

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#296

LELAND HOWARD HELLESTAD

USS *TUCKER*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 7, 1998

BY JEFF PAPPAS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Jeff Pappas (JP): Feel free to drink during the interview too, so don't worry about it.

Leland Hellestad (LH): Not during the filming though.

JP: Oh sure.

LH: Oh.

JP: Yeah.

(Conversation off-mike)

JP: The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998 at five p.m. The person being interviewed is Leland Hellestad, who was aboard the USS *Tucker* on December 7, 1941. Leland, for the record, would you please state your full name, place and date of birth?

LH: Full name is Leland Howard Hellestad. I was born in a small town of Waupaca, Wisconsin in 1922, February 14, 1922.

JP: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Wisconsin.

LH: Was in rural Wisconsin. My father was a farmer and I grew up and lived on a farm in a small town, just outside of Wittenberg, Wisconsin and lived there 'til eighteen, the age of eighteen and I joined the navy.

JP: Okay, very good. Tell me a bit about your father. You told me an interesting story early on today about your name and about the farms. Can you tell me that story again?

LH: Well, the—have to go back and, well, a long time ago. My great-grandfather came from Norway to the state of Wisconsin, I believe in roughly in 1845. And he come over, his name was Ole Olson. And when he came over, he was single. He married a lady that also came over from Norway, but not the same time. They met in a small town of Muskego,

Wisconsin, which is a short distance from Milwaukee. And then they had so many problems with the name because everybody that came over from Norway, an awful lot of 'em are Olsons. And some of them they called Big Ole and Little Ole and Plain Ole. And so then the name, the banking and the post office, they had more problems. People were losing a lot of their mail and of course, got the wrong addresses and stuff, so that he changed his name to Hellestad, which a name that comes from, well, a farm area in Norway. And he changed the name to Hellestad, so they took the name from the township, so to speak, that they were from.

And so there are very few Hellestads in, well, in the United States. I don't think there's maybe our family are all based in Wisconsin, with the exception of one son of mine that lives in Dallas, Texas. And so you can look in the Texas, Dallas, Texas phone directory, and you'll find one Hellestad in there, with a pretty thick telephone book. And even in Milwaukee, there is only three Hellestads in there. There are some of them that might make a mistake because they might spell it wrong. But the spelling, the way they have it here. I have to tell everybody, if you know how to spell "hell," then you got a good start. So some people say hell is big, some is HELL-IS-STAUT, which would be German. But this is HELL-IS-STAD. And, like I say, there is three Hellestads in the city of Milwaukee, in the phone directory, and they've got a thick phone directory also. So it isn't like Smith or Olson or Johnson or anything like that, because those, they've got a big number of people like that.

JP: Did you know any other Norwegian families in Wisconsin that had done the same thing your father had done, in regards to the name?

LH: Well, there [*were*] some, yes, there [*were*] some that came over, the name, I don't know if they really divided, derived their name from Norway, but there was Skogen, which my great-grandfather married. And that name [*came*] over but the lady naturally had to change her name to Hellestad also. And so I know that the name was Skogen that came from—Skogen was another territory in Norway that came from. But well, if I dug back into it, I suppose I could find a few others.

JP: Have you ever been to Norway?

LH: No, however, I just signed up, before I came here, they're having a tour to Norway in June and I signed up for it. Of course, I don't know whether I'm going to actually make it or not and so, but I put a down payment on it, so I feel that's about the only place that I really haven't been in during my tour of service and stuff. So I'm kind of looking forward to it. So they'll go to Stockholm, to Oslo, and back to Copenhagen and then flying back to Milwaukee.

JP: Is this a local group in Milwaukee who had organized this tour?

LH: Yes. The athletic director of the WTMJ...

JP: Which is?

LH: Jim Irwin. And of course he's doing that through Holiday Tours.

JP: Now the WTMJ stands for?

LH: Well, that's a radio and television station. And of course call it WAH-TUM-JAH, but that isn't really, it shouldn't be.

JP: It's a local radio station in Milwaukee.

LH: Yes, and TV.

JP: And TV.

LH: Yes.

JP: And there's a group being organized this summer?

