

Stephen H. Putnam
Private First Class, USMC
Oral History
July 5, 2001

Deborah M. Lyon: This is an interview with Stephen H. Putnam. He is a crewmember of the battleship, USS South Dakota, and the interview is conducted by Deborah Lyon on July 5, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Sir, could you please give me your name and current address.
Stephen Putnam: My name is Stephen H. Putnam, and I live in South Hamilton, Mass.

Lyon: Could you explain the circumstances of your enlistment into the Marines?

Putnam: I enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor. Actually, I went into the South Postal Annex in Boston, and they didn't accept me that day. I wasn't accepted until Tuesday--the Monday after Pearl Harbor, and on Tuesday I was accepted. I spent eight weeks as Parris Island, South Carolina, and then I went to C School in Portsmouth, Virginia, for a month and a half.

Lyon: How old were you when you enlisted?

Putnam: Twenty-one.

Lyon: Why did you select the Marines?

Putnam: I wanted to join the Navy. But the Navy line was too long, and the Marine line was short, so I stopped at the Marine line. Then they told me I had to go to a Navy doctor for my physical, and I wound up at the end of the Navy line that was too long to join. That's why I'm a Marine.

Lyon: What was your rating and specialty?

Putnam: Every Marine is a special person in that their specialty is slogging through the mud. Or something similar. My rating was private first class.

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

Putnam: I really don't know, except that I was in a special platoon at boot camp, and most of the people in my platoon either went to drill instructor school or they wound up at C School.

Lyon: Where did you board USS South Dakota?

Putnam: We were assigned to USS South Dakota about a month prior to commissioning. We stayed in a second-floor warehouse in Gloucester, New Jersey, until the commissioning date.

Lyon: So what would you say would be the nature of your service while you were onboard? What assignments did you hold?

Putnam: My assignment for the first part of my tour was in the five-inch gun mounts. Aiming the guns. After maybe two years, we shifted from the five-inch gun mounts to the twenty-millimeter guns. After four months of twenty millimeters, I left the South Dakota at Bremerton, Washington.

Lyon: What hazardous actions did you experience?

Putnam: During my time on the five-inch gun mounts, we fought the Battle of Santa Cruz and the Battle of Savo Island. We had eight battle stars awarded for the time I was aboard ship. Those were the two most hazardous.

Lyon: How did you handle your fear of dying or being injured?

Putnam: At twenty-one years old, I was gonna live forever. All the other fellows, it was possible that they would die, but I wasn't gonna. And didn't. Luckily.

Lyon: What are your recollections about your place in the ship's company? And were you able to move about the ship, or were you restricted to a small area on a day-to-day basis?

Putnam: I moved about the ship. In port, I served as a radio communications orderly. I also served on brig watch and regular gangplank watches.

Lyon: Did you stay in the same group?

Putnam: There was some movement between sections, but mostly we were in a section which stayed together a good part of the time, and we worked mostly in that section. The ship was divided into three sections, so there would be somebody on duty twenty-four hours a day. At general quarters, of course, everybody was on duty, and in really dangerous waters we would be divided into two sections. So we were on duty twelve hours a day.

Lyon: What are some of your memories or reactions toward shipboard discipline?

Putnam: While we were in Scapa Flow, Scotland, I was called up in front of the commander, but no discipline was assigned, for emptying spit kits in the direction of the British Navy as they were floating by.

One of the humorous parts of the discipline, my friend, Dan Ackerman, tells about being on brig watch. At the time we were pretty well segregated. The only Negroes aboard served in the officers' mess, and one night they must have had a party, because there were a number of them in the brig. He tells about letting them loose to have showers, and he didn't know who he had let loose in amongst the others. He says he got six back; he never knew whether they were the correct ones or not.

Of course, there was a lot of yelling at the Marines, by Marine NCOs, but there was very little discipline, as such, awarded. I believe two buglers went over the hill in Pearl Harbor the first time we were there, and we had two new buglers assigned to the ship.

Lyon: What's your memory of courageous actions while serving on the South Dakota?

Putnam: At Savo Island, we had the only Marine death that I know about. The report I got later was this was a fellow who was in an exposed position, but he could have ducked below the bulkhead. But he didn't, and he got hit by shrapnel, which was a big waste, really. Other than that, there was no real active heroism that I was a party to.

Lyon: What's your reaction to being at sea? Problems with seasickness, boredom, concern about the weather?

Putnam: The North Atlantic was the most difficult weather that I ever saw. One night we couldn't see anything. The officers that were steering the ship couldn't see anything, either. Two of us was taken from the forty-millimeter guns, where we were standing watch, and went up to the bow to try to spot other ships in our group, before we rammed into them. I think that was the most dangerous spot I was in.

Lyon: But you didn't have any problems with seasickness?

Putnam: Seasickness, no. It was a battleship. The nearest I came to being seasick was on the trial runs that they held. The air conditioning didn't work, and for some reason we were below decks. As soon as I got in the fresh air, I had no problem.

Lyon: What about your concerns about Japanese submarines and your reactions to the bombing attacks?

Putnam: I was probably too stupid to be afraid. There was some doubts when we were at general quarters--what's going to happen?--but really I wasn't--I had no fear.

Lyon: Were you on the South Dakota your entire tour of duty?

Putnam: No. I left the ship at Bremerton, Washington, in June or July of '44. I went from there to San Diego, and from San Diego I had thirty days to report to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. I came home and got married and went to Camp Lejeune, and from there to Camp Pendleton. My wife was with me part of the Camp Lejeune experience and all of the Camp

Pendleton time. From Camp Pendleton I went to Guam, and the day the first atom bomb was dropped was the day I was assigned to the Third Marine Division. By this time I'm afraid. There was nobody around when we reported. There were about twenty of us. We finally found the first sergeant, who told us they were practicing for the landing on Japan. So I have always been glad that we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Lyon: When did you leave the Marines?

Putnam: December 10, 1945. I was discharged at Bainbridge, Maryland.

Transcribed by:
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