

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#267

CLARK JAMES SIMMONS

USS *UTAH*, Survivor

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 7, 1998
BY DANIEL MARTINEZ

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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Daniel Martinez (DM): Clark, do you like to go by Clark, or do you have a nickname?

(Taping interrupts then resumes)

Clark J. Simmons (CS): Are you still active on duty with the park there?

DM: Yes, I'm the historian. I'll give you my – did I give you my business card?

CS: Yeah, you did. I didn't know whether you were still active or you were semi-retired.

DM: Yeah, I've worked for the park service since '79, came out of college.

Okay, here we go. The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. The taping was done at the Imperial Palace Hotel at Las Vegas, Nevada, on December 7, 1998, at approximately eleven o'clock a.m. The person being interviewed is Clark J. Simmons, who was aboard the USS *Utah* as a mess attendant on December 7, 1941. For the record, Clark, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date?

CS: Clark J. Simmons, July 15, 1921, born in Beaumont, Texas.

DM: Okay. And J stands for?

CS: James.

DM: James. Now, were you named after an uncle, or did your folks just...?

CS: I was named after a grandfather.

DM: Grandfather, okay. First of all, let's talk about your family. How many were in your family, brothers and sister?

CS: I come from a family originally with six. My father was killed in an accident at a very young age and my mother raised four children – three sisters and myself. And she was a worker. She was a librarian. And we moved from Texas at a very young age. I was a very young age. And moved to a place called Chester, Pennsylvania, which I...

DM: What was the reason for moving, for the family?

CS: We're moving because of economics and the fact that she thought that we'd have a better chance of educating the children and everything in an environment other than Texas.

DM: So you went from a southern environment to a northern environment.

CS: Northern environment, and...

DM: And hoping that you would get a better chance. Now, this was right in the middle of the Great Depression.

CS: It was right in the middle of the Great Depression.

DM: What was – was life pretty tough, feeding kids and...?

CS: Well, as I said, my mother was a librarian and she used to get paid twice a month, the first and the fifteenth, regardless when those days fell, that's when you got paid. And with four children, which really was the reason why I went in the navy in order to help my family. My mother never wanted me to go. I went in there at seventeen and a half, and she just said, "No," emphatically, "no."

DM: Now, I'm interested, what were her objections about? Was she fearful for you or not wanting you to leave home?

CS: Well, no, my mother was an educated woman and she felt that I could wash dishes and be a maid, a male maid, anyplace. And some of the people, her co-workers and everything, agreed with her. And the only thing about it is that there were no jobs. When you think back, 1936, '37, '38, '39, you know, if you got a job for fifteen dollars every two weeks, you were a lucky person.

DM: So your mother, knowing that if you went in the military, it was segregated.

CS: And I was going to be a mess attendant.

DM: You were going to be a steward. You were going to...

CS: Well, I was going to be a mess attendant at that time.

DM: Right.

CS: And she strongly objected to it. You know, why go and be a servant, you know. You know, take my chances and try and get a job and maybe get a scholarship, you know, which was, quote, very unlikely.

DM: Remote.

CS: Unless you were a good athlete or you had an exceptionally good brain.

DM: Right. In talking about your family, how many brothers and sisters did you have? How did it break down and where were you, in the middle of that?

CS: Well, I had three sisters and I was the only boy and I was the oldest one.

DM: Okay.

CS: And there's five years difference between my oldest sister and myself. So I sort of was the surrogate father to my three sisters.

DM: Are your sisters still alive?

CS: All three of my sisters are still alive and two are in New York and one is in Connecticut.

DM: I hazard a guess that you guys are pretty close.

CS: We are. We are very close; a very close knitted family.

DM: Let's talk about this decision you made. Now besides the work, did you understand that there would be maybe an opportunity to travel and to see other things? Was that part of the decision?

CS: Well, my biggest thing was what I had heard about the midshipman crews, you know. And in the back of my mind this was really the motivating reason for me going into the navy. I get a chance to travel to all these beautiful ports and meet these beautiful people, and I thought that would broaden my education despite being able to go to these different places that I wouldn't normally, not be able to afford in life. But...

DM: Especially in an economic depression...

CS: Yes. But you know, when you get to see these posters, you know, join the navy and see the world. And I said, "Oh my god," I could see myself walking in Spain and in Singapore and in China and all these places. And this was – I never thought about, at that time, what the navy had to offer me. It just...

DM: It was – you were thinking about what the navy maybe had to offer in the way of...

CS: Of travelling.

DM: ...travel and broadening your horizons.

CS: And being able to send some money home, you know, to help my sisters through college. They all went to college, you know, with my help and my mother.

DM: You know, going in at seventeen and a half, you know, you think differently, obviously, when you're like that. But did the issue of possible race enter into this, because your mother's obviously brought it up that she didn't want you to be, you know, a butler for officers, but did you think about that at all?

CS: No, it never – it'd never crossed my mind. I guess being in the neighborhood where everybody was, quote, at that time, poor. And neighborhoods were different than what it is now, or what it became later on. It wasn't a lot of – we knew that there was segregation, we knew they were different in color, but it wasn't so profound.

DM: Okay.

CS: And so there was no problems.

DM: Did the family suffer that when they were in Texas, or was it not...

CS: Not greatly, no.

DM: Not greatly. When a lot of people think when you moved to the North, that that suddenly those things just don't occur, but it can be more profound even in the North. How was it in, you were in, you said Chester?

CS: Chester, PA. That's where.

DM: I've been to Chester, Pennsylvania. How was it there for the family?

CS: It was very good.

DM: Okay.

CS: And well I spent very little time there before I went into the navy.

DM: Now when you enlisted, you enlisted in Philadelphia?

CS: No, the funny thing is that I went to enlist in Philadelphia. There were no quotas. I had an aunt in Texas and my mother, you know, was absolutely against me going into the navy. So through writing my aunt, my aunt said, "Why don't you come and enlist here?"

DM: Okay.

CS: And the quota was a little better. And through Houston, Texas, I was able to get in there.

DM: Okay, so you enlist in Houston. Do you remember the day or the year?

CS: How can I – I'll never forget, September the sixteenth, 1939.

DM: Now here you are, you're a young man, you go in there and they got these chiefs and they got all these guys. How did they – I'm curious – how did it all happen? Obviously, you're an African-American that comes in there, did they tell you exactly what your job would be and where you were being trained. Was the training segregated or – I don't know anything about that.

CS: Oh they told you that, you know, this was a utopia. You know, you go into the navy, he says, "Oh, the sky's the limit, the things that you can do," never saying that you're going into a segregated – and I mean a segregated navy. That you're going to go to Norfolk, Virginia, which is, to me, was one of the worst places in the world at that time.

DM: Why is that?

CS: Pardon me?

DM: Why was that one of the worst?

CS: Well, first place, the city ran this government reservation, N.O.B.

DM: Okay.

CS: Naval Operation Base in Norfolk, Virginia. The city ran that. All those government...

DM: Federal government, but the city ran it.

CS: But the city ran it. And the base was segregated. Even to the point where on Sunday morning they tell you that you had to get in your dress blues, go to church. And you went up into the balcony of the church, where all the bottom of the church were for White, but you and your company went into the balcony of the church. Now this wasn't – you didn't have a choice. They said that you had to get up that Sunday morning, you had to go to church and this is where you were going to sit.

DM: Those were orders?

CS: Those were orders.

DM: Okay.

CS: And that's just the beginning of it. And going to the ship stores, there's only certain hours that you could go. You had to go in a group and then you march back to your N.O.B., the B East and K West. That was the mess attendant training unit. You had the officers' steward or officers' cook, who was the second in command. You had a chief petty officer, who was usually White, was the gun's mate or boatswain mate, who was your training. He's the one that did the drilling and everything else. The cook, first class, at that time, there was no chief, officer's cook or officer's steward. They gave you the things that you were going to do, like making beds and shining shoes and later on how to prepare the breakfast for whatever officer you were assigned to. But that was the two people who were in charge of your group. And usually your class was anywhere from forty-two to fifty-two, or fifty-six. And my class was class ten of 1939. And I think they were glad to get rid of us in Norfolk.

DM: Why is that?

CS: Well, most of the fellows there were high school graduates and very aggressive bunch of fellows.

DM: Aggressive in what way?

CS: Aggressive that, you know, they resented the things that were going on.

DM: This racism, hypocrisy.

CS: Racism and all that.

DM: How they were being treated.

CS: I mean and it was just something that, I guess, the classes before had not, they had not expressed their feelings on it. But this...

DM: Did you get the feeling that this was now, as a Black man, that there was an evolution going on, that as the years of slavery had slowly now started to remove itself, that African-Americans were starting to feel resentment towards this treatment?

CS: No, I think it was just an individual thing.

DM: Okay.

CS: And then you got a bunch of guys collectively that had the same kind of...

DM: Thoughts.

CS: ...thinking, the same kind of thoughts.

DM: Okay.

CS: And I guess because of their reading and teaching and things, they knew that what was going on was wrong, but it was, again, it was the authoritative people there that was able to suppress, you know, you could only be so much.

DM: And you were in the military.

CS: And you were in the military. And you had to...

DM: Tell me some of the things that class ten did. I mean, they were glad to get rid of you. Was there some kind of general protest against...?

CS: Yes, in fact, one of the things they did. When you're there, they call you a boot. So you had to wear the leggings.

DM: Right.

CS: And they felt that, you know, when you wore the leggings, it wrinkled your pants and all.

DM: Right.

CS: So, except for drilling, they wouldn't wear them. So they restrict the whole barracks. We couldn't go to the canteen; we couldn't do anything.

DM: Okay.

CS: And you couldn't go – and they restrict the whole barracks, you couldn't go into town.

DM: Now, chiefs like drill sergeants and such, they use a certain language sometimes to get their points across. Did they ever refer to you ethnically?

CS: No, we had a chief gunner's mate and I'll never forget his name, by the name of Barlow. I don't know what happened to him, but he had been in World War I and he was a very sharp chief, but he was straight down the line. And I'm trying – he isn't the kind of guy that you'd embrace as a fatherly figure.

DM: Right.

CS: But he was a top sergeant.

DM: So you respected him?

CS: You had a lot of respect for him. And the fact that...

DM: And he didn't look down the color line?

CS: No, he just, he was there for specific purpose and that was to teach you how to act as a unit.

DM: Okay.

CS: And that he did. And most of the time, you know, he said, you know, if we had any problems, to call him. And you know, whatever he could do, he would try to smooth it over. Where the chief, the first class cook, was a guy by the name called Steward G. I never knew what the G stand for, whether that was a interrogative, just a G, or just...

DM: Was he African-American?