LH: Yes. And he has organized a couple of 'em before this, one to Ireland, I believe it was, and another one to central part of Europe, from France, Germany and I believe Austria and Czechoslovakia. But I never was on 'em. See, I was in the invasion on Normandy, but I never actually got on land, except on through Gibraltar. I was on land there. And 'cause we docked through there. But really, I wasn't on land because, well, during the war, we weren't able to get on land.

JP: Right.

LH: Except over in England and Ireland and Scotland, we got on land there, when we were docked there. But I have never been close to Norway. I've been up through Iceland, Greenland, but there too, we never docked.

JP: It's going to be quite an adventure for you.

LH: Oh yes. I'm looking forward to it because I don't have that many years left and as long as I'm physically able, I think that I would like to go and enjoy this.

JP: Well, tell me a little bit more about your mother.

LH: My mother...

JP: And please include her name too.

LH: Well, her maiden name was Mildred Danielson. And she married my father, Elmer Hellestad, in [1919], I believe Thanksgiving Day. And of course, my father passed away in May of 1941. So he was not aware of the war, as far as, you know, World War II.

And then my mother remarried in December of 1945, to a person by the name of Norman Nelson. And there was four of us boys and then he had five children. And so there was, he was like my stepfather. But there were—well, I was older at the time, so I never really was involved in it as far as the family was concerned, 'cause when I came out of the service, I went to Milwaukee and went to work down there. There was really no work in my state, up in that small towns up there, except maybe you could pump gas or something. That's about the only kind of work that they had up there. My stepfather was a carpenter, so he had a trade. And of course, I made a little bit better for him and the family.

JP: So you were raised on the family farm.

LH: Yes.

JP: And what kind of farming did your father do?

LH: Now that was one we couldn't be too proud of. It was only an eighty-acre farm. We didn't have much machines. We only had a team of horses. And we didn't have a tractor. We had to do an awful lot of handwork. We planted potatoes by hand. We cultivated by hand and dug 'em by hand and so on, so forth, although we did have a potato digger with a small engine on it that dug 'em for a while. And then of course we did that, the picking and hauling and you know, that type of work. And we had a small dairy, maybe eight cows or so. But my father was more interested in chickens and if he would have the money to proceed with it, he would've gone into chicken farming, but that was all during the depression and of course there was no money available.

JP: Now, the schools that you had attended in Wisconsin, did they make arrangements for you to get out of school during harvest time?

LH: Yes.

JP: Was the schooling built around the farming culture there in Wisconsin?

LH: Yes. The—a lot of people laughed about it, but when I went to high school, they had what you call a potato-digging vacation, the two first weeks of October. That's when they're having to harvest the potatoes. But I did not live on the farm my father had at the time, because I went to high school maybe twenty-five or thirty miles away from there, 'cause there was no high school available in the township that I was in, so you went to the small town where my father and mother were raised, and they had a high school there. And so I stayed with an uncle of mine, my dad's brother. And so he was also a potato farmer, so a couple of years, my brother a year older than I lived with him during the time we went to high school. Then of course, we had to work for our room and board.

And so then they had two weeks off during potato-digging vacation, but we had to take off from school even after that because it was almost four weeks of harvesting. And so we were taken out of school even after the school

resumed operation. We had took off two more weeks. So that's how we had to—we paid our room and board by laboring, so to speak, yes.

JP: What was the name of that town that you went to high school?

LH: Little town of Scandinavia, which was a Norwegian settlement, so to speak. Now of course, there's an awful lot of other ethnic people in that town too.

JP: Mm-hm.

LH: But at that time it basically was a Scandinavian settlement.

JP: In high school, were you active? Did you do any extracurricular activities?

LH: Well, yes. Baseball was really—we didn't have, in the grade school, a country, small-town grade school, we did not have any activities as far as basketball is concerned. So when we went to high school, we didn't, we weren't good enough to be playing, because those kids that lived in town, they had a grade school basketball team. So by the time I got there, I just wasn't good enough, but I did make the baseball team. And I was in the debate teams and oratory and stuff like that in high school, besides baseball, of course.

JP: And you graduate from high school in what year?

LH: Nineteen forty.

JP: Nineteen forty.

