

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Steve Sagat

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

October 31, 2002

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
in partnership with the Library of Congress

Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on October 31, 2002 at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with Steven Sagat. Mr. Sagat was born on January 9, 1913 in Chicago, IL and now lives in Darien, IL. Mr. Sagat served in the US Navy during World War II. He learned of the Veterans History Project through the Indian Prairie Public Library newsletter. His son read the article and told him about it. He has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives' Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

Part 2: Entering the Military:

Mr. Sagat, when did you first enter the service?

May of 1942.

Where were you living at the time you went into the service?

We were living about on 79th and Laflin.

And you were 29 years old at that time?

I was 29 when I joined.

What were you doing before you joined?

I worked for International Harvester, in the tool room.

Were you married at that time?

I was single at that time.

And you said you joined. You weren't drafted?

I got a questionnaire one day, and I joined the Navy the next day.

Who did you get the questionnaire from?

It came in the mail.

From the-?

US Government.

About going into the service?

One of the services. And I picked the Navy.

And you joined the next day, you said?

I joined the next day. And the following day I had to go for a physical.

Why did you pick the Navy?

(laughs) I figured I wouldn't have to dig foxholes. (both laugh)

And where were you inducted?

Some office downtown. I don't know where it's at today.

Part 3: Training:

What were your first days like in the Navy?

Well, I was required to come to Great Lakes Training Center, and I trained there for about five, six weeks, to get my shots and that. And all of the sudden I was given a train ticket to go to New York.

Well, while you were at Great Lakes, what type of training did you get?

We did physical training.

Physical training. Any other type of training?

Exercise and that's about it. And a lot of, there were quite a few lectures and that.

Lecture classes. And since you were in the Navy, did you have to learn to swim?

No.

It wasn't a requirement?

It wasn't a requirement.

Before we talk about New York, when you were inducted, did you get to go back home or were you kept?

Oh, I was kept at Great Lakes. I stayed. I didn't go home at all.

Did you get any leave before you went to New York?

None at all.

And what was your rank, or rating, when you were at Great Lakes?

Having tool room experience, they gave me a second class fireman rating.

When you first got there, or right before you left?

Well. I didn't even know I had the rating (laughs). I thought I was a recruit like the rest of them.

What rating do they give the recruit? What did they call them then?

Depends what they assigned you to.

But, I mean, as a recruit, did they call you a seaman, or-?

Well, there was no name at all.

Part 4: First Assignment:

No name at all. OK. So, you had your training there, and then you went to New York. How did you get to New York?

I got to New York by train. And I had to report to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. When I got there, the ship I was assigned to, went out (had already left) on a shake down cruise. And by the commanding officer, I was assigned to a bunk in the barracks, and I had to watch the bulletin (board). The name of the ship I was assigned to was the USS Mervine. And I waited there for the ship to come back. So after about five, six weeks the ship, instead of coming back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, came back to Charleston, SC. And when it came to Charleston, SC, I was given a ticket for New York to Charleston, and when I got to Charleston, SC, my ship was there, and I was assigned to the ship, and I was assigned to the engine room. And, as a matter of fact, I became a machinist's mate, is what the rating was.

The ship, the USS Mervine, was it a mistake that they thought it was coming back to New York, or did they change their plans?

They changed their plan overnight. You never know what...the navy commanders control these ships.

What kind of ship was the USS Mervine?

It had four five inch guns, and there were four torpedoes on it, too. But as long as I was on that ship, for two years, the torpedoes were never fired.

What class of ship was this?

This was a destroyer.

Now, how does a destroyer rank in size, compared to the other Navy fighting ships?

The destroyer has anywhere 300 to 350 people. In peacetime, they have 200. And, well, comes the destroyer, comes the cruiser, battleship, and aircraft carrier.

So, the destroyer is smaller than a cruiser?

Yes, they're smaller. They're (laughs) half the size. A destroyer is about 30 to 40 feet wide, and about 300 feet long. And a cruiser has one or two destroyers, a battleship has between three and four destroyers with it. 'Cause a destroyer is expendable, where these bigger ships aren't expendable.

You say they're expendable?

'Cause they're easier to build.

How long does it take to build a destroyer?

Anywhere from six to eight weeks, where a cruiser takes over a year, and a battleship and a aircraft (carrier) takes two years to build.

So, from start to finish, it only takes that long to build a destroyer?

Yes.

And that's to fit it out with all the weapons and the facilities for 350 people?

Yes. And the duty was out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard there, and we used to escort troop ships. There'd be 12 or 14 troop ships. There'd be a division of troops. There would seven or eight destroyers. We'd have a cruiser or battleship in case of a German raid would come out. And in two years I made 12 trips there, 12 back, and never met one, submarine or a cruiser or battleship of Germany. And the cities we were at were Belfast, Northern Ireland, Wales, England. They were the main two ports that we dropped the troops off.

