Interview with Charles Lovett

November 21, 2002

This oral history interview of Charles Lovett is taking place on November 21, 2002, at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, NJ. This interview is for the Oral History Project for HS 298 01 (Oral History) at Monmouth University. I am Melissa Kozlowski, a student at Monmouth University. I will be conducting the interview. Charles Lovett served in World War II. He was discharged with the rank of Seamen First Class. He also served in areas such as the European Theater, Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines, and Manchuria.

Question: Mr. Lovett, how would you describe growing up in Atlantic City, New Jersey?

Answer: Great. It was a great little town. Before World War II it was really--everything was on the boardwalk, and Steel Peer was there, you could go to the Steel Peer on the weekend. If you go, you’d pack a lunch and you’d spend the whole day at Steel Peer, with the water surfers and all that. It was great.

Q: What was your family like?

A: My family was great. My father was a railroad engineer. My mother never worked, she took care of myself and three sisters but she had a full time job in them days taking care of us.

Q: So you had siblings?
A: Yes, I had three sisters.

Q: What was your relationship with them like?

A: Very close. A very close family.

Q: What were race relations like in Atlantic City?

A: Well, I went to Atlantic City High School and there were no problems at all. A lot of people—everybody got along well in those days. Those were good days, before World War II.

Q: What did you know about Hitler before the War?

A: Not really too much, not really too much... before the War. There wasn’t too much news about him in those days.

Q: What did you know about Japan before Pearl Harbor?

A: Hardly anything.

Q: Did you think that the United States would go to War?

A: At my age, no. When WWII broke out I was 15 ½ years old, so I didn’t have any conception of the War being ready.

Q: Do you see any similarities between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the attack on the Twin Towers?

A: No. No—Japan made a sneak attack, but this attack on the Twin Towers, nobody even expected it. They did suspect Japan, but the terrorists, you don’t know who they are, they could be in the same room with you. WWII we knew who our enemy was, the Japanese, the Germans, and the Italians, too.

Q: Tell me about your decision to enlist.
A: WWII broke out I was 15 ½ years old, when Pearl Harbor was attacked I didn’t even know where Pearl Harbor was, I mean, where’s Pearl Harbor, you know? So the only way that we could hear the news was on Saturdays, at the newsreels. You could go to the movies all day for twenty cents, and now it cost eight bucks. We saw the devastation of what they did to Pearl Harbor, and the lives that were lost we went to the movies a couple more weeks and saw more devastation my buddy and I, and then and there we decided we had to get into the Navy. That was it, we had to get in the Navy. When I turned seventeen, June twelfth, 1943, my buddy and I went down to the post office and signed up for the Navy. I didn’t get in right away though.

Q: How did you persuade your parents to let you in?

A: Ok, here’s the story. We went to the Post Office in Atlantic City up to the Second Floor, to the two petty officers, and told him my buddy and I want to join the Navy. So he says can you read the chart on the wall, for your eyes...so no problem we could read that...he gave us a color blind book, you can’t be color blind in the Navy, and we read the color blind book no problem. He says, now you need your parents’ signature. Well, it took me 4 ½ weeks to get their signature. My sisters were really mad when my mother and father signed me in, but they signed me in.

Q: If you hadn’t joined the Navy, what do you think you would have done?

A: That’s a good question; because I was so young...I really can’t answer that question. The Navy was in my mind.

Q: Why did you choose to join the Navy instead of another branch of the service?
A: Because I always loved ships...when I seen them ships at Pearl Harbor hit, and the American flag flying on the stern and all, it just got to my heart. I had to get in the Navy.

Q: Did you have any other family members serving in the war?

A: No.

Q: What was the name of the ship you served on?


Q: Who was your ship named for?

A: It was named for a fellow named John McNulty, who was killed in World War II. It was commissioned by his wife in 1944, March 31st; she commissioned the McNulty, Mrs. McNulty.

Q: What naval action did you participate in?

A: We took the first convoy to North Africa, we went through the Rock of Gibraltar, it was two o’clock in the morning, the moon was shining bright and the German bombers attacked our convoy. We were going to smokescreen around the convoy, and

Q: That was your first action?

A: That was our first action, yes.

Q: Do you remember any others that come to mind?

A: Well, we didn’t see any more action until we got to the Pacific. We made anther trip across and after that action and everything was quiet. By that time they had so many DE’s built that we got the convoys across safely; they really didn’t need the
DE’s in the Atlantic anymore so they started sending us around to the Pacific were the action was.

Q: And what action did you see in the Pacific?

