

Arlow B. Helgeson

Seaman First Class (Leading Seaman)

Oral History

July 5, 2001

Harry Thompson: With Mr. Arlow Helgeson, 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.

Arlow Helgeson: I seen the start of the cars, and the airplanes, and boy, look at the airplanes now. They're fast. We thought them Corsairs were fast in World War II. They'd dive down across the decks and we'd practically break our necks following them around.

Thompson: Tell us a little bit about how you came to enlist in the Navy.

Helgeson: That's easy enough. I was in Minnesota, it was on a Sunday, and I went to the bakery to have a cup of coffee and a bismark. Just sat down and it come over the radio that they were bombing Pearl Harbor. So I had my mother go with me, and I enlisted.

Thompson: How was it that you happened to choose the Navy?

Helgeson: I always wanted the Navy. I wanted to know where my meals and my bunk were.

Thompson: Where did you do your training?

Helgeson: Great Lakes. Two and a half weeks. Then they sent us to Philadelphia to go aboard the ship. I was supposed to have went aboard in Camden, but I got pneumonia and went into the hospital instead. When I come off of there, they sent me. A guy today said it was the 23rd of March we went aboard.

Thompson: He and you were together?

Helgeson: Yeah. I didn't know him. We both went in, guns, in the First Division. About three months later, they transferred us both to the Sixth Division. That's where we were till the end.

Thompson: Your rating, seaman first class, you already indicated that.

Helgeson: I went in as a printer, I was supposed to, if I'd went in about two weeks sooner, I could have had a rating of first class printer. But they had enough, so they cut it down and gave us seaman first. I got \$54 a month instead of 21. It would have been more if I went in as a printer first class. Never had to do no mess cooking.

Thompson: You had worked as a printer before that.

Helgeson: I was doing that when I enlisted.

Thompson: Newspaper printing? The weekly newspaper in Crookston?

Helgeson: And Eagle Bend. [Minnesota.] I didn't go back to printing after I got out, for quite a while. I worked other places. Farmed. Mined.

Thompson: Aboard USS South Dakota, can you tell us something about your duties?

Helgeson: I had charge of the gear locker for the Sixth Division. I had to hand out the scrubbers and wire brushes and stuff like that, and had to keep them supplied. That's what I did. Leading seaman is what I got to be right away. That's just underneath the rating. I'd do the rating work but I didn't have the responsibility.

Thompson: Did you stay pretty much in that line of work?

Helgeson: Yeah, I was that right up to the end. There was only three of us on the ship knew how to wire splice. I would splice them ten-inch housers. Part of my job was making fenders. They weighed about five or six hundred pounds apiece when we was done. It took a crew of guys to get the rope--I'd start her through--and they'd run down the deck and drag it through, and then come back and I'd start again. It would make a big fender, about six foot long.

Thompson: Made out of rope.

Helgeson: Yes. Ten-inch houser. We pert-near knocked the Exec overboard one day with it. It got away from us. I told one of the guys to take a turn around something to pull on, and he took a turn around a twenty-millimeter spare gun case cover. We broke the stantions and everything else on that side.

Thompson: You were on, you said, for the duration.

Helgeson: Yeah, after the war I got off in Pearl Harbor. And got on the Iowa and rode back to Bremerton. I enlisted for two years or duration. When the war got over, I had enough points to get discharged. I wanted out. I didn't want no reserve. I didn't want nothing to do with them. When I had the physical to get discharged, the pharmacist said they wouldn't be able to release me. My blood pressure was too high. He said they'd have to keep me till they got it down. I said mark it normal; I'm going home. So he did.

Now I'm all filled with asbestos. I got that up in Division One there. They chipped asbestos off the overhead. It was all lined with asbestos, just under the main deck, for insulation. I had a top bunk, and I'd come to go to bed at night, I'd have it that deep on my bunk. I'd just brush it off and go to bed. So I've been on disability since 1977.

Thompson: Do you want to talk about your hazardous experiences?

Helgeson: Boy, that's hard to think back. There was lots of them. The typhoons scared me worse than the battles. I thought that ship was going over. Thirty-two degrees is all we were supposed to take, and we was on 34. That scared me more than anything during the war.

Thompson: Was that a whole-night affair?

Helgeson: I think it was mostly in the daytime. And night. We went right through the middle of it. Another time that scared me, was a buddy of mine from the Fifth Division--it happened twice with him--we'd be sitting topside and the weather would be nice, and all at once he'd straighten up. "I smell blood," he said. And both times, we got into battle and lost guys. Him and I were drinking buddies. But it never failed, if he smelled blood. He smelled it before Savo Island, he smelled it before Guadalcanal.

Guadalcanal didn't scare me till after it was over. When we come out of there, we was the only ship all alone. Two destroyers were sunk there, and the Washington and one destroyer were gone, we had no radar left, no searchlights left. I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience I had, but I wouldn't go and do it again.

Thompson: What did you think about the way the ship was handled? The discipline aboard ship, the commanding officers--

Helgeson: We had Captain Gatch, the best commander the Navy ever had.

Thompson: So you liked your commanding officer.

Helgeson: Oh, he was wonderful. He took away all the saluting and there was no spit and polish. In fact, he told the admiral in an admiral's inspection, a little dirty? We're a fighting ship, not a palace. The next one we got, I think McCormick was the second one, he wanted everything shiny and polished. We called him Old Soap Powder. Called Gatch "Gunpowder." But Gatch was good. Even when he got wounded, he didn't take no special orders. He went and set with the crew. You weren't supposed to smoke down there, but he'd pass out cigars. We'd visit with him and have a smoke. He was hit by shrapnel when the bomb hit the number one turret. He said he wouldn't duck for no Jap bomb. He had a fifty caliber machine gun on each side of the bridge. If they'd come in from one side, he'd go there. He wanted to fight.