Part 5: Combat Duty- Atlantic:

You met the USS Mervine down in South Carolina and then you started making these runs back and forth across the Atlantic to escort convoys?

And our home port was mostly Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Brooklyn Navy Yard. And your mission was to escort these troop convoys? And what was your assignment on the ship?

I was down in the engine room. And when I became a second class machinist's mate, I had charge of a watch. And there'd be four, five people there, and we used to handle the pumps and the speed of the ship.

When you say handle the pumps, what do you do?

Well, there'd be the generators and the- the battleship operated under 600 lb. steam pressure. And making fresh water out of salt water, and that. Things like that.

What was the fuel they used for the boilers?

It was oil. These ships were all run by oil. At 15 knots, the ship would burn 300 gallons of oil an hour. At 30 knots, it would burn 3000 gallons an hour. So, you can see, the faster you go, the more fuel you burn.

When you were in the engine room, how long did your shift last?

They were eight hour shifts.

How long would you be at sea on a typical escort run?

We'd be there anywhere from ten to twelve days. We'd zigzag.

You zigzagged to avoid...?

Submarines and that. In case one is fired. And we'd have general quarters at sunrise and sunset, every day. Because that's the time when the enemy (would) surprise you with torpedoes and that.

Why was that?

To hide themselves.

They would do it at sunrise and sunset as opposed to during the nighttime?

During the day, and that.

What is general quarters?

You're prepared to fight. That's general quarters. And you do that sunrise and sunset, every day.

When you weren't responding to general quarters and you weren't on duty in the engine room, what did you do, besides eat and sleep?

We would, on the deck during beautiful days, we'd either play cards or- you know, a destroyer isn't a big ship. We don't have no recreation room or anything like that; or exercise room. It's not that big of a ship. As a matter of fact, we don't even have a soda fountain, like a cruiser has (laughs) or a battleship.

When you say a soda fountain, you mean a place for people to meet and have a (soda)?

(laughs) Yeah, that's what we called- on the bigger, they had a recreation room. We didn't have that.

Was alcohol permitted on the ship?

No. No alcohol at all.

Did anybody smuggle it on board?

Well, maybe get away with a can or two of beer, but it's not permitted.

So, it was ten or twelve days, typical voyage, across. How many voyages do you think you made during that two years?

I made twelve there, and twelve back, in two years.

And each one was about ten to twelve days?

Well, then we would wait about ten -15 days before we'd go back. I'd say at least ten days, and then come back.

Ten days in England or Wales or wherever?

Well, same thing at the United States. We'd be ten-twelve days before we'd go again.

Did you get time off the ship when you were...?

At the home port, we got 48 hours.

And how about on the other end?

On the other end, we stayed on the ship. Well, we would get liberty in these foreign ports. They'd leave you off at, say nine, ten o'clock, and by four, five you had to be back

What foreign ports did you have your liberties in?

I had them in Belfast, Ireland, and Wales, and I had liberty in Naples, Italy. I had liberty in Casablanca, Africa, and Algiers, Africa. That's about it.

Well, those are some pretty interesting places to have liberty. Do you remember the name of the port you that you had the liberty in Wales?

No.

Any particular memories you have of those shore leaves?

Well. I had liberty in Casablanca. I see a restaurant there, and they were selling steak dinner for \$2. So I went in there and ordered a steak dinner, and waiting for it, and when they brought it, a camel went by. And I looked at the steak, and they smelled the same way. (both laugh)

Oh. Did you eat it?

No.

How about Belfast? Do you remember anything particular about your time in Belfast?

Belfast had department stores on our...as a matter of fact I bought a linen tablecloth for my Ma at one time over there. So they had some nice stores.

You mentioned Naples, Italy. Do you remember what year you went ashore-?

Well, I could have been in Naples, it must have been about early part of '44. That's when...

It was already in Allied hands?

Yes, it was in Allied hands, so it must have been in 1944. Early part of '44. Then I got transferred, after the twelve trips, I got transferred to another...new construction, and I went to school, in, it must have been, the destroyer was built in Bath,.. Bath, Maine. And we went to school over there

for about four, five weeks. To learn all about the ship.

What year was that?

That could have been early part of 1944. And then when I went to...well, the most interesting thing that happened to me when I was in the Atlantic, we took a convoy of about eight or ten troop ships, and there were British entertainers on these troop ships. So we were taking these people from England to Africa. And one Saturday night we got attacked by German bombers. And that night they sank the destroyer Beatty, and they hit two of the transports. And from one of these transports we took 700 people on our destroyer. The next morning we dropped them off in the city in Africa.

Where did the attack take place?

This attack took place in the Mediterranean.

You said there were eight to ten troop ships that you were escorting? This ship, the Beatty, you said?

The Destroyer Beatty, was sunk that night. And the next day as we were going, we saw one of the transports sink too. Go to the bottom. It was still floating, but the next day we watched as that went down. We took 700 people, and there were men and women entertainers for the British army.

That were on the ship that went down?

That were on the ship that we took on our ship.

Seven hundred extra passengers must have crowded your destroyer.

Well, yeah. We fed them, too, so you can see the amount of food we had.

Were there people lost on the sinking?

I don't know nothing about that. Never found out.

Did you actually talk to any of the survivors that were brought on board?

Yeah, we were talking to the people. Yes, we talked to them.

How did they seem to react?

Well, they were used to the bombing. You know, the way London and the different cities over there were bombed from the Germans and that.

Was your destroyer hit at all in that attack?

No. Wasn't hit at all.

Part 6: Combat Duty- Pacific:

Then after that I went to this new construction in Bath, ME. I was assigned to the USS Bauer. I went through Panama Canal, to Pearl Harbor, and we were at Pearl Harbor for maybe a month or two months, just waiting and waiting and waiting. And then, we were assigned to the invasion of Iwo Jima. But, us being enlisted men, you don't know anything that's going on. The next thing you know, we were at the invasion of Iwo Shima (Jima). And the day the Marines put the flag up I was on the destroyer about two blocks away. We were watching through binoculars. The first time they shot it down. The second time it stayed up. And we were there, I'd say, for 40 days or more. We'd bombard one day, and load up with ammunition. Bombard, load up ammunition. Every third or fourth shell would be a phosphorus shell to light up the battlefield.

On the days that you were bombarding, was this a night and day thing?

Oh, we'd bombard for 24 hours. And for 24 hours we'd load up with ammunition. Go 30 miles away to load up with ammunition. To an ammunition ship.

Would that be a tender?

It was a freighter and that.

And they would reload your destroyer with shells. How many shells would you take on?

Well, these are five inch shells. We're firing them one every five minutes or something like that. So, we'd take a couple hundred of them on. And they, I'd say, it takes, I don't know, about 20, 30 pound of powder to shoot that shell. That shell must weigh at least 50 pounds or more.

Were you involved at all in the loading of the ammunition?

No, I don't touch anything. And then, after we were through with Iwo Jima, we went someplace in the Marshall Islands there, and we grouped then, and we waited there for maybe a month or more. And all of the sudden we got orders. There were five of us destroyers. We were on our way. We didn't know where we were, but the destination was Okinawa. We got there a week before the invasion. And these five destroyers were escorting 60 minesweeps. Thirty on each end. The Marines would take the one end, the Army the other end. So, we were over there a week. The invasion happened to be Easter Sunday, and we were there for a week. Never saw any suicide planes or anything come out. But the day of the invasion, the suicide planes came out.

What was the date?

It was in April. It was Easter Sunday in April, the day of the invasion, in 1945. So, we were there for four, five months, fighting these here suicide planes, and giving help to the Army, what they needed. And then they'd ship us out about 30, 40 miles out, and we'd radio any if suicide planes (were) coming. And we'd be attacked by them, too. And we got hit by this aerial torpedo. Made a hole going in one side and the hole going out, and never exploded. The second time we got hit by a suicide plane, not the same day, maybe a week later. We got hit by it, and it put a hole in our fuel tank below the water line. Eighteen days after this happened we go to a floating dry-dock and they pull out a 550 pound bomb. It's the letter that you read (Exhibit). And the third time we got hit by a suicide plane, he knocked a depth charge from the upper deck to the main deck, and we threw it

over, in the water and that. And I'd say he missed us by ten feet, and he killed himself. So we were pretty lucky.

His plane hit the deck?

With the wing, he knocked the depth charge. As a matter of fact, the wing of that plane fell on the ship, and we cut it up for souvenirs.

Did you get a piece of the wing?

I got a piece about an inch square.

You have it at home?

My son has it.

Oh, you gave it to your son. So, you say the wing of the plane knocked one of the depth charges off of its rack?

Off the rack. To the main deck. And we threw it overboard. We were just lucky, that's all.

You were lucky.

Yes.

Was there any other action that you engaged in with the USS Bauer?

No. That was it. Well, I'd say the night before the war was over, we were in Buckner Bay, someplace in the Philippine Islands, and a Japanese suicide plane came. I think it was a bomber. And hit this here Pennsylvania the night before. It killed about 20 people. The night before the war was over this happened. The battleship was the Pennsylvania. That was the last I remember. And two weeks after the war was over, I got discharged. But I traveled- my ship didn't come back- I had to- they put me on a ship, a troop ship, and all the way to San Diego, and I got discharged. I got on a train all the way to Great Lakes, and I got discharged from there.

Before we go to the discharge, because that will be probably the next thing we talk about, the letter you mention that talks about your ship...

