

Henry L. Stewart
Radioman Second Class Petty Officer
Oral History
December 14, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: Let me make sure I've got your name right. You're Henry L. Stewart. You're in Keithville, Louisiana. What was your rank in the Navy?

Henry Stewart: I was radioman second class. I was the executive officer's radio operator.

Huseboe: And the dates you served on the South Dakota?

Stewart: When the South Dakota came down from the States, I went aboard at Pearl Harbor. I stayed on it till after the war was over. My battle station was in Second Conn. That was way up in the superstructure, and I had a bird's eye view of everything that went on. Sir, I'm here to tell you, somebody's going to get hurt over this story, because the Washington--USS Washington--had an admiral on it, and he ran off and left us. We were burning from one end to the other. He wouldn't even give us the courtesy of answering our transmission.

Huseboe: I'm going to give you a chance to put that in here, if you'll just give me a couple more facts about yourself. Your date of birth?

Stewart: I was born May the 12th, 1920, in Laurel, Mississippi.

Huseboe: Did you grow up there?

Stewart: No, I didn't grow up there. I went in the Navy very young.

Huseboe: Did you go through high school?

Stewart: Yes, in Laurel, Mississippi.

Huseboe: Did you go on to college?

Stewart: No. I got a lot of my education in the Navy.

Huseboe: Did you have a job before the Navy?

Stewart: Oh, yes. I was in construction.

Huseboe: How was it that you enlisted in the Navy?

Stewart: Well, I decided I'd go ahead and enlist in the Navy, after I got out of school. That was before Pearl Harbor. I was two hundred fifty miles up the Yangtze River in China when they bombed Pearl Harbor. They came in there and got us out, because we were trapped. The Japs had put up a barrage across the river, and the Chinese did the same thing, and we were right dead in the middle of it. I was on a little gun post. We couldn't get out, so a PBY came in there and landed in the river. We just dove over the side and swam out to the plane, and they took us to Australia.

Huseboe: How many were you that got aboard the PBY?

Stewart: Six of us. When I left Australia, I caught a submarine, and when I went aboard, I saw the five nuns that they had rescued in the Philippines. They went back to the States and they dropped us off in Pearl Harbor. I got into radio school. When I got out of radio school, the South Dakota came down from the States, on a shakedown cruise, and I went aboard there as a radio operator.

Huseboe: You must have gone in when you were pretty young then.

Stewart: Yes, I was. I weighed about a hundred and eight pounds. I was a little bitty fellow. My mama lied about my age. I was sixteen.

Huseboe: Where did you go through training?

Stewart: In Pearl Harbor. We had a bombed out building we had the school in, and I also captured a German spy that was there on base. I was coming back from lunch one day, going

back to the school, and this guy was walking along the road, and he asked me a lot of questions about the radio school. I said I don't know anything about a radio school. He said don't they have a radar school here, too? I said, look, I told you I didn't know anything. I think you better get on out of here. I went to the school, and I reported it to the chief radio operator, the teacher there. He called and Admiral Nimitz and a whole crew come out there, and give me the third degree, and they caught him that evening. They said they had been looking for him for weeks. They knew he was there, but they didn't know what he looked like. So I give them a real good description of him, and they caught him.

Huseboe: Did you ever hear what happened to him?

Stewart: No. I went aboard the South Dakota right after that.

Huseboe: How did you get assigned to the South Dakota?

Stewart: I didn't know where I was going. They put me aboard. "This is your home." I'm proud of it now.

Huseboe: What did you do onboard ship?

Stewart: I ran the radio control teletype machine, and I copied the schedules--MPM--they broadcast around the clock. Like the Germans do. I also went aboard the Yorktown, while we was up in the North Atlantic. Me and Romanoff (?), a friend of mine--he was a radio operator--they dispatched us over there to learn the German procedure, and we stayed about there about four or five weeks. We went back on the South Dakota when we set sail.

Huseboe: The Yorktown got sunk, didn't it?

Stewart: Oh, yeah. We lost the Hornet, too. We were with the Hornet, but she strayed off away from the South Dakota. We couldn't protect both of them, so we picked the Enterprise. We were running circles around it.

