

T. L. Conner

Oral History

July 6, 2001

Arthur Huseboe: This is an interview with T. L. Conner from Albertville, Alabama, and conducted on the 6th of July, 2001. Mr. Conner was a member of the battleship, USS South Dakota, and I'm the interviewer, Arthur R. Huseboe. We conducted this interview at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. How was it that you enlisted in the Navy?

T.L. Conner: I just wanted to get away from home, and join the Navy. I didn't want to join the Army.

Huseboe: How old were you?

Conner: Eighteen years old.

Huseboe: You dropped out of high school, didn't you?

Conner: Right. I joined May the 8th, 1940.

Huseboe: Before the war.

Conner: Oh, yeah.

Huseboe: You chose the Navy because?

Conner: I didn't want to walk.

Huseboe: Where did you go for your training?

Conner: I enlisted in Nashville, Tennessee, was sworn in, and I went to Norfolk, Virginia, for eight weeks training. Then I was assigned to USS Prairie, AD-15, which is a destroyer tender. I put it in commission in Philadelphia in 19--well, it'd be mid-1940. We operated in and out from Philadelphia to Guantanamo Bay and Newport, Rhode Island, and up to Argentia, Newfoundland, for about 18 months. Then I was transferred from there back to Philadelphia to put the South Dakota into commission.

Huseboe: So you were assigned to USS South Dakota, when? How did you get assigned there?

Conner: In March of '42.

Huseboe: What was your rating?

Conner: I was seaman first class when I was on the South Dakota.

Huseboe: What were some of your duties?

Conner: Our cleaning station was the superstructure on the South Dakota, from about the main deck all the way up to the yardarm. It was our duty to keep it clean, and have to paint it when it needed it. I painted the yardarm because the other fellows was afraid to get out on it. It was about a hundred foot out, I guess, and I volunteered to paint the yardarm. That was our cleaning station.

Huseboe: What was the most hazardous, the most dangerous, action that you went through?

Conner: In the Battle of Santa Cruz, which was our battle, all we was doing was firing anti-aircraft guns at the enemy. We have a record of shooting down thirty-two planes. And the captain got wounded with shrapnel when it hit the turret--number one, I believe, or number two, maybe--a piece of shrapnel hit him, but I wasn't wounded at all.

Huseboe: Were you manning a gun?

Conner: I was on a five-inch gun.

Huseboe: Do you know if you hit any Jap planes?

Conner: Well, I don't know for sure, but somebody did.

Huseboe: Anybody in your group get wounded?

Conner: No, not that I know of.

Huseboe: Were you also at Savo Island?

Conner: Yeah, Savo Island was a night battle. Best I can remember, it started about half past twelve. That would be 0030 minutes. It was dark, and everybody was scared. We sideswiped a coral reef, but it didn't seem to do any damage. But the next day, we--being the biggest majority of the wounded people, or the one who got killed, was in the superstructure--that was our job to help tote them down. I noticed one room that I looked in, and it was about knee-deep in water, and you could see a man's head, like a half a watermelon, floating around. That would really try you. I put my head up over a ledge, to kind of brace myself, I guess, and a man's finger rolled off in my hand. So we gathered them up and had to carry them down several flights of steps, and lay them out on the fantail, which was--everybody had a long face because the shipmates--I think fifty-to-sixty men got killed.

None of them was in my division, but this was one thing that kinda affected me a little. One night we was transferring ammunition to another ship, and a tackle pulled loose from a turret and hit an electrician in the back of the head and killed him. The next day we buried this man, with military honors, with planes and all that. When they slid him off the side of the ship, we could feel the water splash up on us. That was kinda sad.

Then after this, this battle at Savo Island, we went in to New Caledonia, and all the ships present knew about it. They was lined up--they could see the ship was pretty well shot up--and they was lined up and give us a salute as we came in. And then, the kinda sad part was, we had orders to return to the States, to New York City. Well, they needed some more men for duty on some of these ships, so they transferred off so many men from each division. I seen boys crying because they wanted to come back, and this was kind of sad. The good thing was, I wasn't one of the ones they transferred. I think really what they done, and this is the truth of the Navy, they transferred the goof-offs.

I remember the trip back to the States, we had a destroyer escort for awhile out, to protect us from the Jap submarines, but then we went the rest of the way by ourselves. Full steam. We went through the Canal, and when we got through the canal, destroyers picked us up to escort us to New York. Well, it was rough. The water was rough, and the captain--of course, the battleship could plough through it--and the captain was going so fast the destroyers was telling him, slow down, we can't take it this fast. So anyway, he said, you can come on, I'm going home. That's common knowledge.

We got to New York and the *pride* that we felt as we went in past the Statue of Liberty, we knew that we had just come from a couple of battles to protect that, and we was proud. And we still are.

We stayed in the Brooklyn Navy Yard for about three months, getting repaired, and I went and prayed to go on liberty, and walk by myself, or whoever was with me, at that time it was safe to be out. And then we got a thirty-day leave, and that was enjoyable.

