

Oral History Interview of Frank Holmgren

Military Service: Navy, 1942-1945

Interviewer: Tiffanie Salisbury

Date of Interview: December 15, 2002

Location of Interview: Eatontown, New Jersey

Archive: Guggenheim Memorial Library

HS 298 (Oral History)

Interview of Frank Holmgren

Professor S. Douglass

December 15, 2002

Fall, 2002

This oral history interview of Frank Holmgren is taking place on December 15, 2002 at his home in Eatontown, New Jersey. This interview is for the Oral History project for HS298-01 at Monmouth University. I am Tiffanie Salisbury, a student of Monmouth University, and I will be conducting the interview. Mr. Holmgren served in the Navy from March 1942 to December 7, 1945. He was discharged with the rank of Gunner's Mate, Third Class, and served in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters of war.

Q: What was it like growing up in New Jersey as compared to today?

A: Ohhh (laughs), I don't know... It was so quiet. I mean we didn't have anything in my days...Uhhh we had to go out and make our own couple dollars to live with because we couldn't get it from our parents. They didn't have no money in those days, so we would have to go caddying or polo or go out muskrattin' or stuff like that to make a couple of dollars. All you needed was one dollar a week, so I'd earn that.

Q: Okay, so what town did you grow up in?

A: What was that?

Q: What town did you grow up in?

A: Eatontown. I'm an Eatontown boy all my life.

Q: And what high school did you attend?

A: Long Branch

Q: What year did you graduate?

A: The 12th. They had to throw me out because I joined the Navy. (Laughs)

No, I am only kidding you... But I did graduate in February on 1942. I think it was that year.

Q: Did you any favorite radio programs?

A: Hmmm. I can't... I forgot what they were in them days... Any favorite, any favorite radio programs. Ohhh, all's I was interested in was football. (Laughs) I did listen to them because that's all we ever had was the radio. I can't remember to tell you the truth- too many years have gone by.

Q: What did you know about WWII prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor?

A: I didn't know anything. I didn't even realize things were as serious as it was. Like I say, here with radio we didn't have that kind of information. I don't remember at all until it happened.

Yep.

Q: Where were you when you heard about the attack?

A: I guess I was home.

Q: Do you remember how you felt when it happened?

A: All about is was that I still didn't realize what was going on outside... These guys were getting killed and stuff like that. The more you read and did hear from the radio or from the papers. We were ready to go in right there.

Q: Were you drafted into the Navy or did you enlist?

A: Nope, I volunteered.

Q: Do you remember the date that you had volunteered?

A: That would be around January, somewhere's around there.

Q: January of 1942?

A: Yep.

Q: Where did you go for your training?

A: Uhh, Newport, Rhode Island. And it was only about four weeks that I was gone. All they take you there for is to put needles in you and put you out on the parade ground, show you a little model of a ship- because I never seen a ship or anything. And that was it. So we were out of there almost the beginning of May. Really they taught you while you were there on ship. I learned by being on ship in no time at all. If they had told me, I would have had no idea. I would've said, what are you talking about?

Q: So, your training lasted about four weeks?

A: Mmmmmhmmmm.

What was a typical day like while you were training?

How long did training last?

Q: What type of ship did you serve on?

A: I served on an anti aircraft cruiser. It was a new ship. It was really built for protecting aircraft carriers and planes.

Q: Was that the USS. Juneau?

A: USS. Juneau, yeah.

Q: Did the name have any significance?

A: Uhhh, well it was name dafter the capital of Juneau, Alaska.

Q: How many men served on this ship?

A: We had 728- somewhere's around that, officers and crewmembers.

Q: What was your position aboard this ship?

A: Well, when I went aboard, we were the last ones that went aboard this ship... Uhhh, there

were thirty-eight of us and boot camp was called. I had a friend here from Eatontown that I joined with, and here was on there, too, and we both got on the same ship together. Because the way they picked us was alphabetical order, by name. His last name was Haynes, and his name went first, and I was Holmgren, and was one of the last ones, of the thirty-eight, to go aboard. That's how we got together. We were the last ones to get aboard ship.

Q: What was your position aboard ship?

A: Well, I ended up as the Captain's orderly. Captain's orderly, what that is, you sit outside his door, and if he wants you, you got to run his errands for him. It was a good job.

Q: How did you keep in contact with your family during this time?

A: I would write letters. That's all.

Q: What areas of the world did you serve in?

A: Well, I was in the convoys. We were taking ships down to South Africa, protecting at that time. Then they lost some ships in the Pacific in August and we were picked to replace a ship that sunk. In August we went to the Pacific, we went through the Panama Canal in August. We went to the pacific side, and from then on that's where it was at. Uhhh, we were in New Caledonia. There was a base there that we worked out of. Then we went out to Guadalcanal. The big thing was Guadalcanal- supplying- they had already taken Guadalcanal, but they were still fighting there, so we were supplying there all the time, and the Japs were doing the same thing. So uhhh, it didn't take us long after we got there that we were already in action.

Q: What was a typical day like for you while aboard the ship?

A: Typical day, well I had that. Really, if I wasn't on duty with the captain orderly, I would have another, I would have to stand another guard on the lookout or something, that's what we called it. So, and uhh, either that or, at that particular one there cleaning up or whatever they asked me

to do, because I didn't have no rating then. My rating then on that ship, I just got into the Navy. I was only a first class seaman, but that's another thing. I was in the Navy in March, I was on the ship, and it was sunk in November of that same year. My time was only a few months in the Navy on the ship that sunk in the battle.

Q: Prior to the sinking of your ship, the USS Juneau, what was your experience with the enemy?

A: What was my experience with the enemy? What was that question again?

Q: Prior to the sinking of your ship, did you have any experience with the enemy?

A: Oh we were in battles. That's how we got into trouble. We, oh yeah, we were, for the first time we were there for the aircraft carriers. Well, we had the WASP. The WASP got hit with a submarine torpedo, and it was sunk. That was my first experience with the war. We picked up survivors and took 'em back. And when I was with the Hornet, then we got in a battle with the Jap planes, and uhh, in October, the Santa Cruz was in a big battle, and it got sunk. So, we were doing pretty good. There were two aircraft carriers and both of them got sunk during the war. But uh, naturally our planes did damage to them, too. And then after that, that was in, eh, October, and after that is when we went to, we had to go on through and had to go take troops and supplies to Guadalcanal to supply the Marines and the Army, whoever was there on Guadalcanal. And while I was there, we were hit again. Fifty-two Jap planes came in. We were never hit, thank God. So uhhh, the first time I ever seen anything that looked like a Jap was the... When I got out of battle that day, I came up topside- I was the Captain's orderly, and I was on duty. I looked in the water and there was a wing on a Jap plane, and they had the big sun on it, so that's when I knew we were in battle with the Japs. But everything was Guadalcanal in them days. The Japs wanted to keep it 'cause they had an airport there, and we wanted it because of the airport there. So, that was the first time that they invaded one of the islands, when they

started on their way to Japan.

Q: Did you ever see any kamikaze action?

A: No, no, no, no... That was back in '45, '44, and I was back home then. No.

Q: What was the date that your ship, the USS Juneau, was hit?

A: The date, November the 13th, 1942.

Q: Could you tell me about the day that happened?

A: Can I tell you about what?

Q: Can you tell me about the day that happened?

A: Like I say, I was Captain's orderly, and I had to be on duty that day. We were in the harbor in Guadalcanal, and we were unloading and standing by to protect the unloading of the ships, and these planes came in. I went back up to the Captain when the thing was over with. My station was down below, in the handling room with 1.1- that's where I was at, and the bell went off to go to action. I was booting the ammunition up, we were passing the ammunition, and so when we went back, the Captain pulled me out. It was late in the afternoon, and he said get some sleep 'cause we'll be up tonight. But he didn't tell me what. But what was, the Jap fleet was coming in to supply Guadalcanal, and they had it way bigger than we did. We didn't know this. We didn't know what we were going to do. They had a bigger fleet than we did. We had thirteen ships, but the biggest one we had was the San Francisco, a heavy cruiser. They came in with these huge battlewagons, and like the captain said, the next thing I know, I was sleeping. I told the fellas, there's no need to take your clothes off, because we'll be up tonight. They thought I was crazy. In fact the bell went off at about o'clock in the morning- somewhere's around there, and uhh, the next thing I know, I hear this boom boom boom. And I thought we were being bombed... (Pauses) And what was really happening was we ran right into the middle of the Jap

fleet, these thirteen ships of ours- right into the middle. And uhh, that's what that was- the guns going off. But we were so close that they couldn't get the guns below the water line, so everybody who went topside was taking a beating. Not our ship, so bad, but the 'Frisco and them took a bad beating. And then the next thing I know I am getting knocked down. We got hit with a torpedo in the number on fire room. If it hit the magazine I wouldn't be here talking to you today. But it hit the fire room, and we somehow kept the ship floating, and we got out of the battle. So when I came topside, I thought, this is a nightmare. We were still firing back and forth, so it was then that I found out what was going on. I didn't even know that we had run into the Jap fleet. I probably would have died of a heart attack. So after that, we rendezvoused with what was left- the 'Frisco and the Helena and a couple destroyers and us, we were down in the water. They were really beat up. Helena was okay. And, uhh, about eleven o'clock that day, in the morning we were sitting in the back. We figured that we were going back to Guadalcanal, or to Pearl Harbor, maybe back to the States. We had a big hole in our ship. And uhh, as were sitting there talking, I remember one thing specifically- the life rafts, you know when the ship goes down. There were three of them. They were tied down to the deck. And we're saying, if this ship goes down, ain't anybody going to get off. So, somehow we asked for permission or we just went and untied them, cut them off, not knowing we were going to get hit again. So just at that time, it was eleven o'clock. I was either going to see my buddy Charlie, or I was going to get sandwiches. I don't know which. And then we got hit again with a submarine, another torpedo from submarine. And it blew us up. We went down inside of a minute. Now I can't even swim. I got blown into the air and when I came down and I hit down on the deck, thank God, my hand hit a jacket, life jacket, and I wrapped it around me. (Pauses) And uhh, I had to hold on and then I felt something hit my back. (Pauses) I remember looking back and I could see

that the ship was up like that (gestures) all inside of a minute. And there was nothing. Nothing. I was holding on and I heard the water roaring. I said, I am going to die. I am going to die. And I was gone. Then I was jettied. If I didn't come up, I don't know how far down I went, I would have been dead. Then the next thing I know I am shooting up out of the water, and uhh, I could see the light when I hit the surface- a lot of fuel oil and that. I could hear these guys hollering. They were on the rafts. I had to make my way over to one of them. I saw the raft and got on that. And, the three rafts I told you, they were the only three rafts that got off the whole ship. If it wasn't for that, we would have had nothing. The other rafts, they didn't come off. So, we had the three rafts. I don't know how many survivors we there at that particular time. Probably around seventy-five to a hundred, maybe not that many but, I would say at least seventy-five. And everybody was really wounded, and that. I was all right, but most of 'em were all wounded and everything. And uhh, the next thing we know the ship the 'Frisco and the Helena, they were leaving. The guys were hollering. They were leaving us. They didn't even come over. We looked over and they were gone. We thought, they'll come over and pick us up. But they didn't come back. They left. They left us out there. And so, the plane came by the same day or the next day I don't know, and dropped a rubber boat. An officer and two guys got in, and were saved, and by the time we was in the water from the thirteenth to the nineteenth, and when we got picked up... We got picked up by a PTY because there was five of us. We started off with eight, and we were trying to make land ourselves. This was after a few other days. We ended up with us five on a raft, and the PTY picked us up. There were two other guys on these two other rafts. There was five, one, two, three, five, six, seven of us. There was only ten of us who survived the whole deal out of seven hundred people on one ship. And then from there on I went back to Guadalcanal again. We couldn't walk. The Marines took good care of us. I ended up in

the hospital and came back to the States. Then I went out on another ship, the USS Oakland, which is the same ship as the Juneau. I went out on that. I seen action from the islands to Saipan. This was in 1944. And there was a fellow on board, and he said, I'll get you back on shore. And I asked to go back. By the time I got over my six month limited duty, the war was over. And that was it.

Q: I read in the article from the *Atlanticville* that the five Sullivan brothers served on this ship. Did you know any of them?

A: No, not personally. I was in such a short time, that I was not ready for talking like I am talking to you now. I wouldn't. But there were also four Roger brothers aboard that ship. And two of 'em got transferred off, just before we went out that last time. But the one Roger brother was the same as I was, captain's orderly. I knew the Roger brothers. I was close to them. I knew only one Sullivan boy got off the ship, and that was George, the oldest one. He was hurt so bad, I don't think he lasted no more than two or three days. He passed away too, even though they said that the sharks got him. The sharks didn't eat him. He was hurt so bad, he just died like most of 'em did. But the sharks did get a lot. The day I was out on the raft, the day I was picked up, before that the officer swam away- they go out of their heads, too. Another fella went before him. He swam away. It was only six of us. That day when we got hit, this other fella, he jumped off, and the sharks got him as soon as he jumped off. And uhh, that left only five of us. The plane finally found us out there.

Q: Where and when were you discharged from the Navy?

A: Where? I was up there in Earle, you know where that is? Well, I was out for six months limited duty, and I when I came back, I went to gunnery school. So I was down in the sick bay, and they asked me if I wanted to get out. I said no, but I didn't want to go out again right away.

So, they said pick where you want. So I found out about that they had this place at Earle in the ammunitions depot. That place is about six miles from my house. So that's where I went. The war was over, now I was only single, so I had to stay in there until my number come up to get out, in December. I didn't have school. I had nothing to go to, so I got a job up there, and I was there for thirty-five more years.

Q: How did your friends and family receive you upon your arrival home?

A: Wanna see 'em?

Q: After we finish the whole interview, we can look at the pictures.

A: Ya know, they were really happy. I waited until I got to Newark before I called 'em up. I was getting on a train coming into red Bank.

Q: How did you re-adjust to civilian life?

A: How's that?

Q: Did you find the adjustment to civilian life easy?

A: Oh, yeah. No problem. I had a job and everything else, and I met her (gestures to his wife and laughs)

Q: What profession did you pursue after coming home?

A: I worked in the ammunitions department.

Q: Looking back, do you feel that Hollywood's portrayal of the war is accurate?

A: The history channel is. I don't know about the other ones. Probably some of it is, but the history channel on TV is really accurate. They got the real thing.

Q: How do you feel about the present tension between the United States and other countries in the world?

A: I really don't. That doesn't bother me. You know you get mad at some things. You don't

really know what is going on. I don't get myself into that.

Q: Overall, what did you learn from your experience in WWII?

A: Well, I would do the same thing. I would still volunteer to go if we had a war. I would still go, because that's what to got to do. So, uhh, you try to stay out of wars. Sometimes you must go, and that's the only way to stop it. That's what happened to begin with. Everybody was sleeping and these other ones, and they knew all that stuff was going on. They knew Japan was doing what they were doing. After the war was over we had so much out there that nobody would have touched us in '45. But that was my feeling anyway. Stay strong. If you are strong people will think twice before they do anything. That's for sure.

Q: What do you feel that young people should understand about WWII?

A: About World War Two? Just like I said, you gotta stay strong. You gotta do what you gotta do, and I still believe if you stay strong you ain't going to have to worry about going into any world war. What they are doing now is probably right. There's always these guys doing something wrong. There's always these one or two. You elect these people to go up into the Senate and all that and they can't settle anything because they are fighting over democrat or republican. I don't go for that either. I vote what I think it right. I don't vote democrat or republican down the line. I can't believe that no more than jumping over the moon. No.

Q: Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

A: I don't think so.

Q: Thank you very much. This is greatly appreciated.

A: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW