

Lester Thompson Oral History Interview

LESTER THOMPSON: Thompson and I was born to John Robert and Rachel Belle Burt, and I was working for Texaco for six years. Started (inaudible) 1936 and the war came along and I had been courting my wife a couple years and we decided to get married. I bought a little home. And we married. And I decided that I would quit my job with Texaco and take something a little more lucrative so that I could (inaudible) my responsibilities (inaudible) so she wouldn't be left holding the sack when I left. Which I did. I went to work for a Houston shipyard, working on Liberty ships. I worked there a couple months. And my older brother was (inaudible) and he asked me if I'd like to go to (inaudible) shipbuilding company and work on the (inaudible) boats, which is more interesting in wartime of course. And we did (inaudible) went over and he got (inaudible) job and I got a third-class shipfitter's job.

Q: What were they paying an hour back then?

LT: The pay was something, quite a bit of money (inaudible) \$45 a week, see, which was much more than I'd been making. I got married, I was making like \$120 a month at Texaco. Having said that (inaudible) you could -- I had a car and like I said I bought a home. And had (inaudible) two years

old (inaudible) we were quite happy together. Married at 23. Being in the draft age I knew that sooner or later I would be drafted. This was really for changing jobs really primarily. Wanted to get (inaudible) before I left. And sure enough I'd been married two years by the time my draft notice came. And I said, "Well, this is it." I told my leaderman in the shipyard. I said, "I'm going down Sunday morning, I'm going to sign up in the navy (inaudible) the post office (inaudible)."

Q: You had that choice. Soon as you got the notice. You still had -- you could still go someplace (inaudible).

LT: Yes, yes. But I had to do it in a hurry.

Q: What kind of time? You had a week? A day?

LT: I don't know what the timeframe was but it was very (inaudible) probably a week or so. I don't remember. But I went down on a Sunday and signed up (inaudible) post office in Houston on the 29th of November, 1942. And was supposed to sign up with my brother-in-law. I went by to pick him up and he was hungover so bad, I told him he would never pass the physical. So I (inaudible) myself. And it was fortunate, because I went (inaudible) submarines, and he wound up in the paratroopers. (laughs)

Q: Make it? Did he make it?

LT: Yeah, he made it. He didn't live very long after the war though. Short-lived family they were. My wife (inaudible) matter of fact I lost my wife in 1988. So having been married for almost two months short of 48 years, about 16 years ago. Fact, I said I'm philosophical about life and what's going to happen to me (inaudible) but anyhow they shipped (inaudible) to navy reserve, and they went me to Great Lakes, Wisconsin. I served exactly 28 days in Wisconsin in boot camp, which was normally a 16-week course. And they drilled us on the tarmac there with sticks for guns. And of course (inaudible) and I remember one guy there. He had done a stint in the army and one in the marines, and now he was in the navy, so they made him a drill sergeant (inaudible) drills and he was telling us to do about-face (inaudible) about-face and he'd come up and stay in front of me. And he says, "I want you to do about-faces until I tell you to stop." I said, "You might as well tell me to stop now." He said, "Why?" I said, "Can't you see I'm stuck in this tarmac here?" It's just -- the thing was so hot that it was sticky. I said, "I can't do that." So anyway (inaudible) 28 days in Great Lakes and I was sent to torpedo school in Rhode Island, Newport, Rhode Island, 16 weeks' torpedo school. Mark 15, which was a surface craft torpedo. And I graduated from there as a

third-class petty officer. Backing up a step or two, when I arrived at A school, which was Mark 15 school, they made me a first-class seaman.

Q: Was that a big pay raise back then?

LT: Not a whole lot. But in peacetime it would take them a lot of time for these advancements (inaudible) came so rapidly, see. I went to A school (inaudible) Mark 15 school, graduated, and came out of there a third-class petty officer. From there they sent me to Torpedo Station, which is an island in Newport, Rhode Island. And I went to submarine torpedo school for eight weeks. Which was specialized weapon for submarines. And I graduated from there, and they sent me to New London, Connecticut to go to submarine school. Here again the fact that while I'm still in the Mark 15 school they came down one morning and said, "We're going to send two companies of you down, take the submarine physical." Okay, that's great, we got something to do besides look at each other. So we go down and we take the physical. Well (inaudible) they eliminate at least 25% of the men is their teeth.

Q: Really.

