

Roger Mathews

Chief Petty Officer Fire Controlman

Oral History

July 7, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with Roger A. Mathews, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Arthur Huseboe on July 7, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Roger, if you'll give your name and address.

Roger Mathews: My name is Roger A. Mathews--Mathews with one T--in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Huseboe: The date of your enlistment, and your age?

Mathews: I enlisted January 12, 1938. I was nineteen years old.

Huseboe: You were in earlier than most of the guys on the ship.

Mathews: Yes, I was. I had three years and eleven months in when World War II started.

Huseboe: What was your rating when you were onboard the South Dakota?

Mathews: My final rating on the South Dakota was a chief fire controlman.

Huseboe: How was it that you enlisted in the Navy in '38?

Mathews: Well, things were pretty tough in 1938, and I didn't have a job, so I enlisted in the Navy. A friend and I went down together and enlisted.

Huseboe: Your training for sea duty was where?

Mathews: Newport, Rhode Island.

Huseboe: You went through four weeks?

Mathews: No, at that time boot camp was three months.

Huseboe: You told me you were assigned to USS South Dakota at the time it was commissioned. You were serving where before then?

Mathews: I was on USS Nashville, a light cruiser. I had put the Nashville in commission in 1938. I stayed on there until January '42, when I left the Nashville with orders to go to school and then go to South Dakota. The school was a fire control school. It was a school on computers at the factory in Long Island City, New York.

Huseboe: They must have been incredible computers at that early date.

Mathews: They were pretty crude. They were humongous. They were primarily electromechanical. There were a lot of mechanical parts in them.

Huseboe: You went on board at the time it was commissioned. Where was it then?

Mathews: At the Philadelphia Navy Yard. It was designed to be the flagship. After we hit the reef, we went to Pearl Harbor for repairs. And one of the weird things that happened, the ship was repaired and we were backing out of the dry dock, and there was a lot of debris in Pearl Harbor from the original bombing, and we backed into something. When we went out to sea, we kicked it up to twenty-five knots and it started to vibrate. So we went back into dry dock again, and two of the props had part of the blade broken off. We thought, boy, we're going to be here for awhile now. They won't have props for this new ship. But that same day, here come two flatcars with a prop on each one, and just a few days later, we were back at sea again.

Huseboe: That's the same type of prop that was just mounted over here at the memorial in Sioux Falls.

Mathews: Exactly the same.

Huseboe: You told me you were working with computers. So how did that translate into a job on board the ship?

Mathews: I was a fire controlman before that. When the ship went into commission, I was a second class fire controlman. We handled all the directors and all the control equipment for the guns. The computers were used to control the five-inch guns.

Huseboe: So you'd get some information from visual and some from radar, and maybe you would feed that into the computer.

Mathews: The antiaircraft directors, the visual part, with their rangefinder, they would get on the target, and when they had their rangefinder synchronized, they would press a button and it would send a signal down to the computer. And the computer would analyze this equipment and determine which angle the gun should be fired at, and so on, and they would put the computer and the director on automatic, and also the gun. So when the computer was controlling the director and the director was staying on the target, then he would punch a button and you could close the firing key on the computer and start firing the guns.

Huseboe: I didn't realize they had computers that were that far along.

Mathews: This was called the Mark One computer, so it's pretty old.

Huseboe: Did you get any new computer equipment during the time you were onboard?

Mathews: We did get some improvements to the computers and to the stabilizing equipment, but not a lot. One thing that's a little bit unusual--when I went on the /South Dakota, these computers were in the plotting room. Although I had been to that school, we also had some directors that controlled our forty-millimeter antiaircraft guns. These small directors were operated by two people. One man was the director operator, and the other one was the spotter. That's where I got stationed when I first went on the ship. These small computers had a gyroscope in them, and when you got on a plane, and your movement--that gyroscope would track and lead the target for the gun. The spotter, when you started shooting, you and the director closed the firing key for the forty millimeter, and when you started shooting, the tracers--the spotter you had with you--I was the operator on one of these directors at the battle of Santa Cruz, and my spotter was an ensign. Our orders then were, you get on a plane, and as soon as it starts to smoke, shift to another one. There were a lot of planes, so you didn't have any trouble finding something to shoot at.

Huseboe: At your first combat battle, what were your feelings? Did you feel safe or in danger?

