

Daniel Ackerman

U.S. Marine Corps

Oral History

July 5, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with Daniel Ackerman from Beaver Creek, Ohio, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Arthur R. Huseboe on July 5 at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. We'll start with our first question--the circumstances of your enlistment.

Daniel Ackerman: About a year after Pearl Harbor, I enlisted.

Huseboe: And your age was?

Ackerman: Eighteen.

Huseboe: Why did you select the United States Navy?

Ackerman: I didn't. I selected the Marine Corps.

Huseboe: Oh, that's right. You told me that.

Ackerman: It looked to me like a pretty good branch of the service to be in.

Huseboe: It turned out that way, too.

Ackerman: Yeah. After you get through boot camp. That boot camp was rough. I went down to Paris Island.

Huseboe: How many weeks?

Ackerman: I went in there in November '41 and come out in February '42. And then we was sent to the Navy Yard in Virginia--Portsmouth--and went to "C" school there. And then in March of '43 I went aboard the South Dakota. She had just come back from the Santa Cruz, and had been beat up pretty bad. After the repairs, that's when I got on. I wasn't there for the Santa Cruz.

Huseboe: I think there was a bomb dropped on one of the turrets.

Ackerman: Yes, we got hit several times, from what I understand. Even had one Marine killed there.

Huseboe: Wounded the captain pretty badly.

Ackerman: Yeah, Captain Gatch got wounded pretty bad.

Huseboe: But he came back later, as I remember.

Ackerman: Yeah.

Huseboe: What was your rating?

Ackerman: Corporal. We was on the twenty millimeter anti-aircraft. When I first went aboard, we was one of the five-inch mounts. Then we got transferred out of the mounts up on topside to all the twenty-millimeters.

Huseboe: The USS South Dakota, when it was commissioned and went into the service, it didn't have that full complement of anti-aircraft guns.

Ackerman: No, it didn't. When they come back this time, when I got on it, they had quite a few guns on it.

Huseboe: It would have helped a lot in the earlier battle.

Ackerman: The way I understand, that was a nighttime thing, and the South Dakota got her electrical units all shot up.

Huseboe: It was a miracle we had radar for Savo Island. You were in on that?

Ackerman: No. I got on in '43. You're talking about radar--they took individual people and

put them out as lookouts. Give you sunglasses. I thought that was a waste of time to be a lookout when they got that radar going up there. And when them two Japs come in under that radar, and almost hit us, I thought, boy, someone reported them from a visual. Not the radar, but a visual.

Huseboe: Not such a bad idea.

Ackerman: No. I changed my mind then. I said well they must know what they're doing.

Huseboe: You said--how did you get assigned to the South Dakota?

Ackerman: I don't know. When I went through boot camp, I was the only one out of my platoon that went to "C" school. The rest of them went to Lejeune and other places and ended up in the Fifth Division.

Huseboe: Was there a large percentage of Marines on the South Dakota?

Ackerman: We had about ninety-two. There was 2,200 altogether, and 92 of them was Marines.

Huseboe: Where did you board the--

Ackerman: In Norfolk.

Huseboe: Norfolk, Virginia. And then while you were onboard, you were anti-aircraft most of the time?

Ackerman: Not at that time. Five-inch. It was anti-aircraft, but it was five-inch. Then we went to twenty millimeter. At that time they was going out for a shakedown cruise, because of the repairs. We went in and out, got into Portland, Maine, and all them. Then we went to Newfoundland, and then from Newfoundland we went to Scotland, Scapa Flow, made up a--they had a lot of troopships that were empty, they filled them full of water, and we made a feint at Norway. They brought a bunch of Germans. That's when they went into Africa--the invasion of Africa.

In the meanwhile, we was in the Atlantic. We ended up in the Arctic Circle. That makes you the Royal Order of Blue Nose, when you get to the Arctic Circle. We was up there, I suppose, four or five months. Then we come back, and had a few more repairs made, and then we went back through the Canal and out to the Pacific. We went from there to Pearl.

I mentioned a little while ago, every time we went past the Arizona, everybody had to stand at attention. We was in and out of Pearl I suppose three times, and every time you had to--of course, they didn't have that memorial there then. They just had a flag sticking up.

We hit all the islands. Ulithi was our base. Even there we got attacked. We was sitting there one night and watching movies on the fantail, and we heard these two planes go over. The next thing you know, the Randolph--they dove right into that aircraft carrier.

Huseboe: Kamikazes? When was that? '44, I suppose.

Ackerman: '43 or early part of '44. In '44, of course we had that big typhoon. If the battleship listed one more degree of list, it would have been capsized. That lasted three days, and I'm telling you it was a--and they blamed Nimitz for not knowing that storm was coming. They had no idea. They knew it was coming, enough to pull up anchor and go out to sea. You didn't want to be caught in a typhoon at anchor.