LT: Because you had to have a good overbite in order to accommodate what they call the Momsen lung, which was an escape thing. It proves out in reality it's not a good

thing. Because submarines operate better in deep water than they do anywhere, so (inaudible) sunk, you're not going to need it anyway. But anyway.

Q: It had to do with getting this --

LT: The overbite.

Q: That's what I do. I'm an orthodontist. I work on bites.

LT: That would be interesting to you then.

Q: Oh yeah, very interesting. This is a mouthpiece that they had to be able to put on?

LT: Yeah. It's a mouthpiece and this thing to put over your chest. See? And fill it up with air.

Q: And breathe off.

LT: And you breathe. Normal.

Q: At what depth?

LT: Well, the state requirement was 100 feet.

Q: You could get out with this thing on and make it?

LT: Yes. What they did, they had a tank there that was filled with water. And certain distances down the side of this tank they had chambers. And they put you in this chamber. Then they start putting water in it (inaudible) but they keep the water level down with air pressure on top of it. And when it's equal to the pressure in the tank then you can go ahead and fill your Momsen lung up. And you go up a line that's on it. Attached to a buoy. And you proceed up

under instruction slowly. They had swimmers in the water along with you. In case you (inaudible).

Q: If you had a bad bite or you didn't have enough teeth or something --

LT: That wasn't really it. I never saw anybody fail really. There were men going through that couldn't even swim. And they came through with flying colors.

Q: Still disqualified them at the physical (inaudible).

LT: Well, I guess (inaudible) back to the two companies that went down for submarine physical. There were 35 of us passed out of 200. And I get right (inaudible) guy just sitting at a desk with his feet up (inaudible) and I'm standing in front of him in Fruit of the Loom. And he's asking me. Said, "What makes you think you want submarine?" Nobody asked me (inaudible) so I asked him. I said, "What makes you think I do?" He was so smart aleck with me, I just --

Q: Went right back.

LT: Right back at him. Anyway he said, "That's all." Well, we finished Mark 15 school. And we went to (inaudible) Mark 14 school. They're assuming now that I'm going to -- all these 35 people are going to go into submarine school. They could send us to advanced submarine torpedo school. And they get there and (inaudible) said, "Well, we know

there's 35 of you that passed this physical examination. You might as well come on and take it again. Because we're going to give it to you anyhow." This is not a voluntary examination. But having said that, submarines particularly at that time were strictly volunteer. And all you had to do was say, "I don't want," and you didn't get. Very interesting situation we all went through. And we lost a couple of men out of that, so we're at 33 now. And we go to submarine torpedo school and graduate from there. And go to New London, Connecticut. And I think several washed up there. I don't know how many. After submarine school (inaudible) in front of a psychiatrist which (inaudible).

Q: (inaudible).

LT: No (inaudible) one or two of those psychiatrists were cycled out too.

Q: (laughs).

LT: They were asking some really personal questions.

Absolutely unnecessary. It didn't happen in my case (inaudible) sat down and (inaudible) talk to him. He asked me a few questions. Talked to me (inaudible) says, "Do you really want submarine?" I said, "Well, why not?" I said, "I've been to submarine torpedo school. And I went to sub school. And if I don't go to submarines I've wasted all my time. Yes, I'm interested in submarines." I'd been sold

on it by then. Seeing what they presented. And he said, "I'm going to let you go." But he said, "I tell you something. You failed your hearing test (inaudible)." He said, "You don't hear (inaudible)."

Q: (inaudible).

LT: And he says, "You only hear the midrange sounds." And he says, "I want you to promise me if I let you go if somebody tells you they hear something don't argue with them. Because you don't hear it."

Q: You don't hear worth a dime.

LT: You don't hear worth (inaudible) anyway I (inaudible) and what do you think they did with me when I got on submarine?

Q: Engineer.

LT: (inaudible) say that from there I went to California, to (inaudible) and was put aboard the U.S.S. *President Taft*, which was a refurbished ocean liner which had been out of commission and put back and was given to the army and assigned as an army transport. That's what they were doing. It was in charge of -- the colonel was in charge of the ship. Of course it had a navy skipper to actually operate the ship. But he was under the command of the colonel. The (inaudible) were army people. And I hadn't been through (inaudible) school and sub school. I wouldn't

sleep below in the hammock in the holds that they provided for us. I slept topside on the deck.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: Yes. And not only that. But the ladders (inaudible) if you will were wooden. Everything in it was wooden (inaudible) and I had an aversion to splinters. So I liked to sleep topside. But I wasn't by myself. The topside was littered with bodies sleeping there at night.

