

Wilbert Wieland

Oral History

July 7, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with Wilbert A. Wieland, Willie Wieland, a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, conducted by Arthur Huseboe--

Willie Wieland: Honorary crewmember.

Huseboe: An honorary crewmember, okay. How come honorary?

Wieland: I was on a destroyer. They said if it wasn't for those destroyermen, we wouldn't be here.

Huseboe: You told me that, too, and I should have written that down. What was the destroyer's name?

Wieland: USS Chauncey. DD-667.

Huseboe: So, an honorary crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, who served on the destroyer USS Chauncey. And often you were with the battleship USS South Dakota.

Wieland: Often, we were. We took fuel. They held many gallons, and we only held 75,000.

Huseboe: You were lucky you survived, because some of those destroyers that were along in that bad storm--

Wieland: Oh, yes, we were in one hundred ten miles an hour.

Huseboe: I'm going to finish my preliminary stuff here, and then we'll get going on the interview. Conducted by Arthur R. Huseboe on July 7, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship USS South Dakota.

Wieland: My name is Wilbert E. Wieland. Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Huseboe: What was your age at the time of your enlistment?

Wieland: At the time I was seventeen.

Huseboe: And when you actually signed your papers, you were eighteen?

Wieland: I was eighteen then. A week and a half afterwards.

Huseboe: How come you enlisted?

Wieland: I enlisted because I got my draft card for the Army, and no way was I going into the Army. I'd watched enough shows to see the news, in late '39, to realize that I don't want to crawl under fences, in mud knee deep, water in creeks and whatever. So I decided--I went over to the Naval Reserve and they said we'll fix you up. And they did.

Huseboe: So you were trained where?

Wieland: In San Diego.

Huseboe: How long was your training?

Wieland: That was eight weeks.

Huseboe: What specialty did you have when you came out of your training?

Wieland: Just seaman second. I didn't go to any schools.

Huseboe: How was it that you were assigned to the destroyer?

Wieland: It's like the sergeant said. You, you, and you. We were all in a lineup, and when it came down to the letter T, they said everybody after the letter T go with us over here. So we went on trucks, went out to the docks, and there was the USS Chauncey sitting there. That was our assignment. The ones before that went on a troop ship.

Huseboe: What was your impression on coming onboard a destroyer? It looked pretty big to you, didn't it?

Wieland: I thought so. It was really something to see. I could feel the sensation of seasickness already beginning. Boy, did I have a trip.

Huseboe: Did you get over your seasickness?

Wieland: I finally got over it in Rabaul, when the first twenty Japanese dive bombers started peeling off to the carrier Essex. I never felt any sensation of seasickness after that.

Huseboe: It's not a recommended remedy.

Wieland: I just wouldn't know how I could get over it, except when we came back to Pearl Harbor from the Wake Island event. It didn't feel any different to be on land then. You're just over it that quick, but it reinstated once we got back out to sea.

Huseboe: Now at Wake Island, was that just an attack from sea, or did we send troops on shore?

Wieland: No, no troops at that time.

Huseboe: Just a bombardment. Then back to Rabaul, you said that's where you got over your seasickness. Was the Essex sunk at that battle?

Wieland: No. No. We operated with the Essex, Bunker Hill, and the Independence, which was a converted.

Huseboe: They called them, not a jump carrier, but they called them something like that.

Wieland: CVE. Escort carrier. That's where the Independence got hit, from the rear. Kind of damaged the back part of it. Didn't put it out of commission too bad.

Huseboe: Rabaul was the big Japanese naval air base.

Wieland: Yes, it was. That was the center base for any activity around the area.

Huseboe: How did you hook up with USS South Dakota?

Wieland: The fleets changed from time to time, from the Third Fleet to the Fifth Fleet, and the Thirty-eighth and the Fifty-eighth. So when the admirals changed commands, then they changed the numbers. So we were assigned to the South Dakota for awhile, for escort.

Huseboe: When you were escorting USS South Dakota, it was bombarding some of the islands in preparation for landings?

Wieland: Yeah, I think it was later, in Okinawa. I can't remember if South Dakota was with us when we bombarded Honshu, in Northern Japan.

Huseboe: Your destroyer was part of the bombardment of Honshu? What was the largest guns you had on the destroyer?

Wieland: Five inch. They were our main batteries. But when battleships bombarded--they called it the Pittsburgh of Japan, where they had the steel industry--they were shooting the shells over, and we were underneath their arc, waiting for their small vessels to escape, which they did, and we would finish them off. Sink them.

Huseboe: You were on board then when you heard the news of the atomic bomb.

Wieland: Oh, yes, I was still aboard out there. After that, I was assigned to the Seventh Fleet and we got sent to the South China Sea.

Huseboe: What was the mood onboard the ship when you heard about Hiroshima?

Wieland: Oh, everybody just shouted. They couldn't wait to tell somebody.

Huseboe: And then they wondered why it took so long for Japan to surrender.

Wieland: Actually, we didn't know about that political part there, no. We didn't find that out on the destroyers. The big ships always found those things out, because of the

communications systems. They didn't care if the destroyers knew that or not. We found out later.

Huseboe: The most dangerous action you were involved in, what would that have been?

Wieland: Tarawa. When I say Rabaul, that was part of the Tarawa landing. Pretty scary there. I was in the five-inch gun mount handling room. So we had these set projectiles that would go off at a certain altitude, and one of those got lodged in the elevator, and bent the top, so they handed it to me, and I had to run out--but first I had to go through a watertight hatch, and carry that thing that weighed fifty-seven pounds. And then I had to go and open the hatch deck--it had a wheel on it--and climb out of there. And then I had to close that up, so that when I opened the main door hatch on the outside--the light turns red then--so no enemy can see white lights. So then, I threw that over one hand.

