

John F. Lock

Gunner's mate

Oral History

July 7, 2001

Herbert T. Hoover: This is an interview with John Lock, a crewmember with battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Herbert T. Hoover on July 7, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. If you would give us your name, and where you are currently living.

John Lock: My name is John Lock, and I currently live in the town of Wallace, Kansas.

Hoover: Let's take your mind back to where you were at the time you enlisted in the United States Navy, how old you were and why you chose the Navy.

Lock: I was twenty years old when I joined the Navy. I was asked several times why I joined the Navy, and I told them I felt like I would either have a place to eat and sleep or I wouldn't, and I didn't have to worry about a foxhole. I left home on the seventeenth day of August, I was sworn in on the twentieth--that was 1942--in Saint Louis, Missouri, and went to San Diego. We were there a short time. The company commander that was the head of us there said, "Boys, I've got bad news. You're all going to sea." So that's what we did. We left there and went to Treasure Island. I can't remember the dates but I know it was in September of 1942. It took us seven days to go across to Pearl Harbor where I boarded the South Dakota.

Hoover: What do you remember about Treasure Island?

Lock: We spend a few days there before we got aboard an old transport to go over there. Some of the guys had come back from Midway--their ships had been sunk. And they didn't give us a very good picture. Kind of made you wonder if you was doing the right thing. It was just a stopping off place. When we got to Pearl Harbor on October 4, 1942, I boarded the South Dakota with several of my other buddies from boot camp.

Hoover: Had you ever been at sea? Did you get seasick on the transport?

Lock: No. No, I didn't get seasick. But I couldn't stand the smell that was coming out of the galley. We had one of the guys in charge that went and volunteered to work in the butcher shop on the ship. We had some passengers on there also, and they give us some entertainment as we went across. That's where I worked. There was a colored fellow that was in charge, so when they asked for volunteers, I punched my buddy and I said let's go down to the butcher shop. So we ate pretty good on our way across there. I had a buddy from home that asked me to join the Navy with him. His name was Bussin (?). Well, see, when you go down the alphabet for ships, he got on a Coast Guard boat, and he was sick all the way across there. I carted food to him and he couldn't keep it down. He finally got a medical discharge after several months. That old Coast Guard boat--it just run him down to where he had a problem. I never did get seasick, but we had several guys that did. I remember one little feller that got on the ship--this was after several years--a little red-headed kid had one of the spittoons. I come along and I said, "Can I help you?" He was heaving. "No," he said, "just go away and let me die."

Hoover: When did you learn that you were going to be on the South Dakota?

Lock: I didn't learn until I got on it.

Hoover: What was your first impression of that big ship?

Lock: Ohh. It was out of the world. I didn't realize something that big could float. And it was just a little ship--it was the first one of its class of four. Everything was new. As far as

knowing anything about the Navy, the operations or anything like this, I had no idea what we was heading for. I went to gunnery school while we was there in Pearl Harbor, a day or two, to get acquainted with some of the equipment. I didn't know what a twenty millimeter or a forty millimeter looked like.

Captain Gatch, when they pulled in there--they had to go in there because they poked a hole in the bottom of the ship--so they had to go to Pearl Harbor into dry dock to get the bottom patched, and that's when I got on. So while they were in there, Captain Gatch says I want all the fifties and one point ones taken off, and forties and twenties put on. And that's what they did. I can't remember the exact amount, but it was a lot. Into the seventies of twenties and forties, each. I guess Captain Gatch kind of figured what we were getting into.

I don't remember quite the day we pulled out of Pearl Harbor, but I do remember that we had firing practice two or three times--shooting at socks as the planes pulled them. We were kind of getting used to firing the guns and getting them loaded. I was first loader, being I was new. I didn't know the boy that was my gunner. It was only twenty-two days. We got hit with the bomb on the 26th, he was wounded. That's when Captain Gatch got hit in his neck. My battle station was just above him, and I could look down that catwalk, and this person that was with him was holding his jugular where the shrapnel hit him. We had run out of ammunition, and the second loader and I had to go down four decks, and we picked up--those magazines weighed sixty pounds apiece--and we picked up one in each hand and went back up the ladders, right up the four decks. And here come our gunner, and he was holding himself where the shrapnel had hit him, and that's the last time I saw him. The bomb killed, I think, forty people.

Hoover: What kind of planes were you shooting at?

Lock: Zeros and Betties, I guess. Bombers and torpedo planes. I think a Zero is a fighter plane. I don't know what they called the bombers. The Betty was a torpedo plane. I can remember the 26th--you just couldn't believe, with what was going up there, how anything could get through. When we took that bomb in the number one turret, I didn't know we'd been hit till we went back out there and seen [the gunner] coming in the door. That was our first taste of war.

Hoover: Tell me how you felt at that point. Did you feel any fear?

Lock: We didn't have time. That's something that never entered my mind. I guess when you got a job to do, you got to do it. Things just drop into place. We knew we had to keep the gun going. It's hard to realize--for no longer than I was in the Navy--I left home on the 17th day of August and this happened on the 26th day of October--it's not many days.

Hoover: After that first battle, then where'd you go?

Lock: We headed into Guadalcanal. It was two battleships, the South Dakota and the Washington, and we had four destroyers. That's what we had for battle--to go into Guadalcanal against what the Japanese had in there. This was on the night of November 14th and the morning of November 15th of 1942. Being I was a twenty millimeter machine gunner, I had no battle station. We were told to take cover in the superstructure, which we did. I went into a little head up there, and the rest of the guys sat down on the deck there. I laid down on the deck, and seeing the wastepaper basket over there--I had my helmet and life jacket on, but I put this wastebasket over my head, too. You could never tell whether we was really getting hit with something, or big guns was firing. It was just a big roar all the time. It happened to be that the deck I was on, there was no shells that went through it. But there was shells above my deck and below it. When everything ceased firing, I laid there a little bit until things quieted

down, and I got up, opened up the door, and there wasn't anybody on the deck. I was the only one there, and I heard a commotion from a couple of decks up.

Then I heard somebody hollering for help, and this shipmate had fell down the first flight of stairs, and I could look up the next deck up there and I could see him hollering for help, so I went up the steps and got hold of him under the shoulders and started back down the stairs. And when I did, I could see--he had no use of his legs at all--his legs were just flopping. So when I got him down on the next deck, I laid him down on the deck. There was no way I could pick him up and carry him down because of the room we had to get down through the hatches. I asked him if he thought he could get hold of my neck if I laid down beside him, and he said yeah. So that's what I did. I got as close to him as I could get, and he put his arms around my neck, and I stood up and his legs straightened, straight down. The only way I could get down was to slide on my stomach. And we went down those four decks.

And we seen bodies floating in the water, where the shells had went through. It was something. You don't think much about--I don't know. I finally got him down, and by the time we got down there-- we'd had fires, you know, and the fire parties had run a lot of water, and these guys were floating in water. I stepped over the hatch to take him on in the wardroom where they were taking the wounded, and he kept telling me all the way down, he'd never forget me, and--I lived with that for fifty-seven years. Wondering if he lived or died. Like I say, it's something you don't forget. I didn't know the man, I had no idea what his name was, but I was--I had no other choice but to help the man. When you get into something like that, that's the only thing a fellow could do, is do what you can do to save him.

Hoover: You know who he is, now.

Lock: Yeah. I do. By coming to the reunions here in South Dakota, I talked to Cathy Verschelden--her dad was on the ship--and asked her if she knew how I might could go about finding somebody I've wondered about for years. She told me to go over to Howard Bartoff, he had a table there, and visit with him. So I did, and told him my story, and he said I might be able to help you because I went to the archives in Washington DC, and I've got a list of every man that served onboard ship, every man that was wounded and everyone that was killed. So I gave him kind of a description of his wounds--this was in July two years ago--and in September, the morning of the 25th, I got a phone call from a fellow from California.

I was out in the yard working, and the Mrs. come out and said there's a guy from California wants to talk to you on the phone. So I went in, and he said, "My name is Jack Erskine (?)." And he wanted to know what I knew about the night of November 15th in Guadalcanal. I said I had lots of memories. I was there. He said, "After reading the newsletter I got here, that you were looking for somebody that you helped," he said, "I just got to thinking it probably was you." I said, "Well, if that's the case, then you're the guy I've been thinking of for fifty-seven years, wondering about whether you lived or died." He said, "I believe I'm that man." So we communicated several times on the phone, and letters, and we set a date to meet on the 20th of January a year ago. I told him I've got to come and see you; that's all there is to it.

