

Harvey Levine
Quartermaster Third Class
Oral History [telephone interview]
December 14, 2001

Deborah M. Lyon: My name is Deb Lyon, and I'm a collections assistant at the Center for Western Studies, and I'm also a member of the USS South Dakota oral history project being conducted here in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and I'm speaking with a former member of USS South Dakota crew, Harvey Levine from Boca Raton, Florida. Today is December 14, 2001, and we are tape recording this interview. Could you please give me your dates of service?

Harvey Levine: I'm an original plankowner. Approximately from the 26th of October to August of '45.

Lyon: What was your rank or rating?

Levine: My rating was quartermaster third class.

Lyon: How old were you when you entered the Navy?

Levine: I was seventeen.

Lyon: What was your date of birth? Where were you born?

Levine: January 31, 1924. I was born in Jamaica, New York. Not the islands.

Lyon: It's spelled the same way, though?

Levine: Spelled the same way.

Lyon: Before you entered the service, what level was your education? Did you complete high school?

Levine: Yes. I was in my senior year. But I didn't stay for graduation. I went into the Navy.

Lyon: What school was that?

Levine: Franklin K. Lane.

Lyon: Do you want to give us the circumstances of your enlistment?

Levine: Well, I was in my senior year, and I remember laying on a couch and listening to a football game on December 7, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I had a very good friend of mine, who I used to play basketball with, his name was Danny Schlesinger. He says to me, "Do you want to join the Marines?" I said, "No, if we're going to go down, I want to go into the Navy." I had a hard time trying, by the way. I had my mother sign for this. He went into the Marine Corps and I went into the Navy. We went down together, but he went into one office and I went into the other. I just could not see myself going into the Marines at that time. I always like the Navy, was another reason. I used to go fishing a lot with my dad. That's how I ended up in the Navy.

When we got into boot camp, we were in a line of two, and we were walking, and an officer put his hand in front of me, and I stopped. Everybody that was ahead of me went to Company 114, and I was in 115. And the company of 114 went aboard with the ship where the Sullivan brothers went down. So I was fortunate at that point. Maybe this is when my luck started, when I was in the Navy. Later on, while we were underway and we were going to do battle one night, [USS Juneau] came alongside, and being I was quartermaster and I was on the bridge, the captain of that ship asked our captain--Captain Gatch, I believe it was--said, "I have five brothers aboard. I would like to split them up. Would you take a few?" He said of course, but the next thing we did, we had a message about an hour later, and it was sent to my captain, and it said the boys don't want to split up. So it never happened.

Lyon: The reason you selected the U.S. Navy was because of your experience as a young man?

Levine: I would say so. I always liked the ocean anyway.

Lyon: Where were you trained for sea duty?

Levine: Newport, Rhode Island.

Lyon: How did you come to be assigned to USS South Dakota?

Levine: Our whole company of 115 was assigned to it. Right from boot camp.

Lyon: Do you remember when you boarded her? And your impressions?

Levine: They were still fixing up the ship. It hadn't been underway. It was before the shakedown cruise. I think it must have been somewhere about June. May or June of '42. I was on the first shakedown.

Lyon: What was the type of work you did while you were onboard?

Levine: I was a helmsman. That was my battle station. I was a helmsman. And I seem to have done a very good job on that, because--that was my battle station, and when we went through the Panama Canal, I had to be on that all day. It was a good job for one reason. It was in a conning tower so it was safer than any other place on the ship at that time. Unless a kamikaze hit us. In fact, my skipper, Captain Gatch--we took a bomb hit, and he got a piece of shrapnel in his artery in his neck. And I'll never forget, one fellow that was in my division, a fellow by the name of Novak, really saved the captain. Because he put his hand in and held the artery until a doctor was able to get hold of him. In fact, Novak was a first class petty officer and became chief petty officer the next day. So that was my job. I was a helmsman during combat, and going through the Panama Canal, and everything else.

Lyon: What do you consider the most hazardous action you experienced?

Levine: Oh, I think it was when we went through the Slot at Savo Island. Guadalcanal. That's when the Japs opened up on us. That to me was even worse--that was the time when we could have been sunk. In fact, we took twenty-eight hits from eight-inch guns, from the Japs.

Lyon: Savo Island, if I recall correctly, that was a night battle?

Levine: Yes, that was a night battle. I'll never forget that as long as I live. First, we started to smell Flower Island, and that's such a sweet smell, that gardenia smell. I never liked gardenias from that day on. I was on the bridge, and the radar guy said to my commander, "I picked up some land over at such and such." And I remember the commander saying, "B.S. That's Japanese ships." And then all of a sudden everybody opened fire on each other. I think that was the scariest part because I remember the destroyers going down, and guys yelling in the water, it was terrible. The next morning we were taking off, and I thought we were getting away from Guadalcanal, and we were all by ourselves. Those destroyers were gone--at the time, five destroyers were sunk--the Washington, who seemed to be getting a lot of credit, I don't know how, but nobody was with us. We had no more radar. Our radar was shot away, everything was shot away. Until we got back to--I think Ulithi--one of the islands. MacArthur wanted us to go back in the next day, after what I don't remember. But I'll tell you, our captain was a great skipper. He said we're not going back in there. We have no radar, nothing left, no fire control. So that was the last of that.

Lyon: How did you manage your fears of death or injury?

Levine: I was down near sick bay--it was around lunch time, I don't remember--and we went to battle stations. I had to go from way back in the stern up to the bridge, and I got caught between a five-inch mount--the kamikaze planes were coming in, and they opened fire. At one point, one gun's above my head, and I had no cotton in my ears, and they got blown apart,

and busted my eardrums. I couldn't hear for a little while, and when I went to go to sick bay, there was a line of guys. It seemed that when that bomb hit, it wounded a lot of people. So I never even bothered going down to sick bay until the following day. I knew one of the pharmacist's mates, and he pumped sulfur (?) in my ears and it seems it cleared up a little. So I got one hearing aid today.

Lyon: So that was at Savo Island?

Levine: No, that was one of the air attacks that we had. We had thirteen major engagements, the South Dakota did. That was not the Battle of the Coral Sea. That was another one where I think I did very well. I was on the helm at that time. When the planes come in, and the fleet goes on their own--nobody follows--you go into circles. The captain says you make a hard right, you make a hard right and keep going around in a big, big circle. Then you make a left and you go into another circle. When I could look out, I could see we were heading for the Enterprise, and I started doing something I wasn't supposed to do, but I started to inch the wheel a little because I saw that ship cutting across our bow, I thought sure as heck we'd hit them. But, luck again, we were right there.

Lyon: What are some of your memories of your place in the ship's company? Working with the crew, and were you able to move about the ship?

Levine: We had the run of the whole ship.

Lyon: What do you remember about being with the crew?

Levine: Well, it was a big crew. My division, there were a few people that I--in fact, I just sent Christmas cards out to some of them. There was some I was friendly with and I liked, and there was some I disliked.

Lyon: What's your reaction to discipline on the ship?

Levine: We had discipline, and I think it was normal discipline you had to adhere to. We had one captain, by the name of McCormick--in fact, he became an admiral, and it just so happens, I just finished reading a book about the sinking of USS Indianapolis, and I think he was part of being one of the idiots. But the discipline, no more than what a military ship should be.

Lyon: Do you have any recollections of courageous actions of people on board ship?

Levine: Yeah. After we left Savo and Guadalcanal, when we got hit, we had a lot of it shot away. One of the fellows, I don't remember his name, he was able to take a feller down from one deck to another deck, and we didn't know how it ever happened, because the stairwells were blown away. We don't know how he carried this person down from one deck to another. One of the worst events, I think, that I had in the career that we had, was some of the people that were blown up, and we had to scrape them off the bulkhead. I will tell you with all sincerity that when I came home after that, I never went into a butcher shop in two years. Not after scraping my shipmates off the bulkheads.

Lyon: What were your reactions to some of the other things about being at sea?

Levine: The typhoons that we had--god, you'd see those swells coming up. Waves almost sixty feet, coming up and hitting the bridge, it's really scary. But you see the aircraft carriers going along, on your sides, and planes are falling off the deck. We lost more planes in a typhoon than we did under action. The planes would fall off the decks. It looked like you could stand in the water and play handball against the decks, that's how the aircraft carrier was. And we couldn't get out of it. We got into the eye of the storm, and we couldn't get out of the eye. It takes a lot to get out of it. But it was scary. I thought thank God I was on a ship that

was 35,000 ton and not a destroyer. We lost a couple of destroyers during the typhoons. The typhoons were something I'll always remember.

Lyon: Did you ever have any problems with seasickness?

Levine: No, but I was in after steering. That's another part of the ship I had to stand watch in. We were in the typhoon something like five days and couldn't get out of it. I think by the sixth day I was ready to get seasick. But I never got really seasick.

Lyon: Was that the first or the second typhoon?

Levine: It was the first one.