A: We went through the Panama Canal, and we were heading for the main land. New Guinea was going to be our home port, and on our way there we were attacked by suicide planes and one just missed our ship. We got to (New Guinea); we had to take a convoy to Leyteye, the invasion of Leyteye Gulf, in the Philippines. We got attacked by kamikazes day and night, they kept coming in. That was our first action in the Pacific.

Q: Did you ever suffer any injuries?


Q: What do you remember about your training?

A: I was at boot camp, we only have 5 ½ weeks of boot camp, boot training in Sampson, New York, just about enough time to get our shots and do some marching around and before you know it we were home on a seven day leave, back to Sampson, sent to Boston Navy Yard, then board the ship.

Q: Was it hard to adjust to living on a ship?

A: No, no it there was so many on the ship that you felt ready and just did it. I want to tell you something about getting on the ship. There were fifteen of us ... and they took fifteen of us and the ship was up on dry-dock, just got back from shakedown. I didn’t go on shakedown. On this side they had ... and they started
taking guys to their bunks. There’s four of us left standing there, they ran out of bunks. So they took us four back to the aft of steering and we swung our hammocks back there and that’s where we slept on the ship. That’s where I got injured, back there.

Q: So on the ship you slept in a hammock?

A: O yeah, it wasn’t very comfortable, because you couldn’t turn around; you had to lie on your back all the time. Until I got hurt, the day after I got hurt for some reason I got a bunk!

Q: Can you tell me about an average day on the ship?

A: We were deckhands so we maintained the ship. The average day started at 5:30 in the morning. The boats mate would get on the PA system and blow his whistle and say “now here this, clean sweep down, forward aft.” That was our cue to get out of the bunk. And get the brooms and sweep down. That was the start of our day.

Q: And as the day went on...?

A: Well, you had to stand watch. And everyone had a battle station, too. So my watch was up in the lookout. And your watch was four hours on, eight hours off. The first watch was from midnight till four in the morning. You did that for one week. Then you went from four in the morning to eight o’clock in the morning, and shift it around

Q: How was your relationship with your shipmates?

A: Great. I never saw one argument or one fight aboard that ship in two years time. It was just; to me it was one big family. We had 225, 235 guys and we just got along
fine. We'd eat together, we slept together, we did everything...it's hard to explain, but it was just a great bunch of guys.

Q: What about relationships between the enlisted men and the officers?
A: The executive officer was really good, the only time you'd see the captain was when he came down for inspection, but the executive officer would come down and talk with us, he was pretty good. Couple officers were good, a couple officers weren't, but an officer is an officer, they have to show discipline. You look up to an officer, and you never argue with an officer that was taboo. What he said, you just listened to him and did it.

Q: Were there any African Americans on your ship?
A: Yes, one. He took care of the captains meals. He took care of the captain, that was his job.

Q: Did the war have any effect on your religion or your religious beliefs?
A: No, none at all.

Q: What were meals like aboard the ship?
A: Meals were pretty good. In fact, the first night we got attacked was Christmas Eve 1944, and we just had a good meal, turkey and all because we'd just left the States and we had the meat on there. The meals were pretty darn good, yeah.

Q: Was there any entertainment on the ship?
A: Yeah, movies on the fantail, if the conditions were right, they were lousy movies but at least they were movies.

Q: How often did you go on liberty?
A: We had liberty in Boston when we first got on the ship, we had liberty in
Brooklyn, Time Square, we went to Coney Island...we had a good time.

Q: What was it like to be off the ship and on liberty?
A: It was great, because people respected you when you had your uniform on.

There were plenty of girls, we had no trouble picking up girls in Time Square, and you'd get a girlfriend for a couple of nights.

Q: Would you say the men were excited to be out and about?
A: Sure, we went to Coney Island, when the war was over we went to San Diego. It took six months to decommission the ship, we had every night liberty, we had fresh food, we slept in the best bunks, we went to Hollywood, we got into all kinds of trouble in Hollywood...I say quite a bit.

Q: Were you able to receive mail while you were on the ship?
A: Yeah, we received mail but it took a long time to get there, especially in the Pacific. In the Atlantic we would go over and come right back, it took about a month to get a convoy across and et back to the United States. In the Pacific we got mail about every couple of months or something like that.

Q: Was your mail censored at all?
A: Mail going out was censored.

Q: What types of things would they censor?
A: Anything pertaining to the war. There were no cameras, maybe some of the officers had cameras. There were very few pictures of the ship taken during the war, I have a few of them.

Q: How often were you able to contact your family?
A: In the Atlantic I was able to contact them, but it was twelve months before I was
able to contact them in the Pacific. I was in the Pacific for twelve months before I got back to the States again, and I called them right away!

Q: Tell me about earning your two bronze stars.

