

Charles H. Taillie

Ship Fitter Third Class Petty Officer

Oral History

July 6, 2001

Deborah M. Lyon: With Charles Taillie, a crewmember of the battleship, USS South Dakota. It's being conducted by Deborah Lyon on July 6, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Sir, could you please give your name and where you're currently living.

Charles Taillie: My name is Charles H. Taillie [Tay' lee] and I live in Avalon, New Jersey.

Lyon: Could you please explain the circumstances of your enlistment in the Navy?

Taillie: I first enlisted in the Navy in 1937. A good buddy of mine had graduated from high school, and he was going to enlist. I wanted to enlist but my mother and father wanted me to finish high school. They gave their consent for me to enlist, but they didn't think I would pass the physical examination, being six foot and maybe a hundred twenty-eight pounds wringing wet. And the fact I was missing a couple of teeth, they were sure I wouldn't pass the physical. Anyhow, I passed the physical, and in October when Uncle Sam sent the letter for me to report to be sworn in, my mother and father allowed me to go.

Lyon: Why did you select the Navy?

Taillie: My father was a former Navy man. He was in during World War One. And I was attracted by the tattoos he had. Consequently, when my mother and father said "please don't get tattoos," as soon as I got out of detention, the first thing I got on my first liberty was a tattoo.

Lyon: What was the place of your original training for sea duty?

Taillie: My very first time in the Navy, for training, was Norfolk Training Station in Norfolk, Virginia.

Lyon: What was your rating and your specialty when you were on the South Dakota?

Taillie: When I went on the South Dakota as a crewmember, I was a ship fitter third class. A ship fitter in my day did minor repairs to the interior of the ship, alteration work, and maybe minor battle damage. Since I got out of the service, my rating is no longer in existence. It is now called a hull repairman.

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

Taillie: I worked on the South Dakota from May of 1941 to February of 1942. I had gotten out of the Navy in April of 1941. My enlistment was up. I was living in Collingswood, New Jersey, which was very close to New York Shipbuilding in Camden. Needing a job, I applied and was hired to work in the shipyard, and I was assigned to the South Dakota. Consequently, when the war broke out, I had to go back to the draft board, and the draft board said, if you want to reenlist in the Navy, you must go to the Navy recruiting station. If they want you, they will reenlist you, and they will let us know to take you off the draft. So while I signed up, I requested duty on the South Dakota, which I was granted.

Lyon: Were you part of the commissioning crew then?

Taillie: I was what we now call a plankowner. But also one thing--there's been several members that worked in the shipyard and later enlisted, and were on the South Dakota, but I'm the only one that truly worked in the shipyard and put the ship in commission as an enlisted man. I reenlisted in Philadelphia, and I was supposed to go to Camden for what they

call precommissioning detail. But they goofed and I didn't get to go aboard the South Dakota until she'd been towed over to the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

Lyon: What type of work did you do onboard during your active service?

Taillie: In my division, the C and R Division, as I mentioned, we did minor repair, anything from doors not closing, not locking, some officer's toilet closing down, that's the kind of work we did. When we weren't in battle, we did general repairs throughout the ship, to maintain efficiency.

Lyon: What assigned positions did you have during general quarters and during battle?

Taillie: During battle, I had a battle station that was all the way in the bottom of the ship. It was called After Diesel Engine Room. My duty was if we got torpedoed or had hull damage, I was supposed to be able to transfer water from one part of the ship to the other to make sure the ship rode on an even keel. Say we were torpedoed during the battle and the ship began to list, our main batteries, the sixteen-inch guns, were unable to be able to be fired. It was part of my job to keep the ship on even keel so the guns could operate. That was my general quarters station and my battle station.

Lyon: What was the most hazardous action you experienced?

Taillie: I really can't say I had anything too hazardous. I got scared once or twice. When I was on my battle station when we ran across the coral reef at Tongatabu, being so long in the ship, the deck plate bent as we ran across this coral reef. Other than the rumble of the cutting through the coral reef, it was hard to distinguish, did we get torpedoed, were we bombed, we didn't know what the heck happened. All I know is I was sort of scared, for the action of the deck plates bouncing around.

Then there was another time, during the air battle. Being in the after diesel engine room--the after diesel engine provided electric power to portions of the ship when we lost our regular electrical power. The diesel engines would kick in and provide power. For the diesel engines to run, they had to have air, and there was a big air tube that came from topside, all the way down to the after diesel engine room. During the Santa Cruz air battle, we could hear the guns firing, but oh my gosh the guns' smoke was coming down, and it's not that we were choking to death, but it was sure a little upsetting to be smelling smoke and hearing the guns going off and not knowing what was happening. That was a very interesting moment in my career.

One other time, sort of a heartbreak, was after the night battle, later during the day when we were picking up the dead and trying to identify them, and put them on the fantail--what we call the stern of the ship. I had to help a couple of fellows who were carrying a stretcher with somebody who looked like he was asleep. But I had to help get him over the rail and down a set of ladders. Since I had part of the stretcher, I held on to it until we got back to the fantail. The thing that hurt me the most was when we lifted this young man out, his whole back part stayed in the stretcher. That's where he had been wounded and killed, whatever had killed him. But what a disappointing thing to have to see.

Lyon: How did you manage the fear of death and injury?

Taillie: I just had a feeling nothing would ever happen to me. I was one of the guys that would be there but nothing would happen, and it turned out nothing did.

Lyon: What are some of your recollections about your place in the ship's company? And were you able to move about the ship or were you fairly restricted to a certain area?

