

**Earl Armstrong
Veteran**

**BJ Sullivan (Mr. Armstrong's grandson)
Interviewer**

**Hudson Falls High School,
Hudson Falls, NY
12/2/2003**

Q: I'm BJ Sullivan interviewing Earl Delmar Armstrong, my grandfather, at Hudson Falls High School at December 2nd, 2003 at 3:05PM. Alright Gramp, what was your branch of service?

A: I was in the Navy.

Q: What were you dates of service in the Navy?

A: It was '43 through '46.

Q: Where were you on December 7th, 1941?

A: I was home on the farm. I hadn't joined the Navy yet.

Q: What were you doing that day?

A: I was out skiing with my dog.

Q: What was your reaction to Pearl Harbor when it happened?

A: I had never heard of Pearl Harbor before. I didn't realize the catastrophe that it was at the time.

Q: Why exactly did you enter the service?

A: Well, I had a farm exemption but I couldn't find any help. So, I kind of wanted to see the world anyway so I sold the farm and joined the Navy.

Q: Were there a lot of slogans or banners put up during that time that encouraged you to get in the Navy?

A: No, not really. There was rationing going on. That's about all I can remember anyway.

Q: What was it like during the Great Depression growing up prior to entering the war?

A: It was kind of rough on my parents. I know it was. I remember one thing distinctly. We had a check for two months and it came to \$7.14.

Q: If you could just tell me briefly what your ship's complete assignment step by step was through your term on your ship. Actually, what was the name of your ship?

A: The *Charles S. Sperry* DD-697.

Q: What was its assignment for your term?

A: We were part of a squadron that escorted Task Force 58 which was the big carrier forces and we were more or less looking after them. We were on the outside checking for submarines and (unclear) like that.

Q: Where did you train for all of this?

A: I started out in Sampson, NY down by Seneca Falls. I went to Gunner's Mate school. I volunteered for Gunner's Mate school. I thought I was going to be shooting and I was (chuckles). And that's about it. The Gunner's Mate was actually..the duty to that was to keep the guns in shape.

Q: So, you had to do a lot of cleaning?

A: Oh yes, we used gallons of fuel oil to clean them with. (unclear) whenever I had -Twin 20's is what I worked on -I had it all torn out. Oh, I can't think what you call it. Anyway, it was all laid out piece by piece. I can't think of how many pieces but there were a lot of them. General quarters rang and I had to get the gun back together before my crew got up on the guns and I did it.

Q: What kind of guns were these?

A: 20 millimeters. Twin-20's they called them. The first time the Twin-20's came out, they didn't prove to be too good.

Q: Did you every have any problems with them.

A: I had a problem getting them started. So, what I did, I found a big ball hammer and when we got the orders to fire, I hauled off and hit them and they fired.

Q: Before you entered the war what was your opinion on the Navy and the whole entire military?

A: Well, we didn't hear too much about them. Just before the war started, we had a contingent of mounted cavalry go by our farm. That's about as far behind we were as anybody.

Q: When you got on the ship and heading toward the Pacific, what was going through your mind?

A: Well, we began to realize we were in a war then. We were on four hours on and four hours off watch. We were scouting for submarines and what not. It brought the world a little closer to us.

Q: You had to go down through Panama right?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you every encounter any sort of attacks on the Atlantic side?

A: No. We didn't.

Q: When was it when you passed through Panama that you started encountering attacks.

A: We went through the Panama Canal and we lost our escort duty. We had to go up to San Diego for some reason. I don't know what. From there, we went to Pearl Harbor out in Hawaii. Things got tighter practicing General Quarters and all such things as that.

Q: Who was in charge of the ship?

A: The captain was in charge of the ship.

Q: How was he?

A: He was pretty good. We actually had two of them before (unclear). We had a short guy. He was good. We had a good gunnery officer. Our first captain he got transferred onto a new destroyer coming in. They sent another captain out. He was a heck of a good guy. He was an older guy. In fact, on one of our reunions, I met him there. He was still alive and old like I am.

Q: Speaking of the reunions, have you gone to any recently? When was the last one that you went to?

A: It must have been ten years ago or so.

Q: Where was that?

A: It was at Dollyland.

Q: Did a lot of people show up for that?

A: It was around thirty or thirty five.

Q: How many were on the ship?

A: They had all retired from that.

Q: When you were on the ship, did you keep in touch with everybody back at home, your family and what not?

A: Oh yes. We had mail delivery right out in the middle of the ocean.

The carriers would go in and they would make carrier strikes on the shore of the different islands and Tokyo.

Q: So they could keep in touch with you. How did they handle you in combat?

A: We were on the outskirts of the carrier force. It was made up of three or four squadrons, seven ships to a squadron to circle the outside of the carrier force. The carrier force themselves had two big carriers. They had cruisers. They probably had thirty five, forty ships to a carrier force. They had three of them going.

Q: What did your family think about you out in combat when you enlisted in the service?

A: They wrote pretty good letters to me which was helpful. It wasn't too bad on the ship there it seemed that you got out at the ports or where you were anchored or what not. You stayed there two or three days and you forgot all about (unclear) if somebody didn't shoot at you.

Q: When you look back on your military experience, what do you think of them?

A: They were pretty good. I saw a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have seen before. I had a lot of different opinions on it. It was a good experience. I don't know if I would recommend it to everybody.

Q: What was your most memorable experience? Do you have any of those? Funny moments? Scary moments?

A: The scariest moment I think we had was we were making strikes on Okinawa when the Kamikaze planes were busy. I know I'd been on half the night on watch and finally got off and I had breakfast and went down and got my towels and what not. I was going to take a shower. It was a beautiful day. Just as I came out on deck, I saw these two airplanes come down on the big carrier *Bunker Hill*. One after the other dove right in and never pulled up.

I wasn't very long that the sailors were leaving the ship like rats. I'm telling you they were jumping off all over six feet down into the water.

Q: What time of year was this?

A: This was in the spring. I think it was in May or June.

Q: Was the water cold?

A: It probably was. I don't know. I didn't get in it. We picked up fifty two sailors off of the *Bunker Hill*. Then we got order to move all our ammunition over to the port side which was away from the *Bunker Hill* then to approach the port side of the *Bunker Hill* and use the firefighting equipment.

So, we're going along probably twenty miles an hour and we pulled up to the side of it and had to get the fire hoses out and everything. I and two other fellas got posted up on top of the pilot house - the highest part of the ship. We sprayed water over onto the *Bunker Hill*. That's one place that I realized life was too short to argue with people and make trouble because I saw them pull three hundred and sixty bodies out of the *Bunker Hill* that got burned to death. So, we were lucky. I never gave it a thought that they might blow up in our face.

Q: Did you ever have any Kamikaze attacks on your ship?

A: Yeah, we had a couple that flew at us but missed us. We got them before they got to us.

Q: They landed right in front of you though?

A: Right on the side of us. It must be they got the pilot. He must have died or something. He was coming in right on our fantail and all of the sudden he swerved off and plunk.

Q: Speaking of Okinawa and Iwo Jima and all of those places. Tell me a little bit about this. What happened?

A: Iwo Jima was, we did a little shore bombing there. It was just a desolate looking island. There was nothing there, that mountain (unclear) or something like that. We didn't see too much of that but Okinawa we didn't see any of it until it was over. We stayed out of site of land for ninety days. We never saw land. We had shore bombardment. We sent our planes in and fought off the Kamikazes. We were about seventy miles offshore. It was too far out to see the Japanese when they took off from the main island. (unclear). They put us out on picket duty half way between.

Q: Did you ever step foot on Okinawa.

A: No, I never did but I was in Tokyo, Japan after the war. No we were there. We picked up downed airmen that got shot up so bad that they couldn't land their plane and picked them up. We had a bunch of them.

Q: Was there a medical unit on your ship?

A: Just a corpsman, that's all. He did pretty good. Nobody died.

Q: You said you saw Tokyo. Did you go in after the fire raids?

A: Yeah.

Q: What did you think of that napalm?

A: Oh, that was something I'm telling you. It burned acres and acres as far as you could see down the line. It was - the Japanese must have had some valuables or something because every house along the streets were burned and there was nothing but these big iron safes one after another. It

was the only way you could tell there had been a street there. Everything was burned out completely as far as you could see one way and the other. I don't know what I was doing there alone.

Q: You went down there alone?

A: Yeah, I didn't realize until I got down in there. I turned around and came back.

Q: Did you ever meet up with any Japanese people?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you every talk to them or communicate with them?

A: Not really.

Q: Did you ever find out what they thought of Americans?

A: I never did. They were very quiet.

Q: Did you ever see signs of Japanese propaganda going against Americans?

A: Well, I don't know about that. The only propaganda we heard was Tokyo Rose, I guess they called her, on the radio. She broadcast that our ship had been hit and she did it three times.

Q: Tokyo Rose. So, she was like the Japanese propaganda spokeswoman?

A: Yeah.

Q: When the atomic bomb was dropped what was your reaction to that?

A: We were all happy. We could come home pretty quick.

Q: Is that how it was?

A: That was about it.

Q: Did you have any prior information hinting that the atomic bomb would be dropped?

A: No. It was a complete surprise.

Q: What did all of your friends think about that?

A: They all were just as happy as I was.

Q: Did you guys go out to the bars that night?

A: We were out of (unclear)

Q: Alright. Are you familiar with Bataan?

A: No, we were in the Leyte Gulf and we were out in the ocean all of the time. (unclear) after it was over.

Q: Speaking of the Leyte Gulf, I'm not too familiar with that. Can you tell me what the Leyte Gulf is?

A: It's a harbor just south of Manila, Philippines. I think it's, I don't know I've forgotten now what it is whether it is an Island. I think it is.

Q: Manila?

A: Leyte Gulf. I can't remember. We sent planes into the battleships. We managed to luck out on that.

Q: Did you ever hear anything about the Bataan death marches or any of that?

A: Oh, yeah. I heard a lot about it over there after they freed the prisoners. I read a lot about it. It's true. It's no exaggeration. They were something, the Japanese, they would think no more of slicing somebody's head off.

Q: Did you ever see anything like that happen, torture either between American to Japanese or Japanese to Americans?

A: No, I never did? I see, when we went into Tokyo, a couple of Army guys picked me up in an open jeep. As we were going down the road, the Japanese would be walking with their back, they'd haul off.

Q: These were the prisoners?

A: No, they were civilians (unclear).

Q: Did you ever meet with the Jap prisoners of war?

A: No.

Q: Were you every concerned that something like Bataan or anything like that could happen to you and that your ship could get taken over.

A: Yeah. You did. You heard all these. They weren't rumors. You'd think they were but they weren't. You heard these things going around. It made you think. It made you think.

Q: Do you feel that being in the Navy changed your life? Do you have a different perspective on it?

A: Oh yes. I have never been that serious since then I think after seeing all of those sailors pulled out of the *Bunker Hill*. Then our sister ship the destroyer (unclear) on picket duty one night. They had, I forget, how many casualties that night. They got hit by a Kamikaze. I forget how many casualties but they buried them at sea. They sewed them up in a canvas bag.

Q: All together?

A: They put them on a (unclear) one after another. I heard about that and read about that but I had never seen it.

Q: Was there ever a newspaper or something that they sent to the ship updating on how the states were?

A: No.

Q: Did you guys every know what was going on back in the states?

A: No. Not really. My father died while I was in the Okinawa campaign. We got our mail. It came in on the ships. I had been on duty seventy two hours without any sleep when I get this letter that my dad had died three weeks ago.

Q: How did you handle that when you were on the ship?

A: Well, it shook me up for a couple of days but I didn't have time. The Kamikazes were thick about that time. Like I said, I was up for seventy two hours. I was exhausted. I was seeing...things.

Q: How was sleeping there? How did you sleep on the ship?

A: You had bunks and cots, not cots but canvas on a frame. I slept as near to the deck as I could. It was right over the ventilation for the engine room. It was kind of hot but (unclear). We ate good on the ship.

Q: How was the food?

A: The captain liked good food and liked the crew to have good food. So, we had fresh potatoes and fruit, apples and chicken. We actually made hot plates. We had fire bricks and cut the grooves in them for the (unclear). Made utensils from powder cases aluminum and at night on watch, we had fried chicken.

Q: You had a little barbeque on the ship?

A: As long as the captain and the officers didn't find it. They could smell that chicken cooking but couldn't figure out where it was coming from.

Q: Did they every join you guys to have some?

A: They never found it.

Q: Sounds like you guys had some creative ideas out there. Just tell me a little bit of what it was like on the way from home to the ship.

A: Of course, I was in boot camp for four weeks then I went to Gunner's Mate school and got out of that. Then I volunteered for the PT Boats which was the same physical as the submariners. My class all went to amphibious and they left me standing there alone.

It turned out I didn't have all of my teeth. They had to make some before they let me go. I was put in the barracks and I was there for a month and a half, I guess, and I'd still be there but they found my papers down in some secondary desk.

Q: How did you lose your teeth?

A: They pulled them.

Q: They pulled them on you?

A: They pulled eleven teeth and filled eleven.

Q: How come they went to Amphibious?

A: Well, that was just after Normandy and they needed them to get across the rivers. They were going in training in (unclear) amphib boats . I got a destroyer which was good.

Q: Yeah, a little bit bigger. As you were in the Pacific, did you hear about stuff that was going on over in Europe?

A: No.

Q: You never heard about it.

A: I Never did.

Q: Did any of your friend from home go to Europe?

A: Yes. My next door neighbor did. He was in the Normandy beachhead. (unclear) he got out (unclear).

Q: Did you know anyone who was in World War I while you were in World War II?

A: No I didn't.

Q: That you could compare stories.

A: I probably did because we had a few older guys. Some of the officers (unclear)

Q: What was your reaction when FDR died?

A: It was a shock to everybody. (unclear) he was dead because he really was good to all of the services.

Q: Did you every receive any medals or anything like that while being in combat?

A: For the different campaigns like Iwo and Okinawa and Tokyo. No real personal medals.

Q: Just like ribbons or something?

A: Yes. That's what it was. I don't know where they are now.

Q: How was it when you got back home?

A: It was great. It was nothing spectacular. Everybody was coming home from the war.

Q: How was it adjusting back to work and all of that? Did you have to find a job?

A: Yeah. I found a job at a paper mill. I stayed there two or three months. I didn't like working inside so I got a job driving a truck, a gas truck, (unclear). I was a janitor at a state school. I see all of these guys going to college and said why couldn't I go? So, I did.

Q: It was a lot cheaper back then.

A: The government paid for it.

Q: Paul Smith's you went to. Right?

A: Yeah.

Q: That was a state school. Did they pay for every college?

A: Yes.

Q: Because you were in the Navy they paid?

A: Yes.

Q: Were a lot of the veterans in college at that time with you?

A: '45 and '46 , I think it was, they were all veterans. So was '47, '48 which is what I was in. There were about forty in the class and all but two of them were veterans.

Q: Did you ever get past Tokyo?

A: No. How do you mean?

Q: How did your campaign end?

A: It ended in Tokyo. One thing did happen. We were out at sea when the war was over but they hadn't signed the peace treaty yet. We got assigned to go over to Iwo and pick up some newspaper reporters and take them up for the peace signing on the Missouri.

So, we did. We picked them up and went out into Tokyo harbor - like a long river getting into the harbor. We kept watching. We were nervous. We didn't know what they were going to do but they didn't do anything. We saw a Japanese sub going out with a Japanese flag on the bottom and the American flag on the top. We went in and we anchored. We anchored about 1000ft. from the Missouri.

Q: So, you were right next to where the treaty was signed?

A: We watched them. We could see them. The night before was the first night with lights since the war started.

Q: They didn't have lights on the ship?

A: Yes. But they didn't use them. They'd get shot if they did.

So, they had lights on (unclear) or something. They all speculated on what they were doing. We couldn't get off to go. The next morning we looked and saw it was a hospital ship.

Q: You said that when you went to Tokyo you were part of the first group to go on the shore (unclear) right?

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me something about that.

A: We were (unclear) and done shore bombardment there and then went up to the northern part of Japan. (unclear) where it was probably about 120 degrees then went to Iwo and then went on up to the northern part of Japan where it was winter and you froze to death.

Q: In our readings, it says how warm it was and what not. How was the hot weather when you were in the islands?

A: Oh, it was terrible. You sweat all the time. The humidity was high.

Q: Did a lot of people get sick from the heat and humidity?

A: It was not too bad. You'd wear nothing but shorts most of the time anyway.

Q: What was dress like on the ships? Did you have to wear certain uniforms?

A: Just for inspections. You had dungarees, (unclear) jackets. After the war was over we were in to Nagasaki or one of those places. They had just unloaded box after box of Army green uniforms.

Q: (unclear)

A: So, on the way back to the ship we'd sneak in back and take a bunch of them. We'd all put on these army outfits, I guess they were, (unclear)

Q: Did you guys every talk about the other branches of service wondering maybe what was going on with them?

A: Not too much. We kept pretty much to ourselves. We were kind of a select group, the destroyer guys. They were expendable if you know what that means.

Q: Were you ever worried that you might have to go on a land attack in Japan?

A: No we didn't but we were all talking about it before the atomic bomb came because they had just about taken over Okinawa and Japan itself was the next step.

Q: What was it like to come back here. You said that you didn't enter until 1943, right?

A: I think it was '43, December '43.

Q: So, between '41 and '43 how were times in America then?

A: We didn't suffer too much. We lived on a farm. My dad was a good farmer. We had a big garden and we raised our own meat and vegetable most everything. We didn't have to buy too much.

Q: When did you graduate?

A: Graduated from Paul Smith's?

Q: No from High School.

A: Oh, 1939.

Q: What did you do in between that time? Did you just run the farm?

A: Yes. I had a couple of part time jobs.

Q: Did you have to leave a job when you went into the service?

A: We had an auction and sold all the cows and the farm and machinery and everything and (unclear) and that was it.

Q: Were your brothers or relatives in the war?

A: My brother Don he was in the Coast Guard Reserve in shore duty checking for, what do you call them?

Q: Enemy?

A: Yeah, spies getting to shore. He had a certain amount of beach to patrol. Then my other brother, my older brother, he was in the air corps. He was a stenographer. He ended up over on the back end of China.

Q: What was that again? Stenographer?

A: Yes.

Q: What exactly is that?

A: He was like a secretary.

Q: What was he doing in the back part of China?

A: He was keeping records. Most of the time they were moving around keeping ahead of the Japanese and the Communists.

Q: What was everyone's attitude toward the war. Was everyone pretty patriotic?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you think about when Vietnam came around and there was all the things going on in the college campuses with the kids and what not.

A: The original idea was good but they went too far with it. We've got to keep that kind of stuff out of our government if we are going to have to fight (unclear)

Q: You enlisted right?

A: Yeah.

Q: But there was the draft going on?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: How come you enlisted and didn't just wait to get drafted?

A: Well, one reason I quit farming and enlisted was one when I needed help I would try to get these fellas that were deferred because of farming and I couldn't get them to work for me. So, I didn't fool around. I just quit.

Q: You were working for your dad on the farm?

A: Yes. I was working with him.

Q: What did he think when you decided to go off to war?

A: He said whatever I wanted go ahead.

Q: Did he worry at all about you knowing what you were about to go into?

A: I don't know. I never got home again when I enlisted.

Q: It was pretty quick then when you enlisted you were right in then?

A: Yeah. I went to school. I went to boot camp for conditioning then I went to school where you learned all about the guns.

Q: Did you find what you used in school helped you or was it pretty much you were learning it all over again.

A: Pretty much learning all over again. I knew how to clean my guns.

Q: Was there a lot of kick back on those things?

A: Not too bad. They were 20mm. They were twins. (unclear) At the start of the war, they weren't perfect.

Q: Was there ever any Japanese resistance on you guys fire power wise? Were they shooting at you?

A: The planes did. The planes were Kamikazes. We had one plane at night that was a torpedo plane. They didn't want to shoot the machine guns at night because the tracers would show them were the ship was.

Q: The would light up, right?

A: Yeah.

Q: So, what did you guys have to do at night (unclear)

A: Yeah. We had bigger guns shooting. I stood down on the deck and I'm watching the big guns shooting. They were hitting right behind the airplane making waterspouts. All of the sudden, I happened to look down at the water and coming in toward the ship was this white streak. That was a torpedo. We were turned so it went right by the side of it.

Q: So it just barely missed it.

A: Just barely missed it.

Q: My god, that's frightening. Did any of the Japanese ever survive or anything? Did they eject or just completely suicide?

A: Just suicide. You could tell when they headed for you that if you didn't get them, they would get you to honor the emperor.

Q: Did you make a lot of friends on the ship?

A: Oh yeah. Quite a lot. There was a division between the engineers which were down below the deck and seamen which were above deck. I got along good with both of them. After the war, we actually had parties once and awhile.

Q: What did you guys do for fun on the ship when you weren't in any kind of action?

A: Well, after the war, we had liberty in quite a few cities on the shore because we were delivering mail to the ports in Japan and they used different ports. We'd deliver mail to them and we'd pick up some on the way back. So, we got to see quite a few cities (unclear). It was interesting.

Q: Did you meet grandma before the war?

A: Just about a month before I went into the service.

Q: That tight. What did she think about you going off to war?

A: We never really got together until after the war was over.

Q: Was that at Paul Smith's where you guys met?

A: No, up in Potsdam.

Q: How did that happen?

A: She worked in a (unclear) as a (unclear). I got part time job until they called me so we met a couple of times.

Q: Did grandma ever say what she thought about the war or what she did during the war?

A: She used to be a clerk in a grocery store. She told me some good tales about rationing

Q: Yeah. How about the rationing. How did that work?

A: It worked pretty good, I guess.

Q: customers (unclear)

A: (unclear)

Q: Is there anything else you want to mention?

A: Not really.

Q: Anything else that you did? Any memorable moments? Maybe some funny moments or anything like that? Mistakes?

A: No.

Q: Alright. That's about it.