

George E. Workman

Boatswain's Mate Third Class Petty Officer (Coxswain)

Oral History

July 5, 2001

Harry Thompson: This is an interview with Mr. George E. Workman, 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. Mr. Workman, if you would say your name and where you currently live.

George Workman: George E. Workman, Roselle, Illinois, which is about thirty miles west of Chicago.

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

Workman: I graduated in January of '44 from high school. We all knew as soon as we did we were going to go in the war. Rather than wait, I went down to enlist in the Navy. I had some sort of a chest problem, so I had a thirty-day deferment, or whatever you call it. After that I got another notice to go down, which I did, and I passed. I was accepted by the Navy and I was sent to Great Lakes, Illinois. Went there and after that they sent me to California and waited there for awhile. A bunch of us got aboard a transport ship, crammed in like sardines, and we were on our way to the way to the Pacific. That's when I got my first taste of the sea. On a crowded transport ship. When we got to Hawaii, they took us off the transport cuz they needed the transport--we were supposed to go further on, to some island--but they took us all off because they said they needed the transport that we were on to come back to the States because there was a bunch of Marines that had been wounded and they had to have a way to get them back for treatment. So then we were set up in Hawaii in tents in some cane field for a couple of weeks, I guess.

Then the South Dakota came in from the West Coast, and some of the other fleet, and all of us were assigned to different ships. I was assigned to the South Dakota. When I got alongside her in the launch that took us up there, I looked up at it, and it was monstrous. But anyway, I went aboard and there was--one of the boatswain mates that met us was Ray Flanagan(?), and he was in Sixth Division, which I was in, and he was also from Chicago. So he more or less took me under his wing, and that's how I started on the South Dakota. In the Sixth Division--the Deck Division. We were assigned to the five inch gun mounts--mounts six and eight on the port side. That's when I got my taste of the South Dakota, what to do and all that other stuff. When we pulled out, going on operations and all that other stuff, back and forth. Then we got deferred to go across the equator, which I guess every sailor--the treatment you get when you go across. That's a treatment that you never forget. It's really something to go through. But I'm an official pollywog [he means shellback] now, and I know what it is. I've got the card and everything, so I don't have to worry about it no more. Getting beat with cattails and all that. Then we went on and on, to different invasions, the Philippines and that there. Two of them that really stand out, in the seventeen months I was aboard the ship.

I guess it was in late '44, I don't know if it was December or what, Halsey was the admiral--Third Fleet. We were going on an engagement, and all of a sudden we got wind of a typhoon. This still sticks in my mind. We ran right into the head of the typhoon. Hundred and thirty mile-an-hour gales. The waves were enormous--thirty or forty feet high. I don't care how big of a ship you're on, it suffers. Just before this hit, we had our mail delivered by one of the destroyers. We were the last ship that got mail from it. As it was casting off, we were

waving at the guys that were waving back at you. During the night the waves were so tall that the Monaghan sunk. Lost almost all the crewmembers. Very few of them survived it. We were bouncing around so much--I was on gun watch at the time--five inch gun with earphones--radios on--and first it would go all the way over, the gun barrels would be way in the water, then we'd come back to starboard, way in the water, and all you could hear was come back, come back, come back. If we'd have gone over, there's no way anybody would have survived. Anyway, we survived it. A little damage, not too much like some of them. Every carrier in that task force, the bow--the way the flight deck goes over the bow--was all bent down, like can openers. The wind was terrible. A lot of the ships was dead in the water, 'cause water went down the smokestack. I think every ship was damaged in that storm. It was just something I'll never forget.

Thompson: So the destroyer that delivered your mail was sunk.

Workman: It was one of them that was sunk. We were the only ship that got mail. The poor guys. And the ones that did survive, how they ever survived in those high waves, it was just a miracle that they could have survived it. We all thought on the big ships, what in the world kept us from going all the way over. Nobody seems to know why. It's hard to believe that another wave did come, and push us back. How it happened I have no idea. It was an experience. As long ago as it was, I still remember it. That story is in the book, the American Battleship Association book. I sent in the story and it was published. That's the story that stuck most in my mind. I consider myself very, very lucky that we survived it.

There was one more, which I think was in '45, when we were off of Japan's coast. We were one of the first battleships to fire ashore at Japan. With the sixteen-inch guns. I was on the five-inch. We had an ammunition ship alongside, taking ammunition aboard. Again I was on the five-inch--I seemed always to be on the five-inch watch when these things happened--we were getting ammunition on, and there was a sixteen-inch shell going down--a shell or powder, I don't know which--was going down the hold, and all of a sudden there was a big explosion. Black smoke just pouring from the bow of the ship and number two turret. I had the phones on, and I could hear this--the bridge was on it--and all that other stuff. The ammunition ship just cut lines and cast off directly to get away. Later we found out that--I guess it was some sort of friction or I don't know what set the powder keg off--transferred all the way down to the hold and it ignited other shells. From what I understand, it was travelling amidships, and amidships was where the ammunition was really staged. So in order to save the rest of the ship, they flooded that magazine. And there were quite a few of the crewmembers were lost because of that. You just don't know what happened and why. The captain, I forget what his name was now, got on the loudspeaker and said you got so long to get this under control; otherwise we're gonna go over the side. We're gonna have to go because if the bottom of the ship goes, you'd go down like the Arizona did at Pearl Harbor. There's hardly no way anyone can get off of that. I'm thinking to myself--I didn't say nothing, of course, I just listened--that water may be cold, and I don't know if there's sharks in it. So then I turned around and looked, and here was two destroyers on the port coming up and two destroyers on the starboard side coming up. The whole fleet had turned and left us, and we were dead in the water, and I guess they were coming up for survivors. Thank goodness, and the Lord was with us, that they did get it under control, outside of the poor guys--the ones that didn't get killed in the initial explosion, I believe the flooding did get down there.

