother-in-law from Oxnard, California, call me and tell me how good real estate was. He said come out and take a look. And having been born in California and raised in Los Angeles, I said I'd come out and look around. I got in real estate in 1964, and about a year or so later, I got my office. About fifteen years ago, I sold it and opened another little office.

Thompson: You and your wife had five children?

Arnold: Five children. The first girl we had when I was still in the Navy, had the second girl down in Los Angeles, and then went to Illinois and had a third girl. And then our fourth child was a boy. And then we had another boy. We have fourteen grandkids and two great-grandchildren.

Thompson: Is there anything you'd like to say in closing, about your service aboard USS South Dakota?

Arnold: All I can remember is it was a very memorable experience. I enjoyed it. What surprised me when I was going to come back here--gee, would I recognize anybody? I don't remember buddying up to any particular individual. To this day I haven't recognized anybody. But it's really been a fine trip, and I'm looking forward to the rest of it.

Transcribed by:
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