Q: Sleeping under the stars, were you? Right on the deck.

LT: Oh yeah. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Q: (inaudible) sleep on the teak or --

LT: Well, what's the choice? It's either getting splintered to death or getting a little --

Q: (inaudible).

LT: It was an interesting situation because these (inaudible) as we called the army fellows, they had these big boots (inaudible) they tended to walk around (inaudible) tend to step on you a little bit now and then (inaudible) but it wasn't bad. We had fine weather. About 400 sailors. And probably 1,600, 2,000 army troops.

Q: And where were you all off to (inaudible).

LT: We were going to Australia.

Q: Australia.

LT: On the other side of the world for us. And (inaudible) I'm 25 years old and I'm (inaudible) initiated in (inaudible) affairs and (inaudible).

Q: How long a trip was that?

LT: Sixteen days.

Q: That's a lot.

LT: They had a lot of stuff (inaudible) they had a boxing ring set up on the deck. And they had a fellow get in there (inaudible) style of fighting, he just put his head down, and windmill his arms over his head like so and (inaudible) knocked him out. That's just accident for me because I had been fiddling round with boxing gloves for a good many years myself. Not professionally. But I had sense enough not to get in with somebody in the ring that I didn't know. Because you never know (inaudible) groups of people from around the country who you're going to be up against. But anyway (inaudible) happened. And the next day they brought him up there again and presented him and he asked if there was somebody in the crowd who would like to try him. This is all entertainment for the troops. So they had a fellow from Oklahoma who said, "I'll take him." So he got in the ring and he put on the gloves.

Q: There wasn't any betting going on.

LT: Oh, no, no. If there was I don't know anything about it. There wasn't enough money (inaudible) to make any bets anyway. I had \$4 when I landed in (inaudible) island and I went to the restroom and the (inaudible) over the door (inaudible) with my \$4 (inaudible) when I went back to my bunk I said, "Oh, forgot my billfold." And I went back and there was only \$2 in it. Somebody had (inaudible).

Q: (inaudible).

LT: (inaudible) yeah, I went back and (inaudible) the guy (inaudible) laughing about it, he said (inaudible) (laughs).

Q: That was a kindhearted guy. Good Christian man (inaudible).

LT: Anyway the Italian (inaudible) this fellow from Oklahoma (inaudible) rough-and-tumble kind of guy and he just (inaudible) absolutely diametrically opposed. He looked like a crawfish (inaudible) and the guy is flailing over his head with his arms like so. And the guy with the crawfish style (inaudible) steps aside and then the fellow (inaudible) and knocked the guy down to parade rest. Dropped his arms to his side. And he just turned around and walked round to the corner and offered to take his gloves off. (laughs).

Q: (inaudible).

LT: (inaudible) back then at times you know that you have (inaudible) by itself. No escort. And (inaudible) explained to us (inaudible) going by ourselves because this thing can do 17 knots (inaudible) which is not really -- as far as I'm concerned (inaudible) by ourselves (inaudible) knots is probably (inaudible) get away from a submarine. But anyway --

Q: You're totally unescorted.

LT: Totally unescorted. But (inaudible) unescorted. Like the man who just yesterday said he went over on a Liberty ship. And their top speed is about 8 to 10 knots. This is extremely dangerous in submarine-infested waters.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: Yes. The thing that most submariners understand is there's only two kind of ships. And one of them is targets.

Q: (laughs).

LT: I happened to be in a (inaudible) one time on a patrol run and I happened to stick my head up through the hatch. And I see this great large troop transport. And the thing that came to my mind instantly was my, what a target he would make.

Q: Look at everything as a target.

LT: Yeah, everything's a target.

Q: (inaudible) you got a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

LT: Yeah. The (inaudible) we would leave port (inaudible) a patrol run. You had an escort (inaudible) it would be either a PC, a patrol craft (inaudible) or a D, destroyer, escort, or a (inaudible) started from the first (inaudible) long about sunset (inaudible).

Q: What was the idea behind that? Just added protection?

LT: Yes. Because submarines, enemy submarines, would be lurking in the waters in around any port where ships are coming and going (inaudible).

Q: This is back on the troopship again. Or was it --

LT: No. I was on the submarine.