There two there are the worst I could remember. Then when that happened, after it was all put out--we had some electrical damage and what--we went back to Guam for

drydock. It's more or less on a lighter note now, I knew one of my buddies from high school was in Guam in the Third Marines. I said while we're in dry dock, I'm going to see if I can't go over and see him. So I went to the officer of the deck and I told him the truth--I didn't lie--I said I'd like to go see my buddy. I got permission to go, so I went ashore, and it took me awhile to find him. Guam had just been taken over by our forces--to find him in tents in the island. I found him, and we had a very wonderful meeting, Bob and I. He was a hospital corpsman in the Marine Corps. I tell you, it was really old home week that day. Taking pictures and this and that. While we were there, I heard gunfire. Some Japanese were still there; they were up in the hills, and they keep coming down to raid the garbage cans. I went ashore to visit; I didn't think about them being stragglers. Anyway, that got over and I had to go back to the ship. Then Bob come over the next morning. I took him through the ship. He said, gee, I wish I could get assigned to this ship. We had lunch in the mess hall and had some more pictures taken. That was a happy story, after the other two.

Thompson: You were on the South Dakota seventeen months?

Workman: Seventeen months. I went back to Philadelphia with them, and I was there for just a short time, and they transferred me off. I thought I was going back home to Chicago. I was sent back to Chicago, I thought this is going to be pretty good duty till I get my time in for discharge. I'm at Navy Pier; I could go home once in awhile. It's like a job, more or less. So I'm doing this for just a few short days--I was a coxswain--now they're a third class boatswain's mate--so I come back one day to report to the pier, and everybody's laughing at me. We carried a little black book with girls/dates and all that. A lot of guys said, hey, Workman, let me have that black book of yours for this weekend. I said why? They said because you ain't gonna be here. I said why? They said go look at the bulletin board. I went over there, and here I'm at the top of the list--Workman, on the next available train out for the state of Washington.

I got sent to Seattle, Washington, and got assigned to I guess it was a World War I gunboat. They called it USS Panay, AG-41. I was there to put it out of commission. It was just a little gunboat, and there were holes in the deck, and I don't think it was from any shells. It was rusted away. I was the only coxswain aboard. It was anchored to the pier, and we had to sit there. I wanted off this thing so bad, but I had to stay on it to decommission it. One night a little fellow--I think he was a storekeeper--he was on watch and I was asleep. He comes running down--"George, George wake up. We're going to drift out to sea!" What are you talking about? "Well, the tide is going out, and the lines are getting tight. They're gonna break!" I said loosen them up. He said I don't know how. I had to go up there and loosen them up. Then I called him weird names after that, and I went back down to the bunk and went to sleep. We had a lieutenant in command of the ship, and I said, "Lieutenant, did you guys really sail this thing through the war?" I wouldn't want to go outside of land with this thing. I came from a battleship, and this was a rowboat, almost. We put her out of commission, and then I stayed there awhile. It wasn't too bad upon shore until I got ready to go back to Chicago. In those days I didn't do much drinking. I spent a lot of time in roller rinks; I used to roller skate a lot. A lot of guys would go to the bars and pick up women. I said if you've ever been to a roller rink, you could find a lot of girls in a roller rink. Then I got sent back to Chicago and got discharged.

Thompson: Can you characterize your life aboard USS South Dakota? Discipline? Your commanding officer?

Workman: I had no problem. I thought it was very well--which it had to be, aboard a

battleship. It was a capital ship. And we were flagship, when there was an admiral aboard. We had Admiral Halsey aboard a few times, and other admirals. Naturally, when you got a flagship and you got an admiral, you can't be sloppy. We were part of a deck crew. We had certain parts of the deck on the portside that we had to keep clean. Swab it down and what they called holystone it, which was just a batch of guys back and forth with a (?) stick that looked like a brick, and you'd go back and forth, and you cleaned the deck. Then you'd hose it down to wash the stuff off.

Thompson: Was that every day?

