

Hiram T. Quillin, Jr.

USMC

Oral History [telephone interview]

December 13, 2001

Deborah M. Lyon: My name is Deb Lyon, and I'm calling from the Center for Western Studies in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and I'm one of the interviewing researchers for the USS South Dakota battleship oral history project. What I'm doing right now is interviewing Mr. Hiram Quillin from Huntsville, Alabama. You were in the Navy, is that correct?

Hiram Quillin: Marine Corps. There was 80-90 Marines in the detachment. We manned the twenty-millimeter antiaircraft guns on the South Dakota.

Lyon: When did you enter the Marines?

Quillin: Right after Pearl Harbor. I owned a service station, and I sold it. I started looking for a buyer the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. Three weeks later I sold my business. When I got my business wound up, I joined the Marines. February '42.

Lyon: When did you get out of the Marines?

Quillin: I got out forty-five months later. Almost four years.

Lyon: How old were you at the time you joined the Marines?

Quillin: I was twenty-three years old. I was an old man for the Marine Corps.

Lyon: What's your birth date?

Quillin: September 15, 1918.

Lyon: Where were you born?

Quillin: Nettleton, Mississippi.

Lyon: When you joined, what was your rank or rating?

Quillin: Going in, as a private.

Lyon: How did you become assigned to USS South Dakota?

Quillin: I went overseas, and was in the Guadalcanal campaign as a machine gunner in 1942. The same year I joined, I wound up at Guadalcanal. Then I got a blood stream infection that settled in my lungs, and I almost died over there. They shipped me back home to die, I think, but I fooled them. I spent a year or year and a half back in the States. When I got back on my feet, they sent me back out. They sent me through C School in San Diego--this was 1945. They shipped us out to Pearl Harbor on a ship, and then they flew nine of us out to--the orders read "proceed by Naval Air transportation to the vicinity of USS South Dakota." Nine of us flew out and caught the South Dakota in the Philippines in June of 1945. They assigned me to twenty-millimeter antiaircraft gun, on top of the number two sixteen-inch gun turret.

Lyon: So you missed most of the battles the South Dakota was involved in.

Quillin: No, ma'am, I was not. I went aboard in June of '45, and I made three bombardments of the Japanese homeland. In July, I think. We left the Philippines and went up and shelled three times with the big sixteen-inch guns. The third bombardment was at Kamaishi. The same day we made our third bombardment, they dropped the bomb on Nagasaki, on the same hour. We were up on the north end and they were on the south end when they dropped the bomb. We didn't know anything about them dropping a bomb until hours later. We were a few hundred miles from Nagasaki, I suppose.

I observed the big naval sea battle at Guadalcanal, from the shore. I was attached to the First Marine Division in 1942. The most famous sea battle of all time--they were just right

off shore. The South Dakota was in that sea battle. They were out far enough away that we couldn't tell what ship was what. I was there when they--

Lyon: So you were watching the Savo Island battle.

Quillin: It was the battle after that. It was on Friday, November 13th, and through the 14th and 15th, I think. I read this after that war, that fifty-seven Japanese ships came in. Included in the fifty-seven ships was eight troop transports; they was gonna run us off the island. We was already outnumbered two to one on the island when they came in there. But we observed the great sea battle. And later on, I was proud to serve aboard the South Dakota. I've written a book on my experiences in the Marine Corps. The title of my book is *From Guadalcanal to Tokyo*.

Lyon: So most of the action you saw, when you were assigned to the battleship--were you involved at the time of the surrender?

Quillin: That's another story. When the Japanese decided right after they dropped the second atomic bomb, they started talking about they wanted to give up. They started getting the Marines on all the battleships and carriers and cruisers, the small detachments, they formed a landing. We were transferred at sea, to troop transports, from the battleships, cruisers, and aircraft carriers. They formed a landing party, and we were in it, and we ran from a typhoon for four or five days, and finally landed at--I can't think of the name right now--it was in Tokyo Bay, at Yokosuka Naval Air Station. We went in as occupation troops two days before they signed the peace terms. They had agreed upon the terms, but they hadn't signed them. So we were ashore in Japan, the Marines were, and the South Dakota and the Missouri was right off the shore. My book will tell you all this.

Lyon: What was your impression of the teamwork of the crew? Coming in as someone who hadn't been there all the time, how did it look to you?

Quillin: I had never seen a battleship until I boarded this thing. I was impressed with the size of the battleship, and the firepower it had.

Lyon: What did you do when you were assigned to the battleship? What were your duties?

Quillin: My duty was to man one of the twenty-millimeter antiaircraft guns, on top of the number two sixteen-inch gun turret.

Lyon: When you weren't doing that, what were your other duties?

Quillin: That's about all the duties I had on the battleship.

