

Dwight A. Smith

Seaman First Class (Fire Control Technician)

Oral History

December 14, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: My name is Art Huseboe. I'm the director of the program. We have four of us professors who are making these calls. Some of the fellows said they hadn't even been able to talk about these things until just recently.

Dwight Smith: I'm not in that shape, because some of the worst things that happened to the ship, I wasn't aboard.

Huseboe: I have your address. You're in Kearsarge, New Hampshire. Your rank or rating?

Smith: I was seaman first class, and a fire control striker.

Huseboe: And the dates you served?

Smith: Roughly July 1943 till about April of 1944.

Huseboe: Date of birth?

Smith: One - sixteen - twenty-five.

Huseboe: Place of birth?

Smith: Baltimore, Maryland.

Huseboe: Is that where you grew up, Baltimore?

Smith: No. Brooklyn, New York. And moved to Groton, Vermont.

Huseboe: You completed high school in Vermont?

Smith: I went to boarding school in Massachusetts. Class of '41.

Huseboe: Did you go in after the service to do some higher education?

Smith: I did two years before I went in the service. Two years of a two-year college. While I was on the ship, I applied for the Navy V-12 college program, and that's why my voyage was cut short. I went back to the States and went on to college.

Huseboe: Where did you finish then?

Smith: Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

Huseboe: Did you work at something before you went in the service?

Smith: No, I was in this two-year college. I graduated in May of '43, and I got drafted in May of '43. The day I was drafted, there were vacancies in all four branches of the service, so I was given an option. The Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard all had openings, so the day we were drafted, you could have said which one you wanted to go into. Maybe that didn't occur very often, but fortunately, in my case, it did occur.

Huseboe: I keep running into new ones like that. One of the fellows worked with computers on USS South Dakota. He said it was the first computer that had ever been put to use, and they put it on board the South Dakota.

Smith: I worked in the plotting room, which is where the computers were.

Huseboe: They must have been pretty good-sized in those days.

Smith: They were. All vacuum tubes, so it got rather warm in the plotting room. I cranked data into it manually. Because of the heat generated--there were two places on the South Dakota that were air-conditioned--one was the sick bay and the other was the plotting room.

Huseboe: How old were you?

Smith: Eighteen.

Huseboe: Where were you trained for sea duty?

Smith: I went to boot camp at Samson Naval Training Center in the Finger Lakes District of New York state.

Huseboe: What's the nearest big town there?

Smith: Syracuse. And Rochester. Our liberty town was Geneva, New York.

Huseboe: What was your specialty?

Smith: I was in the fire control division. When I went aboard ship, as a green boot, they asked for volunteers who had high school math. I raised my hand, and I got the fire control division. I'd been in the Navy for a total of six weeks when I went aboard the South Dakota.

Huseboe: How did it happen that you were assigned to USS South Dakota?

Smith: I finished my boot camp, and they sent me home for ten days leave, and when I went back, they put me on a train down to Cape Charles, Virginia, and then we went on a steamboat over to Norfolk. The ship was in dry dock in Norfolk at the time. July of 1943. We didn't stay there long, and headed out through the Panama Canal.

Huseboe: You must have been in a couple of pretty good-sized battles then.

Smith: I had four stars on my Pacific ribbon, I know that. Four engagements that rated battle stars. The Marshalls, the Gilberts, I forget what else. I know we visited New Caledonia.

Huseboe: What was the most danger you were in during the time you were on board?

Smith: I wasn't physically aware of danger. I was keeping the plotting room going. That was my battle station. I could hear all the sixteen-inch batteries being fired, and could hear over the earphones about the Japanese aircraft and so forth, but I didn't see any of that. I felt secure with sixteen inches of armor plate on both sides. My watch station was up topside, and I enjoyed that--to be able to see the armada we were in, and watch the airplanes land and take off the carriers, the destroyers bobbing around. It was fascinating.

Huseboe: What about your recollections about the way in which your group of men worked? Did you stay pretty much in one place?

Smith: The fire control division was quite closely knit. What I found fascinating when first aboard was going through the Panama Canal. That was an experience, and I was off duty when we did it. So I was topside, enjoying watching the procedures.

Huseboe: How about seasickness?

Smith: Only when we were in dry dock in Norfolk. Seriously, I got sick, but I think it was more sun than anything.

Huseboe: What about storms at sea?

Smith: We had some, but we rode them out--we watched those poor destroyers. We were just so big. There was a lot of rolling.

Huseboe: What about shipboard discipline?

Smith: It was quite strict. I think we were under stricter supervision than people were on the smaller ships. With an admiral on board. Many a night, many of us slept topside. We took a mattress up, and put it down on the deck. It was quite common. Like I said, the fire control plotting room was air-conditioned, and a few of us could squeeze in on the floor there.

Huseboe: Did you have hammocks?

Smith: We didn't use them. We had to carry one with us. We were issued them.

Transcribed by:
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