

Thomas C. Hair
Narrator
Water Tender 1st Class
U.S. Navy – World War II
DOB: 4 March, 1923
Place of Birth: Bronx, NY

Interviewed by
Wayne Clark
New York State Military Museum

WC: Today is May 23rd, 2001. We are interviewing Mr. Thomas C. Hair at the Lexington Ave. Armory in Manhattan. My name is Wayne Clark. Mr. Hair, please tell us where you were born.

TH: I was born in the Bronx, March 4th, 1923.

WC: What were your Mother and Father's names?

TH: My mother's name was Elizabeth and my father's name was Thomas.

WC: What kind of work did your father do?

TH: He was a plasterer, working on the Empire State building and other big buildings.

WC: Where did you go to school?

TH: I went to a public school, no. 72. From there I went to a trade school, Samuel Gompers, in the Bronx.

WC: What year was that?

TH: Somewhere around 1939 I guess.

WC: So you were out of school when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

TH: Oh, I was in the service when Pearl Harbor happened. I left high school and worked in the CCC.

WC: What was that like? It was the Civilian Conservation Corps?

TH: It was a good outfit. I was sent up to Idaho. We fought brush fires and planted trees in the areas that were burned out. We did road work.

WC: How long were you in that?

TH: I was there for six months to a year. I left there and went into the Navy.

WC: Where did you go for your basic training?

TH: I went to Newport, RI.

WC: How long was that training?

TH: Three months, or 12 weeks.

WC: I have heard from other Navy veterans that it was kind of tough during Basic learning how to sleep in a hammock. Did you have to do that?

TH: We had to sleep in a hammock. Once you learned it was very easy. Before I was sent out to the fleet I was stationed aboard the old USS Constitution. I lived on that for about two weeks. There you had to sleep in hammocks. There were no bunks or anything. When I got aboard ship there were hammocks of course. We didn't use bunks.

WC: What kind of specialty training did they give you in the Navy?

TH: I didn't really receive any specialty training. When we got on board our ship they just assigned us to a division and we got our training from there on.

WC: Tell us about the type of work you did aboard ship.

TH: When I first went onboard I was in training with an engineer, running the engines in the motor whale boat and launches that ferried the crew back and forth in the harbors. From there I went on to various other things. I ended up working in the fire rooms, always the fire rooms.

WC: That must have been pretty tough work down there.

TH: It was tough work. When we were down in the South Pacific it was extremely hot. One of the ships I was on was called "forced-draft". It took air from the outside and force-fed it to the boilers. So you had that warm air plus the heat of the boilers, so down in that area it was around 110 degrees. You were always around that extreme heat. As the years went by they got encased boilers where the air was encased in the boiler, so the pressure was not on you.

WC: When did you go over to the European theater?

TH: I was first assigned to the USS New York (LPD-21). I was later taken off the New York and assigned to base "bobcat", which was a code name for Bora Bora in the Pacific. They were building an oil base out there. I was in Bora Bora for a while and then got assigned to a ship, the USS Ramapo.

WC: What kind of ship was that?

TH: She was an oil tanker. She went back to her West Coast home port in San Pedro. She was a big oil tanker and I stayed aboard there for maybe a year. I worked in the fire rooms and made my ratings. When I left the Ramapo I went aboard a destroyer, USS Harding (DD-625). She stayed on the West Coast for a bit, then went through the Panama Canal to Norfolk. We went to Casablanca and back. I got made Boiler Tender 2nd class and they sent me for more training in boilers. From there I went to brand new construction and the USS Monssen (DD-798). She left the East Coast and went to the West Coast. (8:01)

WC: What kind of ship was that?

TH: She was a destroyer. We went on to Pearl Harbor, and then on into the Pacific.

WC: At Pearl Harbor was there still a lot of destruction visible at that time?

TH: Well, that was 1944.

WC: So most of it was cleaned up by then?

TH: Yes, most of it was pretty well gone. We went on to Saipan and right up to Tokyo. There was Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, the first Battle of Philippine Sea, Philippines, Leyte Gulf, etc. We were in the whole thing.

WC: It must have been quite an experience. Did you have any problem with Kamikaze's?

TH: Oh yes, we had problems. We saw a lot of them at Okinawa. Fortunately, we were not hit. But we came mighty close a few times. We were able to down a plane that went into the water. It missed us by maybe 25 yards. There were a lot of Kamikaze planes out there at that time.

WC: Any contact with Japanese ships or submarines?

