

John H. Camp

Pharmacist's Mate Second Class

Oral History

December 14, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with John H. Camp, conducted by telephone on December 14, 2001. How old were you when you enlisted in the Navy?

John Camp: I was eighteen. I had my 18th birthday on August 25, 1943.

Huseboe: What made you decide on enlisting in the Navy?

Camp: I had a brother in the Navy in San Diego, and I had another brother who eventually went into aviation training. I did not want to be drafted and go into the Army.

Huseboe: Where did you complete high school?

Camp: At Warren Easton High School in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Huseboe: Did you go on for further education?

Camp: Not till I got out of the service.

Huseboe: Where did you go after college?

Camp: When I got out of the Navy in 1946, at Loyola University, New Orleans.

Huseboe: Were you working at a regular job before you went into the service?

Camp: I was working part-time after school, in marine supply. Then I hooked up with Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in '46. I retired in 1986. Forty-one years.

Huseboe: Your place of birth--was that in New Orleans?

Camp: Yes, in New Orleans. In 1925.

Huseboe: Your rate/rating when you were in the service?

Camp: I got out as a pharmacist's mate second class.

Huseboe: Did you pursue the career of pharmacist after the Navy?

Camp: No, I didn't. I hooked up with Goodyear and worked for them.

Huseboe: Where were you trained in the Navy?

Camp: I was sworn in to the Navy at the Custom House in New Orleans on August 23, 1943. Then I went to boot camp in San Diego on August 25. I went in as an apprentice seaman. I took boot camp in Company 3-6-0. I was made the mailman for the company. After boot camp, I went to the naval hospital corps school in San Diego on October 18, 1943. After that, I went to the corps (?) school in Company 36 in San Diego.

Huseboe: What kind of a school was that?

Camp: Just a general knowledge of medical.

Huseboe: So when you were finished with that, you were a corpsman?

Camp: I was a corpsman. I graduated on December 11 and chose Treasure Island Naval Hospital in San Francisco. On January 1, 1944, I made hospital apprentice first class, and I started my training in the operating room as a technician. On February 1, one month later, I made pharmacist's mate third class. I had to take a test that was three hours long. July 1, 1944, I completed my training in the operating room, received my technician's certificate. I learned quite a bit, some very interesting operations. I finished with the 110th Scrub, which is Surgical Operations for six months. I thought there were about seventy-one majors and thirty-one minors. Do you know the difference between the minor and the major? It's minor surgery when it's on you; it's major surgery when it's on me. Major surgery is when you go on the inner body, and minor might be a broken arm--something exterior.

Huseboe: How is it that you were assigned to USS South Dakota?

Camp: I got promoted. I left Treasure Island for duty overseas on October 1, 1944. We anchored in Hawaii, and we had liberty. We were supposed to leave on Christmas Day. Let's see--we left San Francisco on November 30, 1944, arrived in Honolulu on December 10th, and had liberty. The name of the transport ship was Cape Clear. We got underway on December 26 and had a week in Marshall Islands. On December 30, 1944, we crossed the 180th meridian, the International Date Line, gaining a full day. We arrived in Eniwetok on January 3, 1945, and left on January 5, 1945, for Guam on the Marianas Islands.

We landed in Apra Harbor on Guam and we were taken up to the camp site, which was just a jungle. On January 15th, we started construction of Fleet Hospital 1-0-3, which was on the cliff looking down on Agana Bay, not far from the B-29 base. About two miles away. On February 15, on the hospital site, on the road came up--they had a carbine with two clips and thirty rounds--the blackout came at oh-one-thirty, and I was quite scared, to say the least.

We commenced building the hospital with Seabees. I'll tell you, they are quite a construction outfit. From jungles, we cleared them, built the hospital, and we opened April 1, 1945, the day Okinawa was invaded. Admiral Nimitz came to inspect the hospital at that time. On April 5 we received the first hospital patients, from Okinawa. Which were badly burned from Japanese suicide planes.

May 15, 1945, I came aboard USS South Dakota for duty, at Guam. The ship was floating in drydock in the harbor with number one screw and shaft bad. I replaced a technician that got killed when they were loading ammunitions a few days before. I think they had seven of them killed. It was unfortunate, but fortunate for me that I would get on such good duty.

We left Guam and arrived in Leyte Gulf June 1, 1945. On June 20 we went out for gunnery practice, and the sub whistle sounded, so the ship had to stay out overnight, and we entered the next morning. Because if the ship went in, the sub could have followed it in, so we had to sit out there overnight until daylight--and get destroyers to come out and protect us.

We left Leyte on July 1, 1945. It was quite a sight to see all the battleships we had, and the carriers behind us. On July 9 at noon, the ship started its speed run for [?] on Tokyo. The next day on the 10th, a mine was sighted ten degrees off the starboard bow about six thousand yards. The planes from the carriers took off for strikes on Tokyo. On July 14 at 12:10, the South Dakota and other ships fired their six-gun salvos and the sixteen-inch on Komoshi, Honshu, Japan. A total of 230 rounds were fired, with no Japanese opposition.