Lyon: So as part of the Marine contingent, if you weren't at your duty station, then there wasn't anything else that you did? The Navy guys had other duties.

Quillin: We stood gun watches, four hours on and sixteen hours off, around the clock. There was somebody on watch on those guns around the clock. We'd sit around, loafed and told lies, wishing we was home, and all that stuff.

Lyon: That was going to be my next question--what did you do with the other sixteen hours besides sleep and eat?

Quillin: Nothing. Besides waiting for the war to end.

Lyon: Were there any liberties?

Quillin: The short time I was on it, we had no liberty. I was just on it from June until the end of the war.

Lyon: When the war ended, did you go back to the United States on the South Dakota?

Quillin: The Marines spent two or three weeks--we stayed at the Yokosuka Naval Air Station--as occupation troops. We went in and took over the guard duty at this naval air

station. After we'd been there two or three weeks, they got Army troops. The war ended so fast they didn't have troops to move but the Marines in the Third Fleet ships. When they got some Army troops in, they relieved us and we went back to our ships. Our ships were still in Tokyo Bay after they signed the peace terms. The South Dakota was used by Admiral Nimitz as his flagship during the signing, and Admiral Halsey--it was his flagship coming back to the States. He flew back Hawaii, and when we got to Hawaii, he came aboard and came from Pearl Harbor to San Francisco with us, on the South Dakota. The day after we got there, we had a big parade, and he led the parade, Bull Halsey. I think there was eleven hundred Marines and sailors in this parade. Then the next night Bob Hope broadcast his weekly radio program from our battleship. Bob Hope always put on a good show.

Lyon: Do you remember anyone else who was there besides Bob Hope?

Quillin: Any man would remember Frances Langford. She was the pinup girl of 1945. She was with Bob Hope on a lot of his shows.

Lyon: What would you consider your most hazardous action during World War II?

Quillin: The bombardments of the Japanese homeland. We pulled in just a few hundred yards off the shore and bombarded two hours. Before I got aboard the ship in the Philippines, they took a whole lot of damage from a kamikaze Japanese plane, and I think we had one dive on us on that first bombardment. The war was over and we didn't know it. We were just doing our job.

Lyon: When you were transferred onto the ship, did you have any problems with being seasick? Did you go through one of the typhoons?

Quillin: I never was in a typhoon while I was aboard ship, but we ran from a typhoon. They try to stay away from them if they can, and when we left the South Dakota at sea, to the transport, we ran five days from a typhoon, but I never was in one.

Lyon: Did you get seasick?

Quillin: I didn't get sick on the South Dakota. I got sick on the troop transport going to Guadalcanal. I thought I was gonna die and hoped I would. A battleship is so big and so heavy. We went in some heavy seas on it, but it was a much bigger ship than the transports, and I never got sick on it.

Lyon: Were you able to move around the battleship pretty much on your own, or were you required to stay in a certain part of it?

Quillin: Oh, no, we could go most anywhere on the ship. They didn't let us go up in officer's country, but we could go pretty well anywhere. It was just a floating city. They had just about anything that you could go down to the shopping center and get.

Lyon: What was the most interesting part of the ship?

Quillin: I don't know. To see the big guns in operation, I guess, was what impressed me more than anything else.

Lyon: Anything else you remember from World War II you'd like to talk about?

Quillin: My wife gave me a note here to tell you about coming under the Golden Gate Bridge. That was a great day. They had thousands of people lining the bridge and the shore. A big welcome home.

Lyon: How long did you stay in the Marines?

Quillin: They transferred us off the ship, the ones that were going home, maybe a week or so after we got back to San Francisco. We caught a troop train to the closest separation points, and my closest one was Bainbridge, Maryland. I was discharged a few days later. About a month after we got back to San Francisco, I was a civilian again.

Lyon: What did you do then? Did you go back to school?

Quillin: I got my schooling in the United States Marine Corps. When I got home, I traveled for the Standard Oil Company. I ran a service station before. I sold my station, I told you that, and joined the Marines. They wanted to give me another service station. I liked service station work, but I didn't like working eight days and eight nights a week. I had a lot of time to think while I was gone, and I decided I wasn't going back in that, so they gave me a job as a traveling salesman, for Standard Oil Company. I was not married then--I got married while I was traveling, and I could see real quick that that wasn't the way it was supposed to be, and I found me a business to go into--a wholesale produce business. I bought that land up, and we started raising children, and we've been married fifty-five years and every year gets better.

Lyon: You were born in Nettleton, and now you're living in Alabama. Have you lived in the South all your life?

Quillin: Cain't you tell by my speech I've lived here all my life? We lived in Nettleton, Mississippi, and we moved to Alabama when I was four years old. I'm just the same as born in Alabama, although I wasn't.

Lyon: Where did you go to school?

Quillin: Huntsville High School. I graduated in 1938.

Transcribed by:
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