

Lawrence J. Kuczma

Seaman First Class

Oral History

July 5, 2001

Harry Thompson: This is an interview with Lawrence Kuczma, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Harry Thompson on July 5, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. If you would give your name, and where you currently reside.

Lawrence Kuczma: My name is Lawrence Kuczma, [Kuz-ma] and I reside in McKees Rocks, PA.

Thompson: How is it that you came to enlist in the service?

Kuczma: The war started, and I had to get in.

Thompson: How old were you?

Kuczma: Seventeen and a half.

Thompson: Why did you enlist in the Navy?

Kuczma: Because I didn't want to sleep in the mud.

Thompson: What was the place of your training?

Kuczma: That was Providence, Rhode Island. That's where I had my boot camp. I had six weeks of boot camp. I enlisted January 2, 1942, and they took me into the service the end of January.

Thompson: What was your rating, or specialty?

Kuczma: I had the shortest rank in the Navy for three days. Coxswain. I was seaman first, most of my stay on the South Dakota. I made the rating of coxswain, that's bos'n second and bos'n first, and I made it on this day, and the next day I was supposed to have the duty on a whale boat. And the Washington and the South Dakota were competitors, so guess what. We were in an island, I forget what island it was, we had a torpedo nets around the ship. The commander was supposed to go and have a meeting. They called us the SoDak. He says, "SoDak, come in." There was a whaleboat on the gangway. It was U-shaped; you could go in there sideways. And I'm going in there slow, and they keep saying, "South Dakota, come into the gangway." But there's a boat there. He would start up, and he would flood the engine or something, and he would stop. I was coming in, and all of a sudden--I knew I was going to hit him, so I reversed engine. And I ended up on the torpedo net. The commander says--I won't tell you what he said--he got off the whaleboat and there was five big booms. He was jumping from one to the other to get to the gangway, and he fell in. So the hook man, he grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in, and he told me, "Coxswain, take me back to the SoDak," and I said, "yes, sir." He was calling me names that were derogatory, and I said, "Pardon me, sir, I'm a Christian man and I have a Christian name." He said, "You go to your division, and you're on report." So the next day I went before the captain, and they broke me from coxswain to first class seaman. On account of stupidity--not mine, because I didn't tell him to jump. And I could never make another rate. Never. Any time I was recommended by a bos'n or a gunner's mate--Sargent Shriver was my division officer--he would recommend that I be advanced. It would go to [the commander], and then when I would pass the test, he would refuse it. I tried to get transferred off the ship, and he didn't transfer me. He just had it in for me. That's why I was only seaman first in all those years.

Thompson: How is it that you were assigned to USS South Dakota?

Kuczma: We were in Newport, Rhode Island. Nine o'clock was lights out, and we were learning how to sleep in hammocks. This one day, on March 28, lights went out. About a half hour later, a rated man come in and put the lights on, and he said, "Pack your sea bags. You're leaving." "Leaving where?" You don't ask questions. "You're leaving." So they marched us to a train. Got on the train--first class. We're riding all night, and then one of the fellows says, "I know where we're at. We're in Philadelphia. This is the Navy Yard. I live about five blocks away." We took our sea bags to a big warehouse. They told us to drop our bags down, form a line. We marched. And this is the biggest ship I ever seen. It was commissioned, and they took us off, and we went back to the warehouse and got our sea bags. And they were marching us again. And where were we going? Back to the South Dakota. We go up, and they count off six guys, and they took us to a compartment, and they says, "This is your bunk." I said, "I'm not gonna be here long." Because I'd passed the test--I was an apprentice machinist before I joined the Navy, and I took a test to be a machinist. They said, "No, you're here on the South Dakota permanently. Forget about being a machinist."

During the course of learning the ins and outs of the South Dakota, I noticed a brand new machine shop, and I looked, and I knew I could run all those machines. So I wanted to know how I could get into that department. So I talked to my division officer, he gives me a chit, I went to the ensign and I said I have some experience, about a year and a half. He said, "Son, I'm going to tell you something. There's three ways they do things in the Navy--the right way, the wrong way, and the Navy way. The right way would be for us to take you, the wrong way would be to deny it, but the Navy doesn't want you. Because we're gonna teach the person our way, not their way." So every time I passed the machine shop, I was heartsick, because I knew I could work in that department, and they wouldn't allow me in that department. And that was wrong.

October 26, 1942, during the battle of Savo Island, we were on the machine guns and we had a night battle. There was a major in the Marine Corps, he told our captain, it should be Marines that are using that twenty-millimeter instead of Navy. They should be on a five-inch. So then we switched. They switched from five-inch 38 to the twenty millimeters, and we went from twenty millimeters to the five-inch 38. I stayed on until the very end. That's the early part of my career, I guess you'd say.

Thompson: What was the most hazardous action you experienced?