July 15th we hooked up with Task Force Thirty Point One. On July 17, 1945, a British task force joined us. On July 29th at 2300, we started bombarding Homahoanatu. We fired 270 rounds of sixteen-inch.

Huseboe: You kept pretty accurate records on that, didn't you?

Camp: Yeah, that's where I'm getting this from. I kept a diary. There's a copy of this at the site of the memorial. I gave all my grandkids a copy of it.

On August 7, 1945, we had two typhoons, and that's why we didn't make any strikes. On August 9, the bombardment was called at 1300 instead of 0500. In spite of low ceilings, South Dakota bombarded Kamaishi for the second time in less than a month. The ship got within one and a half mile of the beach. When I got topside, we were firing the five-inch, a total of 260 rounds. At 1600 we fired at a Judy, a Japanese plane, which came over our starboard bow. The plane dove and dropped a bomb on the cruiser Boston.

August 10 at 2130 we learned the Japanese were willing to surrender. We were quite happy to hear this. On August 11, 1945, we received a dispatch from the Flag that Admiral Nimitz would come aboard and, from all indications, sign a peace treaty. On August 25 at

0100, we heard the Allies were willing to let Japan surrender, providing the Emperor takes orders from the Allied commander. The flag was transferred to the battleship Alabama and we came alongside at 0800.

On August 15, 1945, Japan had accepted surrender terms, as President Truman announced it about 0900. Admiral Halsey spoke from the Missouri at 1300. On August 17, the mightiest task force in the world, Thirty Eight, was grouped together as Task Force 38.1 and Task Force 38.4 joined us, and Task Force 38.3. We still shined the brightwork, and the ship was getting back to the peacetime Navy. The 18th we refueled from a tanker and at 1600 we pulled alongside a supply ship to get stores. On the 20th, a group of sailors got off on an APO transfer ship, a bluejacket landing force.

Huseboe: That's a marvelous account you kept of all those activities. When you were onboard as a pharmacist's mate, what were your duties?

Camp: I was the operating technician, and I took part in sick call. We had four doctors and three dentists, and they had about twenty-five hundred men on the ship at one time. I would have surgical instruments sterilized, and participate with the doctor in the operation.

Huseboe: So you would function like a surgical nurse. Did you take care of wounds?

Camp: No, no, just the routine stuff.

Huseboe: Did you worry about submarines, or bombers attacking?

Camp: When you're eighteen years old, you don't have any fears. You're bulletproof.

Huseboe: Were you pretty much stuck in one place, or could you move around the ship?

Camp: When we went to general quarters, I was up near the bridge, up in the superstructure. Everybody roamed around where they wanted, unless they were on duty--then they had to stay in their position. But any other time--then general quarters, everybody had a place to go.

Huseboe: You didn't take part yourself in the bombardment. You didn't have a role--

Camp: No, just sick bay, and then up on deck sometimes. If there was any casualties, we'd take care of them on deck, because the sick bay was about three decks down. I tell you, it was a first class sickbay. They had air conditioning and innerspring mattresses. I was fortunate to have those rather than the bunks.

Huseboe: How about seasickness--where you bothered by that?

Camp: I really never had a problem with that. We hit a typhoon around Okinawa on the way back. The bow would hit the water and it would go over the superstructure. The destroyers would bounce around like a ping pong ball.

Should I continue? August 24th--avoided typhoon most of the day. August 25th--my birthday. I'm twenty years old today. Got a bunch of steaks to fry, and sixteen of the fellows came in. We had a little party, and they sang happy birthday to me. All together, we had twenty steaks, alongside cheese, eggs, tomato sauce, and peaches.

Huseboe: That was quite a feast.

Camp: Yeah. We had the alcohol; the cooks had the food.

Huseboe: Where did you get the alcohol?

Camp: It's in sick bay. They use it for procedures and things.

Huseboe: But would it be drinkable?

Camp: Well, you had to dilute it, because it was about 150 percent pure.

August 25th at 0930, we went to general quarters, battle stations, near Sagmiwan. The island was visible in the distance. About 1300, Mount Fujiyama was visible off the port bow. We secured from general quarters about 1430, anchoring shortly after the Missouri, Iowa, several battleships of the old class, about ten cruisers, one British cruiser, sixteen destroyers,

six British destroyers. A Japanese destroyer came out and met the Missouri to escort us all in. Planes were flying around, and the American flag could be seen on the mainland. August 28, more ships pulled into the bay, and destroyers and small craft lined up along the beach. We had ten battleships, eight U.S. and two British.

August 29th, this is a day I'll never forget. At sunrise we [?] by Sagmiwan for Tokyo Bay. We went to general quarters, and then into the bay about 0745. As we came into the bay, you could see the white flags on the sixteen-inch coastal guns. They were supposed to have about a hundred and fifteen of them. Near Yokohama you could see a Jap battleship that got grounded in the bay. It was hit by our planes on July 28. Planes covered us as we anchored in the bay. On the Missouri, Iowa, King George V, Duke of York, which came in later. About 1400, Admiral Nimitz came aboard with his staff. Shortly after, two doctors and seven corpsmen boarded the landing craft vehicle, and we headed to cruise ship San Juan for instructions on how to get to the P-O-W camp.