Then after this, we went to--I think it was called the biggest convoy ever made--we went with a convoy all the way to Murmansk, Russia. Of course, we didn't go in port, we just went partway. I think the theory was we might draw out the German battleships, but they never did come out. The best I could remember, it was always foggy and cloudy and damp. You couldn't see the end of the ship. We lost a lot of destroyers. Anyway, we turned back when we got safe in Murmansk, and we went to Scapa Flow, Scotland. I remember going on

liberty in Scapa Flow, and went in a bar-like thing, and they had beer, and a British sailor wanted to buy me a beer. So we drunk a beer, and I couldn't hardly understand him, and he couldn't understand me, I don't guess.

But anyway, on our way back, after a few days, we went to Iceland, and we anchored in one of those fjords in Iceland. We had a chance to transfer one man from each deck division back to the States. And I was the only one in my division from Alabama, so they let me go. We left the ship at ten o'clock at night, and it was still sunny. One feller offered me \$200 for my orders, but I wanted to go as bad as he did, and I had the opportunity.

It took us about a month to go back to the States on an old eight-knot steamer, and old rust tub steamer. They put us on lookout. I remember one night I was on lookout from twelve to four, and it was bright moonlight, and I was watching--this thing didn't have no way to protect it--so I had good eyes, I was about twenty-two years old then, so I seen a ship off in the distance. And they had a voice tube, and a voice tube on a merchant ship is different than on a Navy ship, you just talk into these, but I hollered into it. The officer of the deck came running out, and said, you woke the captain up. And he come out with his little old nightcap a-hanging down, and he pulled out a telescope about this long, and looked through it, and he said, "God dang, boy, did you see that?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, I'm gonna go back to bed. If you're the lookout, I ain't gonna worry."

So we made it safe back to New York. Then we caught a train to Mobile. And that's about the end of my experience with the South Dakota. Now is there anything else you want to ask?

Huseboe: I was going to ask a little more about heroic actions by yourself or others during those battles. Were there some commendations given, some recognitions given to people right after the battles?

Conner: There may have been. I didn't get wounded and I didn't deserve anything; I was just doing my job.

Huseboe: Were you seasick at all?

Conner: Never. Never seasick.

Huseboe: Not on the South Dakota. How about on the destroyer?

Conner: No. Never was seasick. But I've seen them nearly die from seasickness.

Huseboe: Did you get bored?

Conner: We was mostly occupied so much you didn't have time to think about home, or get bored, or nothing.

Huseboe: How about bad weather?

Conner: Bad weather is bad on a destroyer. On a battleship, it's not much.

Huseboe: Were you on the South Dakota when it ran into that whale?

Conner: I must have been. I think that was on the way to Murmansk. I've heard them talk about it; I don't remember it.

Huseboe: How about submarines? Did you see any?

Conner: We chased submarines when I was on another ship. Not with the South Dakota, though.

Huseboe: How about being afraid of submarines, though? Were you worried about them a lot?

Conner: Sure, I was, yeah. The most scared I was ever, was on this destroyer. We was chasing this sub, oh, a day or two. We finally sunk it. Everybody wasn't on the watch at one time. So I was laying in the bed, and they shot the K-gun with the depth charge. And as they

did, the light--the K-gun shined this light on momentarily, and I said, "Oh, my god, they blew the side of the ship out."

Huseboe: How about bombing attacks? You were on a gun--do you remember any of the things that happened relating to the--oh, the Enterprise was nearby at Santa Cruz.

Conner: It was the Hornet--the Hornet got sunk. Well, it got damaged so bad that they sunk it. I could see that.

Huseboe: How about the Enterprise, could you see that at all?

Conner: No, I don't believe I noticed the Enterprise. Anyway, a destroyer got a hit on the bow, and the destroyer had a smart captain, I suppose, so he cut across and hit the wave that the South Dakota was making, and the water come up on the foc'sle and put the fire out.

Huseboe: How about torpedoes during that battle?

Conner: No, I don't believe there were any torpedoes. This was strictly an air battle. We never did see ships.

Huseboe: I mean torpedoes from the planes coming in.

Conner: I couldn't see. I was in the upper handling room.

Huseboe: We heard that the South Dakota really maneuvered.

Conner: Are you just about done with this?

Huseboe: Yeah, we're just about done. Is there anything you want to add to the story?

Conner: I believe I told you all the important things.

Huseboe: Did you go back to Alabama on your leave? That thirty-day leave?

Conner: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Huseboe: Could you talk about your experiences?

Conner: Ah, well, not much. People didn't talk about it much then.

Huseboe: Well, if it was confidential or top secret, or whatever.

Conner: Nah, well, the ship was. They told us not to talk about what or who it was.

Huseboe: Oh, you couldn't say it was the South Dakota?

Conner: Right, right. You wasn't supposed to, but I guess some of them did. They kept it secret a long time. We had a great captain, a great captain. I've had some that was psychotic, on other ships.

Huseboe: The South Dakota had a great record.

Conner: I really think President Truman--I feel hard at him. The top brass in the Navy wanted the Japanese signing on the South Dakota. Cuz she was the queen of the fleet. Had more battle stars than any other ship. But being Truman was from Missouri, he said we'll have it on the Missouri. If I'da been the admirals, I'da say we'll make out like we'll have it, but they could have done it, there wasn't nothing he could do about it. Of course, he could have played heck with them admirals.

Huseboe: You were berthed right next to the Missouri, weren't you, in Tokyo Bay?

Conner: I wasn't on that ship. I was on a destroyer then. I was in there but in a different place.

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