Mathews: I felt secure. At the battle of Santa Cruz, things happened so fast. Somebody asked me if I was scared, and I don't remember being scared. When the bomb landed on the turret and the captain got wounded, the guy next to him got a piece of shrapnel in his arm, but it was nothing serious. It was just a flesh wound.

Huseboe: Somebody reported that the impact was such that the top ten inches of the turret was blown off.

Mathews: I didn't think it blew any metal off. I thought it just took all the paint off. My opinion is it didn't take any metal off.

Huseboe: Were you worried about torpedoes at all?

Mathews: I never was. I was never worried about torpedoes. There was one tragic part of the Battle of Santa Cruz. When the Hornet went down, they had all these planes in the air with no place to go. They were landing on the Enterprise, and they kept what they could hold. The rest they just pushed off the stern.

Huseboe: Was that the most hazardous action you went through? Or would you say Savo Island?

Mathews: Savo Island was much more hazardous. At Savo Island, I was in a repair party. I was on the main deck, and I had a phone talker with me. My job was to try to repair any faults with any of the guns that my department had anything to do with. So I wasn't really involved in the shooting at that time, but I did get involved in running fire hoses up in the superstructure. And after that action cleared, I was trying to get the power back to some of our guns that had lost power, and I went up in the superstructure. We had a lot of damage. One thing I remember--we didn't have any light up there--and I had a flashlight. You carry it with your hand over the end, just a little light between your fingers. The hatch combing in the different areas up there were full of water, and I felt my foot hit something, and I looked down, and it was a guy's arm floating in the water.

You know, it's funny, after they repainted that, after we went back to the Navy yard, I could still smell that in there. I think it's maybe psychological.

Two of my very good friends got killed up there. About three months later, maybe a little longer than that, I got a call from the Catholic chaplain to come down to his office, and I thought what does he want me for? I'm not Catholic. He'd got a letter from one of these fellow's folks, and they wanted to know how their son got killed. He said, would you write a letter? I said that's a tough one. He said you write a letter and bring it to me, and I will write a letter, too. That's what I did. I'll never forget that guy's name, the guy that got killed. His name was Werner Pheil, P-F-I-E-L.

Huseboe: Later on, you were in combat as the ship was involved in various landing operations, and you ran into suicide planes. They must have been rather frightening.

Mathews: We never got hit by one. The ship I was on before, the Nashville, that got hit by a suicide plane.

Huseboe: How about storms? Were storms a threat?

Mathews: They were a threat. The typhoon we were in off the northern Philippines, that was really something. I would go up in the antiaircraft director--nobody could go on deck--go up in the antiaircraft director, and the ship would go up one wave, and the bow would choose the next one, and the whole deck from bow to stern would be just flooded with water. That did a lot of damage to the ship. The forty millimeters had a circular gun shield around the guns, and some of these were bent right down.

Huseboe: Were you seasick at all?

Mathews: I never got seasick. Quite a few of the guys did. I never had a problem with seasickness.

Huseboe: Did you get bored?

Mathews: Ha, not really. People ask that question--when you're at sea a long time, do you get bored? But we had lots of card games, and we'd invest a little money in poker games now and then.

Huseboe: I heard there was a dance band.

Mathews: We had some guys that were good singers, too. When we were in port, we'd have music up on deck, and we had a couple of guys that were real good singers.

Huseboe: How about movies while the ship was at sea?

Mathews: No, we didn't have any movies at sea. Only when we were in port.

Huseboe: You shared quarters with 15-20 men, or maybe more than that?

Mathews: Before I made chief petty officer, in the bunkroom I was in, there was probably

forty or forty-five guys. After I made chief petty officer, the bunking arrangements were a lot smaller. Probably about twelve in there.

Huseboe: Did you have three deep, stacked up?

Mathews: In the chief's quarters it was two deep. The other guys were three deep.

Huseboe: Is there anything you want to add? You left a little early.

Mathews: I left a week before the war ended. I'd requested advanced fire control school in Washington. I'd been there to school when I was on USS Nashville. I get a kick out of it now - everybody wants to wear hearing protection, for everything. One of the worst things for bombarding, if you were anywhere on deck, was the concussion from the sixteen-inch guns. For anybody out there, we just shoved cotton in our ears. And now, everybody wears these fancy ear protectors, and they probably do in the service now. But when you were bombarded for two or three hours at a time, that concussion for anybody topside was really something.

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