CS: African-American. He had been in World War I and he was more the passive. You know, if they say do it, you do it.

DM: Okay.

CS: You know, one of those things.

DM: Okay.

CS: But it's funny, I often wonder what happened to him and...

DM: What happened to both of these guys.

CS: Yeah, what happened to both of these guys.

DM: Now, this is during your training. Were you given any leave during this time?

CS: Yes. After the sixteen weeks of training, we were given – this is in '39, and the war had broken out in Europe.

DM: In Europe.

CS: So we were given a fourteen-day leave.

DM: Okay, and where did you go for your leave?

CS: Well, I went back to Chester and then up to New York. I had an uncle there.

DM: Were you showing off the uniform?

CS: Oh yes.

DM: You were very proud?

CS: Very proud, you know.

DM: What did Mom say?

CS: She held her nose and said, "I still don't like it."

DM: But your sisters, I bet, liked it.

CS: Oh, they loved it. They wanted to show me off to all their friends.

DM: Do you have any pictures that were taken of you during this time? Are those part of your...

CS: My older sister has most of my mother – my mother expired seven years ago. And my older sister had most of the pictures, baby pictures and things like that.

DM: How about ones of you in uniform?

CS: Yes, I have several of them of me in uniform that were taken in Australia and taken in Hawaii.

DM: So you got to some of those places. And we'll talk about that. You finally got to some of those places you envisioned you might be able to go.

CS: Yes.

DM: You get out of training and let me just ask you, since I don't know, were you ever trained with firearms? Did you...?

CS: Yes.

DM: And was there training that you got or didn't get that regular boots got? Was the training that different?

CS: Well, I don't know. Only thing I can relate to is the fact what we got swimming, gas masks, where we were, went into a bunker and had to, with the gas masks, you had to take it off and go out. We had the old rifle training, where we were given like twelve rounds to fire.

DM: That's it?

CS: That was it. We had the manual of arms, which we – we were given a rifle, which we had to learn how to dismantle, and clean it and all like that, which was assigned to us. And the drilling and everything. Now what the other companies did, the White companies, which were out of B East and K West, we don't know.

DM: Right.

CS: But that's what the sixteen weeks were for us.

DM: And then when you – did they send you to school, or was part of that training as being a mess attendant done at that time?

CS: It was all combined within the six weeks.

DM: What were some of those classes? Describe to me. If I was going to be a mess attendant, what would I be taught?

CS: Well, part of your sea bag was a white jacket. You were given, I think, three white jackets besides your blues, your whites. And at that time, there were no – excuse me – there were no dungarees.

DM: Okay.

CS: And you were, after about three weeks, you would have these classrooms, where they show you how to set the table, how to serve from the left, how to pick up from the right. And then advanced work, how would you prepare when you're assigned an officer and you found out what he liked. If he liked grapefruits or if he liked prunes or if he liked orange juice, how to prepare them and set that for him when you get ready to do it. Where his

shoes would be for you to shine in the morning, before he gets up. If it's white shoes or his black shoes. How to make his bunk, how to put his pajamas away. You learn what his napkin ring look like, so that you could set his place according to his rank on the table. You found out where his laundry, you know, where he kept his laundry.

DM: So you took care – that was training to take care of almost all the officer's needs.

CS: Everything for him. You was his nursemaid.

DM: Okay. Interesting. And all you guys knew that. That was what you were in the navy for and I've got a feeling that what I've read is that this was done by most of the mess attendants with great pride in doing this. Doing it the best possible.

CS: Well, you have to understand, it took a great bit of psychology for you to survive.

DM: Tell me a little bit about that.

CS: Well, I found out that if you were, if you went along with the flow and you use psychology on them, that you moved very smoothly. You had no problems. You get so that you knew who the officers were who'd say, "I've got a good boy," and the word was passed. And to the executive officer, if you were in the wardroom, who was the main officer in the wardroom, that he wouldn't notice how you would treat the people you were responsible for and this went along. And if anything happened, they say, oh no, you know, they would sweep it under the rugs. And if you got in an altercation with someone...

DM: Okay, maybe you get arrested by shore patrol...

CS: Shore patrol, or even on the ship, you got in something, they says, "Oh, you know," rather than get a...

DM: Go before captain mass...

CS: ...captain mass, or deck court marshal. They says, "We'll take care of it," you know, stay aboard for a couple of nights. And there wouldn't be anything on your record. And this is the kind of thing that, if you were

smart, you knew rather than to rock the boat like you did in camp, that it'd be smooth sailing.

DM: Okay. You now get out of the training and did you find out at the end of your training what ship you were going to be assigned to?

CS: No, we were all – I was stayed over. I stayed over in Norfolk to, you know, still I don't know how I was ever picked to stay over to help with the incoming classes for a while. And then after two classes of that, I was part of a group that was sent by train from Norfolk to San Diego.

DM: Let me ask you, when you were sent by train, were you allowed to sit anywhere on the train?

CS: Oh no, it was a troop train. You were given three or four cars where it was just sailors.

DM: Okay. Now, among the sailors, were you able to sit anywhere you wanted or was these all African-American sailors?

CS: These are all African-American sailors that is on there.

DM: Okay. So even in the train it was segregated. Okay. Is this something that African-Americans at that time understood because you know, everybody thinks that African-Americans are all the same. They're not. I mean, they come from different parts of the country and they have different responses to this. Did you see that? Did you...?

CS: Yes. Well that was one of the things that class ten, the fellows that came from all over. And some of the fellows had been in this CCC. Some had been in the, did ROTC in high school. And most of 'em were high school graduates.

DM: Right. You said they were smart fellows.

CS: And most of 'em are pretty good athletes.

DM: Okay.

CS: Which gets back to, you know, Dorie Miller, who was a terrific athlete.

DM: Now, was Miller in your class?

CS: Yes, we were all in class ten.

DM: Well, let's talk about Dorie Miller. Dorie Miller was the first of his ancestry to receive the Navy Cross, one of the African-American heroes we look to this day. Tell me a little bit about him in your interaction with him.

CS: Well, Dorie Miller, first place, statue, he was a big man.

DM: How big was he?

CS: I would say he was six-three or six-four, 200 pounds but with a sweet disposition.

DM: You would hope so. (Chuckles)

CS: Yeah, he really was. So anyone who says anything contrary did not know him.

DM: Okay.

CS: He was a very mild man.

DM: And this name, Doris Miller. Can you explain that, why his name was Doris?

CS: We used to kid him about it and I think that his mother wanted a girl and his father wanted a boy and so it's Dorie, D-O-R-I-E.

DM: So that was a name also that he had, was Dorie.

CS: Yeah, Dorie. Dorie Miller.

DM: There had been a story that after he won the medal, I read this, that the navy was embarrassed by Doris, so they made it, called it Dorie. And that sets the record straight. He actually was known by Dorie.

CS: Dorie.

DM: Okay. And you guys would kid him a little bit about it.

CS: We would kid him on it, yes.

DM: I've seen some pictures of him. He seems to be very broad shouldered.

CS: Yes.

DM: And was he an athlete before he joined the navy?

CS: Yes. If you go back to his history in Waco, he was a football player, a basketball player, a baseball player, a swimmer. He was an all-around athlete.

DM: Now, did you have a chance to ask him or did the conversation come up, why did you join the navy? Do you remember his reasons or did he ever say?

CS: No, I never got into that. I guess we all knew that with the depression, we all had the same idea. That would be a way to move ahead in life.

DM: Doris Miller, back to him a little. Was he a quiet man or did he like to tell jokes or was he – what kind of guy was he, like if he walked in a room, what would he be like?

CS: He was a relatively quiet guy, but with a sense of humor.

DM: Okay.

CS: I think he had a terrific sense of humor. And you could joke with him and all you know. And he would just, literally, if he wanted to, could pick you up, you know and bear hug you and anything like that. You know, in a friendly sort of way.

DM: Right.

CS: And I found him to be a very, very pleasant man.

DM: Did it – it probably didn't come to any surprise to you of what he did later on at Pearl Harbor?

CS: No. Well, I have a little anecdote. I, at that time, I was not a very good swimmer. Dorie Miller qualified for me in swimming. We had to do seventy-five yards, free. And we had a thing that, you know, your name's on the back of your swimming trunks.

DM: Right.

CS: And so it was a common thing among us, whoever had, you got three chances to qualify. If you didn't, you know, you dropped down the next class. And you didn't want to leave the bunch of fellows that you started out with.

DM: Right.

CS: So I said, "Dorie, take my trunks and qualify for me." That's how close, you know, we were. So when they called, "Simmons," he...

DM: Had your trunks on?

CS: ...had my trunks on, jump in. And you know, struggle a little bit like it was... So this is the truth, so help me and you know, a few of us, in the class...

DM: You guys must have had a pretty good laugh about that.

CS: Oh, we did. And so actually Dorie Miller qualified for me in the swimming class. That's how close we were.

DM: Did you ever become a better swimmer?

CS: Oh yes. And thank god I did.

DM: Yes, and we'll talk about that. Well now you've stayed behind a couple classes and trained people. They must have saw great qualities in you yourself to be able to train people. And then you did get a ship assignment, or you got sent to the fleet. Is that correct?

CS: Yes, with the training ride across country, into San Diego and wind up aboard the receiving ship *Raleigh*, which was in, I guess, this old World War I receiving ship in San Diego. And somehow or another it happened, I was

pulled for the *Utah*, the only one in that whole group that was pulled for the *Utah*, which was the base force gunnery training ship.

DM: Right.

CS: And was stationed in Long Beach, in San Pedro.

DM: Good old AG16.

CS: AG16, that's right.

DM: Okay, so you go aboard the *Utah*, what kind of ship was she?

CS: A beautiful ship. The thing is that the – it was a battleship structure...

DM: Right.

CS: ...but the complement was so small that you had to run it, you know, it was just you had the space...

DM: About 500 men, wasn't it?

CS: Yeah. Yeah, 400 and something.

DM: Right.

CS: You didn't have water hours. You had a full canteen. You had beautiful officers aboard. I served with three captains aboard there. Captain Blandy, Captain Palmer and Captain Steele, which was the last captain there. And the fact that it stayed in port most of the time, which was a...

DM: Right. Went out on some fleet ops once in a while, but...

CS: Yeah, it went out.

DM: ...exercises.

CS: We'd go out in order to open up the ship's stores, you know, so fellows that smoked could buy cigarettes and buy things like that. You know, three-mile and come back in, Unless we were going through a training cycle.

DM: How many mess attendants...

(Conversation off-mike.)

DM: Thank you.

END OF TAPE 15

BEGIN TAPE 16

DM: On the USS *Utah*, how many mess attendants were aboard and what was the racial make-up?

