

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

RICHARD REDLE

This is Cork Morris. Today is October 11, 2003, I am interviewing Mr. Richard Redle and this interview is taking place in the Bush Gallery in Fredericksburg. Usually I like to start with a little background, where you grew up, who your folks were, what they did for a living.

MR. REDLE: Well, I was born in Columbus, Montana, the 10th of September, 1922. I've lived there most of my life except when I was in the navy during World War II, from January of '42 until November of '45. I went through the Naval Training Station in San Diego. Part of my boot training was up in one of the buildings of the Balboa Park that was built for the World's Fair previously. I can still remember being on the mess crew there and cutting six hundred pies in six pieces for a meal. I went from there to the destroyer base for nine weeks schooling on electra hydraulics which was used in controlling the gun mount of a five-inch gun. I was shipped from there to Norfolk, Virginia, and placed aboard the USS MC KEAN. That was an old four-stack destroyer that had two forward boilers taken out to accommodate bunks for troops. This was, in fact, transport that was equipped with four landing craft to land troops that came down from Norfolk headed for the Panama Canal and off the coast of North Carolina. We picked up the crew of a merchant ship that had been sunk by a German U-boat. The crew was from India and the officers were English. They were difficult to communicate with because they couldn't speak English but they were very grateful for our help. We left them in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and proceeded through the Panama Canal and north to San Diego. From San Diego we went to Pearl Harbor and picked up Marines and practiced landing there for our landings in the Solomons at Midway Island. This was shortly after the battle of Midway and there were bomb craters all over the island yet. As I was saying I just found out now that our mission there was to land the marines that we had picked up and leave them there at Midway to reinforce the troops and stuff that were there in the case another Jap attack there. I didn't realize it at the time.

MR. MORRIS: Can I interrupt you for just a minute? What month is this?

MR. REDLE: This is in May of '42 just shortly after the battle of Midway. Then we proceeded to the New Hebrides and prepared for a landing at Tulagi in Guadalcanal. There were four ships in our squadron that made the original landing there and within three weeks we were the only one afloat. The others were sunk by Japanese gunfire. The ships lost were the CALHOUN, GREGORY and LITTLE and the only reason we were still afloat was the fact that our skipper knew we didn't have the fire power to match any of the Jap destroyers or cruisers.

MR. MORRIS: The ships that were sunk, were they APDs also?

MR. REDLE: Yes. They were all in our same squadron and there was six of us altogether and we, the CALHOUN was number 2, the GREGORY 3, the LITTLE 4 and the MC KEAN number 5 and 1 and 6 never took part in the original landing. They come about a month later after we did. We didn't have the fire power to match any of these Jap destroyers or cruisers and our skipper when we got word from generally a lot of this word come from watchers on the beach. They knew that the Coast Watchers knew that the Jap ships were coming down through the slot and they would let us know and we just pulled into a cove around an island or something out of sight.

MR. MORRIS: What sort of armament did you have?

MR. REDLE: All we had was three 4-inch gun turrets and they weren't worth a dam for aircraft either. They weren't a good gun for that. We did have some 20s and a couple of 50-caliber machine guns on there.

MR. MORRIS: Did you have any anti-sub stuff, depth charges, stuff like that?

MR. REDLE: We had depth charges and we did have some sound gear and stuff on there at the time. We went back to the States. Of course, we went through a lot of this other stuff first. I'll go through that as we witnessed the nightly gun battles, flashes of gunfire would lighten up the sky. There were so many ships sunk in the slot that they called it "Iron Bottom Bay". We hauled bombs, aviation gas, ammo, and rations besides landing troops. We also hauled a lot of wounded Marines back to New Hebrides and the hospital ship there. We went right to the States for major haul in '43 and replacement of our 4-inch guns with 3-inch guns. That gave us a better defense against aircraft. We were back out there in a little over a month and resumed landings all the way up to Bougainville

where we were sunk by an aerial torpedo. I think we made forty-eight landings altogether in the time we were there.

MR. MORRIS: They sunk the ship with an aerial torpedo?

MR. REDLE: Yep.

MR. MORRIS: Lots of loss of life?

MR. REDLE: We had a lot of loss of life. We had I think as far as I can assume, I run into different numbers, there was about one hundred fifty-one men and officers on the ship at the time and we had fifty-nine survivors out of that. We lost about eighty, I think, marines. We had about one hundred and thirty or forty marines on there.