As we went in, Navy planes flying low showed us where the end of the channels in the Tokyo area. They tipped their wings and waved to us as we waved back. As we entered the channel from the bay, some Japs came to watch. All through the channels, they were fishing and coming from their homes to watch us. Some of the houses were pretty nice. Most of them just continued to fish without looking up. Some waved at us and hollered. Now that was scary. Did they get the word, you know? The POW camp was near the bay, and to see these young kids is a feeling you'll never forget. The camp was filthy dirty. Some of the POWs was in pretty bad shape, and all nationalities--American, Dutch, British, Chinese, Australian, Philippines, many others. there were B-29 crews who were in worse shape. Some of them were evacuated to the hospital ship USS Benevolence.

I might add, it's a coincidence, in the Dallas paper one day, they had an article a fellow wrote, and it started off about a prisoner-of-war camp. The guy said, "One of the happiest days of my life was August 29th, when I was liberated." And August 29th in my diary, I said, "This is one of the days of my life I'll never forget." I found him, he was over in Fort Worth, he was a B-24 pilot. So we visited. Henley, I believe. He wrote a book.

Huseboe: Was he actually one of the guys at the camp that you came to?

Camp: Yeah. You know who else was in there? Joe Foss. And Boyington.

Huseboe: Where was the fellow from Texas?

Camp: The Omori Camp. It was right there in the basin. After we took them to the Benevolence--we started out to the hospital camp, which was further in, but it was just about sunset and we couldn't find our way, so we went on to the hospital ship. We had battle lights and spotlights and a few flashlights, so about 2300 we finally found a landmark and headed inland. The POWs were in real bad shape and had all kinds of diseases. All these POWs, we evacuated them to the hospital ship. The ones that were left were a Catholic chaplain, command dispatcher--you remember Stassen from Minnesota--he was in charge of us. About 0300 a boat came back for us. We finally reached the hospital ship a little after sunrise. We went aboard and ate chow--had ham, eggs, and ice cream.

Huseboe: You got all the guys from the camp onto the Benevolence, huh?

Camp: Right. All the hospital people, too. You know, the B-24s came in and dropped supplies to these camps, shoes and what-have-you. These things were so heavy they made what looked like bomb craters. They had quite a few of those parachutes lying around.

Huseboe: They dropped those after the war was over, right?

Camp: Yeah.

Huseboe: And that was just temporary till you guys could get there. What would be in the packages?

Camp: Shoes, clothing, food, and I don't know what all. First aid stuff and medicine. I have another page or two here.

August 30, we left the Benevolence and then proceeded to another Jap prison camp in Yokohama. We had Navy planes showing us the way, and when we got near the prison camp, the prisoners came out, running, waving, and hollering. It was a great sight, believe me. We were the first white people they'd seen for three and a half years. All the time we were there, Navy planes and B-29s were dropping supplies. We took the prisoners out to a destroyer laying out, and we took them to the hospital ship. The last trip, about seventeen hundred went aboard and slept there that night. The doctors came on board, and we went on the destroyer and it took us over to the South Dakota.

September 2: "Today they signed the peace treaty aboard the Missouri at 0900. We are about 400 yards away from the Missouri. Other battleships are the Iowa, King George V, Duke of York. About one thousand Navy planes and six hundred B-29s flew over in formation." The sky was full for awhile with planes. Admiral Nimitz came aboard the ship at 6:30. Then he got off the ship and flew back to Guam. Admiral Turner came aboard on September 4. And September 5, we pulled alongside the Missouri to take off the men that were getting ready to be discharged. And I was able to go aboard the Missouri and look it over. It was a bigger ship than the South Dakota.

I'll skip a few pages here. We went on liberty September 19th in Tokyo. On September 20, 1945, we got underway to the island of Okinawa at 1245. Coming over we passed the New Jersey. Ships with us were the Alabama, Iowa, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Colorado. At 0800 on the 23rd, we anchored in Buckner Bay, Okinawa. In the afternoon we received onboard naval personnel to take back to the States.

October 1 we crossed the 180th Meridian. On October 4, we got to Pearl Harbor at 1130. About 6:30 we got underway from Pearl Harbor and headed to the United States. The ships were divided into three groups, going to Seattle, San Francisco, and San Pedro.

When we passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, hundreds of people crowding the rails waved at us. They had a loudspeaker that was playing "Anchors Aweigh." Small boats came alongside to take pictures. Rescue ships passed in review, and we followed them to anchorage. On Goat Island, they had a sign, "Hi, mates, nice work." Angel Island had "Welcome home. Well done."

We left San Francisco, went to San Pedro, I took leave and went back to New Orleans. I got discharged in April 1946. This was 27 pages that we went through, and I'll send it to you. I live in Dallas now.

Transcribed by:
Diane Diekman
CAPT, USN (ret)
19 November 2013