TH: Well, the closest contact was in the Battle of Surigao Strait. MacArthur had invaded the Philippines and the Japanese knew it and came down there to stop it. They came down from the north and from the southwest, and they were going to come into Surigao Strait. I didn't learn this until after the battle was over, but there were some of the old battleships from Pearl Harbor that were hit and had been refurbished and were out there.

We went to guard Surigao Strait and they (Japs) came down with their task force alright. There were battleships, a couple cruisers, and destroyers. They started up through the strait and were spotted by one of our subs. PT boats tried to deter them, and it did but it didn't stop them. They came on up through the strait and the commander of our task force knew they were coming and assigned us to stop them. It was very imperative that we stop them. My squadron was assigned to make a torpedo run on them. We knew they were coming since we had radar and were tracking them. We did make a torpedo run at them. It was about 2:30 in the morning. There were two other destroyers and mine on one side and three other destroyers on the other side. We did launch torpedoes at them. I don't know exactly what the yardage was, but it was fairly close. This was all done at night, and when we hit them, the explosions were going on and all that. They had big search lights and they trained them on us. A couple of our torpedoes did hit a battleship that helped sink it. The USS McDermott, in front of us, hit a battleship with a couple fish. Eventually she sank. But when they played the searchlights on us, we were told to go to flank speed and get out of there. We had a line of battleships and cruisers formed ahead of them and they started throwing shells at them.

The end result was that we had stopped them. We sunk a battleship, some cruisers and destroyers. So, it was a fairly big battle. A naval battle that you apparently are not going to see today what with the missiles, etc. This was very close contact. We were somewhere around 1,000 yards from this battleship, in order for the torpedoes to be effective. So that was one of the battles.

The Battle of Philippine Sea was what is known today as the "Marianas Turkey Shoot". We were off Saipan and we were covering the marines that were in there. The Japanese

decided to come down and it was a big naval engagement. Most of it was done by carriers. It was a battle that really put a dent in the Japanese navy. From then on we were always active.

WC: Were you able to watch any of this?|

TH: We were attached by plane during the Battle of Philippine Sea. They were Japanese Zeroes, and we downed quite a few. We were there to protect the carriers and other large ships. It was a very large engagement but it was mostly air that I remember.

WC: It must have been pretty exciting for a young man to be part of all that.

TH: To tell you the truth, when things start happening you don't think, you just do. You are down there in the fire room and bells are ringing because you are always changing speeds. You are lighting off boilers and cutting them out, operating the safeties, etc., so you are pretty well occupied with what you are doing. As for standing and watching, you don't get much chance to do that. The ones that can do that are probably the ones on the bridge directing everything. Even if you were in a gun tub, you are passing ammunition or doing something else. You don't get a chance to just gaze around. So you don't get to know much about the battle until it's over. Then you hear about it. It is exciting. I was 20 years old and a 1st class (petty officer). I was training reserves that came aboard. So for a 20-year old it was quite the thing.

WC: Did you go through any of the typhoons?

TH: Yes, we did. We had a typhoon off the Philippines where at the time they said it was Halsey's fault. Instead of steering us out of the storm he steered us more or less into it. Supposedly Halsey got reprimanded for it. That was very frightening. I myself, was on a destroyer, which is much smaller than a battleship or a carrier, and they were bouncing around. We had these inclinometers that go back and forth as the ship rolls. We were going to 45 degrees and I thought we were going to turn over too. If I remember correctly, we did lose three destroyers. They were not able to take on ballast due to insufficient time and they turned over. Fortunately, we got through it. But on some of the carriers it bashed their decks like they were nothing. That typhoon was very, very bad. But, we survived that, too.

WC: Where were you when they dropped the atomic bomb?

TH: We were up shelling the coast of northern Japan. We were shelling steel plants and stuff like that. We were told then that the war had ended.

WC: There must have been quite a bit of excitement on the ship.

TH: That ship was into almost everything.

WC: You were over in the Pacific area when the war ended in Europe, correct?

TH: Yes.

WC: What did you think when Germany surrendered? Did you think it was going to be a short period of time before Japan fell? Did you think the war might go on for a couple more years?

TH: I didn't think the war was going to go on as long as it did. We were glad to see VE

Day. We knew we were making progress and putting Japan down. They weren't as mighty as they were at Pearl. I somehow didn't give a thought to when the war was going to end. I guess because we knew it was there. We knew it had to happen. But the day it ended was a big one, really unique, because you knew that now, no matter where you went you were not going to be attacked by a submarine or something else.

WC: Now, when the war ended, where did you go? Did you head back to the West Coast?

TH: I believe we went somewhere up in the Aleutians. We didn't get to Tokyo for the surrender, I know that.

