

Thomas Vernon Edwards
Electrician's mate first class
Oral History [telephone interview]
December 13, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: I want to make sure I got your name right, Thomas Vernon Edwards. And you're in Warrington, Pennsylvania. Your rank/rating while you were in the service?

Thomas Edwards: Electrician's mate first class.

Huseboe: And the dates you served on the battleship.

Edwards: 1942 to '44.

Huseboe: You don't remember exactly when you went on board.

Edwards: No. Probably in February. Yeah, I went on in February and left in February.

Huseboe: Your date of birth?

Edwards: 2 - 17 - 21.

Huseboe: Where were you born?

Edwards: In Hotspot, Kentucky.

Huseboe: Where did you complete high school?

Edwards: Hutchburg (?), Kentucky.

Huseboe: Did you go on for higher education?

Edwards: I did later, after the service. I have a degree in electrical engineering from Drexel. I have an associate degree. It was a long, hard haul.

Huseboe: The work you did prior to military service?

Edwards: I was in the three Cs for a year and a half. [Civilian Conservation Corps]. That was absolutely wonderful for people in the Depression.

Huseboe: How did it happen that you enlisted? Were you going to be drafted?

Edwards: I went in in '39. I volunteered. There was no draft at that time. When I got out of high school, I was promised--my father was involved in politics--and a Congressman by the name of Andrew Jackson May, he said he could get me into Annapolis. When the time come, his quota was filled, and he would get me in the next year, but it would be all right if I enlisted. And I could get out just as easily. Well, in the meantime, before that year was up, A.J. May and the Garrison Brothers were caught in a lumber-stealing scandal, and he went to prison. In that day that was called political pull. And it remained in my record, probably to my detriment--of course, the Navy didn't like politicians. That was in there I guess three years until they gave me my records to deliver to the South Dakota, and I opened them up, and took it out. I enlisted for six years, and I done my six years.

Huseboe: How old were you when you enlisted?

Edwards: I was eighteen.

Huseboe: And you chose the Navy. Why was that?

Edwards: Like the advertisement said--to see the world. I had talked to a couple of sailors; one was a third class electrician's mate. He was my hero, and he kind of guided me into the Navy. He got me on my first drunk in Panama, too. He was stationed there, and when we went through the canal, he come aboard and took me and my buddy ashore.

Huseboe: What was the place of your training?

Edwards: Norfolk, Virginia, was my boot training. I didn't get to school until--I was already a first class before I went to electrical school in Camp Perry, Virginia. I was in school when

the bomb was dropped. I had been transferred off the South Dakota, and I'd served a year on the Wilkes-Barre. When I was reassigned--after the Wilkes-Barre--by that time I had enough time in as first class that I had my choice of duty, so when I was on the Wilkes-Barre and I was the first class to be transferred, and I chose a school.

Huseboe: Where did you board USS South Dakota?

Edwards: In Philadelphia. Probably March of '42.

Huseboe: On board, what were your principal duties?

Edwards: I was a third class electrician's mate when I was aboard, and I was assigned to what they call the E-7 Division. The electrical department had eight divisions, and I was in E-7, the anti-aircraft gang that took care of the five-inch, thirty-eights, and the forty millimeters.

Huseboe: You saw a lot of duty with those guns, I imagine.

Edwards: Yes, I didn't get to fire any of them. Technicians were assigned to repair parties. We didn't get to shoot. We were laying on the deck someplace waiting for something to happen, so we could go fix it.

Huseboe: Were you at Santa Cruz?

Edwards: Yes. The only part I really got to see was when the Jap plane crashed on the destroyer, the Smith, and I got a glimpse of it when it was a fireball. I didn't get to see it until after it had plowed through our wake and put the fire out. I think the captain got the Navy Cross.

Huseboe: I imagine that Gatch got the Navy Cross, didn't he?

Edwards: Yes, he did. Can I tell you a little story about Gatch? After I was transferred to school, in Camp Perry--I was married and I used to go home and I'd go through Washington to go to Philadelphia. If we had time, we'd stop off and go to the Judge Advocate General's section--it was old barracks-like offices--and you'd announce--I get kind of choked up about this. His secretary would say, "There's a man here from the South Dakota." And you went in to see the Man, and the bottom drawer come out, and a bottle of scotch come out. And you'd sit there and tell him what you done, and all this stuff. I done that twice.