Q: Oh. Even (inaudible) sub was escorted (inaudible).

LT: Yes. Escorted the submarine out because (inaudible) surface.

Q: Because it was shallow or --

LT: Yeah. Shallow. Not especially shallow. But like I said submarines have a habit of being in the vicinity of any port where (inaudible) ships come in and out. We did the same thing. At evening time when the escort left us we would (inaudible) goodbye. And we were then left on our own. We had no friend.

Q: Did you get a sort of a sinking feeling when that happened?

LT: You're looking behind (inaudible) it is a little strange feeling. Not (inaudible) fear per se. But it has to be lurking back in there somewhere.

Q: You were a little older than most. Were you not? Most of them are young kids.

LT: Yes. There were quite a few people that were older than coming in the service at that time. This is 1942. All the gung ho fellows (inaudible) signed up in 1941, December 7th, very next day, they went down and enlisted.

Q: (inaudible) more sense and (inaudible).

LT: Yeah. But there were older men than I was in there. I had four brothers, one sister. And four of us joined the navy at one time.

Q: Wow.

LT: Now I was the youngest of the set. And the older brother - - second oldest brother went into Seabees as a watertender. The second brother went in as a first-class petty officer yeoman. He (inaudible) already was a noncommissioned officer rank, petty officer first-class going in.

Q: Did they have some particular qualification?

LT: Yes. The older brother was a mechanic (inaudible) in the refineries (inaudible) mechanical aptitude so --

Q: (inaudible) special skill.

LT: Yeah. And the yeoman brother was doing office work along with myself with Texaco. And he knew shorthand. And did clerical work. He wound up as being the captain's yeoman on the U.S.S. *Livermore*. That was a submarine (inaudible) and he became like a sort of (inaudible) yeoman because he was the only one who could do shorthand (inaudible) he did his stint in the navy and was very bitter.

Q: Really.

LT: He didn't like regimentation and he resented his stay in the navy, and he had bad experiences because he was so self-opinionated that he didn't (inaudible) everything was done according to him, it wasn't right. In other words he -- they gave him a sleep chit one time to sleep (inaudible) because he had worked all night. A sleep chit means you got authority to go back and get in the rack and go to sleep. Well, he was in the rack and the chief comes down there and bumped him out of the rack. He gets up and he knocks the chief down (inaudible).

Q: (inaudible).

LT: No (inaudible) lost his temper which was quite often. But he was (inaudible) he thought that (inaudible) to sleep in (inaudible) chief come in there and thrash him out and bump him out of the rack (inaudible) the idea was that he hadn't given up all his civilian rights just because he was in the

military. He never submitted himself to the military like I did.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: Yes. One of the brothers went to Catalinas and PT boats. And of course I wound up in submarines.

Q: Your mother had four (inaudible).

LT: Yeah, she (inaudible) when she found out her baby was going to submarines.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: Again philosophy takes over. And I told her, "If something happens to me don't worry about it. This is what I choose to do. So be it." But that don't stop a mother from worrying.

Q: Being a parent now, I worry about my kids all the time.

LT: I still worry about mine and some of them are close to retirement age. Never get through being a parent.

Q: We were talking about they escorted you out first day and then what was your first patrol? You went to Australia. And then did you get --

LT: When I landed in Australia they assigned me to the U.S.S. (inaudible) which was a submarine tender on (inaudible) pier of Brisbane, Australia. And they assigned me to the relief crew, what you call it. But evidently the submarine that I went to needed somebody in my rank and rate to come

aboard. Before they did that they sent me over on the beach and gave me a treat, and put me over (inaudible) demolition bombs. And I knew nothing about demolition bombs (inaudible) work for him. And he said, "Take this line. Put it here (inaudible)." That didn't last but a few days (inaudible) *Peto*, U.S.S., submarine.

Q: That was your first boat?

LT: Yes. It was the first submarine ever launched sideways out of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Floated down the Mississippi. And outfitted in New Orleans. Reason they would be launching sub sideways, every submarine that was built in Wisconsin was launched sideways because the river was not wide enough to launch (inaudible) stern first. So to speak.

Q: I see. Was this a new boat when you joined it? Or had it been (inaudible) for a while already?

LT: When I caught the *Peto* she had made three patrol runs. And I caught it. And I did four, five, six, and seven patrol run on the *Peto*.

Q: How long did those usually last, each patrol run?