Destroyers turned upside down. They didn't have time to fill up with oil, which was their ballast, and they just turned over. Them destroyer sailors were real sailors. That destroyer was a--when they come alongside to refuel, we'd be sitting there just like that, and that destroyer would be going up and down.

I don't know if I should mention this or not. The Marines aboard ship had charge of the brig. They used the brig when they were at anchor. You got to sea, you turned them loose.

At that time, the colored guys on our ship were segregated. They had their own head, and the Marines was in charge of the brig, and I was in there the first time--I had six colored guys--there were six cells, three on either side. I had to take them to their own head, and I turned them loose and there must have been thirty colored guys in there. And I had no idea who I turned loose.

Huseboe: You just hoped you got the right ones back out!

Ackerman: I sit there, and you know how hot that would be, I'm sweating, I'm standing at attention. Of course, you're under arms. What in the world am I gonna do? Six guys come back, and I put them in the cells. I don't know if you can mention that or not.

Huseboe: It's too late for you to get in trouble now.

Ackerman: I still ask the question--at one time we was bombarding Formosa. The whole fleet. We'd left the Indian Ocean and come into the Pacific Ocean, it was as smooth as this table, and we went dead in the water. And there goes the fleet, out of sight. All we had was our four destroyers that made us complete. We sit there two and a half hours. The only answer I got one time was somebody said they turned salt water into the fuel lines--turned the wrong valve--and they had to take the time to clean that out. That was funny, to see that fleet going over the horizon. They wouldn't wait for you; they couldn't.

Huseboe: Let's see, the most hazardous action of your experience, on board?

Ackerman: Well, there was a couple of them. The first time we got hit, at Saipan, we got a five hundred pounder went through the deck and down below and exploded, right underneath where we was at. When it went through, it took out a forty millimeter tom-tom gun, and that was manned by the colored people. Like I said, they was still segregated. They took mostly care of the officers and officers' mess, and they didn't hardly ever come down to the ship parts where we were. But there must have been three or four of them killed right there.

Then we had to go back again and get repaired. And then the next time, we was taking on ammunition from the liberty ships, and when the ammunition got down below, it exploded. And the captain--I forget who the captain was then--we had about four different ones--he said one more explosion, he would have had to abandon ship. But he had to give the order to flood that compartment even though there was guys in there. I'd hate to have to do that. But he had to flood that compartment.

They was all midnight to next day getting out the bodies. I remember one incident, I was walking--every time you open up a hatch, the lights go out. Because it was nighttime. So I went by the hatch, and you could see four or five decks below. I could hear them down in the water, and bringing them up. And at that point, an electric line let loose and started sparking across that water, and I thought it was exploding again, and I took off running and run right into a bulkhead, because it was dark.

Then we went all the way through the Philippines, Leyte Gulf, and we got took that one time when the Japanese fooled us, and we took out after them. That's when the old battleships come in and took over. Halsey was aboard for awhile--his whole staff.

We were supposed to have the signing on the South Dakota. But Roosevelt died, and Truman took over, and Truman's from Missouri, and that's the end of the story.

Like I said, we went all the way--we was the first ship to bombard Japan. You could see the B-29s going over. One time we got orders to pull out. We was out about a hundred miles from Japan, and heard this explosion. It was like thunder, but it lasted a long time. And it got real still. You could feel something. And the next day, they announced they dropped the bomb.

Huseboe: On Hiroshima. Did you have kamikaze planes attack you?

Ackerman: Oh, we had them all the time, every time. Iwo Jima, and Formosa, Okinawa, you could sit there--the hard part was to watch them dive down on the Franklin. There was four of them went right down on the Franklin. They took for carriers. Mostly. And a couple of them went after us. One of them was shot down before he got there, and the other one, I don't know whether he changed his mind or what.

When we had a strike out, the planes off the carriers, one of the carriers got sunk, but when the planes come back, they put them on the Enterprise. As soon as the pilot got out, they pushed the plane over the side, in order to make room. They would fly in a circle. They would fly over us, and you could see the canvas flapping, and the exhaust--one of them just had one wheel down.

The funniest thing was, we watched this one dogfight. And that Zero was going everywhere, and that F-6F looked like he was tied to him. He took to hit the water, right in the water behind him. They picked them both up. The Jap, he was the one that come aboard.

Huseboe: Did you get close to any Japanese prisoners, personally?

Ackerman: Ah, no. Well, after the war, we got in Japan.

Huseboe: But not during the war.

Ackerman: Not during the war, no. The destroyers picked them up.