LH: Yeah.

JP: So we're approaching the war. Had you thought about joining the military during high school?

LH: Yes. In my junior year, we went to another smaller town, about—larger town rather—eight miles away, that they had—oh, I don't even know what you really could call it—but they had an opening in the high school where they had counselors from military and from, well, like for the girls, they had

nursing like counselors and those type of—and they had more than just that. But that kind of, they didn't have a navy counselor there, but they had an army guy there and colonel, I guess he was. And he was trying to promote us to go into the army. And like he said, "Well, if you ever go in the army and you decide to get married or anything, the army is a little bit better because of the fact that you could have your family with you," where if you're in the navy, you couldn't.

But I wasn't too interested in the army, so I thought maybe being a sailor would be kind of exciting. And so then I did join the navy in, well, I tried to in the summer of 1940. I graduated in the end of May. And at the time, they were very, very strict as far as your physical. And I weighed about 165 pounds, and they told me that I was way too heavy.

So I went on a very, very strict diet, on the farm yet. And so when I finally, when they told me I had to be only roughly 128 pounds, but they would waive fifteen percent. So when I got down to 144 pounds, then I went back down there and I was accepted.

JP: When was this and how long did it take you to lose that weight?

LH: Oh, not really, about two months. And September, then I went down to sign up again in a small town of—well, I say small town—a larger town of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

JP: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LH: They had a navy recruiting station there. And so then I was accepted and I went into boot camp. And of course, being off of the farm at 140 pounds, my ribs are sticking out. And the first thing the guy poked me in the ribs a couple of times, he says, "Well, we're going to have to put some meat on you!"

Here I lost this weight and then they wanted to put meat back on me again.

JP: What did you find, you said that the navy was exciting to you. What was exciting?

LH: Travel, I suppose, would be great. You know, coming from small communities, that you could get out into the country and out to the Pacific or Atlantic, or wherever they would send you, that was very interesting. And one thing that really enthused me was the fact that when I did get accepted, I said, "Honolulu-bound or bust!"

And that was the big thing I was thinking about, was Honolulu. Of course, I did get sent out there. If I would've been sent to the East Coast, naturally I wouldn't have been there, but that was, of course, very exciting.

JP: Well, speaking of the East Coast though, at that time, what about the threat of war? There had been of course battles going on in the North Atlantic.

LH: Oh yeah.

JP: Germany and Britain had been fighting.

LH: Yeah.

JP: Were you thinking of that?

LH: Not really. I didn't really think that we would get into war, really. I know that Germany was going through Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and all those, but we, actually I wasn't really thinking on it, I suppose. The government of United States were concerned, but well, we were just sailors, little old seaman, you know. And of course we didn't know that much about it. You didn't really hear too much as far as news and stuff like that. We knew of course that they were at war there, but we didn't think we would get in it.

JP: Yeah.

LH: Yeah.

JP: So now you're shipped off the train.

LH: In boot camp, in Great Lakes, I went through six weeks of training there. And then they shipped me into Vallejo, California, where I put the, went on aboard the USS *Tucker*.

JP: Tell me a little bit about boot camp, your experience there.

LH: Really there wasn't too much there. Of course, we had our regular drills every day, and then we did an awful lot of marching. And they, well there was a chief quartermaster that was head of our Number 92, Company 92, and they had us out on the drill field every day. And of course, we had to march like we did in the army. We didn't, but like the army did of course. And I don't know really whether that training was that great as far as being on the ship, we didn't do any marching, so but we did a lot of marching there.

JP: Remember any of your bunkmates back in boot camp?

LH: Actually I can only really now, I can only remember close wise, I can only remember two, and I haven't seen 'em since boot camp. But I went down through two different towns and I asked people there if they knew of them and some of them said, "Well, yes. I remember the name but I don't know where they're at."

So I never did get to locate them. Yeah.

JP: Okay. So after boot camp, you went to the West Coast?

LH: Yes, I went right to, directly to Vallejo, California, where that was the post there, where the ships were docked in there. We had, our ship was being—minor repairs, I guess. That's what they call it. And of course I was dumb, little seaman coming from the small, hick town. And of course they pulled a few fast ones on me too, you know. I believe there some of these guys have stripes on their shoulders and everything, boy, I thought I respected them. In fact, I can tell a little story here, it wasn't very long that when I was aboard ship, it wasn't very long that one day at noon break, a gunner, second class gunner's mate come up. And he says, "Hey, you were supposed to go on a working party."

I said, “Oh yeah? Where do I go?” Real excited.

And he says, “You go up to the quarterdeck and you talk to those guys there and they’ll tell you where you’re supposed to be and where you’re supposed to go in the working party.”

So I hightailed it up to the quarterdeck and I talked to one of the—I think he was a first class petty officer that was more or less in charge of the quarterdeck at the time. And I said, “I’m supposed to be on the working party.”

And he says, “What working party are you supposed to be on?”

Well, I said, “The man told me I was supposed to be on a working party, open up the Golden Gate Bridge, let the tide out.”

Well, I was gung ho. And I felt a little stupid afterwards. But you know, that’s what happens when you come from a little small town and you’re out in the world, so to speak. Yeah. So I had to learn a lesson.

JP: Well, one of your colleagues told me, who served on the USS *Maryland*, told me about this rooster club back at boot camp, that the most outstanding company was able to choose their boat, their ship assignment.

LH: Yeah.

JP: Did you know about the rooster club?

LH: No. No, I didn’t hear about it at the time, and we were just assigned. We come out of the boot camp, we didn’t have a rooster club, but I know that this gentleman said this and there was two other people that joined the navy at roughly the same time and they chose the *Tennessee*. We had two fellows there that joined the *Tennessee*. They selected the *Tennessee*. But we were not. We were sent right out to Vallejo, California, and there was a bunch of destroyers there and they went alphabetically. And from A up to C, or whatever it was, went on one ship. And C to E or F went onto another ship. And my name was H and of course we had maybe, well, G, H and maybe M—I forget just how many of ‘em—went onto the *Tucker*. They had, they

went alphabetical and that's how they assigned us. And so we didn't have a chance to choose.

JP: Had you ever taken a trip that long before, from boot camp to Vallejo?

LH: No.

JP: That had been the...

LH: The longest I think that I ever got to was—I don't think I even got to the city of Milwaukee from where I lived. That was—so we were, you know, just a small-town goop, you know. And of course we didn't have any—there was no money or anything like that, so we couldn't travel. I think we got maybe forty miles away and that was about it.

JP: Remember, do you remember anything about that train ride to Vallejo?

LH: Yes. That was—I talked to some of the other fellows that had traveled and of course they informed me of—we went on, we had sleeping quarters. And of course, my bunk was up on the second deck there and of course there was no windows or anything else, so I tried to con the guy that was down below me if I could sit down there with him so I could look at the countryside we're going through. And one thing I did remember, I had done—an uncle of mine, coming from China, was a missionary. And they were having problems there and they were told to get out of China.

JP: Mm-hm.

LH: And when they came into San Francisco, they got a train and the train we were on was sidetracked someplace up in Colorado, for the train that they were coming through. And this, my uncle and my aunt was on that train going east, where I was going west. I didn't know this 'til quite a few years later, but we started checking the train schedules and the number and all that. Here, I found out my uncle and aunt were going east when I was going west.

JP: Interesting.

LH: Yeah.

JP: Well, what a coincidence.

LH: Yes, it was. It was very much of a coincidence.

JP: So in Vallejo, you'd been assigned to the *Tucker*.

LH: Yes, I was assigned to the *Tucker* then.

JP: Was the *Tucker* in port at that time?

LH: Yes, we were in port and we were there for—I can't really say how long, but it must have been maybe three weeks. And we had to do guard duty, and well, I really don't know why, but that was part of our military training. And so then I was aboard the *Tucker*. And of course they had minor repair work.

And it was kind of interesting, when we had to take a, what you call, a shakedown cruise afterwards. And they sent us through, into the Pacific Ocean, travel through San Francisco. And swells were just huge. And it didn't bother me too much until I happened to see one of the guys that was a sailor there for quite some while, maybe a year or so ahead of me. And all of a sudden, I'm seeing him going to what we call the head, bath area, you know. And I see him over there and he was throwing up. I couldn't figure what the heck, how come he's sick? That was unusual. Well, we didn't travel too much farther and I found out why he was sick, because I had the same problem. I was seasick and I'm telling you, it was really miserable because the swells were so huge.

JP: How did they treat seasickness?

LH: They didn't, really. They didn't have seasick pills or anything like that, at least not that I know of. That they have now, they have seasick pills, airsick pills and stuff like that. But we didn't have any and the only thing I could possibly do is try, I mean, stay, survive it through. Well, we were only going out for the day then we come back, and boy, was that a blessing, because when I got back into port, I thought, oh gosh, that felt good.

So when we left there a day or two later, we went on an overnight cruise down to Long Beach, and the water was just as calm as can be. I thought, well, I have no problems. A day or two later, we were sent to Honolulu, or well, Pearl Harbor. And there was seven days of just sheer torture. And of course they didn't baby us one darn bit. I was hoping that I could get a grapefruit or something just, something sour to kind of fix my stomach. And that was seven days of just sheer torture because we had to be on lookout duty and we'd lean over the edge of the ship and threw up and everything else.

But after we were at Pearl Harbor, we were there, well in and out a couple of days. And I was over the seasickness. I never got seasick after that.

JP: Tell me about the *Tucker*, what kind of ship it is.

LH: It was a destroyer, DD-374, and but 1600-ton. And we had a complement, peacetime complement of approximately 150 sailors. And it was the rear part of the ship was not very far above water. We had about seven feet that, if the water was a plank, we could almost reach the top of the first deck. But those sort of destroyers were a lot smaller than they are now.

JP: What were your duties on the *Tucker*?

LH: Well, I was a seaman to begin with. Of course I stayed on the deck force. I tried to get into the radio, what you call the radio shack. I put as a striker. But there was no openings, so I had to stay on the ship until we got sunk. And then of course I got to be a third class petty officer, well then I decided to stay on the deck force, because then I was considered a, well, a part-time boss.

JP: That was by the time you had gotten to Pearl Harbor.

LH: Well, no. That took a little longer than that.

JP: Took a while.

LH: Oh yes. But I got to be what you call a leading seaman after a short time and leading seaman was nothing but a glorified, well, straw boss.

JP: We're going to stop there and pick up the rest of the story with a new tape. We need to change tapes right now.

LH: Okay.

END OF TAPE #25

TAPE #26

JP: Okay. So now, we've gotten you from Vallejo on the *Tucker*, down to Pearl and your stations. Tell me now about what happened that morning. Where was the *Tucker* located and what were you doing, specifically?

LH: I was on mess duty, what you call the scullery, washing dishes of course, our trays. And then of course, the general quarters had sounded. And my gun duty was first shell man on a number four gun and so that we fired five-inch gun shells. We didn't have—we were tied up to the USS *Whitney*—well, there was five destroyers, the *Selfridge* [DD-357], the *Case* [DD-370], the *Tucker*, the *Reid* [DD-369], and the *Cunningham*. And we were all in there, minor repairs. We were supposed to have been in the dry dock, where the USS *Shaw* was, but they got in some bow damage, so they had preference. And of course, I was very happy that's the way it turned out.

So then I went onto the gun duty, as far as the shell man was concerned. Now our, some of our sights were also being repaired, so that we were firing, we couldn't look through the sights, because we didn't have 'em on there and the gun captain was just telling the pointer, the trainer which way to point the guns. And we, the shells, we had a fuse on 'em. And there was a fuse setter right alongside of the first shell man, so there's, the shells came up and they had to put 'em in the fuse, the fuse setter, and then they cranked 'em. So they set 'em for as close as they possibly could to fire up and to put shrapnel up, so that if the planes come through, the shrapnel, they'd have to come through some of the shrapnel. And that was primarily the duty we had.

And of course we were not very far from the Battleship Row, so we could see the planes coming in, and well, the high altitude ones we didn't, but the torpedo bombers had to come down low to drop the torpedoes alongside of Battleship Row. Well these planes, then of course, they were all prop[eller] planes and they did not have a very good altitude on 'em. They can come out like the jets. And so they come right up over us and we could see the pilots in the plane. And to begin, we thought it was a fake air attack, but then when we saw the planes come over us, we see the big orange sign on the bottom of the wings. And of course we, that really set us off. Then we thought, oh my goodness, this is something. That really did.

We did not expect an attack or anything. However, the government had given, the Japanese government, an ultimatum, so to speak, as I understand and we often wondered just what Japan was going to do. We did not expect an invasion. But we did find out afterwards it was two Japanese cargo ships in San Francisco, and they took off in a hurry, to get out of San Francisco before the attack came up. They of course naturally would know, but we didn't.

JP: Did you have any plans that day for any activities?

LH: No, not myself. I probably would've gone ashore later in the afternoon, but my job was, on mess duty, and so I probably would've gone ashore a little, you know, maybe after the supper hour.

JP: So tell me what you did that morning then between 7:55 and roughly 9:30. What were you doing?

LH: Oh, we stayed right on the gun. And we just kept on firing as much as we possibly could. See they come in, in two attacks. First one, about 7:55, and then I forget just exactly the time later, but there was another attack, maybe 8:30 or quarter to nine, or something like that. The second wave come in. And so then after that happened, of course there was a lull but every time we saw—I shouldn't say we—every time there was another plane come through, even if it was our own, there were an awful lot of people start firing immediately because they didn't want to take a chance of anything and we even downed quite a few of our own planes.

JP: Now were you on an anti-aircraft gun or were you on another kind?

LH: It was, yeah, a dual-purpose gun. It was surface, anti-aircraft combination. Some of the bigger destroyers had only surface guns.

JP: Right.

LH: But the ones we had were the, they called it a five-inch thirty-eight dual-purpose gun.

JP: So you were, were you above deck? Could you see everything that was happening?

LH: Oh yes, definitely. We were right on the top deck there. That's where our gun was, yes. Yeah, I could see everything coming up. And not only that, the guns I was on did not have a turret. The two forward guns had turrets because, well, traveling, the water and everything else coming over. They had to cover it. But we just had a canvas cover and of course we took the canvas cover off the—so we're right out in the open. So we could see everything.

JP: After the morning, after the attack, what did you do then, after the attack?

LH: Well, I actually, we were on standby and of course we had to go back and do our mess duty and everything else, and waited for any further orders. And we got out of—we pulled away from the—we called it a nest—five destroyers in a nest. We were the center one. And we pulled out about, oh, late afternoon. We had the engines were fixed and repair work was done, but we did not get out of the harbor because they closed the gates, because they were afraid of these two-man submarines. So they closed the gates and we had to anchor out in...

JP: Those were the Japanese midget submarines?

LH: Yeah, midget submarine. And so we anchored out in the channel. And so we didn't get out until the next morning.

JP: So you'd mentioned that there had been some repair work done on the *Tucker*. What happened to the *Tucker*, as far as damage?

LH: There was really no damage. We were strafed, but there was only a few you might say bullet holes. But we did have a couple of shrapnel that we found, well, it came possibly from another ship that were firing and then some of the shrapnel landed. We had no injuries or anything like that. So there was no loss or damage in that sense, except for the repair work had to be done. And some of the repair work was on the USS *Whitney*, which was a repair ship. And of course they had to get the material from there and put it back together. And so then we got out late in the afternoon.

JP: Thinking back now, almost fifty years after the fact, what—how had Pearl Harbor and you being there changed or affected or even influenced your life?

LH: Well, you grew up. It was, well, kind of traumatic. But it woke us up, put it that way. Yeah. It changed our life, yes. And we still feel bad about it. Yeah. I don't know what else I can tell you, really. We knew that we were at war and—but I think that we were not as afraid, 'cause we were young and kind of gung ho. We wanted to get it over with and all that, so that, but it did change our lives, yes.

JP: Mm-hm.

LH: I don't know what else I can tell you as far as any radical changes, no. I can't say that. So I really can't elaborate any more than that, I don't think.

JP: That's fine. Well, we'll, why don't we just finish there then. We're almost up. And I want to thank you for your time today.

LH: Okay.

JP: Thank you. Thank you, Leland.

LH: Thank you very much.

JP: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW