

George T. McNeill

Gunner's Mate

Oral History

July 6, 2001

Harry Thompson: Mr. George T. McNeill, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Harry Thompson on July 6, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Would you state your name and your place of residence?

George McNeill: George T. McNeill in Punta Gorda, Florida. We've been there for fourteen years in November.

Thompson: Can you tell us how it was that you came to join the Navy?

McNeill: I was always interested in boats and ships, and I also liked swimming and diving. I still like boats. I've got one now, and that's the reason we moved down to Florida. We're surrounded by water from the east to the south to the west. We used to go to Florida on vacation, from St. Louis, where we lived.

Thompson: Where did you enlist?

McNeill: I enlisted in St. Louis, and I had my initial training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois. I graduated from there in October 1942. My first tour of duty was up in Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Eighteen months up there. I was assigned to the ordnance department, the gunnery division. Ensign Collins was our gunnery division officer, and Ensign Gorton was our demolition instruction officer. Besides guns, we were given demolition instruction with TNT demolition blocks and dynamite. We also stored all kinds of ammunition, including bombs. The Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor twice during June of 1942. They sought to throw our line of defense, extending from Midway Island to Dutch Harbor, and both attempts failed. They were estimated ten thousand strong on Kiska Island. Since they failed there, there was no more threat from them.

A communiqué was received from the Navy Department; they were looking for volunteers who would be interested in deep sea and southeast diving. The Navy didn't say what it was for, the scuttlebutt was that they were looking for salvage divers in Pearl Harbor to work out the wreckage there. I always liked swimming and diving, and I thought this would be my chance to get away from that snowy base. We also lived underground. So I applied for the assignment, and I passed the physical examination, but then they wouldn't release me. Anyway, after serving several months of stateside duty after I left Alaska, I went to Terminal Island at San Pedro, California, and from there I was included with a group of sailors who were scheduled for fleet replacements. We left San Pedro in March of 1945, and our passage was a fleet tanker. After a week or so aboard, we were transferred via highline to the newly commissioned USS Springfield, a light cruiser. She was commissioned in October 1944. She was a beautiful ship and neat as a pin.

Some of us were told--including myself--that we'd be assigned to the battleship South Dakota. My friend Joe was also a gunner's mate and he was included with the transfer, too. On the 30th of April, 1945, we were transferred by highline and went over to the South Dakota. When I first saw the South Dakota, her armament really impressed me. I didn't know at the time she was fitted out as a flagship. I felt truly lucky to serve aboard such a powerful battleship. When my turn came to go across the highline--they called it the preacher's seat or the bosn's chair--I noticed marine growth below the ship's waterline. It appeared to be about

eighteen inches long as it waved back and forth, and I wondered how long the ship had been to sea. My friend Joe was assigned to the forty millimeter antiaircraft guns, and I was assigned to main battery sixteen-inch gun turret number two.

On May 6, 1945, we were scheduled to take on gunpowder. It was a Sunday, I went to church, and in the morning we had refueling from a tanker. About one o'clock or so, we started to get our ammunition from the ammunition ship, USS Wrangell. My duty that day was to man the headphones down in the magazine room, about three decks below main deck. There were about ten of us shipmates down there. The first canister of powder came down, and I was to report topside if there was any problems. The powder kept coming down, and the sixth canister--I'm not quite sure which one--it exploded. A chain reaction set off four more containers of powder. The impact sailed me across the room and I hit the bulkhead on the other side and landed on top of the gravity hoist pedal mechanism. The lights went out. The only source of light we had was the burning powder on the deck, and there was also a lot of smoke. We ran back to the next magazine to escape the fire, and the lights were out in there also, and the powder was stacked to the overhead. It was completely stored with powder. And somebody closed the door. But then John Mellentensky (?) found and loosened the battery-powered battle lamp; that was our only source of light. We could see that Cornelee's (?) blue chambray work shirt was burned off his back, and his hair was badly singed. He died later, and he was buried at sea. Crewmen were running back and forth and shouting, and Nick Pitenero (?) said there were ten canisters that exploded. To this day I do not know the exact amount of canisters that made up the inventory, nor the exact amount that exploded.

I stood across from a guy by the name of Armstrong, with a powder container between us, and I was given a vision. I was standing behind my mother, and she had a paper in her hand that appeared to be some kind of letter. I couldn't make out the lettering at first, but then I could see it was a telegram. It was saying that I would not be coming home. I felt I might already be dead, and this was how it was supposed to be. I was in a trance. Then I heard John Mellentensky say, "The gravity hoist, the gravity hoist." It was a small mechanical elevator used to lower a single bag of powder down to the magazine below. It was about one and a half feet by two and a half feet in size. Some jumped down and some dove down through there. I think it was Ed Cheza (?) and Nick Pitenero who were trying to Cornelee, the guy who hadn't died yet. So we got down to the fourth deck, and that room was also stacked to capacity with powder. We went to this next magazine, and it also was stacked to capacity. And right above is where the fire was burning and the explosion occurred. There was a big, heavy door that led to the lower handling room. We undogged the door clamps--it was locked from the other side. This was customary while at sea. So we rattled the door, and it was still loose. Finally, Eriquo Cesarini (?), who had the turret watch that day, and the key--he came and unlocked the door. He asked what happened. We said turn on the manual sprinkler system. He wouldn't do it unless there was really a reason. We said give us the key and we'll do it. We were arguing back and forth. He said we looked like we were scared and in shock. Well, we were.

Thompson: He didn't want to unlock it because he didn't have a direct order to do so?

McNeill: That's right. If you flooded a magazine and disabled all that powder--so we convinced him, and he did it. I ran up a ladder to topside--I wasn't the last one up, either. He flooded the magazine. I went back to the aft of the ship, and half the crew was on the fantail ready to abandon ship. They had their life preservers on. The sun really looked good there.

Thompson: Why don't you read the title of your account so we have it on tape?

McNeill: It is entitled "The Untold Story of the Explosion on the Battleship South Dakota,

May 6, 1945." And my name is George T. McNeill, Gunner's Mate, Second Division. This was in the south part of the North China Sea. Okinawa is in that area; that's where we were. I first wrote the article with the help of Al Weir, my friend aboard ship, because we thought it needed doing, to make an account of the ship's history. This is all part of the ship's history that was never done before. By asking for information from all these different crew members, we had a vast supply of different perspectives to authenticate the story.

Thompson: When did you finally get it finished?

McNeill: February, 2000.

Thompson: You mentioned that vision you received right after the explosion. How did that affect your life afterward?

McNeill: I'm a firm believer in the Lord. I got into the Bible, a very strict study, so strict that the Lord's calling--I was baptized in the Jordan River in 1972. No, my calling was 1972, and I was baptized in the Jordan River in 1987. I said earlier I was a Baptist deacon, ordained.

Thompson: You were a Christian aboard the South Dakota; your faith meant a lot to you.

McNeill: In fact, I went to church that morning. It was Sunday, the day of the explosion.

Thompson: How did your faith give you a context in which to understand the fighting and the lives that were lost through errors like this?

McNeill: I took it all in, not really understanding why it was happening. I can see now it was an act of God that we didn't lose our ship. I think, too, the Lord has a purpose for our ship. She was the flagship. I think there were plenty of prayers said that day. I didn't say any at the time. I thought this was it.

Thompson: Any final words you'd like to say?

McNeill: I'd like to see all the crew saved. Our pastor says, when you go to heaven, take as many people with you as you can. We had a real good crew, because we had good skippers. Captain Momsen developed the Momsen lung, also the diving rescue bell. He saved a lot of people by using that. He was the commanding officer all the time I was aboard. Right after the explosion, we went into Guam for repairs.

Thompson: What did the fellows think? Regardless of what the official report might be, what did the fellows think put out the fire? Why didn't the ship explode? Why didn't that fire get to the other magazines?

McNeill: Nobody knew. Nobody said. But I think it was an act of God. Because there was more powder in there--she was about one third filled. I didn't mention, I don't think, that it was caused from static electricity. I should have said that. A metal container, aluminum, and three bags of powder contained in silk. Just a little bit of play back there, and that silk produces a spark. A communiqué that was received from the Navy Department said they had previous problems with this lot. It was SPD-6413. That's smokeless powder with diphenylamine. Diphenylamine is used to prolong the life of powder in storage, and 6413 is the lot. This was the high capacity powder. It was a little smaller than the armor-piercing. The high capacity shell weighed 1800 pounds, and the armor-piercing weighed 2700 pounds. They could shoot those about twenty-three miles.

Transcribed by:
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