

James O. Johnson

Seaman First Class

Oral History

July 5, 2001

Deb Lyon: This interview is one of the twenty to twenty-five interviews we're going to do in the next three days. It's going to be a contribution to the history of the battleship USS South Dakota. The project is funded by a grant from the South Dakota Humanities Council and also from a personal gift from Dr. Daryl Ferguson, who is an alumnus of Augustana College. We've been hired by Augustana to do this project. It's being conducted by our facility, the Center for Western Studies, at the college. We are a research agency. This is an interview with James O. Johnson from Marysville, Washington. He's a crewmember of the battleship USS South Dakota, and the interview is being conducted by Deb Lyon on July 5, 2001, at the Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, during the reunion of the crew of the battleship. Please state your name and where you're currently living.

James Johnson: My name is James O. Johnson, and I live in Marysville, Washington, the strawberry capital of the world.

Lyon: Please explain the circumstances of your enlistment.

Johnson: When we were at war, the day I was old enough, I joined. On my seventeenth birthday. I wanted to go in. I was supporting myself anyway.

Lyon: Why did you select the Navy?

Johnson: I'm from the Washington coast and I've always been interested in the seas. Still am. Still have boats.

Lyon: What was the place of your training?

Johnson: Farragut, Idaho. Camp Scott. My trainer's name was Chief Taylor.

Lyon: What was your rating and your specialty?

Johnson: I was a seaman first class. No specialist. Deckhand supreme.

Lyon: How did you come to be assigned to USS South Dakota?

Johnson: I don't know. When we got out of boot camp, they asked you, what kind of duty do you want, and that's the only thing I ever asked for in the Navy and I got it. I wanted sea duty, and I was sea duty until I was discharged. I guess she was in port for repairs in Bremerton when I got out of boot camp, and that's the way it went. June of '44. I was the only one on board from Seattle, so everybody was asking me where the best liberty spots were, and I think that was my first duty, was pointing out where all the places to go were.

Lyon: So where did you board USS South Dakota?

Johnson: Bremerton, Washington. Naval Shipyard.

Lyon: What was the nature of your service while on board?

Johnson: My cleaning station was the admiral's quarters. I got quite a story to tell about that, and my battle station was the lower handling room for the five-inch mounts. Preparing shells and outer casings to send up to the mounts. My most fun duty was my last duty; it was in the spud locker.

Lyon: What was the most hazardous duty you experienced?

Johnson: The explosion in the sixteen-inch turret. I came down to get my mail, and I was just going back through the hatch to go back. I wasn't on duty, and the hatch alongside me exploded up in my face. I was leaning over to see what all the commotion was when

somebody--lucky for me--grabbed me and pulled me back when the flames come up. So we closed the hatch and went back in the compartment of the Fourth Division. We had to go up a ladder to the main deck to get out, and it was engulfed in flames, and the flame was shooting and then coming back. We were timing it, and when the flame would come back, one guy would run out towards the bow. Then it would come back, and the next one, and I was the last one there. The flames were getting shorter in between so I timed mine to go through the flame as it come back, and then forward to the bow. It took the hair off the back of my head. Afterwards, I don't know why I was selected, but I was put on the burial detail. I can't listen to taps till this day. That was probably the saddest part of the whole cruise.

Lyon: How did you manage your fears about that, and the possibility of injury?

Johnson: If you understand youth at that age, you didn't have fears. Like all youths, you were invincible; at least, I thought I was. It would always happen to the other guy. That actually never came in my mind.

Lyon: What are your recollections about your place in the ship's company and how you felt about yourself as part of the crew? And were you able to move around the ship, or were you limited in your duties?

Johnson: Topside, I had access to everything. I was never in the engine room, only one time when we were painting, I had to go down and get a hook scraper sharpened, and that's the only time I've been in the engine room. As far as the turrets, when we went through the Panama Canal, we were showing guests through. That was the first thing they all wanted to see, and that was the first time I'd ever been in one. It was just lucky there was a gunner's mate there to explain the inside, because I couldn't have done it. I was never in the officer's quarters. Except for the admiral--I was in charge of cleaning up outside of what they call admiral's country. I had quite an experience there. I knocked an admiral down with a mop, and I thought I was going to be in the brig for the rest of my life. He got up and patted me on the shoulder and said, "Sorry, son, I didn't see you." It was either Admiral Hanson or Lee, I couldn't tell them apart. He was a gentleman. Also, it was his fault; he was in the way.

Lyon: What was your reaction to shipboard discipline?

Johnson: It was fair. The South Dakota was a very lenient ship, as far as dress code. I left the South Dakota to visit--in port in Frisco, I think it was--to visit my foster brother on the Iowa, and I was dressed to get me off the South Dakota, which was tailor-mades. When I went to leave the Iowa, they wouldn't let me go ashore because I was out of uniform. That shows the difference in the two ships. When they found out I was from another ship, they took me ashore in the officers' barge.

Lyon: What are some of your memories of courageous actions?

Johnson: Everybody did their job. It was a well-working crew. Worked together good. Everybody followed orders, and that made things run smooth. I didn't see any individual acts that I remember.