WC: What kind of reception did you get when you got back to port?

TH: We just came in and docked.

WC: No bands or anything?

TH: No bands, no fanfare of anything. We came in and docked. A lot of the guys topside had been drafted, so their time was up. I had enlisted for a set amount of time, which was nearly up. At that time I did not have a desire to re-enlist.

WC: This was 1946?

TH: Yes. So, I elected to go home. They sent me back to the East Coast. I got 30 days leave, and then was assigned to a sub tender. I was on that for a few months before my time expired. I got discharged in 1946.

WC: What did you do after the war?

TH: After the war, I tried to get a job in boiler work, but that was impossible in New York. I worked in construction, and ended up working for the NYC Fire Department. So, I put my time in at the Fire Department.

WC: That must have been a pretty exciting job, too.

TH: That was an exciting job. My time there ended and I entered a program to become an RN. I got my RN license and worked in a NYC hospital for 15 years as a registered nurse. Then I retired. I didn't particularly like that, so I took a part-time job driving hearses and limousines. I did that for about 6 more years.

WC: I think at some point you got married after the war?

TH: Oh yes, I got married in 1953.

WC: How many children?

TH: We ended up with two children.

WC: A boy and a girl?

TH: Yes, a boy and a girl.

WC: Any grandchildren?

TH: We have seven grandchildren. One of them is in college today. The years have gone by.

WC: Is there anything that stands out the most in your war time experience?

TH: I guess the biggest thing was the Battle of Surigao Strait. Because it is very rarely that destroyers are called upon to make a torpedo run. The chances of coming out of a torpedo run are about zero, but fortunately we came out of it. You almost never see a destroyer launching torpedoes. You might see submarines doing that, but not destroyers. Destroyers are exciting to be on because they are the first line of defense. They were called the scouts of the fleet. During the Kamikaze era, we were always out on the fringes to get the Kamikazes to hit us and protect the carriers and bigger ships.

WC: What was the typical day like aboard ship, especially when you were in immediate danger of attack? Did you have a lot of drills going to battle stations?

TH: I remember that we were always drilling, so that when things really did happen, things were done automatically. We never really had time to think about what was going on. Life at sea itself is very boring. Standing watch in the fire room for four hours, watching the burners and boilers. You are watching the gauges to be sure of maintaining steady steam pressure. Other than that, cleaning up and stuff like that.

WC: Did you get much liberty time?

TH: Unfortunately, only when we came back to the coast, which was very rarely. When I transferred from one ship to another, it went to sea right away.

WC: What about in the South Pacific?

TH: We went to islands. There was nothing there to do. The guys would end up playing softball, picking up seashells and drinking beer. There were no recreation facilities. For the big ships, it was a different story. They had everything they wanted. They had soda fountains and barber shops, etc. We never had that in the smaller ships. The big ships were ok to be on, but I preferred the small ships. There was more comradery among the fellas. It was the Navy. I'm not saying I liked the Navy so much. It was the guys you were with.

WC: Do you keep in touch with any of them?

TH: Oh yes, every year we have a reunion. This year we are going down to Jacksonville for a few days. We all get together and relive the old times.

WC: Do you know what eventually happened to your ship?

TH: She was eventually decommissioned after WW-II and put into "mothballs" I believe. She was brought out for the Korean War. Then somewhere up along the Jersey coast she ran aground. They had to tow her off. Then she was decommissioned again. I guess they scrapped her, like most of the other ships.

WC: Any final thoughts? Any regrets? I know you are proud of your service. Do you think we were right in being involved to the extent that we were?

TH: I have no regrets. I liked the Navy, but in the beginning, I had a little trouble adjusting, being a 17-year old and my father signing off on my enlistment. I have no regrets about what we did because I think it had to be done. It was a case of you or me and it was not going to be me if I could help it.

WC: Do you belong to any other veterans' organizations?

TH: I belong to the American Legion, the Fire Department Post 930. It's been 35 years or something like that. But I'm a pretty inactive person in the American Legion. I pay my dues and support them, but that is it for me. I also belong to the Elks Club but am not active there either. I guess I like being home, around the house.

WC: Anything else that we may have missed? Any final thoughts?

TH: You had asked me about Pearl. I was at Pearl Harbor one day and it was quite destructive. When you see a mighty ship that is sunk it is something to witness. You see something that big and wonder how it could happen. You wouldn't think it was possible. I think the experience helped me a lot.

WC: I guess you grew up fairly fast.

TH: Oh, yes, I did. Like I said, my first year in the Navy was a little edgy. It was the way it was, you can't change it, so you had to do it their way.