...the bomb they took out.

The bomb they took out. Would you be willing to let the library make a copy of that to put with your transcript?

Yeah. Would you mail it to me then?

Oh, no, they'll make the copy, you'll take your original with you.

See, the most unusual thing, that I put two years in the Atlantic, 18 months in the Pacific. Not many people did that.

That's true. And how did you come to be taken off the Mervine, and onto the Bauer.

They do it automatically.

There was nothing wrong with the Mervine? It was still in service?

I never had any problems.

But I mean the ship, the destroyer, was still functioning?

Oh, it was still on duty.

So, where were you when the war ended?

We were off Okinawa there someplace.

But the fighting had stopped?

Had stopped.

But you say the night before some suicide plane came in and hit the other ship.

When the fighting was over I was in Buckner Bay.

How did you feel when you heard the war was formally over?

Well, I figured I'd be coming home pretty soon. See, when I was on that there Bauer, I was on that ship for about 18 months straight, without getting off of it. Once you're on, you stay on the ship.

You were on this 40 by, let's see (referring to notes)...

And 300 feet long.

And you were on the destroyer for 18 months without ever getting off?

Right.

Was there any way that you kept in touch with people at home while you were on ship?

Not too much, no. There was no way.

They didn't come and pick up mail off the ship?

No. No.

So, how long a period went by without you having any contact with your family?

Oh, I'd say months at a time.

And when you did have contact, what was it?

Well, just a letter now and then. I didn't write too much either. I could be at fault too.

Did you have newspapers or any source of news of what's going on at home?

No. No news. Nothing. Don't know what's going on.

No magazines, no newspapers?

No.

So, for 18 months at a time, what was your routine when you weren't working? When you weren't down in the engine room?

Well, watching these pumps and that. That everything's in order.

When you were not doing that, when you weren't at that duty, what did you do?

Well, we played cards on the deck and that, and...there's no recreation on a ship like that.

Did you get tired of playing cards?

No (laughs) just to pass the time away.

What kind of cards were you playing?

Oh, we'd play Pinochle and that, different kind of games. Mostly Pinochle.

Did anybody play for money?

Well, I imagine there were people, but I didn't engage in that.

Part 7: Return Home and Discharge from Service:

You were brought back to the United States by troop ship, San Diego.

And I got discharged at Great Lakes.

What day was that?

Well, that could have been some day in October, 1945.

What was that like?

Well, it was good lain. (both laugh) Good to get home. I missed my Ma's home cooking. In '45 I got discharged, and in '47 I got married.

OK, you got discharged in '45. Was there anybody waiting there at the..?

No.

So, how did you get home from there?

I imagine by streetcar or a bus.

Do you remember the reunion with your family? Did they know you were coming?

They didn't even know the day I came home (that) I was coming.

They were surprised?

Right.

How was that?

Well, great.

Part 8: Life After Service:

So, the days and weeks after you got discharged, what did you do?

Well, about a month later I applied for my job, and I received my old job back.

With International Harvester?

Yes.

And how long did you stay with Harvester?

I stayed with Harvester, well they closed up that plant, and I worked in the job shop, and I went back with Harvester, and I worked for Harvester for 45 years. I'm retired now, this December, I'll be retired 25 years.

So, you worked there your entire career, for International Harvester.

Yes.

You mentioned a couple of minutes ago that you got married in 1947? Was this somebody you knew before you went into the service?

No. I met her, and six months after I met her, I married her. And we've been married now for 55 years.

Wonderful.

Three children. Two boys and a girl, and seven grandchildren. And, as a matter of fact, out of the seven grandchildren, two are adopted, that my daughter adopted. She has one of her own.

Steve, did you stay in contact with any of your Navy buddies?

No.

You all just lost contact?

That's right.

Did you join any veterans' organizations?

I belonged to two veterans. They disbanded.

What were the posts that you belonged to?

One I belonged to was on 24th and California, and the other one was on about Central and Burbank.

What organizations were those?

Veterans of Foreign Wars.

They were VFWs. Have you ever attended any reunions?

No.

Part 9: Conclusion:

Well, we're about ready to wrap up. Let me ask you this: how do you think that your Navy experience affected your life?

Well, it's hard to say. There were good points and there were bad points. Life is, you've got to make the best of it. That's right.

What were the best points?

Seeing different parts of the world. And seeing different people and how they live.

And what were the worst points?

Well, life is, you've got to make the best of it. I've worked all my life. Never on welfare or anything like that. So, I didn't do too bad.

Did your experience ever influence the way you think about life, the way you think about the world?

It's hard to say. You can see the way every person, everybody's trying to come over here. And right now they allow a lot of bad people to come here. That's a trend.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't already covered in this interview?

Well, I just want to show some of my experience, that I went through.

I thank you very much for sharing all these interesting experiences with us, and we're going off record.