Lyon: What do you remember about being at sea? Dealing with seasickness, boredom, weather? Worry about submarine attacks and bombing attacks.

Johnson: When we thought there was a submarine attack, we saw torpedoes one time, we were standing on the rail, and that's where they were going to hit. That was how worried we were.

Lyon: What about the weather? Were you involved in the bad weather?

Johnson: We hit the largest typhoon on record. That was rough. That was scary. We rolled to the side, and bounced three times. It seemed like an eternity before it would right itself, and

then you'd go over the other way, and it goes down twice as fast and twice as hard, and it comes back as slow. Each time you thought it was going to go all the way over. But it made it. I watched ships alongside us. They'd be three hundred yards away from us, and all of a sudden, you'd slide down one trough and they'd slide down the other trough and they'd disappear. The thing I remember mostly was the destroyers--tin cans--I seen them come up in the air, with their bow, and then pretty soon, they'd go bow down, and their screws would be in midair, beating themselves to death because they had no resistance. They lost quite a few, I don't remember the amount. That was pretty hairy.

I saw that, and then another time I saw a tanker blow up in front of us. That would chill you. It was bringing in oil. We was in Ulithe, the pride of the metropolis of Mog Mog, they called it. That was a place where we got a little shore duty and go out and drink our three cans of beer. I was just coming off watch, and it was early in the morning, and I saw this black smoke go as far as you could see in the sky, and flames behind it, and it was this tanker. Evidently a Jap sub was sitting outside the submarine net waiting for an opening so they could get in. Months later I got a letter, that was written on notebook paper that was folded over twice, and burnt all the way around the edges, so when you opened it up, you had four separate pieces of paper. I didn't know who it was from, except there was a picture in the middle. It was a picture of a girl, it was his sister. We had another J. O. Johnson. They called him big J-O and me little J-O.

Lyon: Do you have any other stories you want to talk about?

Johnson: My favorite was the speech that Admiral Halsey gave the ship. When he left us in Tokyo, they transferred the flag from the South Dakota to the Missouri. By records the peace should have been signed on the South Dakota; I suppose you've heard that a hundred times already. The reason they transferred it was logical. Our ship was all beat up. The Missouri was only six months old, and of course the President of the United States was from Missouri, and that weighed in there a little bit. Anyway, when he left, he said, "I'm going to leave you now." He said, "It's been an honor serving with you. You're going back to Pearl and the States and going on liberty and leave, and going out and have a good time, and that's what I want you to do. You have a good time." He says, "Don't take any bullshit off anybody. You don't have to. You're the greatest fighting ship in the world." He said, "No man will be restricted from leave or liberty for anything short of murder." The first time I had liberty, I got picked up four times, and we tested his word. Each time I got picked up, the Shore Patrol would say, "C'mon, sailor, let's go down the street. You don't like this joint anyway." We tested his word pretty good. He was a man of his word. He was a good man.

Lyon: Now you enlisted when you were seventeen--

Johnson: I tried earlier.

Lyon: A lot of sailors came in at nineteen or twenty. Do you think the three years had a difference when you first enlisted?

Johnson: You were kind of treated like a kid brother. Some of the guys looked out after you pretty good. There was some that tried to take advantage of you. We had one a lot younger than I was there. Only fourteen. Of course, nobody would admit to that, but I sailed with him for three years, and after three years, he was just starting to shave. I've been shaving since I was fifteen.

Lyon: Is there anything you want to add?

Johnson: Admiral Halsey's speech, I wish I could remember verbatim. I remember when-- Chaplain Cunningham I think was the finest man. When we were coming into a port or

anything, if there was any USO or anything around where there was entertainment that he could get to the ship, he'd commandeer and pull rank. The other chaplains we had were just another officer; he was a chaplain. He'd get anything for entertainment and then we'd be on work parties and he'd get everybody released so they all got to watch the movies.

We were watching a movie when the kamikaze come over. This is the real luck of fate here, because he circled us three times, and we had two ammunition lighters alongside us that were full of ammunition. Besides, we had live ammunition on the deck. The carriers were their main targets. He flew over us three times and then he changed his course at the last minute and dove on the Randolph. And exploded on the flight deck aft. Their crews had their movies on the hangar deck forward, so he never hurt a man. He would have got not only our whole ship, but he would have got half the fleet. So I figure somebody was looking after us.

It was also my first experience trying to chew tobacco. When I seen that plane blow up and a ball of flame that was coming toward us, I swallowed the whole cud. I haven't chewed tobacco since then. I was at my battle station for two days with the dry heaves. That was a fun memory and a tough one, too.

Lyon: "The orders of James O. Johnson indicate enlistment the 13th of May, 1944, USNR, at the U.S. Navy recruiting station in Seattle, Washington."

Johnson: Actually, I joined the 4th of May in Portland, Oregon. Because I was a ward of the court, I was sent to Seattle to have the judge sign my papers.

I was hoping one of my shipmates would be here, the one that--this is a picture of my sister. He stole it from my locker and carried it during the war. I just wanted to ask him if he remembered it.

Transcribed by:
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