CS: It was approximately twenty-two, twenty-three and in it we had maybe seventeen were Black and the others were Filipinos.

DM: What was the interplay between Filipinos and African-Americans?

CS: Aboard the *Utah* it was very good. Most of the Filipinos had been in much longer, except for one Black fellow who was from the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas.

DM: Oh really?

CS: Yes. And all of the other fellows were relatively, you know, '37, '38, '39. And don't think we had any '40 people. Thirty-eight, '39, mess attendants.

DM: Were you aware that Filipinos were considered people of color and did those people, were some of those people in your class, or where were they trained?

CS: That's something I never knew. I know that back after World War I, when they stopped the recruiting of Black Americans, that they were taking people from Guam, people from the Philippines and some they held over from the Caribbean Islands, but they stopped completely from taking Blacks, although there were Blacks rates, were gunners' mates, machinist mates and everything else, that was in the navy. But then in 1932, they start taking Blacks again, with provisional – they only could go into the S division, which was mess attendants, stewards and everything.

DM: Yeah, it's really interesting when you read about the Civil War navy, that African-Americans served many, many duties. In World War I they served...

CS: World War I they served in all the capacities.

DM: And then there was this whole reevaluation which kind of represented what the country was going through with the, you know, Jim Crow laws and all this other stuff, that that stretched to the navy, which many historians have said that the navy wasn't very, was the last, very conservative when it came to its race relations.

CS: They were. And I remember once, in an interview – my mother used to send me the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Amsterdam News* and there was an interview with Frank Knox, who was Secretary of the Navy and one of the reporters had asked him why the Blacks in the navy were not given the same opportunities as Whites. He said, “Very simple. If we give the Blacks a chance all the top petty officers would be Black.”

That was his statement in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

DM: That must have read interesting in the South.

CS: Yeah, mm-hm. But that was Frank Knox's statement.

DM: So in a sense, Frank Knox validated the work of African-Americans?

CS: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

DM: It's interesting, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his quest to deal with the issue of race that it wasn't dealt with more thoroughly during that time.

CS: Well, one of the things he did was at least open up the navy back to the Blacks although he put a stigma, as to what they could do.

DM: Right.

CS: I don't know whose thinking that was.

DM: Whose decision that was?

CS: Whose decision that was. But in 1932, they start taking back. It would be so interesting if you could attend just one of the – they called it K East, K West and B East. They have a group called the Black Mess Attendants Association.

DM: I was unaware of that.

CS: Yes.

DM: Tell me a little bit about – it's an organization...

CS: It's an organization.

DM: ...like the Pearl Harbor Survivors?

CS: No. It's an organization like the Pearl Harbor Survivors, but it only pertained to people who went through N.O.B. K West and B East.

DM: How many members are there?

CS: Oh, I imagine...the last time I attended one of their meetings was in Reno and was something like five or six hundred.

DM: Okay. A lot of these World War II vets.

CS: A lot of World War II vets. And they move around but originally down in San Diego was where they...

DM: Well, I'd be very interested to get more information about it.

CS: I think have some literature.

DM: On the *Utah*, where was your compartment? Now obviously you were segregated and where was your compartment? Were you...?

CS: We were on the port side by the blister, you know.

DM: Okay.

CS: On the...and right next to the warrant officer's state rooms and everything. We were...

DM: Were you a midship's or...

CS: Amidship.

DM: ...were you aft?

CS: Mid-ship, right midship. And we could go right out of the compartment into the warrant officer then right up to the wardroom.

DM: How were your quarters?

CS: It was – you know, we didn't have bunks. We had cots. Either hammocks or cots. There were no bunks aboard the *Utah*.

DM: No kidding.

CS: The chiefs had bunks and the officers had...

DM: What'd you sleep in?

CS: I slept on a cot. I got enough of a hammock when I was in Norfolk.

DM: You didn't like a hammock?

CS: I liked it but it took more of a – at night, you have to string it and then take it down in the morning, where a cot you just roll up your...

DM: And if you fall out of one of those, you can hit the deck fairly hard.

CS: Yes. But after a while, you learned to...

DM: I talked to a Pearl Harbor survivor yesterday, he said there was a whole art to it and that you would get used to it. You could dangle your legs off it. It was confining, but then you could get some sticks and stretch the ends.

CS: You call butterflying.

DM: Butterflying?

CS: Yes. You could butterfly the top of it and it would spread it out this way and it wouldn't turn so much.

DM: So you slept on a cot? Was it fairly comfortable?

CS: Yes, it was comfortable. You put your mattress...

DM: You (inaudible) in there.

CS: Yes, we had the ports and we looked right out into – when we were usually at our normal anchor in Honolulu, you know, Fox Eleven.

DM: Right.

CS: Look right out at Pearl City...

DM: Sure.

CS: ...and had the ports.

DM: Nice trade winds coming in.

CS: Yeah, nice trade winds coming in.

DM: Let me ask you about something that I missed in our – I want to just go back. When you were at training, did they go into hygiene and I know that the navy did that in normal training. So did they talk about the hygiene, how much showers you guys were supposed to get and what your nails were supposed to be like? Did they go into all of that stuff?

CS: You know, very lightly. But you see, once you're with a bunch of guys, we police the guys.

DM: You police your own hygiene?

CS: Yeah. And it's only one incident that we had to take a guy and put his whole sea bag and him with salt water soap and brush and scrub him down.

DM: What's that treatment called?

CS: Oh gosh.

DM: There is a name for that.

CS: There's a name for it and...

DM: Yeah. And that's standard. I've heard that from anybody from Vietnam going back that these guys that don't like to take their bath.

CS: We only had to do it for one fellow.

DM: Rough scrub right?

CS: And that settled that. He got to be a nice guy.

DM: Now, among the mess attendants, who was in charge of the mess attendants? Was there a senior mess attendant first class or how did that all work? How's the structure?

CS: You mean aboard ship or in training?

DM: Aboard ship, aboard the *Utah*.

CS: Aboard ship, what you call a head boy, who was usually the first class who had been in, you know, for some time. He was the first class.

DM: And he was called a head boy?

CS: Head boy. He would be in the wardroom. Then you had a head boy that was in the warrant officer's mess. And then the captains had his own mess attendant, his cook and steward.

DM: Okay.

CS: And that's the way it was broken up.

DM: When – and I'll move us along so we can get up to Pearl Harbor – you were on the ship from 1940 then?

CS: Nineteen forty, yeah.

DM: And served on her for over almost two years, I guess.

CS: Almost two.

DM: And when did you guys get sent to Hawaii?

CS: Well, we had come to Hawaii, that was, I think, the third trip. See the *Utah* would follow the fleet...

DM: Right.

CS: ...because we would draw our complement for training from the fleet. And so we'd do a six-week cycle, as you're probably aware of. And wherever the fleet were. So once we finished whatever cycle, then we'd come back, you know, re-store and everything else. And we'd go to Bremerton once a year.

DM: Right.

CS: And then back to Long Beach and then back to Hawaii if the fleet was there. And then we'd do that round robin.

DM: Okay. Now I have a picture of your ship being painted with its measure paint scheme at Bremerton.

CS: (Inaudible)

DM: When you went to the dark gray and the light gray tops above the stack. Also, the ship started to bristle with all kinds of guns. It seems that by 1940, '41, it seemed like there was a lot of gun training for gun captains or what was going on with the *Utah*?

CS: Well, we had the five-inch thirty-eight, which was being perfected aboard that. The one-point-one, which was also – they hadn't brought out the twenty-millimeter.

DM: Yeah, or the CONS.

CS: (Inaudible)

DM: Some of those other guns were starting to show up. So the ship was becoming a gunnery training ship?

CS: It was a gunnery training ship.

DM: Okay.

CS: And also fire control.

DM: Okay.

CS: The fire control.

DM: Did mess attendants have battle stations?

CS: Yes.

DM: Where was yours?

CS: Down in the bottom of the ship.

DM: And what were you supposed to do down there?

CS: Ammunition handler.

DM: You were an ammunition handler?

CS: Yeah, ammunition.

DM: So you'd be down by the magazines?

CS: Down by the magazines.

DM: Kind of tough place to be sometimes.

CS: Yes. Not knowing what's going on up...

DM: How many? Would all the mess attendants be assigned down there or...?

CS: All of 'em.

DM: All of them. That was your job.

CS: So if that was hit, forward. Wipe out the whole...

DM: Do you think that was true on other ships?

CS: Yes. Yes.

DM: I'm thinking of the *Arizona*.

CS: Yes.

DM: Because we had a number of African-Americans killed on the *Arizona*.

CS: Yes, that was true, most of them were ammunition.

DM: Ammunition handlers. Okay. Let's go to the last time you came into your mooring area at Pearl Harbor. Do you remember what day that was you guys came in and tied up on...?

CS: Yes, we came in on a Friday. We had just finished...

DM: With the rest of the fleet, on the fifth?

CS: Yes.

DM: Okay.

CS: We came in on Friday.

DM: On that morning?

CS: And well, around, just before noon.

DM: Okay.

CS: And the *Lexington* moved out of Fox Eleven and we moved in to Fox Eleven.

DM: And when you guys come in and tie up, there's a whole process. Are the mess attendants involved with that or what are you involved with when a ship's being moored?

CS: Well, when the ship's being moored...

DM: Deck, the deck...

CS: ...that's all...

DM: ...deck hands...

CS: And what you try and do is find out what your, you know, what officers are going ashore, who's going to be there for lunch or dinner.

(Conversation off-mike.)

CS: Find out who's going to be there for lunch, dinner, or breakfast and then also find out what part of your crew is going ashore and who is going to, you know...

DM: So you were prepping for that weekend, right...

CS: Yeah.

DM: ...dealing with the officers and what they were going to do. Did you know how long you were going to be in port?

CS: We were scheduled to leave that Monday morning, headed back to the States.

DM: You were going to Bremerton or San Diego?

CS: No, we were going to Long Beach.

DM: Back to Long Beach. Well, did you get liberty that weekend?

CS: Yes.

DM: There's so many questions I want to ask about that but need to kind of move on because the hour is slipping away, believe it or not. What was liberty like for an African-American in Hawaii?

CS: Well, it depends on what you like to do. You know I don't know if you remember there was a Two Jacks bar.

DM: Right.

CS: There were a lot of fellows who liked to drink.

DM: Was that – could you meet, mix with White sailors?

CS: It was a fellow that – Two Jacks, I think he came from someplace around San Francisco or something and opened up this bar. And most of the fellows, you know, Black fellows who went there, it was a sort of meeting place for the Black fellows.

DM: Okay. So they knew they could go to that bar and be comfortable there.

