

Charles Nebes

Signalman Second Class

Oral History

July 7, 2001

Herbert T. Hoover: This is an interview with Charles Nebes, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Herbert T. Hoover on July 7, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Would you say your name and where you currently live?

Charles Nebes: My name is Charles Nebes, and I currently live in Madsen, Illinois.

Hoover: How did you get into the United States Navy and onto USS South Dakota?

Nebes: I joined the Navy when I was sixteen years old. I was stationed on the George F. Elliott. That was a troop transport. Then they finally transferred me over to Key West, Florida, and I stood down there, and as soon as war was declared, I put in for new construction to get on the South Dakota. I left Key West and went to Philadelphia.

Hoover: So you were in the Navy at the time of Pearl Harbor?

Nebes: Oh, yes.

Hoover: And you put in to get on the South Dakota.

Nebes: Yes, I requested the South Dakota.

Hoover: Had you been on a warship before that?

Nebes: I was on a Navy troop transport.

Hoover: Tell us a little about that duty.

Nebes: It wasn't much, because we were just young boots at that time, and all we were doing was taking Marines and landing them and bringing them back aboard ship. But it was an experience by itself.

Hoover: Where did you board the South Dakota?

Nebes: In Philadelphia. I put her in commission.

Hoover: Tell me what you thought when you saw it the first time.

Nebes: I'd never seen anything that big. When I left Key West, I was a signalman striker. When I came aboard the South Dakota, I put in for signalman, and I got into the division. Everybody was just raw recruits. We did have a couple of old-timers on there, from the Asiatic Fleet, breaking us in the right way. The first ship stance(?) that we had there in Philadelphia, I helped put up the flags.

Hoover: Tell me about your duties and responsibilities.

Nebes: As a signalman, you read blinker light and semaphore, and communicated between ships.

Hoover: You pulled out of Philly, and then where did you head?

Nebes: We went down to the Chesapeake Bay. I don't know if they ever had it reported, but we actually ran aground in Chesapeake Bay. They were doing some dredge work, and the barge would go out and drop the mud and everything else. We dropped anchor in there one night, and the next morning went to pull out. I guess when they were bringing the anchors in, they were bringing the ship across this mudflat. The captain couldn't get there. He put it in reverse and couldn't get off, so he said, "Sally, shift the colors. Sally, shift to starboard." Finally, we got off of it. I don't think it was ever recorded that we went aground there.

We did go aground the night of--I think it was Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, where they had an old chart and we went across a coral reef and wrecked the bottom of the ship. [It was 6 September 1942 in the Tonga Islands.]

Hoover: After you left the Chesapeake, then where did you go? Through the canal?

Nebes: Eventually. We stayed in the Atlantic for awhile and went up the East Coast to Portland, Maine, and we were doing a shakedown cruise. Then finally we went through the Canal, and we went up to Espiritu Santo. We sat around there and then we went further on.

We started to form up with other ships, and we had the battle of Santa Cruz. That was quite a deal. Then after that, we had the battle of Savo Island. At Savo Island, we got all the hits in the superstructure. At that time I was a signalman second class, and we had bogies coming in, but nobody had the latest recognition signals, so they figured we'll run the biggest American flag we have up the yardarm. Pappy Yeager, he was a first class signalman, he says, "Chuck, you go up in the yardarm and run the halyard down." Hell, I was scared of heights to start off with, and I was supposed to go ninety feet above that deck. As I was going up there, Pappy Yeager was laying flat on the signal deck, and he was waving his hand, like I should go out farther on the yardarm. I thought, you're crazy. So finally I just pulled the halyard and I come down, and said, "What's wrong with you? All I did, when that ship was rolling, and I'd see the ocean and then I'd see the ship and I'd see the ocean." He says, "Nah, I wanted you to come down. We got bogies coming in. It had nothing to do with you going out to that yardarm." So that was one experience.

Hoover: What were you doing at the time of battle?

Nebes: I was on the signal bridge, on a night engagement. In fact, both engagements I was on the signal bridge. We had Admiral Lee with us. He was happy as a lark, because of those five-inch thirty-eight guns. He could stand and listen to them all day.

Hoover: What was your reaction to combat?

Nebes: It never bothered me. I never was scared; it just never entered my mind that we were so close to death. I never thought of it. The planes were coming in--we were just like we were in a movie theater, watching it.

Hoover: Was that true with the whole crew?

Nebes: I knew on the signal bridge it was. I don't think anybody realized what was happening. Even in the battle of Santa Cruz, and the battle of Savo Island, when we were going in, all we could smell that night was gardenias, off the islands.

Hoover: How long did those battles last?

Nebes: The battle of Santa Cruz, because there were different formations of planes coming in, I would say a couple of hours. The battle of Savo Island, that was fifteen minutes or so.

Hoover: What came after that?

Nebes: We got damaged, and we came back--I think we went into Espiritu Santo, and we had a memorial for our dead, and then we went back to the States. We went to New York to get repaired. After we were repaired, we joined the British fleet. We would escort convoys up to Russia. We would always stay between the convoys and the coast of Norway, and trying to get the von Tirpitz to come out. But she would never come out. You'd see a little observation plane that the Germans would send out every day. We'd always look at this poor machine gunner in the front of that plane; he was exposed to the weather in there. Finally, somebody show him down. We weren't shooting at them. We more or less looked forward to him coming out every day.

