

Luther Leon Gee, U.S. Navy

Oral History

Interviewed by CAPT Diane Diekman, USN (Ret)

Diekman: I am Captain Diane Diekman, United States Navy (retired) and president of the Battleship South Dakota Memorial Foundation. I'm interviewing 97-year-old Leon Gee [*pronounced with a hard G*] in a telephone conversation on Wednesday, November 2, 2022. Leon is at his home in Sanger, California. He was a sailor on the battleship USS South Dakota (BB 57) during World War II. His highest rank in the Navy was radarman third class. This interview is being conducted for the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress and for the Battleship South Dakota Memorial Foundation. Leon, would you give us your full name, birth date, and place of birth?

Gee: My name is Luther Leon Gee. I was born October the 30th, 1925, in Mount Vernon, Missouri.

Diekman: Where were you living when you joined the Navy, and why did you decide to enlist?

Gee: I was living in Sanger, California. I tried to join the Navy, and went to Recruiting, and they told me to go home and put on some weight and come back, maybe we'll take you. But in the meantime—I was eighteen years old, and my dad's sister's son lived in Sanger, too. I was born October 30th, and he was born the 31st. We were called up for the draft. So we went to Sacramento, California, to take our physicals, and they told me **[00:02:00]** you're gonna be in the Navy, and they told him he's gonna be in the Army. I don't know how they decided that, but that's how I become to be in the Navy.

They told me to go home and do what I had to do to go into the service. When I reported back, they put me on a bus in Fresno, California, which is about fifteen miles from Sanger, and they took us to San Francisco to the Federal Building. And at the Federal Building, that's where I was sworn into the Navy. From there, they put me on the train, and the train went to Spokane, Washington, and at Spokane, Washington, I got on a bus and went to Farragut, Idaho, and that was the new training station built during World War II to train all the Navy recruits.

Diekman: What was the date you enlisted? Or the date you got to Idaho, either one.

Gee: The date I was inducted was 5/10/1944.

Diekman: Is there anything special you remember about boot camp in Idaho? **[00:04:00]**

Gee: No, but after I finished training there, I went to Bremerton, Washington, and that's where I got aboard the South Dakota. The South Dakota was in Bremerton being repaired from damage that they had received. It was in Bremerton, and that's where I got aboard.

Diekman: Did you go radarman school or did you do that OJT?

Gee: No, when we went aboard ship, I told them I wanted to be a machinist's mate, because that's what I was gonna do when I got out of the Navy, and they said no, we have all the machinist's mates we need, so you're gonna be a radarman. I didn't even know what a radar was. That's how I became a radarman. Being a radarman was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me, because being a radarman, we served our duty in CIC, which is Combat Information Center, and being there, you knew everything that was going on—where we operated the air search and surface search radar, and when we were in combat, where all the other ships fit in the task groups we were in.

Diekman: Other than being told that when you got on the ship, [00:06:00] what are your first memories of being on that battleship?

Gee: Being how large they are, y'know, the only ones that you knew aboard ship was the ones that was in your division. It's kinda like living in—the town that I live in, in Sanger—when we came to Sanger in 1930, I think, in the town of Sanger—the population of the ship was as big as the town I was living in.

Diekman: Do you remember getting underway from Bremerton, and the trip across the ocean?

Gee: Yes, when we left Bremerton, we crossed the International Dateline, and when you cross the International Dateline, you become a golden dragon, or something, and then when you cross the equator, you're a pollywog before you cross the equator, and then you go through their celebration, you become a shellback.

Diekman: Any particular memories about that process, and becoming a shellback?

Gee: Yeah, [00:08:00] they fill a tank of water on the ship, and you got dunked, and they had King Neptune there, and they smeared grease on his belly, and you got down and you had to kiss King Neptune's belly. They had the officers standing up there with two rolls of toilet paper for binoculars, looking for the equator.

Diekman: Where did you go first? Did you go to Nouméa, or did you go right into—

Gee: I think we just joined up with the fleet and operated with the task group. Task Group 38, I think it was. We operated between 38 and 58. The ships in the 38 task group and 58 was the same thing, they just changed it back and forth to make the Japanese think we had twice as many ships as we had.

Diekman: What were some of the most memorable experiences of battles and such, that you can—

Gee: Well, the South Dakota was in thirteen battles, and I wasn't aboard for those first six. I was aboard for the seven. I think probably shelling Okinawa for the landings and that, and we were in the battle of Leyte Gulf, and I don't know [00:09:59] what all we were in.