We took an Amtrack down, and he met us at the station. He'd said I'll meet you at the train station. He come limping around into the bench, and we talked a little bit. Y'know, I see him standing there, I couldn't say anything. He kinda looked at me. I walked over and took his hand and said, "Jack." "Yup." We kinda hugged one another there, and sat down and visited for awhile. He had talked to the *San Diego Union Tribune*, and so this man was there, and we

had quite a little visit there. Port Brooks was the guy that wrote the story. It was something to meet somebody you'd always wondered about, whether he made it or not.

Hoover: This was published by the *San Diego Union Tribune* on January 21, 2000. I wanted to read that into the tape. This is a beautiful picture. That's a marvelous story.

Lock: I can't help from getting emotional about that. It's hard to explain. I don't know how many letters I got from people out thataway. Even some of my shipmates contacted me. It made renewed relations with shipmates I'd lost track of.

Hoover: Mr. Lock, you're a legitimate hero.

Lock: No. No, I just done my job.

Hoover: The real heroes feel that way.

L: I just figured that was part of my job.

H: You didn't feel any fear when you were carrying that guy down.

Lock: No, not a bit. I was thinking of him. He told me he didn't have any idea how he got down there. He didn't remember. He was kinda coming and going because he was in a lot of pain, I'm sure. It was a blessing that I got to meet him when I did. Jack--him and his wife, Rosa--was just as nice a people as we've ever met.

Hoover: What happened to you after Guadalcanal?

Lock: We had to come back to the United States. We had forty hits through us. We come back to New York and got repaired, and then we went to the North Atlantic for a couple of months. The German battleship, von Tirpitz, was up there.

Hoover: What was that like? It was rougher seas, wasn't it?

Lock: Oh, yeah, it was rougher and colder. When you get that far north, you got foul weather gear that you gotta wear. It was for a short time, and I'm glad about that, because I didn't like to get cold. You couldn't go out topside if it was cold. The waves were coming in, and ice spraying over everything. They sent us up there to decoy that ship out. It was along the coast of Norway. After a few days of going up and down the coast there, there was us and the Alabama, and we had two or three destroyers with us, we finally got them nervous enough they decided they would come out. When they started moving and the airplanes got track of them, the base planes from England, they come in and they done away with it. I was thankful of that, because that was a big battleship. We never saw it. After that, we went back to the South Pacific and spent the rest of our time down there.

Hoover: Did you go through the canal?

Lock: Yes. We sure did. I can't remember for sure, it was in '44, off the coast of Saipan where we took another five-hundred pound bomb. We operated with the Enterprise. I know the battle of Santa Cruz there, there were times when she got close enough to us--because we had firepower that they didn't have--I understand the South Dakota kinda got credit for the Enterprise not being sunk. Because in the other task force--we split up. There was us and the Enterprise and some destroyers, and then the Hornet and some cruisers and destroyers. We was the only battleship out there at that time, and we could see it on the horizon over there, that they had pretty well damaged the Hornet. That was the day they finally got the men that was still alive, off, and when they got back, they sunk it with cruisers. The Princeton was the same way, when they got it damaged in one of the battles out there. It was off on the horizon and we could see it burning, and they finally had to do away with it. As far as actually sinking the ships, the Japs never really did, but they was crippled so bad, they couldn't get back. Some of the small ones they blowed up. I don't know, it's something that if I suppose I had to do it again, I would, but I'd think about it twice.

H: What did it feel like on a big ship like that when it took a bomb? Did that shake it?

Lock: I never noticed it. The second bomb we got went into the forty millimeters on the port side. I was on the starboard side. I couldn't tell we'd been hit with a bomb, because of all the firing we were doing anyway. When it was all over with, then is when I found out a five-hundred bomb hit turret one, and went down through the deck.

Hoover: You had been in the North Atlantic and you came back through the canal to the Pacific. Where did you go from there?

Lock: We went back down though all those little islands in the South Pacific, bombarding, and doing what we could do to get to Japan. We had taken another bomb in Saipan, when we were bombarding it. It done lots of damage, more than the first one did. See, the first one, when it hit number one turret right on top, it didn't do as much damage to the turret as it did number two turret, because the shrapnel went up into two barrels in number two turret. And they couldn't fire them guns. So when we went into Guadalcanal, we couldn't use those two barrels. We only had seven guns. The other two couldn't be fired. The shrapnel is what--from that bomb explosion--the one that hit the quad, there was lots of boys killed there. Some of the fire department that went down through the first deck there, it was a lot worse cleaning up than what the other was. Anyway, after that, we had to go back to Washington, Seattle, Bremerton, and get repaired from that bomb hit. Then we went back to the South Pacific to finish our job.

It was my understanding that the South Dakota was the first battleship to fire on the Japanese homeland. We was the flagship. Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Halsey. Like the guy said at Pierre, maybe I shouldn't say this--

Hoover: Go ahead.

Lock: That supper we had last night, that speaker, that historian that writes books--we all felt the same way as far as this goes--he said the South Dakota was the flagship, and thought the surrender would be signed on the South Dakota. But being Mr. Truman was President, it was signed on the Mighty Mo. And you know the Missouri didn't get out there until the war was damned near over with.

Hoover: Where was the South Dakota when that took place?

Lock: We were, oh, I'd say, probably within a couple city blocks. I sit up in the superstructure with my binoculars and seen 'em do it. When we pulled into Tokyo Bay, it was weary. Because we had to go through kind of a big channel, with mountains on each side. You could see some gun emplacements as you went up through there. You'd think, all they got to do is cut loose and where would we be? But we had two Japanese pilots on there to pilot us up through there.

When we dropped anchor in Tokyo Bay, why, we weren't really very fast, but when they put the anchor down, then they put the ship propellers in reverse, and it stirred up a lot of mud and stuff. I looked down at the side of the ship, and there was a body come floating by. It had khaki clothes, but it was in a sitting position, face down, and you could just see his back, down to his rump. I don't know, he went drifting on by, and as near as I could tell, there was a ship that was looking for him. But whatever happened, I have no idea whether he was American or Jap or what, but he definitely had khaki clothes on.

Hoover: You just stayed on board while you were in Tokyo?

Lock: I did, yeah. They had a landing party that went over, I guess a kind of police thing. For us twenty millimeter--machine gunners--stayed aboard. In case something should happen. We had a company of Marines on the ship to do that kind of work. Although they did have battle

stations on the twenty millimeters, and forties. Anyway, they went over, and some of the sailors for two or three days.

Hoover: When you left there, where did you go?

Lock: We went to Pearl Harbor, and we picked up some other people that were there. Servicemen. And I think we picked up a photographer or two, some other people, that was coming back to the United States. I had one of the officers come to me and wanted to know if I had enough points to get out. I said, "Yeah, I do." "Well, he said--I had made gunner's mate, although I didn't have my stripes yet, but that's all I did for three years, was take care of guns. Twenty millimeters--it gave us something to do. I don't know how many times a day we'd tear them down, clean them up, put them back. Keep us occupied. And make sure that they was gonna to operate right. But anyway, I told him, no, I said, I've had enough. "Oh," he said, "it will be a lot different for you now. You'll have a group underneath you." I said, "I've had a group underneath for the last two years." Anyway, I told him, "No, I believe I'll just call it quits." So that's what I did. I got in--we went under the Golden Gate Bridge--

Hoover: Back to Treasure Island?

Lock: No, we stayed on the ship until we got a train to go back to St. Louis for discharge. I got discharged on the 23rd of October, 1945. So that gives me--like I say, my time in service was practically all on the ship. From the 20th of August to the 4th of October, that's when I went through boot camp and on my way to Pearl Harbor. The rest of the time it was on the ship.

Hoover: When you were all done and you got out of the Navy, what did you think? Did you have trouble getting over the war?

Lock: There's things like that--it comes back to you. Even in the middle of the night sometimes. You never--it's just hard to--as far as really bothering me to get back to the civil life, I got along all right. But you still think about things that happened that you're not going to forget. Remembering things like that--there's just lots and lots of things that stick in your mind that happened. Some were real good, some real bad. Anyway, I feel like I recuperated pretty good, after the situation. I waited three years to get married.

On this cloudy day we had bogies reported. That means unidentified planes. I don't know, after going through what we did, you're itchy. Of course, these planes dropped down out of them clouds, and everybody opened up. I could look up there, I seen them stars. I said, "Hey, guys, hey look, them's our planes." They were from one of the aircraft carriers. I can remember--I had the phones on at that time. Sky Defense said, "Look what you guys done. You got their own ships firing at them."

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