Kuczma: We were on the main deck with the twenty millimeters, and whenever they would fire the sixteen-inch guns, they would say, "Machine gunners, take cover." So what we did, we went into the ammunition locker room. There'd be maybe about twenty of us. There was four twentys on the main deck right outside the compartment. There was four gunners, there was four loaders, there was four ammunition passers. I was one of the ammunition passers. On November 13, after we ate our supper, they asked us to write a letter home, because we were going to be in battle. So we go to the compartment where we always went; this is the ammunition locker room. About a quarter to twelve, we hear the firing, and the next thing you know, somebody said, "Dammit, that's shrapnel." "And look where in the hell we're sitting. Let's get the hell out of here." So we opened the hatch, and there were six dogs. Two dogs on the bottom were always loose, so whoever was in front, he opened the six, pushed the hatch open, and the sixteen inch went off, and it blew the door shut. And it bent the door. We said the hell with that. You couldn't see for a second because there was a big tremendous flash. So we sat there. Nothing happened. It went over us. The officers' mess was on fire. We sat there.

The next thing you know, a guy comes--a repairman says, "Come with me. Grab a fire hose. We're putting out the fire." So we went. Begley, he's in R Division--I'm in the Seventh division--during our stations, I met him in 1980, I think it was. I started talking to him and we became friends. Although he's a radarman, he was attached to the Seventh Division. About four years ago, he says, "Larry, you were on the main deck with twenty millimeters, weren't you?" I said yeah. He said, "Could you tell me how that hatch was bent on the bottom? There was no shell fragments or no holes, so why was that door bent?" I said, "I can tell you very easily." He said, "That bothered me all those years." He couldn't understand how that was bent that way.

Thompson: That's from the impact of a shell?

Kuczma: Concussion. The number one turret, number two turret, you could fire nine guns at one time or three guns at one time, or individual shells, so I don't know how many went off at that particular time. You couldn't be out on the main deck, even aft, if they were firing the guns. It would split your shirt or your pant leg. You had to tie them down. We weighed 35,000 ton, and if the sixteen inch would fire broadside, it would move the whole ship three to six feet in the water. It's tremendous.

Thompson: So you got out of the room you were in.

Kuczma: No, we stayed there until the very end. We were afraid to go out. We didn't know when the guns were firing. If they were firing as we went out, it might blow us over the side. There was the Washington, the South Dakota, they were the two battleships, and then there were four destroyers. Two on the side of the Washington and two on the side of the South Dakota. Three were sunk. The fourth one was damaged.

That's one thing I liked about the Navy. If it was Iwo Jima, Philippines, they would have a display of what we were going to do. At the beginning of the war, there weren't too many ships. They told us, when we went into Guadalcanal, half of you guys won't come back. As the war progressed, they would say, we have thirty ships. That was only one task force; we'd have four or five task forces. If our task force would be thirty ships, maybe ten were going to be sunk. But it never happened like that.

I haven't talked to anybody.

Thompson: Well, now is the time. How did you manage your fears of death and injury?

Kuczma: I prayed. I guess everybody prayed. I'm not sorry I was in there, but I wouldn't want to go through it again. There were ninety-five guys killed aboard our ship. They would bury them at sea. I think about it. No memorial, nothing. If it would have happened, it would have happened. I'm glad it didn't.

Thompson: Was your most hazardous experience the one you just recounted?

Kuczma: That would be it. We were sitting in this ammunition locker room, and the wardroom was--as you would be facing the water, it would have been on our right hand side. That was amidships. When somebody said, "You know, that sounds like shrapnel," and "Let's get the hell out of here," we opened the door to the wardroom, and it was on fire. They had a safe in the captain's [stateroom] and it was a deck above where we were sitting, and nobody could open the safe because somebody lost the combination. They could never open the safe. Captain Gatch had a dog, and he had the run of the whole ship, and during the battle, he stayed in the captain's room. And whether it was a five-inch shell or eight-inch shell, came and hit that safe. The shell didn't explode but it opened the safe up. The dog was a nervous animal after that. When Captain Gatch departed the ship in the Brooklyn Navy Yard--he was hit in the October air attacks in the jugular vein, and a corpsman put his finger on his jugular

vein and saved his life. His arm was paralyzed. He stayed on, because he insisted in staying on the South Dakota, and he was on during the battle of November 14-15, and when we came back to the States for repairs, he left and he took his dog with him.

Can I tell you why we have our reunion here? Captain Gatch had a daughter, maybe 17-18 years old, and she had the run of the ship, when it was commissioned. She was always on the ship. In 1969, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, wanted to put a plaque here, and they advertised in the local paper, and a guy by the name of Knauf (?) worked for the Veteran's Administration, and [the daughter] said, "It's going to be twenty-five years since the war ended. Wouldn't it be nice to have a reunion here?" Knauf says, "Yes, but can you imagine how much money it would cost?" So she talked to her husband, who was a doctor, and he said, "We're going to a country club. How many sailors from the South Dakota are here?" There were eight. He said, "Please come." All eight showed up. The doctor asked, "How much do you think it would cost?" [Knauf said,] "Probably at least \$5000." He sat down at the table and wrote a check for \$5000. He said, "When you spend this money, I'll allow you another 5000. Get this ball rolling." The reunion was in 1970. There was standing room only. I've only missed two reunions, when we went to Poland twice.

Thompson: Do you want to tell about Sargent Shriver?