Diekman: You said you always knew what was going on. Do you remember any incidents about how you were surprised at what was happening, or you wondered what was—

Gee: When the Japanese would send out planes, we could hear the aircraft carriers launching planes to intercept the Japanese, and one thing I remember was when the Japanese planes were getting close to the fleet, you could hear the pilots say “Splash.” “Splash two.” A bogey, or whatever. And then you would hear our five-inch guns start firing at the planes coming in. And as they got closer, you heard the twenty-millimeter guns start firing. Well, you knew that they were getting closer, and then when the fifty-caliber and twenty-millimeter machine guns started firing, you knew they were really close then. And then when all the firing ceased, you knew that the kamikazes either had hit some ship or something, or were shot **[00:11:59]** down, because all the firing is all over.

Diekman: So you could hear the firing although you were in CIC—

Gee: Yeah, you could hear it good.

Diekman: It shook the ship?

Gee: We wasn't firing ship-to-ship, but we were firing at all the aircraft.

Diekman: Right, I'm saying when the guns fired, could you feel that?

Gee: You couldn't hear the other ships firing. All you could hear was yours.

Diekman: You were there when there was the magazine explosion, right? Do you recall that day?

Gee: Yes, I do. We were alongside an ammunition ship, taking on ammunition at that time, and they didn't wait to untie from the ship, they just took off, and that was it. Another thing, y'know, six or seven shipmates died. When they had their services aboard ship, they were buried at sea, I attended all the services even though I didn't know any of them. **[00:13:57]** Maybe, I don't know, the reason I attended—my father was a minister, so I went to all the services aboard ship.

Diekman: Okay, so that was optional. You could just go to it if you weren't on watch and wanted to go?

Gee: Yes.

Diekman: It was just kind of a support-your-comrades thing?

Gee: Mm-hmm.

Diekman: When you talked about the ammunition ship, you mean when they heard the explosion, that other ship just took off, so it broke all the lines—pulled all the lines loose?

Gee: Yes, it did. They didn't wait to untie them, they just left. When that explosion went off, they flooded the magazine down below, right away.

Diekman: Okay. How did you find out what had happened?

Gee: Just being there, I guess I just heard what was going on.

Diekman: Because you were right in the middle of everything.

Gee: Yes.

Diekman: So what about shelling the homeland and all that? Did you have any involvement or any special memories about those, or did anybody on the ship talk about, oh, we're shelling Japan, or we're at Okinawa, or anything like that?

Gee: No, I'll tell you, another thing that happened aboard ship. [00:15:57] You know when we went through that Typhoon Cobra.

Diekman: Oh, yes, yes.

Gee: The only time I ever got seasick, I got seasick during that storm. One of the main shellings—I know just before the war was over, we was up at the northern island of Hokkaido, shelling one of the steel mills up there.

Diekman: The typhoon, how long did it feel like it went on, and were you—

Gee: I think it was just about a day, as long as the typhoon went on. I have a lot of pictures and stuff of the ship in that typhoon that somebody gave to me. I just the other day mailed one—I just sent it in the mail, pictures of the typhoon and of the sailors in the radar—in the I Division, y'know.

Diekman: And were there pictures of you, too?

Gee: Some of them are.

Diekman: When you look back on your time on the ship and being in combat and such, what thoughts come to mind? What [00:17:57] kind of things do you remember?

Gee: There's a lot of things I remember. Sometimes when we were out at sea for three or four months, then we'd go into these islands, we could go ashore there, they would give you a couple cans of beer and go ashore and you could play basketball or go swimming or whatever you wanted to do.

The main thing I can remember, when we we're up there shelling the steel mills, then we heard they dropped the atomic bomb, and then when things—when the Japanese surrendered, we sailed into Tokyo Bay, and Admiral Nimitz came aboard the South Dakota. Because the South

Dakota was built as a flagship, and we thought the surrender was gonna be signed on the South Dakota, but since President Truman happened to be from Missouri, they decided to sign it on the Missouri.

Diekman: What was the reaction of all you crew members, hearing that news?

Gee: Well, at least we got anchored alongside, at least we got to watch it from the ship.

Diekman: Describe for me that day, when you [00:19:57] went topside to watch the surrender ceremony. Could you see it well, and what happened?

Gee: We could see it good. Of course, we couldn't hear what was going on, but we could see it. We was just glad that things was over.

Diekman: Well, yeah, I guess so. You stayed there—you went to Okinawa, I think, and picked up—

Gee: Yeah, when we left there, we stopped by Okinawa and we picked up a bunch of Marines, and came back, and under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco, stayed there a few days, and then after we left, the South Dakota went down by Long Beach harbor. We were there a month or so, and when we left there, we went through the Panama Canal up to Philadelphia, and in Philadelphia, that's where I was transferred off the South Dakota, and came back to Shoemaker Receiving Station up close to San Francisco. From there, I went to Treasure Island, and I was put on a sea-going tugboat. From a battleship to a tugboat, that's quite a letdown.