CS: Exactly. And also the Paradise Dance Hall, the fellows liked to dance. I don't know whether...

DM: Could they dance with...

CS: Yes.

DM: ...local girls?

CS: It was a taxi dance. Yes.

DM: Taxi dance?

CS: Yeah, that was the Paradise.

DM: And you didn't get any flack from any White guys about that?

CS: No, because believe me, nobody messed with the Honolulu police at that time.

DM: Why...?

CS: They were there big...

DM: Big local guys?

CS: And they would throw you a mile.

DM: Is that right?

CS: That's right.

DM: They're tough guys?

CS: They were. They were tough guys.

DM: Now, I know there was lots of activities in Honolulu. I interviewed one of the African-Americans and he said if you went to sporting house, there was a sporting house that was for African-Americans, one for Filipinos and all of that. Not that you participated in any of this (chuckles), but...

CS: (Chuckles) I went to the library, of course.

DM: Library. But is that true, was that segregated?

CS: I think it's more than segregated. I think it's something that they felt more comfortable with. That Black – and you know, the word would pass. You go here...

DM: This place is okay for us.

CS: ...and you're treated, yeah, you know. And you're treated, you know, sociable. They don't put the clock on and things like that.

DM: I gotcha. I gotcha. So Honolulu was not a bad place to go for liberty?

CS: It used to be a beautiful place before they got the Cinderella liberty and I had friends, you know, who I had met who were living there, who got married there. So if that was the case, a lot of times, I spent overnight liberty, you know, because I had an address that I could...

DM: Were these African-American friends or...?

CS: Yes, African-American.

DM: Now, did they marry local girls?

CS: They married local girls.

DM: So Hawaii, in a way, presented an alternative to some of the places in America that you couldn't do those kinds of things.

CS: Yeah, that's right.

DM: Interesting.

CS: It certainly did. And one fellow that – I don't know where I, can't remember where I met Loving, Floyd C. Loving, who lived in Waianae.

DM: Okay.

CS: And he married a local girl there. In fact, he was deputy mayor there for a while.

DM: That must've been pretty curious to you at that time. Wasn't it? I mean, that that kind of freedom existed?

CS: This is long after the war.

DM: After the war.

CS: And he lived in Waianae. I'm trying to think of the fellow's name that was mayor at the time of that.

DM: Okay.

CS: But anyway, Floyd got to be a deputy mayor and he was very instrumental in the shopping center out in Waianae...

DM: Okay.

CS: ...that he got involved.

DM: On the night of December 6, the night before the attack, did you have Cinderella liberty, or did you stay...

CS: Yes, I had not been home in, oh, two and a half years or so. And I had gone into Honolulu and bought presents, you know, for all the family and friends. We used to get these – we'd call it perfume.

DM: Right.

CS: (Inaudible) oh and I'd spend all my money.

DM: But did you run into any prejudice at all when you were...

CS: Not.

DM: So when you went into a store, you were treated just like any ordinary guy?

CS: I had no problem at all.

DM: In Honolulu.

CS: In Honolulu.

DM: So you bought these presents anticipating sending 'em home for Christmas?

CS: Yes. Yes. Had 'em all wrapped in packages and labels.

DM: Did you get 'em sent?

CS: Nope. I was going to bring 'em back on the eighth.

DM: Right.

CS: On the eighth, and then I was going to...

DM: Then you were going to get your leave?

CS: I was going to go on leave. And then...

DM: And go home with the presents.

CS: And go home with the presents.

DM: Where are the presents now?

CS: Down in my locker on the *Utah*.

DM: They're still aboard ship.

CS: Still aboard ship.

DM: Well, let's go to the morning of December seventh. You get back, Cinderella liberty. It must have been a grand sight, seeing those battleships and all of that, being involved with the navy. That navy was a great big navy.

CS: Yes.

DM: Was there a sense of pride, even as a sailor, seeing those ships?

CS: Yes, well, as I said, my motivation, one of my motivation, was, you know, getting on a midshipman cruise and being in a great wide fleet and, you know, sailing around the world.

DM: Right.

CS: And just to see these ships. And I was sort of disappointed when I got assigned to the *Utah*. This was not the fleet. This was the base force.

DM: Right.

CS: But I learned to love it because of, you know, the things that it was doing and the way that you...

DM: It gave you other opportunities.

CS: Yeah, other opportunities. But the *Utah* was beautiful duty.

DM: Yeah. On the morning of December seventh, what time did you get up that morning?

CS: Well, I was off that whole weekend.

DM: Right.

CS: I was part of the ward room crew, but I was off that day. And one of the fellows, that Sunday morning, I had gone to shore that Saturday, shopped, came back and had dinner and then went back on the beach again. And so I

got back, you know, usually Cinderella liberty and a fellow came down and says, "The ship in front of us just blew up," that morning.

He was talking about the *Raleigh*. And actually what had happened, I think they found out that a torpedo had gone through...

DM: Right.

CS: ...into the *Utah*.

DM: So that morning, you guys were just ordinary (inaudible)

CS: Laying down, you know, relaxing that Sunday morning.

DM: Did you hear an explosion at all?

CS: And I...we ran to the port to look out and I actually saw one of the Japanese planes come in, release the torpedo, dip his wing and straighten up and the torpedo headed for the *Utah*. Then I felt the...

DM: Reverberation?

CS: Reverberation.

DM: So the ship shook.

CS: Shook.

DM: Where did you think she hit?

CS: It was someplace forward...

DM: Okay.

CS: ...of where we were. You know, we were like mid-ship.

DM: Did you think what the heck is going on?

CS: Well, had no idea what was going on.

DM: Okay.

CS: So I took off going up to the officer's country where I knew there were life jackets and there's a way of getting off the ship.

DM: General quarters sounds (inaudible).

CS: Well, at that time, the bugler was blowing abandon ship and there was no P.A. system, you know. Only the boatswain mate was everything.

DM: Was the ship listing?

CS: It had begun to list so the chief engineer, the communication officer, Sol Isquith, who was a senior officer aboard, a lieutenant commander, and Lieutenant Windsor, who was the communication officer, and myself, we went into the captain's cabin. And each one of us had a life preserver, this old kapok life preserver.

DM: Right.

CS: Which, thank god, we did.

DM: Life jacket on, right.

CS: We didn't put 'em on.

DM: You didn't.

CS: 'Cause had we put them on, these big ports, which was eighteen inches in circumference...

DM: Right.

CS: ...we wouldn't have been able to get through the port.

DM: Well tell me, then now the ship got hit twice. Did you feel that second torpedo hit?

CS: I didn't feel the second, only one.

DM: There was just too much happening.

CS: But the ship was beginning to list. And everything was...

DM: That must have been a frightening feeling.

CS: It was. Everything was beginning to break loose and everything else. So we got – each one of us took a port, thank god.

DM: You mean you went over with the ship?

CS: No, just as we went out the port, the lines were getting to part and I got on it and then jumped into the water and swam to Fox Eleven.

DM: Okay. So which side did you abandon ship on? The ship's listing this way. Did you abandon on the port side?

CS: On the [*starboard*] side. 'Cause she listed to the [*port*] side.

DM: Okay.

CS: On the [*starboard*] side and went, I swam to the Fox Eleven and then after I saw what was happening, I then headed for Ford Island.

DM: Now, you didn't have your life preserver on?

CS: No, I left that in the cabin.

DM: You left that behind. There was a lot of sailors in the water I understand.

CS: There were a lot in the water. Then some of the boats were in the water.

DM: Planes everywhere?

CS: And planes. They were strafing.

DM: The water?

CS: Yes, the ships and the water. And when I got to the beach, I was bleeding in the head, in the shoulder and everything else. And luckily, one...

DM: What had happened?

CS: I don't know whether I was hit with shrapnel or hit with a bullet. You know and I don't know when I was hit. But when I got there, you know that trench they were...

DM: Yeah, there was a trench...

CS: They were trenching...

DM: ...they were laying some...

CS: The pipe, water lines...

DM: ...pipe and a lot of *Utah* guys jumped in there.

CS: Yeah, we jumped into that. So one of the pharmacist's mate which had brought his gear with him and he said, "You're bleeding."

And he began to...

DM: And you didn't know you were bleeding.

CS: I didn't know I was bleeding.

DM: Now did you receive the Purple Heart?

CS: I received the Purple Heart [*medal*].

DM: Seeing your ship sink for a sailor is a tough thing. Was that tough for you to see her go or...

CS: Well, first, I didn't realize what was happening.

DM: It didn't seem real?

CS: It just didn't seem...you know, it was a bit of shock. You're seeing these planes and then word passed that these were Japanese planes. We're being attacked by the Japanese and they're diving on us. And you're seeing the machine gun.

DM: Right.

CS: And the *Raleigh* and the *Detroit*, they began to fire all over the island.

DM: You could hear the gunfire from the other...

CS: Gunfire from all over. And you're in a state of shock. You don't know what's...

DM: Were you scared at all during this?

CS: Yes. And it was...you just didn't know what was happening.

DM: Now you were, what, twenty?

CS: I was twenty at the time.

DM: And were there other African Americans that got off with you?

CS: Yes. There was...some of 'em was picked up in the boat and some of 'em like me, they swam to the...

DM: Did you have any problems swimming?

CS: No. None whatsoever. I don't know, maybe I walked on water, but I know it didn't take me long.

DM: So even though Doris Miller passed your swim test, you passed your swim test that day.

CS: Oh yes. Oh, after that, I...

DM: You got to be a pretty good swimmer, you said. Were there any mess attendants killed on your ship?

CS: Yes. We lost one fellow by the name of Smith.

DM: Did you know him?

CS: Yes, I knew Smith, a fellow from North Carolina.

DM: What kind of guy was Smith?

CS: He was a very aggressive sort of fellow.

DM: In what nature?

CS: In the fact that he aimed to please. He was going to make the navy his career.

DM: That was going to be his home?

CS: That was going to be his home.

DM: Was that your goal?

CS: No, I don't...

DM: You were just going to see how it goes along?

CS: How it goes along. But I thought I would do a hitch and extension and that would be it.

DM: Do you know what maybe happened to Smith?

CS: I understand from fellows who was on the barrel, that he was machine gun, that he had bullet holes in his chest.

DM: And he – that happened on the ship or in the water?

CS: I don't know. I don't know whether he went out on the quarterdeck and when they were strafing he got it, but they found his body and they buried him up in Punchbowl.

DM: In Halawa Valley and later in Punchbowl?

CS: Punchbowl.

DM: The ship goes over, your guys are in the trench. Did you remain there the entire time of the raid?