MR. MORRIS: Did it go down fast?

MR. REDLE: It went down within about ten minutes or fifteen minutes. In fact, I was the last one off the ship. I left after the skipper did. The ship was going through the water and it hit where we had fuel tanks for diesel oil and a magazine. Oil was burning on the water and I wasn't a strong swimmer so I couldn't get away from the ship. I tried one time and I come back to the ship. I didn't have a life jacket which I come back and looked around again and I found a marine's pack down there and it had a couple of pair of socks with it and I took that and that give me a little bit of flotation. I really had to work to get away from that ship. I could see as the ship started to settle by the stern that I just had to leave that ship or it was going to suck me down. So I really worked to get out of there.

MR. MORRIS: Nothing like a little motivation.

MR. REDLE: Oh, you bet.

MR. MORRIS: What were you on the ship?

MR. REDLE: I was the boat coxswain on the ship?

MR. MORRIS: Explain to me exactly what they do.

MR. REDLE: They run your boats and they take care of all the maintenance of the deck crew on the ship. You do all the tying up when they come to tying up to a dock or anything like that, your launching your boats and stuff like that and the ones that kept the decks swabbed and the bulkhead swabbed and painted, any maintenance like that. You spliced ropes and wired ropes and anything needed like that. That was your duty.

MR. MORRIS: After they sank your boat out from under you, what did you do?

MR. REDLE: A number of us were picked up by a twenty-one hundred ton destroyer called, some of us were picked up by another couple of APDs that were in this bunch and we were picked up by the, I can't think of the name. I should know. Can you believe that you can forget that ever? The USS SIGURNEY DD643, I believe. A memorable incident that I can recall was when we thought we had a sub contact and went to drop a couple of depth charges by the racks on the fantail and the whole rack of depth charges ran out at one time. We weren't making many knots at the time and when that 27 hundred bombs of TNT went off at one time we thought it was going to blow off the stern of our ship. It blew water higher than our mast and we had acres of dead fish around us. So the water was just orange around us.

MR. MORRIS: How much TNT is in one depth charge?

MR. REDLE: About four hundred pounds.

MR. MORRIS: How do those actually work?

MR. REDLE: It's the pressure seat and of course on the engine there's a disc and you give it how much time you want it. It went more or less by time and the pressure would pour off and you had also on the side of the ship that threw it out. When you dropped a pattern you started with one and then you went with three like this and then you went with three more which would go further out and it was diamond shaped and you'd go back to the three and then one and you had a diamond shape. That was the pattern that you got when...

MR. MORRIS: Are you theoretically trying to surround the submarine with these things?

MR. REDLE: Yes, you tried, and we found out it wasn't actually a sub. I think it was a sunken ship that you picked up on the sonar screen. So after the MC KEAN was sunk we come back to the States on a merchant ship called the MORIMAC WREN and we arrived in Frisco on the 30th of December and went to Treasure Island Naval Base. We were issued a new bag of clothing and given leave the next day for thirty days but before we went on leave about thirteen of our crew were assigned to a new destroyer going into commission in San Pedro the 20th of March. There were only fifty-nine survivors of our crew out of a hundred and fifty one men and officers and we lost a hundred and ten marines out of a hundred and eighty two that we had on board. There were about thirty of us going east on the same train on leave and we all had a ditty bag with a couple

changes of underclothes and a couple pairs socks and loaded with a bottle or two of liquor. There was also a marine that was going back to Quantico, Virginia, for medical discharge that hung out with us. We landed basically the Marine Raider Battalion was on the way. A lot of times it was just a hit and run. They'd go in there and do their job, they destroyed a munitions dump or something like that and come back to the ship and a lot of times we'd leave some of them. We worked with the 1st and the 4th Raider Battalions. We had some of each on there and our first landing was at Tulagi which is where we made our first landing. When we went aboard ship there was only about seventy of us that had been to sea before so we went out to sea on our shake down and there were a lot of seasick sailors lining the rails. After our shakedown we made it out to get a place in invasion and got to give air support to our troops on Guam. That was our first operation after we left the States. After that we were assigned to a carrier task force and operated with the carrier task groups until we got to the Okinawa campaign and then we provided fire support for the troops on the beach and on picket duty. We fired over eighteen thousand rounds there and wore out our gun barrels there. We took on ammunition about every three days while we were there and we had already worn out our engine so we were getting to be in pretty sorry shape. They kept us out there for about two months after the war was over just so we could provide help for any emergency that might come up until everything was in hand over there until the peace treaty was signed. If something went down or some ship had a problem, that was our duty.