After we left Scapa Flow, we came back and went back to the Pacific. Actually, the South Dakota was built as the flagship of the Pacific Fleet. They took two five-inch mounts off that ship; the rest of the sister ships had five five-inch guns. We had four on a side. If you look at the Alabama, the Massachusetts, they have five five-inch mounts on each side. Where we had four. We had a door on the flag bridge for the admiral to go into, and that door was something like sixteen inches thick.

Hoover: Once you got into the Pacific, did you carry a flag all the time?

Nebes: We carried a flag, but not Nimitz's flag. We carried Halsey's flag, we carried Admiral Lee's flag, and we carried a few of the admirals. They were on and off. They didn't keep a flag on it completely. Lee would transfer his flag from the Washington to the South Dakota. If the Washington was going back somewhere, he would come aboard the South Dakota. But he would always go back to the Washington.

Hoover: What did the South Dakota do, mostly?

Nebes: We threw the first shell into Japan. The reason we got the first shot at Japan was because we were the flagship. When your sixteen-inch guns go off, you hear a beep and then another beep, and then the explosion with the guns. Well, they were going to execute the message to start the bombardment of Hyushu, so when we heard the second beep, we executed the colors, that's how we got the first shell into Japan.

Hoover: What was your reaction when you heard about the atomic bombs?

Nebes: Just before that, I don't know if it was the Indiana or the Massachusetts, we were supposed to leave the formation that evening, and then go into Tokyo Bay and start bombarding around the bay. And then we got this message to cease all operations and then go up to the Aleutians. When the war was over, and we were going in there for signing the peace treaty, they had a white flag for every bombardment gun that they had on that beach. They would have killed us.

Hoover: So if the bombs hadn't dropped, you never would have made it?

Nebes: I don't think so. I really don't think so.

Hoover: I'd like to hear your memory of Tokyo Bay. What did you think when you went in there?

Nebes: We didn't think nothing. They had what they called raiding parties. And what they would do was go over to the Japanese warehouses and take parachutes and guns and whatever they wanted, for souvenirs. Until somebody threw a sixteen-inch light, and all these rowboats and everything else, and that was the end of the trips. They couldn't figure out where all these guys were getting all these trophies.

Hoover: When you said there was a white flag for every gun installation, how many flags would you guess?

Nebes: Oh, I guess like--Mother Murphy putting out her laundry.

Hoover: Did you have a Japanese pilot when you went in?

Nebes: Oh, yes. At first, he was more scared than anything else. Because on the conning tower, they had all these planes that we shot down. Eventually, he--I think he was a lieutenant or lieutenant commander--and he took us in there.

Hoover: You were there from start to finish with the South Dakota. When you came out then, you had to sit there and let the Japanese surrender on the Missouri.

Nebes: That's right. We didn't think it should have been. We thought it would be us or the Enterprise.

Hoover: Then you came back with the South Dakota?

Nebes: I rode the South Dakota back to Pearl, and then from Pearl, I got on the Iowa, and I took the Iowa to Bremerton. And from Bremerton, they shipped us to Great Lakes and discharged us.

Hoover: Was the South Dakota very different from the Iowa?

Nebes: Oh, yeah. There was no regulations like there was on the Iowa. If you didn't have a white hat on, y'know. I actually think we only had one bad captain, and that was Captain McCormick. The rest of them, like Gatch and Smith and Momsen, I mean, they knew these guys weren't regular Navy. After the war, they want to go home.

Hoover: What about the bad captain?

Nebes: He was all Navy. We called him--it was Gunpowder Gatch versus Soappowder McCormick. One wanted to really go according to regulation, and the other one was just the opposite. When Captain McCormick left the ship, I think he had tears in his eyes, because no one wished him good luck or anything.

Hoover: How many men do you think you knew, personally, out of that 2500?

Nebes: You stuck to your own division, and guys from your hometown, something like that. I really don't know. I remember shooting dice on the George F. Elliott with this one guy, and when I got transferred to the South Dakota--it must have been a year later-- I bumped into him in a crap game. I said, "How long have you been on here?" He said, "I put it into commission."

Hoover: Is there any other memory you'd like to record?

Nebes: Did anyone tell you about the typhoon in the China Sea? When we went into the China Sea, and the typhoon hit--you know how big a carrier is, and when you see their flight deck go under water and coming up. We were breaking waves ninety feet. Those destroyers that night that dumped their ballast, they lost all their sailors, they turned over during the night.

Hoover: You must have felt vulnerable out there.

Nebes: We were. We were getting low on fuel, and there were no tankers coming through to fuel us, and we had to get back through the Formosa Straits to get back out there. We were actually caught in it for awhile. I've never seen Mother Nature that fierce. It was taking these ready boxes, that are welded to the deck, and just shearing them off.

Hoover: Where were the crewmembers?

Nebes: We were down below. Nobody was allowed topside. Halsey did a couple of boobos. And he got away with them. There was a couple of admirals that did a couple of boobos, too. Like when the Washington--I don't know if it was the Indiana and the Washington--collided. This was where we were zigzagging, and two ships were gonna leave the formation, and nobody stopped zigzagging. Here are these two ships trying to leave the formation and everybody is zigzagging. God, you could turn around and--we were making ice cream on the bridge. We didn't have a regular gedunk stand on there. You went down and you put your name in, and they gave you one of these coolers with dry ice, and then you made your ice cream. We were looking out there, and here are these destroyers. You could actually spit on them, and they're trying to get away from you.

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