Workman: More than once a week or so. I thought it was very interesting duty. What I used to do a lot of time, on my off time, in the evening, I used to stand up on deck--because we were always with carriers--I used to enjoy watching the carriers' planes take off and then land. How those guys could do that--in those days they were propellers. I often thought this was remarkable, how are you going to land on that little flight deck, and take off on that flight deck. Another thing, when the pilots would come back from strikes, and if they knew they weren't going to make their carrier--damaged in some way or another--they would come down and really skimming the water, about deck high to us, and they'd be figuring out the closest destroyers. They knew they weren't going to make it, so when they come by us, they'd give us the thumb sign, going down, meaning they're going in the water--can't make the carrier. I used to see quite a few of those. Nerves of steel. They were hitting the water--canopy would be pushed open, and before the plane was stopped, they were out on the wing of that plane. A lot of them weren't in the water very long. There was a destroyer to pick them up. I think those guys had to have nerves of steel--knowing they weren't going to make it back.

We'd get a bunch of guys together, sing up on deck a lot. Some guys would play instruments. I never did. I couldn't carry a tune, but I sang, oh, sure. We used to have a good time, I thought, anyway. We occupied ourselves doing that. I met a lot of friends. It was a good experience on board ship, I thought. One thing I knew, eighteen years old, I'll have to say, it makes you grow up fast. It also teaches you how to take care of yourself and how to respect others, and also how to take orders.

Thompson: Do you have any recollections of commendations, courageous actions, how you saw yourself as a member of the crew, your reactions to the sea, seasickness, fears?

Workman: I never did get nothing except Asiatic that amounted to anything. I got aboard the ship after Guadalcanal got over, when they got the unit citation, and when they got the bombing, I wasn't aboard yet. So I didn't get any citations. As far as the others, I did see quite a few torpedoes go by us, that was fired at us. Luckily they missed us.

Thompson: You could actually see it in the water?

Workman: You could see the wake. And then typhoons were always--and air attacks. Particularly after the Philippine invasion, when we were into Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the Japanese kamikaze planes. Those were so dangerous. They were just as bad as a bomb hitting us. Terrible. They would pick you out, and they would go into that dive, and they would not let up. They'd go right into you. Fortunately, we were always missed. Guns were going off. We were firing. I was what they called a shellman, on the twin five-inch mounts. Each shell--would start off with the caseman--that would be one of the three on each gun. The third one would be the shellman. He would take the casing out after it was fired. Then it would be the powderman that would put the powder keg in. I would be the shellman, which would take the five-inch shell out of the hoist that would come up from down below. I would put it in the gun, I'd ram it, and that would fire it. After it was fired, it would ricochet back, and the empty

shell casing would come back. The guy with the powder would have to take that out and throw it out the escape hatch in the back. Then we would continue firing as long as we had to. It was just boom, boom, boom. If I remember right, our five-inch mounts had about nine men, I think, with the gun captain. You had the pointer and trainer, and each gun had three men on it. Plus the gun captain. We could never see what we were hitting, but we would get the report over the earphones. Right above us were the forty millimeters. When those would go off, you knew they were getting closer. Cuz we would fire when they were way out yet. Then when they'd come closer, the forties would come in, and when the twenties would come in, they were getting too close. Then you would have all these empty powder kegs laying on the deck, and they they'd have to get a working party to clean up that.

Thompson: How about the sound?

Workman: Oh, the sound--the sound was deafening. Very, very deafening.

Thompson: Did you have some plugs?

Workman: No. Never thought about it. Now that you brought it up--before we got to the Okinawa invasion, we were refueling a destroyer. I was on the fire watch on the starboard side. So they're fueling the destroyer, and I'm just leaning up against the five-inch gun mount on the starboard side there, and watching what was going on, and all of a sudden I hear the motor revving up on the side of the gun mount, above me. And all of a sudden, this thing lets off with a double barrel fire. I'm right below it. The concussion almost blew me over the side. When that blew, that split second--all of us guys carried these knives in a pack on our backs. In any emergency like that, we were cutting the lines and let them drop in the water. The destroyer made a ninety-degree turn, took off, and what it was, there was a Japanese torpedo plane skimming the water. How he got through, I don't know, but he had us dead in the water. I don't know which lookout, on the destroyer or on our ship, saw it, but when they did--and I don't know which firing, us or the destroyer, shot it down, but one of us shot it down. There I am underneath it, and I didn't have ear plugs. I couldn't hear, I don't know for how long. That concussion was--I don't know why I didn't get blown over the side. I had so many lucky charms. If this thing had gotten through, it would have got both of us.

There's one more story, a quick one. Like I said, I went in the Navy, and my uncle, which is my mother's younger brother, he got drafted the same time I did, and he went in the Army. We both got shipped overseas. I went to the Pacific and he went to Europe. In the first battle of the Bulge over there, he got wounded. My grandmother owned this candy store in Chicago, and my mother would be down there a lot of the time helping her, and this particular time, after the Battle of the Bulge and our battle in the Pacific, I guess in those days the government would send a car out if there was a wounded or a death in the family--well, my mother saw this government car pull in, and my mother and her mother--my grandmother--looked at each other, and said, who got it? They didn't know if it was me or my uncle. My uncle, it tore his whole kneecap completely off, and he spent months in the hospital.

I consider myself fortunate. I got seven battle stars out my seventeen months on the South Dakota. The South Dakota got fourteen battle stars, from the time it was commissioned until the time it was put out of commission. I got the last half.

Transcribed by:
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