Huseboe: Were you at the battle of Santa Cruz?

Stewart: Oh, yeah.

Huseboe: You were at Santa Cruz, and Savo, I imagine Savo was worse than Santa Cruz, wasn't it? That's the one you were going to tell me about, where Admiral Lee took the Washington away from the South Dakota?

Stewart: Yes, sir, that was there at Guadalcanal. I got a log. I've got it all written down. And it's never been revealed and never been told. To only two people, and you're the second one. A reporter for the Rapid Journal got in touch with me, and I gave him all I had. I'll tell you what I know. It's gonna hurt a lot of people. Although they're dead. I'm eighty-one years old.

Huseboe: What was your duty station at the battle of Savo Island?

Stewart: It was up in the superstructure. I was the radio operator for the executive officer. If something happened in First Conn, where the captain is, we'd take over up there. We were COMTHIRDFLT [Commander, Third Fleet]. We had to tell them which way to turn, how much speed, and all that.

Huseboe: Our American ships had the advantage of radar at the battle of Savo, blew the Japanese right out of the water, sunk one of their battleships--

Stewart: We surprised them. They were right on top of us before they realized it. That's the controversy there--the battleship. They claimed they sunk the battleship. I say we sunk it. We fired three Jolly Roger shells, and I saw it with my own eyes, and it hit right at the waterline amidships, and went five hundred feet in the air. And it sank immediately. I think we hit a magazine. The Washington--I'm afraid the Washington sank the Preston. The Preston was on their starboard bow, and they fired that way, and it went down.

Huseboe: Let me ask you--at Santa Cruz, where USS South Dakota shot down so many Japanese planes--

Stewart: A lot of people say it was thirty-two, but I say it was thirty-eight. We counted 38, but we got credit for 32.

Huseboe: How about discipline on board ship? Were you pretty disciplined?

Stewart: No, our Captain Gatch was the finest man that ever walked. Now you're gonna get me crying. Our skipper didn't pressure us. He knew that a lot of us was gonna die. That's what happened. A lot of us didn't make it. In fact, the Second Conn, where they steered the ship, the wheel in the front compartment? Well, in the back compartment on the same level, there was ten radarmen, with the radar in there, and a shell came through and exploded and killed every one of them. Right behind me.

Huseboe: That was at the battle of Savo?

Stewart: Yes, sir. I tried to get out, and me and the executive officer--he said, "I'm getting me a machine gun, Sparks," and I said, "I'm right behind you, sir." So I ran and jumped for a ladder, and of course it was at night, and that ladder was gone, and I fell about twenty feet to the deck. They thought I was dead, and pulled me in that small room where the officer of the deck stays when we're in port--they pulled all of the dead in there. One of the medics come through and he sees my foot turn over, and he grabbed to see if I had a pulse. I did, and they pulled me out of there.

Huseboe: Did anybody get any merit citations for their actions during that battle?

Stewart: I never--they tried to get me to put in for a pension and all that, and I don't want no money, I fought my war, I got out of there, I don't want no medals. My heroes are in the bottom of the [?] Channel.

Huseboe: I have a couple more questions. Were you seasick?

Stewart: Oh, no. I have never been seasick. Never. A lot of the guys were seasick. We'd help them all we could.

Huseboe: Were you in some bad storms?

Stewart: Oh, yeah. We'd pick up a hurricane on our radar. We'd all head for it and get in the middle of it and ride it out. The Japs can't pick you up when you're in a hurricane.

Huseboe: Were you worried about subs and Japanese airplanes?

Stewart: Submarines? Oh, yeah, where we were at was full of submarines. We had some good destroyers and DEs--destroyer escorts. They did an outstanding job.

Huseboe: I had one other guy tell me that they made Captain Gatch say the Washington hadn't deserted the South Dakota. Somebody gave him an order to say that.

Stewart: Captain Gatch didn't say that. He turned around and walked away from them, but he didn't say that. If the truth ever comes out, there's gonna be a lot of red faces in Washington.

Transcribed by:
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