CS: No...for the raid, yes. And then the pharmacist's mate got me over to the submarine base hospital. And for some reason, I stayed there – I really don't know – that Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, but that Wednesday, I'm in the

hospital and the radio is on and they begin to talk about the damage that was done and I went into shock. I would get warm; I'd get cold. And so then the ship service officers was checking to see how many of the *Utah* sailors were dead. And I told him to get me the hell out of here. I said, "I don't care what ship, just get me off of this island."

And we had been friendly.

DM: Yeah.

CS: So they said, "Well, I'll see what I can do."

And so the *Lamson* came in and he says, "I got a ship for you."

DM: The *Lamson*?

CS: The *Lamson*.

DM: What kind of ship was she?

CS: A destroyer, 367. And...

DM: Did you serve on her for some time?

CS: I served on her until 1943.

(Conversation off-mike.)

DM: Okay, Mr. Simmons, there's so much more I wanted to ask you, but I'll wrap this. We'll talk about maybe a possibility of doing more. I know you have more things you have to do while you're here, but let me give you the opportunity to talk about, I guess, what all of this meant, being an Afri—first of all, I want to ask you about your medal. What is that medal that you have around your neck?

CS: This is the Congressional medal for Pearl Harbor survivors, which I'm very disappointed with.

DM: Why is that?

CS: Why, because Congress authorized this medal for the Pearl Harbor survivors.

DM: Right.

CS: But they failed to do a resolution saying what the medal meant and why they were awarding this medal to the Pearl Harbor survivors.

DM: What would you have liked them to say?

CS: I'd like for them to have said this was something that was a special day, that these are the people that was in Pearl Harbor or in the Territory of Hawaii on December 7, 1941 and for that services and for survivors and everything else. This is a medal that Congress saw fit to give them, a grateful country.

DM: And what did they do? What...

CS: Nothing. They authorized the medal.

DM: And you kind of picked 'em up right?

CS: And then they sent 'em to the district and said give them to people who are qualified to have them. Which I think is – it's really, it was just so, shit, it wasn't even professional.

(Conversation off-mike.)

DM: ...African-American, what this all meant.

CS: Well.

DM: During this time.

CS: I think being in a segregated navy, a very...

DM: Segregated navy.

CS: ...segregated navy taught me a lot. Not only how to deal with people, but it taught me, you know, that life is very short and there are more important things than life than just dollars and cents. And it's the respect that you get from your fellow man in dealing with your family and taking care of them.

And one of the things I'm proud of is a lot of the Pearl Harbor survivors who went on in their professional life, either they stayed in the service or they went into civilian life and they made a success.

DM: Whether they were White or Black.

CS: Whether they were White or Black, they made a success out of it and just like today is our second birthday. I feel that...

DM: Oh, this fifty-seventh anniversary.

CS: Fifty-seventh anniversary and everything.

DM: Well, Mr. Simmons, I'd like to thank you for this interview and hope that we have an opportunity maybe to do one in the future, to talk about more in-depth subjects about this segregation and what happened to you for the rest of the war and after you were out of the military.

CS: I had a very full life and I can thank the navy for a lot of it. It prepared me for the things that I had to encounter.

DM: Well, thank you very much.

CS: Thank you.

END OF TAPE #16

TAPE #35

DM: The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. This is part two of a segment of tape that is being done at the Imperial Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. For the record, would you just state your full name please?

CS: Clark J. Simmons.

DM: Okay. And Mr. Simmons was a mess attendant aboard the former battleship *Utah* AG 16 at the time.

CS: And BB 31.

DM: And BB 31. Clark, we've already talked about pretty much the Pearl Harbor segment of your life. Was there anything that you wanted to add that, that you maybe over the last day or so had an opportunity to think, oh, I should have told that story, or something that you wanted to add to that interview?

CS: Well, silly things that's come to my mind. But as we go along, I'll, you know, as it comes to me.

DM: Okay, if it comes to you, that'd be great. Let's talk about the next segment of your naval career. You leave the *Utah* because obviously she's been sunk at Pearl Harbor. And you went aboard a destroyer. Can you tell me the name of that destroyer?

CS: Yeah, the *Lamson*, USS *Lamson*, [DD] 367, which was in DESRON Four of the Pacific Fleet.

DM: And where did you get on board? Where did you...

CS: I got on board in Pearl...

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: ...and our first task after getting aboard was taking some Marines to Johnston Island.

DM: And what was the purpose of that?

CS: They went to sort of reinforce the island and see if the Japanese had planned to land there and they were going to hopefully...

DM: Defend it.

CS: ...defend it.

DM: Now, you're going on board a new ship. That's always an apprehensive, I'm sure, apprehensive moment. You don't know what the crew's going to be like. You don't know what your job, I guess, is going to be like or the officers that you're going to take care of. How did that all turn out?

CS: Well, it turned out to be great because—and going aboard there, I met some of the fellows that, you know, we had socialized on the beach together. And not knowing, you know, what ship they were on even, not bothering, you know, to follow up.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: So it was like, like home weekend. And they knew what I'd gone through on the *Utah*, so they sort of welcomed me with open arms.

DM: Now, you're talking about the fellows. You're talking about the African-American mess attendants.

CS: And some of the crew because two of the fellows from the *Utah*, also which were white, also went aboard the *Lamson* with me.

DM: I'd like to talk to you about the issue. How much interplay was there among African-American servicemen and white servicemen? Was it—are we making more of the segregation than there actually was, or was there some friendships that developed out of this?

CS: Well, aboard the *Utah* is like anything else, you know, the water seeks its own level. And you found that some of the fellows that liked the same thing that you did, you know, we had a baseball team and a basketball team aboard the *Utah*. We had a football team. And if you were athletically inclined, that group you sort of went with, and you, on the beach, you would go with them and you'd pool your money and do the things...

DM: So there was a somewhat of a breakdown along those lines?

CS: On the *Utah* it was.

DM: Now does that mean that African-American athletes could play on the teams...

CS: Oh yes.

DM: ...would be integrated and that sense.

CS: Yes, very much so.

DM: So that's interesting, that on the professional level, there was a segregation.

CS: Yeah.

DM: But on the performance level on the athletic field...

CS: You were the same.

DM: It was desegregated.

CS: Yeah.

DM: Once onboard the ship and now you're heading into a combat zone, what was your job? Who was—do you remember the officer or officers? How did that all work out on the *Lamson*? Much smaller ship.

CS: Oh, it's much, much smaller. And the first three days, I spent most of the time over the rail, seasick.

DM: Oh.

CS: It was, you know.

DM: Not like riding a big ship like the *Utah*.

CS: No, not the *Utah*. But the fellows, you know, they were very sympathetic and they realized that I was there with bandage on my head and shoulders and everything.

DM: Oh, you still had...

CS: Yeah.

DM: ...your wounds were still...

CS: Yeah, I still had my wounds.

DM: ...on the mend.

CS: And so my duties were just like light duty. You know, they took care of everything and showed me around the ship and introduced me to, you know, the places I'd have to go in order to get things done.

DM: How was the old man on the ship?

CS: At that time it was a fellow by the name of W. P. H. Blandy. No, I'm sorry, P. B. Mercer...

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: ...was this...

DM: The captain, huh.

CS: ...the skipper, the captain. He later got to be the secretary to Nimitz, the flag secretary to Nimitz.

DM: What kind of guy was he?

CS: Oh he was, he was navy. And he'd remember some of the things he went to Australia, where he got these clothes, you never know, but the navy, the Australian, New Zealand wore the long white socks and short pants...

DM: Right.

CS: ...that's what he'd walk out with when he went on the beach. That's what he had. He had—P. B. Mercer was quite a skipper. And he could handle a destroyer. He could come along the docks and...

DM: So he knew how to handle a ship.

CS: Oh he knew...

DM: He was a sailor.

CS: He was a sailor.

DM: How was his treatment of the crew?

CS: The crew was, they loved him.

DM: Respected him?

CS: They respected him because he's a very fair man.

DM: And he was fair to both and white and Black?

CS: Both white and black. Yeah.

DM: Now where was the compartment where the mess attendants were building?

CS: We were sort of midship aft. Sort of, you know, in the frames.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: We would be where the number, between number three and number four torpedo tubes.

DM: Were you up on the "01" level or were you down?

CS: No, on the first level. You know, destroyer doesn't have all the compartments...

DM: Right.

CS: ...of the battleship. You got, what, you got the ground deck and then you go down one level.

DM: You were down one level?

CS: And then one level.

DM: How many mess attendants aboard the *Lamson*?

CS: I went aboard, there was only five.

DM: Okay.

CS: And later we increased it to nine.

DM: Okay. And were you assigned officers or a officer?

CS: I was assigned a officer at the time.

DM: Do you recall his name at all?

CS: Yes. (Chuckles)

DM: Do you do that with great pride or (chuckles)...

CS: Yes, because he was a guy who was, he was a ninety-day wonder.

DM: Okay.

CS: He was an accountant by profession...

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: ...by the name of Horsepool.

DM: Horsepool?

CS: Horsepool.

DM: Do you know where he hailed from?

CS: He came from the Midwest, but he's in California now. I understand that he has about eight children.

DM: Wow.

CS: And on the *Lamson* reunion, I always miss him. The years that I go, he doesn't go. And when...

DM: Did you get along with this guy okay?

CS: Oh we get along. We got along beautiful.

DM: Yeah. Was there a different feeling on a destroyer than a bigger ship like the *Utah*?

CS: Yes, it was a lot closeness. And I found that true that your battle stations on the destroyer, that it was integrated battle station.

DM: And what was your battle station?

CS: When I first got there, I was an ammunition handler.

DM: Okay.

CS: And I got to be a sight setter when I, later on, as I developed.

DM: So you were in one of the gun tugs. What type of gun were you...

CS: A five-inch thirty-eight, which was a number one gun forward.

DM: Now, was that...

CS: A turret gun.

DM: ...a casemate or turret gun?

CS: Yeah, turret.

DM: So, you're inside the turret.

CS: Inside the turret.

DM: And what's that like?

CS: Well, you like to be on open gun so you could see, you know...

DM: What's going on.

CS: ...what's going on. But again, you like the safety of, you know...

DM: Having some armor around you?

CS: Yeah. When you get strafed...

DM: Right.

CS: ...or the bombs are dropping and the shrapnel is flying all around.

DM: Yeah. Now, what did the *Lamson* do? After it got back from Johnson Island...?

CS: We came back into Pearl and got supplies and we started ourselves with the tour. We went to American Samoa, English [*Western*] Samoa and then we hooked up in Auckland, New Zealand with four other ships.

DM: Now did you get a chance to see some of New Zealand?

CS: Oh yes.

DM: What's New Zealand like?

CS: Oh, at that time, they just, they couldn't do enough for...