LT: The longest one lasted 72 days. And no bath. It's a laugh to me (inaudible) in the water and take a bath (inaudible) we had each day a basin of water. We took a sponge bath.

We did what we thought was necessary to stay clean. And we called ourselves (inaudible).

Q: Now how often in the 72 days would you meet with a tender or something like that?

LT: On that 72-day run we put in at New Guinea. Pulled up beside a seagoing tug and topped off our fuel and resupplied the food (inaudible) went back to sea. And wound up in -- this time in Pearl Harbor. But the first patrol run I made I almost got left back. Everything happened. We sunk a ship (inaudible) depth charge.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: We made a landing on an island. We took aboard aboriginals along with Australians and (inaudible) on an island. And in that group was an Australian in his seventies. He had owned this island before the Japs took it. And he was (inaudible) all of this you're doing is unnecessary. I know all about the island. But no. The military and the brass, they had to do it the hard way. So they're going in. They're going to (inaudible).

Q: He knows all this.

LT: He knows all this already but we were supposed to put two rubber rafts ashore. And one of them was supposed to go first and signal when it got on the beach. By blinking light. We had flashlight (inaudible) tell us the coast was

clear (inaudible) this is normal procedure. When you get (inaudible) small craft (inaudible) they got ashore okay but they were unable to signal. We didn't get the signal. So the second boat never went over. They went ashore. And when we (inaudible) the submarine (inaudible) we were down in the water in case we would hit a reef, we'd just (inaudible) back up. Well, we stayed in the water maneuvering because the current was coming around the island. And we had to maneuver back and forth to stay in position (inaudible) I was topside. And you could hear echo (inaudible).

Q: Oh, really.

LT: And the natives on the island (inaudible) submarine down there (inaudible) so the Japanese sent word down to our landing party that was already there that if they would surrender they would treat them well. And you can imagine what the answer was.

Q: Yeah. Yes.

LT: And there was an ambush when the Japanese came down in the center of an ambush (inaudible) and the lieutenant with a .45 automatic Colt fired -- tried to fire at one of these guys. He was (inaudible) machine gun (inaudible) misfired. And the guys were saved by the 70-year-old Australian with a (inaudible) gun. He killed four out of seven Japanese.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: It's one of those things that (inaudible).

Q: (inaudible).

LT: Yeah. He killed four of them. And (inaudible) we stayed there. They didn't come back. So we put out to sea. And submerged (inaudible) the next day. And you can imagine that the natives that told the Japanese (inaudible) already there, what's going to happen the next night when you come? We're only about 10 miles from (inaudible) the whole fleet (inaudible) in your mind you imagine that. We rowed out the second night. And we did get them back. We got our men back aboard and no sooner got them aboard than (inaudible) the island. And (inaudible) so we just put to sea and left them behind. But in the meantime while we were maneuvering trying to stay in position there (inaudible) forward torpedo (inaudible) which was facing the (inaudible) topside aft (inaudible) position and there's a lieutenant back there (inaudible) circumstances. And he asked me. Said, "Do you know what that is?" I said, "Anybody in his right mind would know what it is. It's a leak. We had a leak." We ruined our (inaudible) equipment at that point (inaudible) these things were pretty hard on my nerves.

Q: I imagine so.

LT: By the time I got back in I was ready to say, "This is enough."

Q: Did you have that option to say any time?

LT: (inaudible) the one (inaudible) that I've gotten from serving in the military was the difference between life and death is paper-thin. You never know when your name is on the bullet. The baptizings that we took were terrific, some of us. Not in my case (inaudible) the fact that life is very precious to all of us. And it distresses me to see people on say for instance Fox where they have two men and a lady sitting on a dais bragging about how many Iraqis are killed (inaudible) it turns my stomach wrong side out to hear these people talk like this. Like they're making a big joke out of it. And to me they have absolute disrespect for human life. The last person who wants to go to war is a soldier.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: (inaudible) and the kid shot himself.

Q: (inaudible) the volunteer.

LT: (inaudible) yeah, he committed suicide. And we got the story that he had put in for a transfer. He got a Dear John letter or something from home. And the captain wouldn't let him go, wouldn't let him transfer.

Q: And he just --

LT: So (inaudible).

Q: Young kid (inaudible).

LT: Yeah. Yeah. We were all young (inaudible) I was 25 when I went in. But the skipper wasn't much older than I was. He was (inaudible) 31 years old and --

Q: Dear John -- the last person I talked to talked about -- well, he got a Dear Ed letter (inaudible).