Taillie: In my capacity as a ship fitter, I would go into almost any place on the ship for repair or just general fixing. I never had to go down into the engine room, the boiler rooms, the fire

rooms, because the men in those particular spaces could take care of themselves in repairs. Anything above the engine room level, up on topside or on the main deck, it was my job to travel anyplace I could. Unless, if we were in battle stations, no. Whenever they called general quarters, battle stations, you didn't go anyplace. Unless you happened to be in a repair crew. If a bomb hit, or shell hit, and there was damage, then the repair crew could travel. But the rest of us stayed right on our battle station until we were secured from general quarters. Then we went about our duties.

Lyon: What was your reaction to shipboard discipline?

Taillie: Having gone in the Navy at an early age, I didn't question what they told me to do or how to do it. I just did it to the best of my ability. I know there were a lot of fellows in the peacetime Navy who resented discipline. But they paid the price, in that they got broken in rating or they got time in the brig, or if they did it more than two or three times, they got a dishonorable discharge. But with me, my mother and father raised me--not real strict, but at least I knew discipline. I'll have to say I had two years in the Boy Scouts, so a little bit of the Boy Scouts rubbed off on me.

Lyon: What are your recollections of the bravest actions by your fellow crewmembers?

Taillie: I don't think I was really close to anything heroic or anything out of the ordinary. But as a whole, I think almost every member of the South Dakota, because we were in the Santa Cruz air battle, I think we all performed outstanding, in our jobs. What we had to do, we did.

Lyon: What were your reactions to the sea? Seasickness? How did you handle boredom?

Taillie: In 1938 when I went on my first ship, we left Norfolk and arrived in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, five days later, and I got seasick on the first day, and I don't think I got up off the deck until five days later. From there on out, whenever we came into port, even on the South Dakota, and the last ship I was on, the Munda, it would take me three days to get my legs straightened out, and not wobbling around walking, but then when we went back to sea, it took me at least two days to get acclimated to not being seasick. Not throwing up seasick, but mentally. Not feeling well for at least two days. But after that first one on the Omaha, I never got really incapacitated with seasickness.

Lyon: Was the Omaha your first ship?

Taillie: That was my first ship. My second ship was USS Tuscaloosa.

Lyon: How did you deal with the stress of submarine warfare and bombing attacks?

Taillie: It's hard to say. Being on the South Dakota, all we could think about was what we were doing. Whatever other ships were doing--I mean, the heartbreak would be, naturally, the ships we were losing, they didn't tell us like it happened yesterday and they told us tomorrow; we didn't hear about some of the ships' losses or damages for maybe a month. The Navy didn't publicize it, even though we were in the same Navy. They kept it a secret. But I'll have to say each branch of the Navy did outstanding--the best they could.

Lyon: What was your last battle? Were you involved in Luzon?

Taillie: No, no, no. The last ship I was on, the escort carrier, USS Munda (?), our main duty was to supply the fleet carriers with replacement pilots and planes. Though we operated with the Third and Fifth Fleet, we never went south to the Philippines. We never got down to that part of the war. So all we did, we were independently a supply ship.

Lyon: Is there anything else you want to add?

Taillie: There was one little anecdote on the Tuscaloosa. This was back in 1940. We had given the British navy fifty old destroyers for islands down in the South Atlantic, and Roosevelt wanted to go fishing. That's my interpretation, but anyway he wanted to see these

islands we had acquired. And on the way down to Martinique, if you can picture a ten-thousand ton ship, U.S. Navy cruiser, with the President sitting on the stern of the ship in his wheelchair with a fishing rod. And when he thought he had a strike, the phone talkers talked to the bridge, and they actually stopped the ship while he tried to find out if he had a fish on his line. Now that's pretty good fishing, for the President of the United States, that he could control a 10,000-ton cruiser while he was fishing.

And then the other anecdote was while he was still on the Tuscaloosa, I was in part of the deck force. We put the motor launch and the motor whaleboat over the side while we were in port. Roosevelt, a couple of times while we were in one of these islands, to inspect them, would get in our motor whaleboat and go fishing. The FBI man, or whoever it was, his aide, was in the motor launch. President Roosevelt happened to come back early one afternoon, and the officer of the deck and whoever else was responsible didn't know he had come alongside. We in the boat crew raised the boat up to deck level, and because the aides weren't there, another fellow and I had to step into the whaleboat and actually pick him up and put him in his wheelchair. That was quite an occasion. All he said was, "Thanks, men," but all I know is the officer of the deck--I don't know what happened to him, but he got his ears burned, for not being there when he came back.

Then being on the South Dakota, when I worked in the shipyard, being an ex-sailor with a lot of liberty, and liking my beer or my scotch, there'd be times when I was working like three in the afternoon till eleven o'clock at night, and I'd be a little hung over, and there were places on the South Dakota that was nice and dark and cozy, and nobody would know I was in there sleeping. So I used to sleep sometime because I was hung over. End of story.

Lyon: I had another question about when you were on the South Dakota. When you were not standing watch, and you weren't in battle stations or anything, and you were awake, what did you do? Did you play cards? Did you hang out on the fantail and get a suntan?

Taillie: No, no, we couldn't suntan in the war days. Unless we were in a harbor, maybe they would let us go sunbathing. Most of the time, in the evening it could be movie watching, or playing acey deucey, or cribbage, something like that. or just plain old b-s-ing. There wasn't much you could do aboard ship during the war--except be there.

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