Kuczma: We came from the Pacific in '43. We got outfitted and repaired at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and they sent us out to the North Atlantic, around the Arctic Circle, and on the Murmansk Run, and to Norway. The von Tirpitz was in one of the fjords, and they were afraid it might sneak out and hit the convoys that were going up to Murmansk. All we were was a buffer zone. They never came out. So after our tour of duty--I think it was about four months--we went back to Norfolk. They told us we were going to go back out to the Pacific. The rumor was we were going to go back out.

I had a friend, John Kennedy, he was a first class gunner's mate, he said, "Minnie"--see, because when I first went aboard ship, seventeen and a half years old, I only had half a year to go to graduate, I couldn't wait. I used to say, "Jeez, Minnie," so they named me Minnie. So anyway, he says, "Minnie, you want to go home?" I says, "What do you mean? Sure I want to go home. What are you talking about?" He said, "Do you have fifteen dollars?" He says, "I work for the airline. Don't tell anybody, but you and I are going to go to the airport." So we got off, went to the airport, he says, "You sit here." He went someplace--he knew everybody. He worked in Boston and he used to travel all over. He was a mechanic of some sort. He come back and he says, "Here's your ticket. Give me the fifteen dollars." Or twelve dollars, or whatever it was. He says, "You're leaving in about 45 minutes." No leave papers. So I get on the airplane. First we fly from Norfolk to Washington DC, from Washington DC, we're over the Alleghenies in Pennsylvania and we hit a storm. I don't know how many times we dropped, I'm saying ten thousand feet, and it would throw us back up, and then down again. Three times in a row. I say no way am I flying back. So when we hit Allegheny County Airport in Pittsburgh, I went to the desk and said can I have my money back? Sure. So I got my money back, I went to the railroad station and I said, "I want to be in Norfolk, Virginia, at six o'clock in the morning. When do I have to leave?" So after about fifteen minutes--it's twelve o'clock now, on a Friday--he says, "You have to catch a six o'clock train to Norfolk. You're gonna have a big layover in Philadelphia and Baltimore." I said okay. So I went home, and I stayed four hours.

I was on the train about fifteen minutes and here comes the Shore Patrol. They want to see your leave papers. They arrested me, put me in shackles, tied me to the--that's what I

didn't like. They shackled me to a seat. That is too far. If they shackled my hands, that's all right. But if there was wreck--I thought that was stupid. So anyway, we hit Philadelphia, and they put me in the brig. When it was time to leave, they took me out of the brig and we went to Baltimore. I don't know how many hours we stayed there, but I was in the brig. The train was leaving for Norfolk. In Baltimore they had a ship--the whole train went on this boat--it was overnight to Norfolk. We arrived about five o'clock in the morning, and they put me in a Jeep and rode me to the South Dakota. I come up the gangplank--Sargent Shriver is my division officer--they say, "He was caught in Harrisburg and he has no leave papers." Sargent Shriver said I'll take care of it and he signed the papers. He looked at me and he said, "What the hell were you doing in Harrisburg?" So I told him the story, why I flew to Pittsburgh, the whole story. He said, "You know what? I have connections. I couldn't get a ticket. They were all full." I said, "Sir, I have connections." He was a good egg. He said, "And you went home. You should have stayed there. When were you supposed to leave?" I said Sunday afternoon. He said, "What do you want me to do with you?" I figured at least a hundred hours extra duty, and I said, "Sir, throw me in the brig and give me a hundred hours extra duty." He thought about it, thought about it, and said, "Get the hell out of here." So I left.

So when we met in Norfolk, I said, "You were my division officer. I was a right spade man (?) on a five-inch thirty-eight, and my name is Larry Kuczma." And he says, "That name doesn't sound familiar." I said, "I had a nickname of Minnie." "Oh, my God, Minnie!" He says, "You changed." See, I weighed 121 pounds when I was in the service, and I probably weighed about 215 then, so there was a difference. He didn't recognize me but he remembered the name. Whether he did or not, I don't know, but he looked at me and he says, "Minnie!"

Thompson: What was that again now?

Kuczma: When I first went in the service, I didn't swear. I said, "Jeez, Min Nee." So they called me Minnie.

Thompson: Tell us about your discharge.

Kuczma: I got discharged from an Army base, not a Navy base. When we hit the States in San Francisco after the war, that was in October, we stayed in San Francisco for about ten days, and then we were shipped to San Diego. Next thing you know, I had enough points. Because I was on board South Dakota from March '42 until October '45. If you had thirty-nine points, you were discharged, and I had more than enough. So they put us on a train to Nashville, Tennessee. And there's a big sign--Army base. I got discharged from an Army base. We stayed there three days, and I came back home. Nobody greeted me. I had my sea bag. I went on a train, I got off the train, and that was just part of my job. Nobody said, hey, glad to see you, or anything like that. It's a shame the modern generation doesn't know about World War II.

Thompson: Any last comments? About the South Dakota?

Kuczma: I think we got the shaft. We got the shaft from President Truman, we got the shaft from Admiral Lee--I'm not looking for recognition, but people should know. What hurts me is ninety-five guys died. For what? The truth is the truth. And I don't think the people--we never got what we deserved.

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