MR. MORRIS: You said this ship you got on was newly commissioned?

MR. REDLE: Yep, the second one.

MR. MORRIS: Did you wear it out that fast?

MR. REDLE: Oh, yes, we were out there for nineteen months.

MR. MORRIS: When you say you give fire support, what exactly are you shooting at when you're doing that?

MR. REDLE: Anything that they bring up. If they find a bunker or something that needs destroying to help them advance or something like that, or when the troops got in a jam. One night one of the marine officers said if you can't put up flares all night here we're a gone goose. And we managed to keep flares in the air there all night over them so that the Japs didn't advance on them. They were pretty thankful for that. Our R&R was two

beers and two hours on an uninhabited island after we had been out for thirty days on the carriers. We never had Bob Hope and the girls put on a show anywhere that we could view in the nineteen months that we were out there. I don't even remember seeing a woman from the time we left Pearl Harbor until we went back through on our way to the States, never seen a woman.

MR. MORRIS: Were you married at the time?

MR. REDLE: No. We never seen a native even, we never got on the beach at Okinawa. On the MC KEAN we went into these islands, like the New Hebrides and New Caledonia and stuff, and the natives would row out and they'd bring a bunch of bananas or something and they wanted mattress covers or something like that. They liked that fluff. They'd trade you a couple bunches of bananas for a mattress cover. One of the scarier experiences I had was when a friend and I were sitting on the fantail talking about when we were screening carriers in the task force and we looked up and saw the bow of this carrier just aft of the fantail on our destroyer. It was a very black night and visibility any distance was very poor and somehow our officer of the deck on the bridge had missed the zigzag course and we were going right through the task force formation. Of course, we were running without any lights and darkened ship conditions and there was a lot of activity in the task force with all ships having running lights on until we resumed our screening position again. I presume the officer of the deck on the bridge received a severe reprimand on his position there. From the fantail of our ship that carrier looked like a skyscraper above us. If they had hit us traveling about twenty-five knots they would have sliced right through us. Another thing I wanted to mention on this was one of the worst things that we run into was the typhoon that we got into in December of '43. It was one of the worst typhoons they had out there at all and Bull Halsey who was in charge of the task group at that time thought we were getting out of the core or the center of the typhoon. Actually, they never had known instruments like they do now and we got right in the center of that.

MR. MORRIS: The fellow I spoke to just before you, Bill Mien, he said the same thing about that typhoon and Bull Halsey getting them in that. He had the same complaint.

MR. REDLE: We lost three destroyers in that. A lot of them were getting low on fuel and they tried to refuel before we got into it. It was just impossible as rough as the sea was to come alongside and refuel.

MR. MORRIS: You were on the MC KEAN at this point?

MR. REDLE: No, the PRESTON.

MR. MORRIS: How big a ship was that?

MR. REDLE: The PRESTON was about 340 feet long and there was between 345 and 350 men on there, I think.

MR. MORRIS: And what was your top speed?

MR. REDLE: We had a top speed of I think on the shakedown we went 42 knots. Working with the carriers you were going 18 to 24 or 25 knots all the time. It was really cutting the water all the time. They had a destination and they wanted to get to a certain place and launch the planes and retrieve the planes and get the hell out of the distance of any Jap reprisal as soon as they could. So we were just banging right along all the time with those carriers.

MR. MORRIS: That explains the worn out engine.

MR. REDLE: Oh, yeh.

MR. MORRIS: You said you stayed out there a couple of months after the war was over.

MR. REDLE: Yes. I don't know why but they just made us stay out there. Just in case something happened, a plane going down or something like that between Okinawa and Japan.

MR. MORRIS: How did you hear about the war being over?

MR. REDLE: They told us.

MR. MORRIS: You were on duty?

MR. REDLE: Oh, yeh..

MR. MORRIS: Did they ever tell you anything about when they dropped the bomb or did you hear about that later?