Lyon: Did you ever have any issues with submarine warfare?

Levine: I remember being up on the bridge and looking down one time, and two torpedoes were coming at us, and they went underneath me. They went under us and kept on going. In other words, the submarine was far away and didn't figure our distance when they shot the torpedoes. That was the only instance we ever had.

Lyon: Most of your attacks would have come from the air. Kamikazes, and were there torpedo planes?

Levine: Yeah. In fact, during the Battle of the Coral Sea, I was on the bridge, and we took a bomb hit. The Japs at that point were so--I don't know--they dropped a torpedo like a bomb, it goes over and over, but it missed us. That's the only thing I remember about that. They went to get rid of the torpedo and they couldn't--I don't know how--but they started to drop a torpedo like a bomb, and it doesn't work that way.

Lyon: When you first went in the Navy, you were seventeen years old, so there was quite a mix of ages. Did you notice a big difference in maturity levels, let's say yourself coming fresh out of high school--

Levine: I was eighteen already when I got in. The maturity level--yes, I found that to be true. I mean, I'm eighteen years old, I'd come out of school, I'm a student, and now I'm heading to some people who were in the working field. In fact, when I was in boot camp, I got pneumonia and ended up in the hospital after I left boot camp. One of the fellows I became acquainted with, he worked at the telephone company. He must have had quite a job at the telephone company because he became a petty officer so fast. He was in charge of the telephones aboard ship at an early age. He was my senior, let's put it. He wasn't my peer. My peer was the eighteen/nineteen-year-olds. There were a couple old-timers. Our compartment was mixed in with the band. There were a couple old guys there; they were already in the Navy twelve years or better. There were a few of those people. They were nice to talk to and be friendly with. You were always a kid in their eyes.

Lyon: What do you remember about the Philippine campaign? Leyte and Luzon?

Levine: We went into the China Seas. I only remember the bombing missions that we sent out the air attacks. I remember going into the China Seas because I was on the bridge, and nobody else knew, except the quartermasters, where the hell we were going. I remember the commander saying, my god, we're plotting for the China Seas. What are we going to do? We'll get in there and we won't be able to get out. But Halsey sent us in there, and we got in. We went into the China Seas, and we bombed part of China, or whatever. We spent almost a week there, and then we got out. The Philippines, I just remember the air attacks. We had air attacks every night. It got to a point where you sat there, you knew you were going to have an air attack that night. But we were a fortunate ship. We had a great ship.

Lyon: Were you there at the surrender?

Levine: No, that's what got me. I was transferred off the ship, and I went down to the New

Jersey, which was going back to Seattle. I landed with the Jersey on V-E Day. I think we went into Seattle. It was V-E Day. I got a little leave, and I came back, and went on to a yard oiler. A few months later, the war ended in Japan. I was only sorry that I couldn't make Japan.

Lyon: When did you leave the Navy?

Levine: I was discharged December 1, 1945.

Lyon: Did you ever go back into the military?

Levine: No, I was sorry--many a time, I wished that I would have stayed in. I think I liked the service. I really did. I went on two reunions to Sioux Falls. I would have liked to have gone to this one, except I had surgery on July 7.

Lyon: Did you use the military benefits to go to college?

Levine: I started college, taking some engineering courses, and I got myself a wonderful job in the construction business, and I was quite successful there for awhile. I never finished college.

Lyon: You didn't get married until after the service?

Levine: I didn't get married until I was thirty-one.

Lyon: Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?

Levine: I stood a lot of watches with Sargent Shriver. Remember Sargent Shriver? Kennedy's brother-in-law? When you read about people, and you know what category he was in, and he was such a down-to-earth officer, and you would think with his background that he may be snobbish or anything like that, he was a great person to stand watch with, a great person to talk to, and he was just a great guy. In fact, I don't know where we were at the time, Kennedy's PT boat came alongside of us. I remember him, and I remember Captain Momsen, the guy who invented the Momsen Lung. He was skipper for us for awhile. We had another young man I used to stand watch with, in the conning tower--I can't remember his name but he was related to Admiral King or one of the big admirals, and he was a sailor, and hated the Navy, hated everything we stood for. He was brought up in a Navy household. He just hated the Navy. He refused to become an officer.

You go in as a kid and you come out a man. I enjoyed it a lot, in some ways. I made some good friends, and still write to a few. That's about it. I really don't know. I did my duty. I enjoyed it. Some of it I would like to do again and some of it I would not. The only thing I recall that bothered me was scraping off the bulkheads. And listening to the guys screaming in the water, going through Savo Island.

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