Huseboe: I don't suppose you saw him much on the ship.

Edwards: Oh, no, no. Well, he wandered around quite a bit, and talked to people on the guns. Especially the people on the forties, because the forties were new guns, and he was very enthused about them. And rightly so.

Huseboe: I read someplace that he was such a supporter of excellent gunmanship that sometimes he'd spend so much time doing that that the ship wouldn't get cleaned up properly. One story said it was called the dirtiest ship in the Navy but also had the best gunners on board.

Edwards: That's true. That's very true. They nicknamed the ship--we was called the Shitty Dick. The crews practiced those guns so much. When he was transferred and we got McCormick--this happened in Brooklyn when we were back for repairs--we nicknamed McCormick "Soapsuds McCormick." He made us clean the ship up.

Huseboe: Was Santa Cruz the most dangerous--or frightening or hazardous--action that you went through?

Edwards: Oh, no. Savo was. At Savo, we took forty-two major caliber shell hits that night. In fact, there was one--it must have been a ricochet--my battle station was in the half deck, the forward part of the ship--and this thing exploded at half-deck level, and Captain Gatch's stores were there. A lot of smoke and shrapnel came into that compartment. One of my favorite stories is that Neal, a boatswain's mate second class, I guess he was, was laying on the deck

beside me, and as the smoke cleared and you could breathe, and see a little bit, I put my hand over on Neal to see if he was all right, and he was wet. I asked him if he was all right, and he said, "Yeah, get your hand off me, you sonofabitch. I'm all right." What it was, the Captain had jars of ketchup, and it had broke those jars and splashed on Neal, and I put my hand on his back or legs, and I got the ketchup.

Huseboe: That was the fight where USS South Dakota was along with USS Washington. And Admiral Lee was on the Washington.

Edwards: Yes. Yes.

Huseboe: He directed that battle. Which was quite a defeat for the Japanese. That was a heck of a fight. And then you had to go back for repairs.

Edwards: Our Navy was so beat up, that when we left there, we had to go to Brooklyn for repairs. The West Coast shipyards were all clogged up. We were in the Brooklyn Navy Yard for three months. Then we went from there to Scapa Flow, and with the British, I guess until September, and then we went back to the Pacific.

Huseboe: What kind of duty do you have, in a situation like that? Do you stay onboard the ship and clean and paint?

Edwards: Yes, you're assigned a certain amount of work. Of course, you have a lot of liberty. A lot of the boys went to training. I went to forty millimeter school. By that time, I'm--not in charge of the secondary battery, but second in command, I guess you would say. We got a lot of training for the lower ratings.

Huseboe: In your job were you able to move around the ship a lot, or were you pretty much stuck in a small area?

Edwards: I was one of the fortunate. I got to go all over the ship. Anyplace there was a gun, or a gun director, and that was all over the South Dakota. So I really had the run of the ship. One time--I guess we were doing a bombardment, after we had come back the second time--they watched somebody to watch a fire plug, close by the forty millimeter on the tip of the fo'c'sle, I volunteered to go up and watch it. The Alabama was ahead of us in the lineup that was going in to make a firing run, and she got out of the line, and we started shooting directly over me. Let me tell you, I was bouncing up on that deck like a ping pong ball. Sixteen inch guns. I was glad to get below.

The Japanese, especially at Okinawa, they were much better at night fighting than we were. Because we didn't really know how to use our radar. Admiral Lee was supposed to have been an expert on it. I have no respect for the man. Because he took credit for a lot of things that he didn't deserve. One of the big things--after we were beat up so bad, he pulled out of line, so to speak, and he supposedly led the Japs away from us and saved us.

Here's something you will never find, except that three or four of us still remember it--when we got back to the base, and the Washington's crew and South Dakota's crew went ashore for liberty, we had a pitched battle. One of my buddies that I still keep in contact with, that lives twenty miles from me, was involved it. He said, "I would have killed anybody I could have got my hands on." He was an ex-boxer, and he says, "I knocked out a lot of boys, eight or nine, but the shore patrol and the Army SPs and everybody got there and got us separated, and arrested. I was taken back aboard the South Dakota, and the shore patrol took me down below to where my clothing was." He says, "I put it in my seabag and I come back and I was transferred." Everybody was transferred. They held them in a stockade for three or four weeks as they were transferring them out. Now there's no record of that. There was no record of the Washington running.

That was one of the things I asked Captain Gatch. He come back aboard when he got the Navy Cross, and he got on the PA system and announced that it was a complete rumor--that the Washington did not run away from us. That supposedly ended the hard feelings between the two ships. But now when I went to see him in Washington, I asked him that. He said, "I'm a good Navy man. I obey orders." So evidently Halsey ordered him to make that announcement to the ship's crew.

Huseboe: And the announcement confirmed that the Washington had run away?

Edwards: No, sir, the other way around. It was "part of the battle plan." And he would appreciate that this ended the whole discussion. He was ordered to say that. From what he told me in our conversations there in his office in Washington, that he was ordered by Halsey to make this announcement. It was politics. The Navy was full of politics. You saved your ass and you took all the credit you could for everything that was done.

Huseboe: Did some of your shipmates, or you yourself, receive special commendations?

Edwards: The only man that I know of was a yeoman by the name of Patrick. He was in the crow's nest as a lookout, and that was the second battle of Savo--the night battle--and he got his kneecap shot off. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he had a couple of morphine surettes. He put a tourniquet on his leg--there was no way to get him down because the ladders were all shot away--he stayed up there till it got daylight and they could get him down. I believe they gave him a Navy Cross. There was a couple of other people--it seems like there was four Navy Crosses given out. The gunnery officer got it, but he got killed.

Huseboe: Were you seasick at all?

Edwards: On the South Dakota--of course, I'd been on the Memphis, an old four-stack light cruiser, and I had got over my seasickness. When I got out of boot camp and was being transferred to San Diego to get to the Memphis--an old ammunition ship--it got rough going around Cape Hatteras, and we were all seasick, laying on the deck with our head in the scuppers, and I was laying beside one of the black mess attendants, and he kept saying, "Lawd, have mercy, I wish I could die. Lawd, have mercy." That was the only time I ever got seasick. On the South Dakota, if I got up on the fo'csle to work on one of the guns--that forty millimeter was on the tip of the fo'csle --in bad weather, I'd start feeling queasy and would have to go back amidships.

Father Cunningham got me transferred back, so I could see my father before he died. That's the reason I was transferred off the South Dakota. I was assigned to the Wilkes-Barre then, the light cruiser, and we were in the Sea of Japan when that typhoon hit. I was in the electrical shop below on the third deck, and I knew that the ship was going to go over. I left the electrical shop and went up the ladder trying to get topside, but evidently another wave hit us on the other side at the right time and put us upright. When I went back to the shop, there was a huge tool locker that was within two or three inches of the overhead, and that thing had started to slide across the deck and had wedged itself against the ceiling. But that was the one time I was scared to death. I was more afraid then, than I was in any of the battles.

Huseboe: How about being afraid of submarines?

Edwards: I was on the South Dakota, and we had a huge armor plate around us, and I wasn't really afraid of submarines. You're always aware, but we had destroyers around us, and it felt pretty secure.

Huseboe: How about Japanese bombers?

Edwards: We got hit once at Santa Cruz. A hit on number one turret, a personnel bomb, I think they said it was. Captain Gatch was standing out on the bridge, he got hit in the throat,

and his jugular vein was severed. A chief standing beside him had some medical knowledge, and he put his thumb on his neck and stopped the squirting blood, until the doctor got there, and they saved him. We had one gunner's mate on one of the forties that had his guts shot out. He died there. We had one death from the bomb.

I got one more story that I want to tell you. It's important to me. We were accused of--we lost power for a minute and a half or two minutes, and a chief electrician's mate, who had a Pollack name about a mile and a half long--we always called him Ski--he was in charge of the generators. And during the investigation, after the fact that we lost power and all this, there was an ensign--maybe he was a jaygee--by the name of Rickover who came aboard. I can barely remember the man. I'm six one and a half, and he--to me--he was kind of short for a naval officer. That's the only thing I remember about him. In having lunch with Ski several times after the war, he always brought this up. He come aboard there, and Ski and the electrical officer were telling how they paralleled generators and so on, and this Rickover kept telling Ski that you couldn't parallel generators. He wouldn't go down in the engine room where the generators were and let Ski demonstrate. He used to call him every sonofabitch, because we were accused--the concussions blew a circuit breaker and we lost a generator, and it was Ski's responsibility to get them back on line. He was one mad Pollack. His wife said he loses it every time somebody brings that up. Ski didn't like Rickover.

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