DM: How were you treated as an African-American?

CS: Royally, royally. I mean, you couldn't, you went into a bar, you couldn't spend any money.

DM: And they didn't care. You were...

CS: No.

DM: ...just a U. S. serviceman.

CS: Just a U. S. serviceman. Nice, big, thick steaks, big pitchers of milk, which, you know, on a destroyer, after two or three days, you run out.

DM: Right.

CS: And it was just beautiful. Both Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand.

DM: Can I ask you something? This changing attitudes of acceptance that where you go one place, you're treated just like an ordinary guy and then go some other places and that's not—or you go back to the ship and, you know, it's segregated and all of that. Did that cause problems for you emotionally?

CS: No, well, we were going through a period, which was new to all of us. It was all, you know, going in a war, being young, not knowing, you know, what tomorrow's going to bring and seeing what the Japanese had done in Pearl Harbor. Every time when we went out of port, we didn't know what we were going to run into.

DM: Right.

CS: And we were the front line. The *Lamson* and the ANZAC squadron, that was the front line.

DM: Because all that was left after Pearl Harbor were cruisers, destroyers and a few handful of carriers.

CS: Well, we had the *Enterprise* and the *Lexington*, but they had to make sure that they stayed out of harm's way.

DM: Couldn't get them sunk.

CS: They couldn't get them sunk. So we were along with the Australian and New Zealand and the English ships and the *Chicago* cruiser and the *Mahan* and the *Lamson*, formed the ANZAC squadron. And we were the communications. We kept the communication line between Australia and New Zealand and the Philippines.

DM: Was part of your job scouting as well, figuring out what's out there.

CS: Oh yes. Scouting.

DM: Now the Japanese came after you guys?

CS: We were reported sunk about twelve times.

DM: Is that right?

CS: Yes.

DM: They get some hits into you or...

CS: No, they bombed us and strafed us between the Marshall and Gilbert Islands.

DM: Yeah.

CS: We used to make daily runs and just so...

DM: So it was just almost like a common occurrence?

CS: Yeah.

DM: You knew they were going to come after you.

CS: Yeah, and we went after them to harass them, you know. Midnight, give 'em a wake up call, you know, in the morning.

DM: Hello, we're here, right?

CS: Yeah and then head to the safety where we'd have some air coverage.

DM: Was the *Lamson* a lucky ship?

CS: It was a lucky ship.

DM: Did you suffer any casualties during...

CS: Yes, in Okinawa, it finally...

DM: Caught up with you?

CS: ...kamikaze flew into the forward port, the CIC, and just sheared the front off.

DM: Let's set that up. So you are on the ship from '41?

CS: Forty-one.

DM: Late '41.

CS: To '43.

DM: To '43. And you get into combat later in Okinawa?

CS: No, I was not aboard in Okinawa.

DM: Oh, you weren't aboard her then.

CS: But I did Coral Sea and Midway. I did Coral Sea and Midway and many of the Marshall and Gilbert raids.

DM: What did you do in the Battle of Midway on the *Lamson*?

CS: The *Lamson* was one of the ones that, the forerunners for the carriers. We were like the...

DM: Point ship?

CS: Point ship for them. Because of its speed.

DM: Right, make sure...

CS: Yeah.

DM: What carrier group were you with? Were you with *Hornet* or do you remember that at all?

CS: No. We were with the...

DM: *Enterprise*?

CS: ...*Enterprise*.

DM: Quite a ship, the *Enterprise*.

CS: Yes, yes, it was.

DM: Did you know any mess attendants off the *Enterprise* at all?

CS: No, I didn't know any of them.

DM: When you fought these, did you know that the Battle of Midway was a big battle that was happening?

CS: We didn't at the time. We later found out that that was the decisive battle.

DM: Yeah, which it turned out to be _____. Did you do escort duty around the *Enterprise* and, or did you sail after her to pick up pilots that maybe crashed into the sea?

CS: Yes. We were the point. We were like the starboard point forward. And usually if we wasn't doing flank speed we would, for submarines.

DM: Okay.

CS: Look for submarines and then when they were either landing the planes or the planes were taking off, we'd be the point in case they had to go down. We'd pick up the pilots.

DM: Now you also probably would spot incoming aircraft to report that.

CS: Oh yes.

DM: Okay. Well those were dicey battles. When you got off the *Lamson* in '43, where did you go next?

CS: I went for shore duty. I was scheduled to go to Bainbridge, Maryland for shore duty, but I got bumped and went to Norfolk, Virginia, which I hated.

DM: Your favorite place.

CS: Which I hated.

DM: Why did you hate Norfolk?

CS: Oh, because it was like being on, I guess—I don't know really how to describe it. It was just a place with so many restrictions. It was such a...

DM: It was in the South still.

CS: In the South. It was...

DM: And those restrictions, are we talking about the restrictions I think we're talking about?

CS: Yes, yes.

DM: Restrictions for African-Americans?

CS: That's right. You know, the back of the bus, the drinking fountains, not being able to go to certain places.

DM: And having to—did you still have to go as ship's company, African-Americans in groups to this, to the stores?

CS: That's right. It was just a horrible duty. It was so bad that I asked to go back to sea, back to the Pacific.

DM: Did they grant that?

CS: Yes, after a while.

DM: And where did you go?

CS: Well, first I went up to Boston and I went what they call a nucleus crew that was testing DE's, you know, new DE's in Charleston Navy Yard. And had the ship would be commissioned, this crew would go out and test...

DM: These were sea trials?

CS: Yeah, sea trials. Make sure everything's on. Then you come back and they put you on the beach. When another ship is ready, you go out and you train a crew. So I did that for a while.

DM: Okay. And then you made your way back to the Pacific finally?

CS: Made my way back to the Pacific.

DM: And what'd they—did you get on another ship?

CS: On another ship.

DM: Which one was that?

CS: This was the *Bivins*, B-I-V-I-N [*USS Bivin DE-536*].

DM: Another destroyer?

CS: No, a destroyer escort.

DM: Smaller?

CS: Smaller. But...

DM: Where did the *Bivins* take you?

CS: The *Bivins*, well, we went through the canal and to Tahiti, oh my god, and then...

DM: You say Tahiti because Tahiti was a French possession...

CS: Yeah.

DM: ...and they had beautiful islands...

CS: Yeah.

DM: ...and beautiful women.

CS: And all that.

DM: And all that. Did you get some leave in Tahiti?

CS: Oh yes, we got leave.

DM: You say that with a smile. There must be a story.

CS: Oh, there are so many stories. Beautiful libraries there.

DM: Beautiful libraries?

CS: Very beautiful libraries.

DM: Oh, I wasn't aware of that. The *Bivins*, would that be that the ship that you would end World War II on?

CS: No, I ended World War II in the Philippines on shore duty.

DM: So you rode the *Bivins* and got to the Philippines?

CS: I did certain, well, Okinawa...

DM: You were in Okinawa?

CS: Okinawa.

DM: Was the *Bivins* on picket duty?

CS: Yeah, picket duty.

DM: So you were, took the brunt of kamikaze attacks like the others?

CS: Yeah. And I saw the *Lamson* being hit in Okinawa.

DM: What was that like for you?

CS: Oh, god, I just wondered, you know, about so many guys that I knew.

DM: And what was the result of the kamikaze hit on the *Lamson*?

CS: Well, it just sheared the forward part. It hit CIC and the bridge and everything else. And a very good friend who had got to be the executive officer from Brooklyn, a fellow by the name of Behan, was killed. He was executive officer and he was in CIC. He was killed aboard, along with most of the CIC people.

DM: Any of the mess attendants killed?

CS: No. Not, not...

DM: Did she lose her bow?

CS: She lost the whole bow, number one, number two gun.

DM: Did she sink?

CS: No, she—they patched her up and took her back to Mare Island and put a new bow on her.

DM: That must have been horrifying watching it.

CS: It was, watching those guys in the water and everything. And nothing you can do about it.

DM: So how did you, I mean, you went through major campaigns in the Pacific. You end up in Manila after it had been repatriated by MacArthur's troops. What were you doing there?

CS: (Chuckles) The funny thing, we went into Manila, which was the only war torn city that I saw during the whole war.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: I went to the walled city and could see the holes.

DM: Bullet holes and shrapnel?

CS: Bullet holes in the wall. And I don't know if you've ever in the Philippines, but there's a big federal building, post office, and bales of Japanese yens where they had made printed money...

DM: Right.

CS: ...for the Filipinos.

DM: Literally bales of them, huh.

CS: Bales of fives, tens, twenty and a hundred-dollar, you know, yens.

DM: Right.

CS: You know, to that equivalent were there. And they're just for the taking, you know. There wasn't any...

DM: So did you get some souvenirs from that?

CS: Oh yes. And as the Filipinos, you know, is now, they needed everything.

DM: Right, it was very poor.

CS: And they found out MacArthur couldn't walk on water.

DM: Right.

CS: But it was nice to endure.

DM: What was your duty ashore?

CS: Well, we set the BOQ there.

DM: Uh-huh. For naval officers?

CS: Yeah, naval officers.

DM: And so mess attendants were required for that.

CS: At that time, we had the luxury of having the title of steward mates. We were no longer mess attendants.

DM: Oh they changed your rank.

CS: Oh yes. We were steward mates.

DM: How about your pay scale?

CS: The pay—well, the pay scale was beginning to go up.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: And that the first time we rated the crow. You know, before then we had the crescent, like the...

DM: Right.

CS: ...quarter moon and the hash marks.

DM: Right.

CS: But then they made us steward mates and we got the bird. We got the crow.

DM: So you got a rate that's similar to white...

CS: Yes, which was, you know, the only difference were that you had the crescent...

DM: Right.

CS: ...there...

DM: Above.

CS: ...and you had the crow.

DM: Well, that must have been a proud moment.

CS: Not really. It just the same thing only different.

DM: Yeah, but nothing much changed...

CS: Nothing much changed.

DM: ...except the rate did and, okay. And that's where you are when World War II ends? When...

CS: No.

DM: When the Japanese surrender, are you in the Philippines?

CS: I was in, yes, I was on the *Bivins* though, when...

DM: Okay. And that must have been a wonderful moment. How did the crew react to all of that?

CS: Well, we were getting ready, you know, to go and, for the landing of Japan. And we knew what the *Bivins* and all of those kind of ships would be. They would be the front ones that go in and sweep, you know, for submarines and mines, like that.

DM: It was going to be tough, though.

CS: And we didn't look forward to it. We wasn't looking forward to it.

DM: There's a good chance that the *Bivins* would be lost.

CS: Yeah. Yes, a lot of ships would be lost.

DM: So it was an apprehensive moment?