MR. REDLE: Oh, yeh, they did. I tell you we were so thankful it was so close to being over with. We figured they would give up because they had sent all of their pilots. They didn't have any good pilots left anymore. All these guys knew how to do was take off with the planes and I think they just gave them enough fuel and the bombs and the plane

to get it down to Okinawa. They didn't even have enough fuel to get back. This was a suicide, that's all it was. They made every effort to down a ship or something if they could. That was their objective and they didn't know how to fly enough I don't think they could have gotten back. They just had one good pilot lead them down to the slaughter and then he left.

MR. MORRIS: It's got to be scary to face an enemy you know is that desperate.

MR. REDLE: Oh, I tell you. Out of our squadron there were two squadrons of destroyers. With the task group you generally had two to three carriers in there and you might have had a couple of cruisers and maybe even a battle wagon, very seldom we had a battle wagon in there. We were screened for submarines and all kinds of stuff and we were sitting out far enough to pick up planes. Our objective was to try to pick off these planes before they got into the carriers because the loss of the carriers was pretty serious. We never lost a destroyer on screening duty. They didn't go after destroyers when we were screening carriers. They wanted bigger meat than that. We were with the PRINCETON when it was sunk, the LEXINGTON when she got hit. Regardless of how hard you tried and we had close calls with planes getting close to us and knocked them down but we had torpedoes go by both sides of the ship. It was just a case where everybody got so run down, you got so tired. You were at general quarters so much of the time and when you were at general quarters you didn't even go down to the mess hall. They just gave you sandwiches. I was gun captain on a 5-inch gun on the PRESTON and they had five 5-inch two forward and three aft. I was gun captain on number 3 gun and I never even went down below and slept in my bunk for I don't know how many months. I just had a hammock swung between the steps underneath and all I had to do was roll out of my hammock and roll up the hot shell chute and I'd be in the gun. They were there day and night.

MR. MORRIS: How did people handle this kind of stress?

MR. REDLE: We had some that didn't and they just took them off and sent them off. A lot of times you never heard what happened. They never told you what was the matter even. They were just transferred was all you heard. You didn't know the reason until some of these guys just couldn't handle it at all. That's like the message we got from Halsey when the MC KEAN went down. "We commend you on all your loss and sorry

about the loss of your shipmates and all that and we hope you will be back in the fight again soon.” I wasn’t anxious to get back in that fight again soon after that. What really irritated me was the fact that when we got to Treasure Island there was thirty-five thousand sailors on Treasure Island and they picked us to go right back out to sea.

MR. MORRIS: You knew what to do. They didn’t.

MR. REDLE: Well, yes, they needed people with experience out there I guess. I don’t know. It didn’t make me feel happy.

MR. MORRIS: I’m sure of that.

MR. REDLE: I was boatswain mate 2nd class on the PRESTON. We had a good division officer on there. I was in 2nd Division. We handled the boats and stuff. We never had anything to do with the anchor up forward but we handled everything aft. When it came to refueling or something like that, where we refueled at sea, sometimes it was pretty rough. It was pretty hard and you’d have men on this line to keep the hose from breaking or pulling out of the hole where they were putting the oil in. You just had these guys running back and forth and I’d done a lot of that getting the lines over and all that and this officer finally said to the captain, “That guy is doing more than what he should for the rate he’s got.” So they did give me an advancement, but we never made that much, I only made about \$110 when I was on overseas pay. That was sea pay and everything else. That wasn’t a lot of money. Anything else I can give you?

MR. MORRIS: So after months out there, did you stay in the service?

MR. REDLE: After I had been out there, I put about eighteen months on the MC KEAN and about nineteen on the PRESTON and when I got back to the states and I was eligible, I was eligible a long time ‘cause we had all kinds of points on the point system. That didn’t have anything to do with it because we were overburdened with points. I just couldn’t wait to get back home and the biggest mistake I made I should have stuck around and got disability. I got my lungs burned getting away from that burning oil and I had my back and my neck all burned. It was one solid big blister. The back of my ears had blisters about the size of my finger. We had a doctor on our ship and he happened to be picked up by the SIGURNEY II and he was the one who took care of us when we got back on the SIGURNEY.

MR. MORRIS: Unless there's something else, you've pretty much covered it. You got a good handle on the story there unless there's anything else you'd like to add.

MR. REDLE: I don't know of anything right now.

MR. MORRIS: They will send you a copy of this and if you want to add something go ahead. I appreciate your time and I thank you for your service also.

Edited copy typed October 30, 2007, by Eunice Gary.