Diekman: So you mean you rode the South Dakota all the way around to Philadelphia, and then you went back across the country to Treasure Island?

Gee: That's right. [00:21:55] One of my buddies that was from California, who was in the radar, too, we rode the train back to California. And the seats on the train then was like a school bus seat. They weren't padded or nothin'.

Diekman: Oh, an uncomfortable ride, huh?

Gee: Yeah.

Diekman: So how much longer did you have to serve then? Is that why you went to a tug, was your enlistment—

Gee: No, that tugboat at Treasure Island, they was gonna go around, through the Panama Canal, to the East Coast again. This tugboat was built in Stockton, California, and it was steam-powered, and it had just been overhauled. Well, going from Treasure Island back down to Long Beach, or San Pedro, it broke down, and we had to get towed into San Pedro. While it was there, before—I was only in the service for the duration of the war, so while it was there, I got discharged.

Diekman: Okay. And headed back to Sanger, huh?

Gee: That's right.

Diekman: How often did you hear from your family, or what kind of communication did you have while you were on the ship? Like how often did you get mail, or whatever?

Gee: I didn't get mail too often. My dad and mother wrote to me [00:23:55] once in a while, but I didn't get a lot of mail. My older brother was in the Navy at the same time. He was on a seaplane tender.

Diekman: Oh, he was. You probably never got any leave. You never went home during that whole time, right?

Gee: As soon as I got off the South Dakota—when it was in San Pedro there, I could come home on a weekend pass. Because it was only about a hundred and fifty miles home.

Diekman: Sure, after the ship was back in the States, but from the time you got on it in 1944, you were on it all the time until it got returned to Philadelphia.

Gee: Yes.

Diekman: And then, after the war, what did you do? Did you ever become a machinist?

Gee: Me and my brother started a business called Academy Manufacturing and Machine Works. I was still living at home. We wasn't making enough money for—he had a wife and two sons. He found another job, and he went to work and left the business to me, and that's what I had until I retired. [00:25:55]

Diekman: Oh, okay. When did you start attending the battleship reunions in Sioux Falls?

Gee: A friend of mine, Joe Prestigiacombo, lived up north, close to San Francisco, he tried to put on a mini-reunion up there, and me and him and I think about four or five of us went to that, and that's where I heard that they was having a mini-reunion in Las Vegas. I went to that, and that's how I found out, going to them—I think I started going to these in 1990, I think. And then I went every year from then, until this last year I went, and I don't know if they'll have any more, but if they do, and I'm still able to travel, I'll be there.

Diekman: Yes, we have decided to have an annual event on the second Saturday in August every year. Just like this year, it was the second Saturday in August. So next year, that'll be August 13th. So yes, we're planning—

Gee: The only problem I have with that, my daughter is a schoolteacher, and she's in school then, so I don't know if I'll be able to make it then or not. It would be perfect if they could have it in July, y'know.

Diekman: Oh, I didn't realize school started that early. We thought August would be a good time [00:27:55] for everybody.

Gee: Well, she's going to school in August already.

Diekman: Oh, okay. Do you belong to any veterans organizations in California?

Gee: No.

Diekman: Okay. It's just your association with the battleship group, huh?

Gee: That's right.

Diekman: So how do you think your combat service on the South Dakota affected the rest of your life? Did it change anything, or did you—

Gee: No, it didn't change anything, but I think being aboard the South Dakota is the best duty I could've had. Cuz I enjoyed being out on the South Dakota.

Diekman: Even though you were at war. What were the things you enjoyed about it, the experience, the camaraderie?

Gee: No, all the fellows in the radar legion were all friendly and everything. Even after I got out of the service, I stayed in contact with a lot of them. Of course, all the ones that I knew then, as far as I know, have passed away already.

Diekman: Yeah, I guess [00:29:46] there's not a lot of 97-year-olds around. What medals did you get?

Gee: I don't know. I really don't know.

Diekman: Just the standard ones, I suppose, then.

Gee: Yup.

Diekman: Is there anything else that you would like to—

Gee: The other reunions I went to, in Pensacola, Florida, one year they had—the people that was at the Leyte Gulf deal, they had a Leyte Gulf reunion there, that I went to one year.

Diekman: Do you recall about when that would have been?

Gee: No, not really. I think I've got a plaque around here somewhere about attending it. That must have the date on it.

Diekman: Okay. Any last-minute memories or anything that you would like recorded, or that people should know about World War II or what it's like to fight a war or anything like that?

Gee: Nothing that I can think of right now.

Diekman: Okay, I'll shut the tape recorder off.