CS: Yes, it was.

DM: So the ending of the war came probably as a welcome relief?

CS: Yes, it was.

DM: So when did the *Bivins* go back to America?

CS: I don't know. I left for the Philippines and they later used it for target practice. I think something like 1976 or '79.

DM: What was your favorite ship you served in World War II?

CS: Oh, unquestionably the *Utah*.

DM: The *Utah* was your ship.

CS: And the next would be the *Lamson*, but...

DM: The *Lamson*. So, when were you discharged?

CS: I was—October 27, old navy day, 1945.

DM: And you go, did you go back home?

CS: Yes, I went home briefly and then I was looking for what I was going to do and then I enrolled in college. I sent out applications.

DM: Now, were you a recipient of the G.I. Bill?

CS: Oh yeah. The greatest welfare program that ever happened to us.

DM: So that allowed you to go to college. And which college did you select?

CS: The University of Wisconsin.

DM: And you completed a four-year degree?

CS: A four-year degree.

DM: In what?

CS: In business administration and political science, and a law degree in the University of Wisconsin.

DM: So you went even beyond a four-year degree.

CS: Yeah.

DM: You got a law degree.

CS: Degree, yes, LL.D.

DM: And where did that law degree take you?

CS: It took me to work for, I applied for the Justice Department.

DM: And what year was that?

CS: Oh boy.

DM: In the fifties?

CS: Yes, it was in the fifties. Fifty-five, '56.

DM: Okay, so you go to work and you were accepted by the Justice Department?

CS: Justice Department.

DM: And what did you do?

CS: And well first, in being accepted, I asked to go to the FBI academy and they accepted.

DM: And how many African-Americans were there in the FBI?

CS: They were three of us at that time, was in the academy.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: And one was a scientist and two of us had law degrees. And...

DM: And you were going to be field agents?

CS: That's what I was hoping for.

DM: And what did J. Edgar Hoover hope for?

CS: He said the marshal department needed someone for recruiting and all. So after we finished that, I was assigned to the attorney general, to the U.S. Marshal Department.

DM: That's interesting. You would've thought that he would want to have as many, what they would term "colored" at that time, FBI agents.

CS: He wanted them in the, if he had any, he wanted them in the office, not as field people.

DM: So you go over to the attorney general's office and you work there through the Eisenhower administration?

CS: Through the Eisenhower administration, through the Kennedy.

DM: And in 1960s things change a lot?

CS: They changed quite a bit.

DM: And now you're working for President Kennedy.

CS: Well, before that, I was assigned recruiting and as Minnesota and the Midwest looking for mostly college, you know, going to see young men coming in who wanted to go into government service and...

DM: And you were recruiting anyone, not going out to recruit...

CS: No, anyone. Anyone.

DM: Anybody that was qualified to work, that was your job.

CS: Yeah.

DM: Okay. Now...

CS: And then the Kennedys came in and then they said, well, when Mr. Wallace and the governors of Alabama and Mississippi, they said...

DM: And Georgia...

CS: ...and Georgia, we need some marshals down there, first undercover.

DM: So Robert Kennedy changed things, is that what you're saying? That the civil rights policy now sent marshals down there?

CS: Yes. Because he wanted to know exactly, not from the law enforcement and attorney generals there, he wanted to know from his people, which was Department of Justice, just what was going on.

DM: Did you ever have an opportunity to speak with Robert Kennedy?

CS: Oh, many times. Yes.

DM: What kind of guy was he?

CS: He was a very straightforward guy, you know. He talked fast, as you know.

DM: Was he direct?

CS: And direct.

DM: He was a young man.

CS: Very young.

DM: So did you like him? Or respect him?

CS: Yes. And you know, from what I knew...

DM: Okay.

CS: You know, it wasn't buddy-buddies, but you know, as my superior, and everything else.

DM: How many African-Americans at that time were in the Justice Department, as marshals, as you?

CS: Oh, I imagine I recruited about twenty-six.

DM: Okay.

CS: But there were other teams all over the country that at the time were getting together. And...

DM: We're going to stop tapes so he can switch over and we're going to talk about this undercover. Did you go undercover?

CS: Yes I did.

DM: Okay, we'll talk a little bit about that.

END OF TAPE #35

TAPE #36

DM: So in 1961, the Justice Department is now going to send marshals down into a very contested area. I mean the civil rights movement, it was underway. There was a number of confrontations were occurring on universities and in the streets of Selma and these places which would later unfold to be a pretty rough period in American history. Now you were sent down undercover in 1961?

CS: Yeah, the latter part of 1961.

DM: And where did you go and how do you slip into being undercover?

CS: Well first you went in and you sort of found a family and you didn't tell them, you know, who you were or what you were. There were no hotels, you know, that you could go, big hotels.

DM: Because you couldn't stay in them, right?

CS: No, you told 'em you were looking for a job and you wanted to work with people and you wanted to meet who the leaders were, you know, and you go to the churches. And you talk with the people. And then at night you're busy doing your reports, as to who you talked to and what they...

DM: What was going on in that community. Where did they send you?

CS: I went to Birmingham, went to Selma. I went to, in Mississippi, to, oh god, so many little towns.

DM: Right. Did you go to Biloxi and places like that?

CS: No, I didn't get to Biloxi.

DM: I'm trying to think of some. I know of some of the towns. You'll think of it. Now when you're doing undercover work, if, for instance, the Klan or some of these white hate groups found out about that, that could be pretty dangerous for you, right?

CS: Yes, well, then they sent the fellow that I had worked with in New York on a project, by the name of MENSE. And word got that we were in a particular motel for a meeting and they broke in on us. About fourteen...

DM: "They" meaning who?

CS: The Klan broke in on us, about fourteen of 'em.

DM: Uh-huh, and what was the purpose of them showing up there? To welcome you to Alabama?

CS: Yes, with a rope! If we hadn't resisted.

DM: Did you pull your firearms?

CS: Yes, we pulled our firearms and we had to...

DM: And you identified yourselves?

CS: And after firing a couple of rounds, they dispersed. And then we got a hot wire off what had happened and they moved us out of there.

DM: Now, was MENSE a white agent or Black agent?

CS: He was white, he was a white fellow.

DM: Oh, okay. Now when you fired these rounds, did you fire them over their heads or did someone get hit?

CS: No, we didn't fire to kill 'em. In the leg, a couple of 'em, shot them in the leg.

DM: These guys came to string you up?

CS: Oh yes.

DM: Here you are, a federal agent, decorated war veteran, and they're going to do you harm because you're Black.

CS: That's right. And they hated the Kennedys. They hated them.

DM: So after that near thing did you now move onto another area to get you out of there?

CS: Yes, they got us out that same day.

DM: Was there more incidences like this in your careers?

CS: It was some, but not to that extent.

DM: How did you as an agent react to the violence that was being perpetrated down there?

CS: Well, one thing, you have to be professional. You know, you know that your feeling personally is one thing.

DM: Right.

CS: But then you have a job to do. And you try to distinguish between the two and it's not easy, but you have to first, by the law, you have to respect the law.

DM: I understand that but during those terrible years, the civil rights movement, that was hosing down...

CS: Yes.

DM: ...firehoses.

CS: ...dogs on them.

DM: Medgar Evers is killed.

CS: Yes.

DM: There's the bombing of the church, I believe, in Selma.

CS: Selma, the six children.

DM: The children were killed.

CS: The little girls. And all I could...

DM: Were you a part of the investigation on that?

CS: No, I wasn't part of that investigation.

DM: And then there was the three civil rights workers...

CS: Chaney and them from New York.

DM: Involved in that at all?

CS: I did some of the primary work on that. And then they moved us out because we were discovered.

DM: So not only did you, did the Justice Department have their intelligence teams, but apparently the other side did too.

CS: Oh yes.

DM: And they wanted to ferret it out, and they were probably assisted by state government. Would that be fair to say?

CS: Yes.

DM: George Wallace. What do you think about that individual?

CS: I think he actually believed in what he was doing in order to further his political ambition.

DM: Right.

CS: But basically I think he was a good man.

DM: Later he...

CS: He recanted and he got to be...

DM: A promoter, a supporter.

CS: Yeah, he said he was wrong. But he was a politician.

DM: Right.

CS: And his constituents, this is what they wanted. They had not been educated to the fact that this is a country of law and you have to abide by it.

DM: Nineteen sixty-three was a terrible year for many people.

CS: It was horrible.

DM: The civil rights movement reaches its height with the march on Washington. Were you there in Washington when that occurred?

CS: I was there, I went there in the preparation, beginning, and helped set up most of the health facilities, I think, like that. And then that Sunday morning, I moved out. I didn't stay for the...

DM: The march.

CS: ...the marches.

DM: It's interesting that President Kennedy eventually met with the leaders and many say that this was the turning point in the Kennedy administration for civil rights. Were you angry that the Kennedy administration was moving slowly or did you understand that had to...

CS: Yeah, but I understood, I understand now, which I didn't then, that being a politician and having certain constituency, that you have to try and bring both sides together in order for you to move forward. And I can understand, you know, him moving very slowly.

DM: In November of 1963, November 22, 1963, emblazoned...

CS: My mother's birthday, I'll never forget.

DM: It was your brother's birthday?

CS: My mother's birthday.

DM: Your mother's birthday.

CS: Yeah.

DM: Now, I've got a feeling that your mother probably cared for Kennedy.

CS: Yes.

DM: And in Dallas, it all ends. Now where were you that day?

CS: I was working in New York at the time. We were doing a project, one of the largest scams that ever were pulled. I was (clears throat) working with the police department there and the marshal department, and the postal inspectors. They had a thing there where in the garment district, they were ripping the people off. They were insuring packages, stamping it being received and the guys were taking the packages back out of the post office. One of the biggest. I worked on that for about nine weeks.

DM: Now were these post office workers? This wasn't organized crime?

CS: These are postal inspectors. These are postal inspectors.

DM: Postal inspectors.

CS: Yes it was part of organized crime.

DM: Oh, it was part of organized crime?

CS: Yes, it was.

DM: Hooked to the Gambino families or people like that?

CS: Yes, yes.

DM: And so you're working on this case and here comes from the news from Dallas.

CS: Yes, I had called my mother for her birthday and for some reason, she was listening to—she says, “Hold on, just a minute.” She says, “The President has been shot at Dallas.”

I says, “What?”

She says, “Hold on! Say he's dead.”

And that was how I got the news.

DM: Did it surprise you that that happened?

CS: Yes, it did.

DM: Was all the hate that was going around—you were working in the—did you think that, well, that a crime like that could happen?

CS: I was surprised because of Johnson's affiliation in Texas and his strength there. I never thought that it would happen.