LT: (inaudible) yeah, there were a lot of Dear John letters (inaudible) 11 million people (inaudible) and out of 11 million people there's not very many young beautiful girls (inaudible) going to sit there and wait for you. I was fortunate enough to be married.

Q: So what year was this now? The young man.

LT: When I got married?

Q: When the kid shot himself on that ship -- boat.

LT: This would have to be in '44 (inaudible) latter part of '44.

Q: So you really got there in Australia to start your tour in that area in '42 or '43?

LT: No, it was '43. I was there.

Q: How long were you in that theater total?

LT: Roughly 20 months of the four patrol runs.

Q: (inaudible) continuous and (inaudible) come back or --

LT: Well, each time you came back in you had two weeks' rest. I spent two weeks' rest in (inaudible) and I spent two weeks at Camp Dealey on Guam. And two weeks somewhere else. I can't recall right now. But anyway every patrol run you got two weeks' rest. And it was -- can you cut the thing off? Are we ready?

Q: Yeah (inaudible).

LT: (inaudible) Guam. I put in my two weeks' active duty -- I put in two weeks' rest at Camp Dealey in Guam. And flew back to Hickam Field in Honolulu.

Q: (inaudible) flying back there.

LT: Yes. They flew us back.

Q: In what?

LT: A C-54.

Q: They had C-54s.

LT: (inaudible) C-54 transport.

Q: And flew you into Hawaii.

LT: Yes. And I was (inaudible) when we got to Pearl Harbor we didn't know it, but the war was winding down, and we lost our priority. Flight priority. So we were stuck in an OGU unit, which is an outgoing unit. Any time you had to transfer, that's where they put you. And we were stuck there for several days. We were getting antsy, wanted to get back to the United States, this, that, and the other

thing, and we finally went to the commander there. I remember the man's name, Commander [Barrett?]. And we said, "Commander, if we can finagle our own transportation back to the United States would you let us go?" He said (inaudible) he said, "I've been trying to get my foot in the door (inaudible) those submarines (inaudible) people for a long time. Yes, I'll let you go." So my brother (inaudible) I was in contact with him. And he knew a yeoman in Pearl Harbor that I could go see. And found out which ships were coming back to the United States. Ship movements were very secretive back then. Not like today (inaudible) all over the world. But anyway he gave me a list (inaudible) ships that were coming back to the United States or scheduled to. And I went to the (inaudible) which was one of the 400-foot boats and asked if we could come back. And they said, "Yeah, we'll take you. But we're going through the Panama Canal." And I said, "No, let's don't do that (inaudible) look a little longer till we find (inaudible)." The U.S.S. [Alayton?]. And the XO said, "Yes, we'll take you." There were 11 of us. "We'll take you but you have to stand watches." "Oh, where can I get my gear? We'll be right back."

Q: (inaudible).

LT: We jumped on it (inaudible) coming back on the [Alayton?]. They put me on the helm steering the ship. And we had a following sea. When you have a following sea it tends to (inaudible) you forward and (inaudible) go off course (inaudible) I fell off a couple times (inaudible) degrees. And the captain (inaudible) in his office so he wanted to know who (inaudible) Thompson, sir. "Stay on the course." "Aye, aye, captain." So we get in a little (inaudible) in the conning tower over the stern (inaudible) and there's a smart-mouthed lieutenant in there and he's (inaudible) I said, "I'll bet you you can't keep it within 20 degrees for three minutes." I bet him \$10. He says, "You're on." I said, "OK. Here's the helm." He grabbed it and he fell immediately off 40 degrees off course. (laughs) Captain says, "Who (inaudible)." "Thompson, sir. I wasn't with him." I never fell off course 40 degrees. I was a fairly good helmsman.

Q: What time of year was this? Was this in 1945 (inaudible).

LT: This was early '45.

Q: Wintertime.

LT: Wintertime. And the swells coming into California tremendous. To such a degree that most of us were tying lines around our bunks to stay in without being thrown out.

Q: Wow.

LT: And almost impossible to sleep.

Q: Was there still a submarine danger at that time between Hawaii and California? Or (inaudible) cleaned out by then?

LT: The Japanese strangely enough never utilized their submarines like we did or the Germans. When they attacked Pearl Harbor they attacked everything but they left our submarine (inaudible) intact.

Q: It's true.

LT: They left the submarine that was alongside there (inaudible) submarine was. But they got half credit for (inaudible) which is remarkable really with a (inaudible) millimeter gun. Japs flying (inaudible) hard to hit.

Q: So you were coming home now on this thing. You were taking turns at the helm and all of that. And you had the big swells. When did you get in? How long did that trip take? Couple weeks?

LT: Oh, no (inaudible) a matter of four, five days (inaudible).

Q: (inaudible) where did you land?

LT: This is from Pearl Harbor.

Q: Where did you land in California?

LT: Landed in Mare Island. And this particular time -- there's always a danger to sailors the first night ashore. I don't know what it is about the equilibrium, and has something to do with it, I'm not sure. Just accidents or whatever. But

you have to be real careful consuming alcohol the first night ashore because it will do a number on you.

Q: (inaudible) why?

LT: I don't know, I (inaudible) I know (inaudible) well aware of the fact that you have to be real careful to get accustomed to alcohol again. But anyway I'm over in Mare Island drinking beer and everything going on around. And next thing I know I'm in the brig. And I wake up and I'm in a cage in the middle of the mess hall. And there's a guy sleeping. There's only two bunks in this cage. And he's sleeping below me. And this is out in the middle of the room. And (inaudible) I said, "Hey, where are we?" He said, "You're in the brig." I said, "I'm not stupid, I can see I'm in the brig. But why?" He says (inaudible) mess hall. I said, "Good, and I won't be AWOL."

The (inaudible) yeoman sent for me. He says, "You got a choice." Said, "You can go to mast or you can (inaudible) would you like (inaudible)." I said, "Yeah, sure." I said -- he said, "It'll cost you a fifth of whiskey," and I said, "You got it." So went promptly and got him a fifth of whiskey and I got off two days ahead of my orders.

Q: So you (inaudible) discharge early?

LT: No, I was coming back home. Preparatory to go on (inaudible) and I came back and (inaudible) the U.S.S.

Sirago (inaudible) and that's where I was at the end of the war.

Q: How did you hear about the end of the war?

LT: The end of the war (inaudible) I had been assigned the (inaudible) watch. And the guy -- I had about 15 minutes to go before (inaudible) the guy said, "Hey, man, will you take my watch." I said, "Sure. I got next watch anyway (inaudible) go ahead." So I (inaudible) I was the only one aboard. I had the submarine to myself. This is off the record. Not supposed to be that way. But anyway that's the way it was, reality of the situation.

Q: Had you known that the atom bomb had gone off? Was that pretty common knowledge (inaudible) at the time?

LT: I'm not sure. I was (inaudible) in Boston when V-E Day (inaudible) that's when the war ended in Europe. V-J Day, like I said I was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. And they threw one big celebration. My wife had been up there with me.

Q: She had come up to join you.

LT: Yeah. I had a room there. That's all you could get during the war. Sleeping room. And she'd been there with me quite a while. And she had gone home at that time. Well, the war was over. And they were putting the new submarine in commission. And I'm looking forward to going through

the Panama Canal with it and going back to sea and all of this (inaudible) the bottom fell apart. They didn't need (inaudible) but they called me and they said, "Well, you can do one of two things (inaudible)." I did. But he said, "You can sign up, ship over, and sign up in the regular navy." I had just taken another physical. And qualified. And the (inaudible) was telling me, "Well, we'll make you second-class petty officer (inaudible) and in six months we'll make you first-class if you'll ship over." So I'm writing to my wife and asking her the question. Because you have to -- you're married, you have to agree on these things. So she answered my letter but not my question.

Q: I see, I know --

LT: And I talk it over with the lieutenant and he said, "Well, why don't you go home and find out what the problem is and then come on back? Because you got 30 days to ship over." I said, "OK." I went home. And then guess what, she's pregnant. We've been married by then for five years. Been married two years before the war. But the thing is being older I realize that the whole actual world was changed by World War II.

Q: It was, yes, sir.

LT: Absolutely no doubt about it. My memory tells me that the United States was creeping and crawling when the war started. After the war the United States (inaudible) heaving, everything was going (inaudible).

Q: And I can remember the housing boom and car boom. And everything else was going faster.