Huseboe: What was your scariest moment?

Ackerman: I would have to say when that explosion was going on, down below.

Huseboe: The gunpowder.

Ackerman: yeah. Top of turret two, that's the three, they got twenty-millimeters, And that was ours. You was always there, no matter what. You was always on that gun, Whether general quarters or not. Except when you had other duties. I had the phones on when that explosion was going on. I could see it. And I couldn't get no complete answer over the phone. It was a bunch of jabberwocky. I called in and said give me a reason to get out of here, so I can leave, so I can get--these guys are wanting to go, you know. Finally, somebody come in and said secure your position and get out on the port side. So we did. We all went down on that side.

Another time, we was bombarding Iwo Jima and Okinawa. We had to get down off those mounts, down on the deck and just follow behind that turret. Wherever it was going, we had to go behind it. When they fired them guns, that water would level off, like for about ten seconds, and then it would start being choppy again. But all day long, behind that turret--you talk about a headache. All we had was cotton--you could stick in your ears. That was a long time.

Huseboe: How did those earphones work? They were all wired--

Ackerman: Yeah, you plugged them in.

Huseboe: Nobody was doing battery-operated then, it was all wire.

Ackerman: Copper wire.

Huseboe: Was it a good system?

Ackerman: Yeah, it worked pretty good. But the thing was, you'd sit there at night, and you're doing nothing--you had to have them on--and after awhile your ears felt like--there was a lot of that jabberwocky. And then pretty soon they'd turn on Tokyo Rose, and let her play the music. She talked to the guys on the South Dakota one time. She said, "Do you know"--I forget, she mentioned the guy's name--she said, "Do you know what your girlfriend's doing

back home right now? She said, "You guys might as well give up. Because it's useless, what you're doing." But she did play good music.

Huseboe: I heard sometimes she had more accurate stories than our own--'

Ackerman: Right. Right. She had some pretty good ones. And every once in awhile, they'd just shut her off altogether. We had records--they were that big around. 72 was our--but these were big.

Huseboe: They used to call them transcriptions.

Ackerman: I don't know what they were, but they--

Huseboe: They used them for radio stations.

Ackerman: I never seen any that big before. They had maybe ten-fifteen different songs on them.

Huseboe: When you weren't in combat, what were your daily duties like?

Ackerman: Well, we had to keep the place clean. Also the Marines were with the captain. Wherever he went, he had a Marine with him. A lot of times, if he was to leave the ship, he'd either take the Marine with him, or tell him to stay there. So you'd stay on deck, with the officer of the day, and then when he'd come back, and then if your time--

Huseboe: Kind of like a policeman.

Ackerman: Yeah. And then when they put the gangplank down, we was at the bottom of the gangplank. It wasn't so much the guys coming off the ship, it was when they was coming back. That nightstick, you'd take it and bust that bottle of whiskey between their legs. But they got more on than what we caught.

I know another incident. When that bomb hit, that five-hundred pounder, it exploded down below and quite a few guys got killed there. In pieces. After they repaired the ship and we went back out again--in general quarters, they shut off all ventilation, everything was shut down inside--if you was there, you got that dead body smell. It was kind of a sickening smell.

Huseboe: I suppose there were some pieces they didn't collect.

Ackerman: Yeah, behind the lockers and stuff, they didn't get it all. But I never did really get my sea legs. I was always just a little bit woozy. Especially when that rough weather came.

Huseboe: Even on a battleship.

Ackerman: It was funny how that ship, you'd watch it, and it would go up and down three times, and quit. Why would it do it three times? And then it would start again. And every time it would go down and come back up, it had fifty thousand gallons of water spraying. But it was just three times.

Huseboe: As a Marine, were you partly responsible for maintaining the discipline on the ship?

Ackerman: No, that was master-at-arms. They took care of that. We worked together. Like shore patrol, we'd--

Huseboe: Was there a little home brew being cooked up here and there?

Ackerman: I must have been awful naïve. They tell me--I'm hearing stories that I never knew went on. Like climbing down the anchor chain and taking a little dinghy into--where they weren't supposed to be. That one guy, he's from New Jersey, he said, "Wasn't you with us when we went down that chain?" I said, "I don't remember climbing down that chain." They had the funnels on the ropes to keep the rats from coming up, but they didn't have anything like that on the chain, cuz it went right down in the water. Yeah, they're telling me stories--I said, "Where was I when all this went on?"

Huseboe: It was a big ship.

Ackerman: Yeah, twenty two hundred guys there. If you got somewhere where you wasn't supposed to be, you got to have a reason why you were there.

Huseboe: Were you around for commendations for guys who did special deeds, or heroism on board?

