

Frederick T. Warner

Lieutenant Commander (Engineering Officer)

Oral History (Telephone interview)

December 14, 2001

Frederick Warner: I was assigned to the South Dakota, but it was under construction. It was at the shipyard. We went into quick commission and moved to the Navy Yard. I stayed there all the way through the war, with Halsey into San Francisco, and down to San Pedro, Los Angeles, and I was discharged there. So I was on the ship for four years. She went from San Pedro, around through the Canal, to the Philadelphia Navy Yard, where she was cut up.

Arthur Huseboe: What was your rate?

Warner: I started as an ensign and then progressed through--I had a spot promotion in January '44 to lieutenant commander, and ended up as lieutenant commander. [I was] the First Lieutenant and damage control officer. I started in Engineering. My first assignment was, I was engineering officer in charge of the first two engine rooms. They had boilers and turbines in each engine room together, so I had the inside and the outside shafts.

Huseboe: A couple questions about you first. You were born when?

Warner: 1917. 9-30-17.

Huseboe: Place of birth?

Warner: Hackensack, New Jersey.

Huseboe: Did you grow up there?

Warner: I grew up around and about. My father was in Texas at the end of World War One, and moved back to New Jersey. I went to high school in Englewood, New Jersey.

Huseboe: Did you go to college?

Warner: Yes, sir, I went to Princeton. I was in the class of 1937. Bachelor of Arts degree.

Huseboe: In what field?

Warner: Economics. That's why the Navy put me in engineering.

Huseboe: Did you work before you went in the Navy?

Warner: Just temporary. Sailing instructor at a yacht club in Maine. When I finished college, I went to work for a bank in New York City.

Huseboe: How did you get into the service?

Warner: The draft act had passed, and I was free, white, and unencumbered, so I decided--I tried to get into the Air Force but they wouldn't take me because of my eyes. Then I volunteered in the Navy and went into the V-7 program.

Huseboe: Where did you go for your training?

Warner: It was called USS Illinois. In New York City.

Huseboe: You started out as an ensign. Did you have a specialty?

Warner: When I first went in, I was an apprentice seaman. The V-7 program was a ninety-day-wonder program. I was a midshipman for ninety days, and I passed, so I was an ensign.

Huseboe: Did you go to a specialized school after you got your ensign bars?

Warner: No, instead of being assigned to some sea duty or something, they called me back--because I hadn't been an engineer, they wanted me to instruct the engineers. I'm joking, you know. I did two schools of midshipman training, and then applied for sea duty and was assigned to the South Dakota.

Huseboe: And you boarded USS South Dakota where?

Warner: At the New York Shipyard in Camden, New Jersey.

Huseboe: So you were one of the guys who got on at the very beginning. I suppose the most hazardous action would have been Santa Cruz or the battle of Savo, huh? Or both.

Warner: Both. I was in Engine Room Number Two for both of those.

Huseboe: What was your specific assignment there?

Warner: I was in charge of Engine Rooms One and Two. The engine rooms and battle stations were [?] so they all were separate.

Huseboe: Your battle station was the engine room, right?

Warner: Yes.

Huseboe: Were the engines interfered with at the battle of Savo by the bombardment?

Warner: They were at Savo. We were hit all over, and things got in bad shape, and we lost the four destroyers ahead of us and the ship behind us. So the captain on the bridge, who was injured, rang up--I've forgotten what was the number of turns, but it was more than we were supposed to make--so the word came to make the maximum speed you could make. My two engines, being on the outside, were expected to do their best, and they did. We averaged a little over thirty knots for eight hours and got away from the Japanese.

Huseboe: Were there four engines on board?

Warner: There were four engine rooms. Each one had two boilers and one main turbine. Each engine room had one shaft. Mine ran shaft one and shaft two.

Huseboe: Down there I don't suppose you had time to get scared. You were too busy.

Warner: Oh, god, we sure did. At the Santa Cruz, I remember being down there, and a very good friend of mine was Sargent Shriver. He was in the gunnery division, and had a forty millimeter or twenty millimeter, I've forgot which, but it was shot up. He didn't have a damn thing to do, and all of a sudden I saw him coming down into Engine Room Number Two, and I asked him what the hell he was doing there, and he just wanted to see how the other half lived. At that moment, word came over the loudspeaker to stand by for torpedo attack on the port side, and we were on the port side. I went over and patted the side and said, "Stand up, boys, stand up." I got him a chair and he sat over there out of the way while things went on.

The Japanese at Savo came around the port side of the island and fired at the four destroyers ahead of us. They were all hit. We came along after them, and they didn't have any torpedoes left for us, so they just had [?] guns and were firing high in our superstructure, and they were just whittling the hell out of us. After the thing was over, I went on deck--this was the next day--and in the waterway on the starboard side of the ship, you could notice a dish in the waterway, and I measured it. It was exactly fourteen inches. A Japanese shell came through there and shot across. Those were the fourteen-inch shells the Atago was firing. They slipped under and hit turret three. Nothing happened except the shell exploded and raised hell with the roller pan, so the accuracy of turret three after that was no good.

Huseboe: Concerning shipboard discipline, I understand Captain Gatch was not the greatest disciplinarian, but that he really emphasized accuracy in firing the guns.

Warner: Yeah, he was a great guy. He had the entire crew behind him. Absolutely a great guy.

Huseboe: I understand he won the Navy Cross.

Warner: After Savo. We'd taken a bomb hit on the top of turret two. He got hit and a corpsman saved him. Then the exec took command of the ship. While we were way down in the South Pacific, we were down in the harbor there, and he was called over to the admiral's ship, and he came back. The entire crew, for some reason or another, was out on deck working. They announced "South Dakota, South Dakota [arriving]". Very movingly, he came

up on deck and showed the Navy Cross, and said, "They gave this to me, but they meant it to you."

Huseboe: You didn't have time to be bored, but were you seasick?

Warner: Nope. Never. Before Santa Cruz, we'd shaken down in the Atlantic, we'd come through the Panama Canal and stopped at Tongatabu Island. We took off from Tongatabu Island, and we were headed for Guadalcanal and places down there, and we hit--drawing twenty-five feet, we hit coral heads at seventeen feet, and stripped the hell out of the bottom. We went up to Pearl and got fixed there, and then came down from Pearl, and we were at Santa Cruz.

Transcribed by:
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