Another thing I remember, we got hit with everything there was. Everything but a torpedo. A destroyer hit us in the side. That put the anchor through the wardroom door. A

bunch of potatoes and toilet paper and pots all over the decks. Like I said, we got hit with just about everything.

Thompson: Were you aboard when the munitions explosion took place?

Helgeson: Oh, you bet. I was helping bring the sixteen-inch [?] cans aboard. That was our job. We were transferring them from one ship to another. It came up through the decks, and I don't think I was but from here to that wall from where it burned up through.

Thompson: Was that a frightening experience, or were you reacting to it so quickly?

Helgeson: It didn't really affect me. I kind of went to the stern.

Thompson: How did you and your buddies feel about the guys that had to be locked in when they closed the hatches down below?

Helgeson: Didn't bother us. We knew it had to happen. We knew if it was us, they would, too. What can you do? We had guys I think it was three days locked in a powder magazine down there, when they flooded the magazines. We could talk to them on the phones, but you couldn't get to them, because it was full of water. It was the same if a man fell overboard. We knew if we fell overboard, you might as well start swimming. Because they ain't going to stop. They can't. Why risk 3,500 guys for one?

We had that happen, coming out of one of the island ports. A big wave washed some of them off. We never stopped. In fact, one guy I knew, it washed him off. The next wave washed him back on. Another time, when we hit that coral reef, I was on the ludline (?) taking soundings just before that. They told me I could secure there, for awhile. So I just went over and was going to sit down, and ker-bang. I got a piece of that coral at home yet.

Thompson: That did quite a bit of damage, didn't it?

Helgeson: Oh, that bottom tore a hole about fifty or sixty foot long. The whole bottom looked like a washboard.

Thompson: How were you able to prevent the water from coming up?

Helgeson: Because we bottomed. We didn't dare fire our sixteen-inch guns or we could have busted the--we went right to Pearl Harbor. There was a lot of stuff like that. I don't really remember being scared on there. That was our job.

Thompson: Did you work different shifts?

Helgeson: On your watches, you were on four and off eight, and then on eight and off four. And you worked in between. Daylight hours you worked. I had a good bunk, though. I could go up there and sleep, and they couldn't see me up there. When that bomb come through, and exploded down below decks, that was just on the other side of the bulkhead from my bunk and locker.

Thompson: Were you in your bunk?

Helgeson: No, I was at battle stations. The time I was in the bunk--we had some survivors of a ship that had been torpedoed and sunk. One of them was on the bunk right below me. When that destroyer hit us, we were asleep. He woke up, stuck his head over the side, and said, "Well, now you know what it feels like to be torpedoed." He turned over and went to sleep. I said, boy, if you can do that, so can I. So I turned over and went to sleep. I thought, after being on a ship that was sunk, he would--but it didn't bother him. Stuff like that I remember.

Thompson: I'll read these two questions to see if they generate anything--recollections of courageous actions by yourself or someone else, commendations, or reactions to the sea. Seasickness, boredom, fears of the weather, submarine warfare, anything like that.

Helgeson: No, the only courageous act, I think, was when them signalmen put their hand in Gatch's neck. That saved his life. I don't know of anybody doing anything special.

Thompson: How did word about that get around? How soon did you know about that?

Helgeson: We knew that the next day. When they took him down to sick bay, that circulated all over.

Thompson: So you would say Gatch was a pretty beloved commander?

Helgeson: Oh, yeah. I don't know of a man that hated him. When we went through Panama, we had about a half an hour liberty, and he let part of the crew go. They wasn't gonna let them out the gate, and he went up and told them let 'em out, and he told them where the closest liquor store was. They all brought back all the liquor they could carry. I wasn't in on that. I mean, I was in on drinking it, but I didn't go get it. I didn't get off the ship. I was on duty.

Thompson: You said this is your first reunion?

Helgeson: Yeah. The first time I heard anything about the South Dakota since I left. Outside of one movie we seen on TV.

Thompson: You're living now in Washington state. When did you move there?

Helgeson: Oh, golly, I went out the first time in about '50, and then I'd go back. I farmed awhile. I'd say maybe '60 when I went out permanent. I wouldn't have known about this reunion, but my son gets the VFW magazine and he seen it in there.

Thompson: Is there anything you'd like to say in conclusion?

Helgeson: The shelling of Japan. When they dropped the second atomic bomb, we'd have been within twenty-five miles and was going to start shelling. They sent us out to a hundred and they dropped it. We didn't know they were going to. Drinking parties, I remember. All I know is there was too many of them. The crew was a rough, tough bunch. Farm boys from the Midwest, the big share. If they couldn't find nobody else to fight with, they'd fight for themselves.

Thompson: Have a few fights aboard ship?

Helgeson: Oh, yeah, if they went out on liberty. One time in Seattle, in the 87 Club, the Washington was there, and the South Dakota was there, and three or four destroyers, they whacked that club. The master at arms wouldn't go and bust it up, the city cops wouldn't go in and bust it up. One side put their hats on, and the other side took them off. A friend of mine was in on that. He got up on top of a table. He said if he was going to get hit with a bottle, he wanted to see where it was coming from. He got hit and he never did see where it come from. Stuff like that I remember. Well, we drank a lot. We said, if I go out again, I don't know if I'm coming back.

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