Ackerman: Yeah. What do you get when you get hurt--the Purple Heart--they was giving that out. And they give out a lot of heroism--a lot of guys were--we had one guy that, he just had a little cut on his finger. Of course, that's enough to get the Purple Heart. And he wouldn't go. He said, "I'm not gonna go down there for that." Our Marine captain said, "You either go or you got a deck court martial coming up." So he went. He said, "I'm going under duress." But they did--they had a lot of them.

And we had a lot of inspections--deck inspections. I remember one time--the Navy will tell you the Marines are always shining their shoes--and we was standing out there one day, and it was so hot that wax melted off. You could see the imprint of your shoe when you walked away.

Huseboe: I used to be a shoeshine boy. That takes a lot of wax to melt off a shoe.

Ackerman: It was so hot below decks that you'd sleep on top of the deck at night. And you used your shoes for a pillow. One morning this one ship was going out--they opened the nets up and let that ship out--it was just getting daylight. He wasn't out there a hundred yards and he [sound of getting hit]. There was a submarine out there waiting for him. The next thing you know, there was three or four destroyers going around that circle. And when they drop a depth charge, even on that battleship, it feels like--you ever jump stiff-legged off something? That jar, you feel that on that battleship. So it must be a tremendous explosion down there.

Huseboe: It doesn't sound like you got bored very often, but did you get bored? They said there was a dance band on board.

Ackerman: Yeah, we had one. Every once in a while, but mostly for the officers. They'd show--if they could, anchored--they would show movies on the deck/

Huseboe: Was there enough room inside to show movies inside?

Ackerman: No. Well, there was, but you couldn't get too many people in to watch it.

Huseboe: You mentioned a Japanese submarine blowing up the ship that went through the fence.

Ackerman: It was Ulithi. We thought we was safe there. One night there--they had what they call a zigzag course, so many minutes this way, so many minutes that way--and we zigzagged, and the Alabama didn't, and we come--boy, that ship was trying to make a hard turn, and they even blowed the whistles, we just barely missed that Alabama.

One of the sights at night was to see the hospital ship. It was lit up like a carnival. I mean, they was lit from one end to the other. Then when it come daylight, they'd come over and take off our sick and wounded. It was the first time we'd seen women in days, and to just stand there and see them women, I mean not days--I mean months, years. It was something else to see them take the stretchers across. We had a regular hospital on that ship, doctors and such.

Huseboe: I heard there was a hospital, I heard there was a blacksmith shop onboard.

A: Yeah, and dentists. Of all that we had, the destroyers--we had a place that made ice cream. And they didn't get anything like that. We even had a barbershop. They had a guy that would cut hair for guys. Like I said, them destroyer sailors were really sailors. They were tough.

When they'd shoot first and get the cables across--you see that old blunderbuss the Pilgrims used to have? They had that, and it shot a small string. And then the string pulled a bigger one and bigger one until they got to the steel cable, and then--the same way with the Liberty ships. Before we had the explosion. The cables were tied, and there was a guy, it was his job to stand there with an ax, and if anything happened, he'd cut the cable. Which they did. There was three of them. And they cut--before that explosion was over, that Liberty ship was--and somebody told me today, that the ammunition they had on that Liberty ship exploded the next day. The whole ship was blown up. Indian Country was where the action is. The Merchant Marine and those Liberty ship guys, they got extra pay when they went into Indian Country.

There was one time on Sunday, they had stores for us, and they weren't going to work on Sunday. So they found guys on our ship that could operate those big [cranes]--and they'd have these nets, and a whole bunch of us guys would pound the nets, to swing over and way down in that hole, and start loading. They'd sit up there reading their magazines, and they had their shorts on.

Huseboe: I think that pretty well--anything you want to add? As you think back?

Ackerman: There was a memorial yesterday. And this woman was asking me a question. She says, "You got the hat on. Were you aboard ship?" She said, "What was the average age?" I said, "Today the average age would be--I'd have to say the youngest one would probably be seventy-five." She said, "How old are you?" I said, "I'm seventy-eight." She said, "Get out of here." My mom and dad was both way up in their eighties when they died.

Huseboe: You didn't have any Jap planes land on the ship, did you?

Ackerman: No. Like I said, two of them tried it. Most of their attention was to the aircraft carriers.

Huseboe: How about torpedoes?

Ackerman: We had a couple of them just miss us. It was over the loudspeaker, they could see the wake of it.

Huseboe: Then you outmaneuvered them.

Ackerman: Well, one of them, they didn't know it until they seen the wake go by. Two of them did hit. Never went off. I don't know how they know that. They said it was hit with a torpedo, but the torpedo was a dud and it didn't go off. Well, I think I've taken up enough of your time.

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