Huseboe: It didn't explode, though.

Wieland: No. I don't think so. Not when it hit. It just went down and cooled off.

Huseboe: You were under attack by Japanese planes at that time?

Wieland: Well, not so much. They didn't come out until at night. They harassed us then at night so we'd stay awake and wouldn't get any sleep. But that actual battle attack--we really weren't in any except when we were on picket patrol. That was our action. It wasn't with the task force or task group. Because we were--

Huseboe: Many miles away.

Wieland: We were twenty-five miles out, patrolling the area--

Huseboe: For submarines and Japanese planes.

Wieland: Planes and all that, to detect them first. If the Japanese wanted to get us out of the way, they would attack. One of the destroyers got hit three times in the same day.

Huseboe: By a plane?

Wieland: Yeah. By a Japanese suicide plane. And it survived.

Huseboe: So you weren't in any combat where Japanese planes were actually attacking your destroyer?

Wieland: Well, we were, too. I can't remember where, exactly, but we were in the task group. The task forces are split into, like, four task groups. Our group was attacked one day, and there was nothing but action. You couldn't tell what was going on. It was just tremendous, and our planes were chasing theirs.

Huseboe: Were your antiaircraft guns firing?

Wieland: Yeah. I was on a forty millimeter, at that time, and later on transferred to a twenty millimeter on the fantail. We tried to shoot down a kamikaze plane that was approaching the USS Kidd, another destroyer, and it hit it right in the waterline. That plane wouldn't explode; we dumped a magazine and a half into it. We were the only ones that could fire. We were the very last gun on the fantail. It still crashed into the destroyer.

Huseboe: Bad damage to the destroyer?

Wieland: Yeah, it went in on the starboard side and fell out on the port side--the engine. That's where also the bomb exploded. Because the Japanese had armor-piercing bombs. Of course, the second deck caught the explosion. The first one usually doesn't. That's why carriers were damaged so badly because they'd go through the first deck, second deck, and the third one, before they'd blow up. That was the magazine area and the fuel bunkers down there.

Huseboe: What happened to that destroyer then?

Wieland: It's down in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, today as a museum. They fixed it up, but it didn't get back in war action. This was June 16, 1945, when that got hit. That was the worst

part of the war. The kamikazes were out there, just everywhere. The Japanese thought one time they'd send out a lot of planes. So they sent fifty or sixty out, and boy we had bogeys on the screen. Pretty soon we'd hear them coming in closer and closer, and finally the bogeys were gone. Our C-A-P shot them all down before they got to the carriers.

Huseboe: I suppose they were F-6Fs. Hellcats?

Wieland: At that time, they were. Hellcats and F-4Us.

Huseboe: Did you have to--you were out doing depth charges against Japanese submarines?

Wieland: Yeah, we dropped some of those. We never saw whether we had results. Sometimes it's very obvious when you hit a submarine, and sometimes it isn't. You can wait it out if they are hit. But we don't know if we hit any.

Huseboe: Did you have to maneuver actively several times because there were planes in the area?

Wieland: Very rapid maneuvers. The entire task group would be zigzagging around, and the destroyers would be moving about and taking various positions to make sure they were being covered, because sometimes submarines would show up during those attacks.

Huseboe: Did you see any submarine action--torpedoes aiming toward American ships you were near?

Wieland: We dodged them. We did have an air action there. That's when there were twenty dive bombers. I kind of lost my track about that. We shot down those twenty that came in--those torpedo bombers. We saw this wake coming toward our ship, and of course we maneuvered around it. A lot of times, you can tell by the direction of the plane because you knew a fish was coming down, so you just automatically made the maneuver, just in case the torpedo did come.

Huseboe: You weren't at the Guadalcanal fights, were you?

Wieland: Yeah, we were involved in some of those.

Huseboe: Not at Savo Island.

Wieland: No, that was all done.

Huseboe: Joe Foss shot down his last one in January '43. You were probably out in those waters then.

Wieland: No, I didn't get out there until the fall of '43.

Huseboe: Oh, that's right. September '43.

Wieland: And November 19th was our attack down at Tarawa.

Huseboe: Our guys called some Japanese planes "lighters" because they caught on fire just like that, because they didn't have armor plate on those wing tanks. So they'd just fire into the wing tank, and she'd light on fire right away.

Wieland: That was the problem with all their planes. They would just blow up, and sometimes particles would keep falling, and the plane would look like a meteor by the time it was just about ready to crash. I never saw any of our planes catch on fire.

Huseboe: Was there anything else you wanted to add?

Wieland: When we went into the Seventh Fleet, and went into the Yellow Sea, that was shallow, and we done submarine practice. So we'd drop our depth charges, and some guy forgot to set them just right, and we had a huge circle that came around and the depth charges started going off. We could have sank ourselves. A lot of little accidents like that happened.

Then one morning we got up--it was heavily mined, that China Sea--and these mines broke loose and kept floating all over. I don't know how we escaped from hitting mines at

night, but we woke up in the morning, and here was one of these big monsters floating by on our starboard side, with all them spears sticking out. And just short of our screw guard.

Huseboe: I heard that fellows onboard ship would have rifles, and they'd shoot at the mines out in the water.

Wieland: Well, yeah, they would probably do that, but you have to have them out quite a ways. Otherwise, when one went off close to the destroyer, you could feel that pretty good. So we'd shoot them with our twenty millimeters. They reach out a ways.

Huseboe: Do you shoot some yourself?

Wieland: No, I didn't personally, no. But I saw it. I've got pictures of it. I even have a picture of three salvos coming out of the barrel of a sixteen-inch gun.

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