A: The one was in the Mediterranean Sea, and the other was for the invasion of the Philippines and the kamikaze attacks that broke out.

Q: What did you think of FDR as a president?

A: I thought he was great, I liked FDR. When I heard he died it shook me all up, I was almost in tears. He was a great president.

Q: Where were you when you heard that he died?

A: I was in the Pacific, around the Philippines area. We did a lot of different duties in the Philippines; we’d mine sweep and we were on the move all the time. We’d look for crashed aircraft, especially from Japan, they lost a lot of B-29 bombers there coming back they’d go down in the ocean, we found parts never people.

Q: So you never had any prisoners on your ship?

A: No, no prisoners. We picked up in the China Sea, we came across a man and a woman, they were in bad shape. They were maybe 50 or 60 years old, we took them off their boat and then we blew that up, we put them in the sick bay and when we got to the next port we let them off. We took care of them, they were starving, and they were trying to escape the Japanese in China.

Q: What did you think about President Truman?

A: Truman? Well, I’m glad he dropped down the bombed, I’ll tell you that much. Because if he hadn’t dropped down the bomb, we were getting ready to invade Japan...we were coming to the front line because we were getting ready to invade
Japan when he dropped the bomb. So, if he hadn’t dropped the bomb there would have been a lot more American lives lost. So, he had to drop the bomb I mean I’m sorry to say that but that’s my opinion.

Q: How did you feel about the kamikaze pilots?

A: O, they—that’s tough. I was watching TV the night, the morning when the trade center was hit, and I thought “boy, here comes a kamikaze,” and it just struck me because kamikazes were trouble.

Q: Tell me about your discharge.

A: I got discharged in Sand Diego, December… and headed home. When you got discharged you got three hundred dollars and they gave you a book, you ever hear of the fifty two point club? These guys put fifty two coupons worth twenty that you cash in every week and get twenty dollars. Well, I didn’t cash one check in, I went to work right away on the railroad, so that was my discharge, I went to work.

Q: Did you get to bring any memorabilia home from the war?

A: Just papers and stuff.

Q: And, what did you go on to do as a career?

A: For my career? I worked for ten years in the railroad; I worked on steam locomotives in Atlantic City. Then the diesels came, and knocked out the steam locomotives and I started seeing the handwriting on the wall, and I went into plumbing and was in plumbing for the rest of my life. I’ve been retired for fifteen years now in January, so I’m a lucky man.

Q: Do you feel that World War II films are accurate?
A: Yeah, o yeah, the ones that are real, the ones that they put on not so much. The ones where you see the kamikazes coming down, o positively, yeah.

Q: Have you been able to keep in touch with any of the men from the U.S.S. McNulty?

A: Yeah, we go to reunions every year. We had a crew of about two hundred, between two fifty and two thirty five, and now there’s only about 14 that come to the reunions, we’re disappearing, it’s a shame, but you know, we’re getting older.

Q: Where do you have the reunions?

A: We have them different places every year. We just had one down in Williamsburg in September, a very nice reunion. In fact, I took my buddy w me, I picked him up in Philadelphia because he hadn’t been to a reunion, and I took him down with me. He was so happy I picked him up. His wife just passed away and he was down in the dumps over it, so I picked him up and took him down there with me.

Q: What veterans’ organizations are you a member of?

A: The D-E-S-A, and Veterans of Foreign Wars, the VFW.

Q: What kind of activities does your post have? Do you sponsor any dances-- I know you said you have reunions, what else do you do?

A: You mean like what do I do for hobbies and stuff?

A: I have a sailboat, I sail. And I’m a pilot, since 194—came out of the Navy and I learned how to fly down in Atlantic City, I been a pilot all my life, I like to restore airplanes, and I actually built an airplane that I fly right now. My own little airplane.
Q: So now it’s up to you. Tell me anything that you would like people to know that we haven’t covered yet.

A: Well I was really proud to serve on the McNulty, proud to be in World War II and do my part, it was a very patriotic war, things are different now, the patriotism isn’t really there anymore, you know?

Q: Did you feel that there was more patriotism after the September 11th attacks?

A: O positively, with the American flags flying and all.

Q: Was that more like the patriotism that would have been present around WWII?

A: Well, WWII--I tell you, before WWII, I was like 15, when the war started, I lived in a little place in north Atlantic City in the suburbs, and they’d drive a truck up and down the street and we’d throw the aluminum pots in, and stuff like that and they’d make airplanes with them. That’s patriotism.

Q: Ok, is there anything else?

A: Like I said, I brought some stuff with me.

Q: Ok, let’s get a look at all that then (see video).

Conclusion of Interview