LT: I had a home that I bought before I left. I rented it. And my wife moved in with her parents and stayed there with them for the rest of the war. But this thing (inaudible) X number of dollars' rent per month for this, for the house. But I couldn't collect enough rent off of it to maintain it (inaudible) moved in there when I first rented it. And his son got up on the faucet in the bathroom and broke it off. Then he went after my pump, which was a demand pump (inaudible) he didn't think it ought to be (inaudible) in and out like it was (inaudible) so he wired around it so it would run continuously and it burned the motor up. Not only were these things expensive but they were also not very available. So my daddy, having taken charge of the property while I was gone, told the man he's going to have to supervise his boy. And the man told him, says, "I don't have time for that, I'm a (inaudible)." My dad said, "Well, you got time to leave." So he (inaudible) but then

the pump (inaudible) if I had it to do over again, I would have taken 16 ton of nails and nailed the front door shut.

Q: (inaudible).

LT: And let the people (inaudible) they could find. Because it was just not --

Q: The (inaudible) were far less than they would cost to own (inaudible).

LT: Oh yeah (inaudible) would take (inaudible) more than a month's rent.

Q: Wow. You were telling me you were coming home to ask your wife what she thought of it. She was pregnant. And you all decided what at that time?

LT: (inaudible) moped around and tried to find a job (inaudible) extremely difficult.

Q: There was a lot of people in the job market.

LT: Oh, man (inaudible) 11 million people (inaudible) one time. And (inaudible) out there.

Q: So but you were doing this on your 30-day leave yet? Or had you made the decision?

LT: (inaudible) was separated.

Q: You separated.

LT: But I could change my mind in 30 days and go back.

Q: I see, so it was a one-way trip.

LT: Yeah. One-way trip. And I just (inaudible) it took me from 1945 until 1952 to get my feet on the ground. And I had to take two jobs (inaudible) to get my head above water again and get to feeling like I was a human being, a productive citizen. I stayed out 12 years. Now (inaudible) I was 25 years old when I went in, 28 when I came out. Stayed out 12 years, which makes me 40. And United States Submarine *Peto* was in the ship channel in Houston as a training platform. So I came and I (inaudible) well, I'll go down and visit my (inaudible) so I did see the *Peto*. And (inaudible) the lieutenant. And he says to me, "Thompson, let me sign you up."

Q: You weren't too old then.

LT: And I says, "Lieutenant," I said, "heck, I'm 40 years old." (inaudible) and he finally convinced me. And I signed up in the reserve. And I went on to retire out of the reserve. This makes me a reserve company retiree (inaudible) my full tour of duty. But when I was about 14 years in, I was first-class. And I went in to the commanding officer. And I told him -- well, I asked him what he thought about it. I said, "I have 14 years in now. What are the prospects of me retiring?" He says, "Well, I got one piece of advice for you. Just don't take no for an answer." But shipped into the navy with a heart murmur.

Bad hearing. And every year when I went (inaudible) for training I had to take a physical examination. And we had a doctor in Houston, he was a heart doctor. And he was famous for this. He would listen to a man's heart till he found something wrong with it. And he wrote up a recommendation that I be dropped from the sub forces. That wouldn't exclude me from the navy reserve. But it would take me --

Q: Out of submarine.

LT: -- out of submarines. And I went to just the regular doctor there. And I explained to him the problem. And he listened to me (inaudible) said, "Come on with me," and he went in and (inaudible) the captain. This doctor officer says to the captain, "Captain, look here what this man has written up on the man here." He says, "What do you want me to do?" He says, "I can't hear any of this."

Q: Murmurs and all that.

LT: "Problem with his heart. I can't hear anything like that." He said, "Tear it up." So he tore it up (inaudible) that story, or the point of that story is that all throughout my career (inaudible) my hearing when I got on submarine crew, and my heart (inaudible) no physical examination at any time during the whole tour of duty somebody didn't ask me if I didn't have rheumatic fever when I was a child. I

perhaps did have because I remember (inaudible) my first year of school (inaudible) terrible first year of school. To me it was remarkable that I made it --

Q: As long as you did.

LT: All the way through. And part of it was bluff. And part of it was talking my way through and being able to pull the right strings. There is in our group right here right now, there is a man in Fredericksburg right now (inaudible) huge man.

Q: This year?

LT: This year. And he's here.

Q: Oh, he's just visiting.

LT: (inaudible) and he is a twin. And he and his twin (inaudible) the war together on the same submarine. This man now is a minister of the gospel. A very articulate man. Educated now. And I would dearly love to see him do this interview.

END OF AUDIO FILE