DM: It would happen somewhere else, if it happened.

CS: I knew it could happen, any time, any place, you know. If a person decided they want to do it, they can get to you. They'll pay the consequences of course, but I never thought it would happen in his state and I was very much surprised.

DM: How did that change things?

CS: Oh. Well, Johnson came in with the New Society and it...

DM: And Vietnam War?

CS: ...and Vietnam War, which I had a son to go there.

DM: Your son went to Vietnam?

CS: Yeah, he didn't have to, but he was one of these gung ho young people and...

DM: Something like his dad?

CS: No. Wasn't very much like his dad. (Chuckles)

DM: But you went off to war?

CS: Yeah, against my mother's wishes. And he went off too, against his father's wishes.

DM: Did he make it?

CS: No, he was assigned to a staff in Jackson, South Carolina and the colonel he had wanted to get the star. And so they supposedly went on an inspection tour. And actually they had to go and find out where the bullets were coming from on the other side.

DM: Right.

CS: And he only had nine months to do at the time and he shouldn't have gone because you supposed to have a year.

DM: Right.

CS: And he had only nine months but he and the colonel, they went to Vietnam.

DM: Everything turned out okay?

CS: He turned out okay.

DM: Didn't get wounded or...

CS: No. I always said he wasn't too bright but not to prove it.

DM: How long did you continue with the Justice Department?

CS: I continued with them until 1969, I went to the Brooklyn district attorney's office, in Brooklyn.

DM: So you worked for the district attorney in Brooklyn?

CS: Yeah, in Brooklyn, in their appeals bureau.

DM: Uh-huh. And did you ever practice law on your own?

CS: No. No, I did, you know, a few wills and consultant work and things like that.

DM: When did you retire?

CS: In '86, finally in '86, I retired.

DM: And when did you join the Pearl Harbor Survivors?

CS: In 1962.

DM: Oh, so you were an early member?

CS: Yeah, I was an early member.

DM: And how did the survivors treat you? Because...

CS: That's an interesting story. And I used to go all of the conventions, all of the conventions. And in eight district, in New York, we used to have two eight district conference, one in the spring and one in the fall. And I would go to those because it brought the eastern states together. And it was interesting situation. Then it got so that...

DM: Got bigger, didn't it.

CS: It got bigger. And then the kind of things that they're doing today. You know, it's a waste of time. They're still back in 1940 and 1941, and some of the fellows just haven't grown. They're just...

DM: Talking about what they're doing today, you mean these resolutions?

CS: These resolutions and...

DM: Politics.

CS: ...lot of nonsense.

DM: Because basically, it would be fair to say that you see the Pearl Harbor Survivors as comradeship...

CS: Yes.

DM: ...as friends and stuff like that.

CS: Yes.

DM: And when you joined in '62, you said, I asked you how they accepted you, I mean, I asked some African-American mess attendants during the fiftieth anniversary, they were all sitting together and they were having a meeting. And I went over to them, I sat down and I says, I said to 'em, "Fellows, how come you guys don't, you know..."

CS: Socialize?

DM: Yeah, they socialize. And they says, "Well, son, we had nothing to do with those guys. We were in a segregated and what we have in common is our experience."

And it suddenly struck me, of course, that's exactly.

CS: March to a different drum.

DM: They marched to a different drum. And so but it seems to me that you had an experience that was fairly broad and so, and it seems like being in the North and in New York, they accepted you as a World War II veteran.

CS: Yes, this is one of the things about the Statue of Liberty chapter, is we were one of the, like, Class Ten.

DM: Uh-huh.

CS: Is that in the executive board of the Pearl Harbor Survivors never wanted the Statue of Liberty to have a really authority position in the association. We tried to develop a good welfare with a lot of the members who couldn't afford to go to the conventions.

DM: Right.

CS: Who couldn't afford _____. They knocked that down. We did two national conventions in New York, one in 1970 and in 1984. And...

DM: And hasn't been one since.

CS: Haven't done one since. But they were the most successful ones that they've ever had.

DM: Right.

CS: Nothing like the one they had here. Not taking anything from it.

DM: Right.

CS: But in the memorial service, you think you're there to memorialize your comrades who have passed and everything else.

DM: Past members.

CS: Just as—this has no—yes, passed. This has no significance at all of a memorial service. The navy ROTC from the high school, that was good.

DM: Right.

CS: And the band was singing, that was good. But where was the memorial support? No wreath, no prayers for the dead, you know, of any significance.

DM: Right.

CS: And these are the kind of things that the Statue of Liberty tried to tell them to have all of the services, both Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. We did that in New York.

DM: So have a more ecumenical approach?

CS: That's right. And we'll...

DM: It sounds like you're a little disappointed about that.

CS: Yes, I am. And I stopped going. This, the fiftieth and this one is the only one, the fiftieth is the last one I've gone.

DM: Right.

CS: And the only reason I went because I happened to be here in Las Vegas for this one. Other than that, I wouldn't go. I go to the chapter meetings.

DM: Excuse me for interrupting. I would hazard a guess that your feeling really reflects that Statue of Liberty branch, right? You...

CS: Yeah, the chapter.

DM: That chapter would probably echo your views.

CS: Yes, they do.

DM: That's interesting because there is, in this organization, a tradition of politics, that this is part of it, and issues of where this association is going to go in the future. And it's interesting you bring that up.

CS: Yeah.

DM: I think in a way you've answered a question that I wanted to ask you, but I'll ask you anyway. I mean, what does this Pearl Harbor Survivors Organization really mean to you?

CS: In the beginning it meant a lot. As I told you about the B's and the K west, and one of the things that I thought it would bring that group along with the Pearl Harbor Survivors, because many of the fellows who were in B's and K west, they were in Pearl at the time.

DM: Right.

CS: And a lot of 'em, they want nothing to do with the organization.

DM: And why?

CS: Because they felt that they just didn't march to the same beat of the drums as the executive board and as the people in the power of the organization did.

DM: Had the executive board at that time extended their hand to them, that would've been a different thing, right?

CS: I think it would've been a different thing. See, with the Statue of Liberty, I was president of the chapter, well, for the first time, I served two terms...

DM: Right.

CS: ...as president. I was treasurer. I was the first treasurer of the association. I'm secretary now and I can't get rid of it, of the chapter.

DM: And so you know, as the chapters get older, kind of get cemented into those positions.

CS: I was in New York state chairman, that first New York state chairman that handled all of the state of New York.

DM: So you've held almost every office?

CS: Every office except a national office.

DM: Have you ever run for national office?

CS: I ran for national vice president. I campaigned in California and Michigan and everything else.

DM: How'd you do?

CS: I didn't.

DM: You didn't make it?

CS: I did not make it.

DM: Did you ever see the vote count?

CS: No, I didn't. But it was obvious that...

DM: I'm going to ask you a hard question. Do you think that the results of that national election was "a," because you're African-American or "b," because you're from that chapter.

CS: Yes, both.

DM: All of the above.

CS: All of the above. And it's interesting that I—most of the fellows down there who have been in the association for fifteen years or so, I know them. I mean, they know me because of my past affiliation with them all. And the kind of motions, the kind of resolutions that I presented to the organization, and nothing has happened.

DM: And here you are with qualifications well beyond many of the members, to be honest with you, as you review. A person that has a law degree. A person that has served in the military twice. But we didn't talk about that. You actually went back in the military...

CS: That's right.

DM: ...after your college education and served in a, now, a desegregated, somewhat desegregated navy. So you had the experience of serving in both...

CS: Both, I had two navy careers.

DM: But would it be fair to say that we have made progress?

CS: Yes, but not enough.

DM: What's your dream of America for the future?

CS: You know, I have no qualms about America ever being overcome by an outside...

DM: Force?

CS: ...country or outside force. Our problems are going to be within is that unless we are able to get together and work out as people, we're going to be in big trouble.

DM: Does it frighten you or disappoint you that hate groups have now emerged among our young people?

CS: Yes, it does. And I wonder where—I don't have to wonder, I know where it comes from. Because this is what they get at home and then they bring it out.

DM: How about the future of the African-American? Is there disappointments there too?

CS: Yes, but again you find that economics has a great, great power. And as the Black, the African-Americans get into the financial part of the country and develop, they're going to be able to move into the mainstream of the country—Wall Street. And it's been true in politics, we've saw the changes that have made and obviously in the Southern states, a state like Mississippi. Look at the differences election and the ballot has made there. And moving to Alabama and Georgia and all like that, that's what made the difference.

DM: So that may be the chance America has.

CS: The chance America has.

DM: Well, is there anything that you wanted to say before I close this interview, that we didn't cover?

CS: No, I have had a wonderful life at seventy-seven years young. The navy was very good to me and I think it could have been better. When I reach the great thing of commander and I thought that surely I'd be a staff wait and they began, the review board began to look at he was a mess attendant, he was an enlisted man and he's Black and I'm passed over once, I saw the picture on the wall. I knew that the next time pass over and that was it.

DM: And that was in your second career?

CS: That was...

DM: When you started back in the navy.

CS: When I started, yeah. And it was a disappointment. And then my only son, I got his appointment to the Naval Academy, and he went to—he only went because of me. And he told me, he says, “I’m going because of you.”

He stayed six months. He said, “I can’t take that B.S. [*bullshit*].”

DM: Was the B.S. over and above the normal B.S. at the academy?

CS: Yeah.

DM: Had to do with race?

CS: It had to do with race. He says, “I’m just not,”—he says, “You could do it, I can’t.”

And as I’ve said, I’ve had a wonderful life, a wonderful family. And most of all, I miss my best friend, my mother who’s six years ago...

DM: Passed away?

CS: ...passed away, who was my mentor, my advisor, my confidant, everything. And...

DM: But you do understand that you paved the way?

CS: Yes, in a sense. I look at Colin Powell and I wonder does he know what we went through? I look at some of the Black admirals now. I wonder do they realize what we mess attendants, quote, promoted to steward mates, went through? In shining shoes and making bunks and handling laundry and serving tables, what we went through back in the thirties, in the forties and the fifties. And it’s amazing that a few of them really know the history of the navy.

DM: Well hopefully this interview, which will become part of the public record will not only inform white Americans or any American that reads this, but African-Americans as well, the struggles that you went through.

CS: Well, it was interesting, but if I knew I was going to go through it all again and come out ahead, I wouldn't want to do it again.

DM: Is that right?

CS: That's right. I wouldn't want to do it again. If I knew everything was going to come out good, I still wouldn't want to do it again. The thing, I guess, of being young and looking to the horizon and saying there is tomorrow and it's going to be different, gives you the inclination to move ahead.

DM: Well, I thank you for this interview.

CS: Well, thank you and it's been my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW