



Orson Blackett

United States Navy

Lieutenant

Pacific Theater

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Interviewer:

Rick Randle

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Rick: We really appreciate you coming down today and I'd like to go over your early life a little bit, tell us where you were born and where you grew up and your experiences prior to December 7th, 1941.

Orson: Okay, I was born December 24th, 1920 on Christmas Eve and my two older sisters said it was the worst Christmas they ever had, they had to act as Santa Clause; and I was the youngest of 6, I had 4 sisters and 1 brother. And I was actually in the house on 1270 Melvin Avenue and its still standing there today and I've wanted to go through and Virginia says, "If you went and knocked on the door you'd probably scare them to death so don't do it." As a kid we moved back to Rochester New York when I was 10 years old during the depression time and we lived there for a couple of years and then went to Washington D.C. and when we were living in Washington D.C. my mother died the day before her 50th birthday and my 2 sisters and I that were with the family when we lived in Washington for a number of months while my dad was transferred to Denver, Colorado and then my oldest sister came back and decided we better get back to Utah. And I drove back in the car with a returning missionary and one that was being called, now this was in 1934 and they drove like madmen, they were doing about 80 or 90mph on those dirt roads, passing on curves on top of hills and got mad at me 'cause I wouldn't help drive 'cause I was 14 years old.

Rick: And just those little 2-lane roads.

Orson: And they were dirt. And then I went to Irving Jr. High School and graduated from East High and then went to the University of Utah and when Pearl Harbor happened, why my very best friend and I, Roy G., we went down and took the Navy Air Corps examinations together. We both passed but we had to have our parent's signature and his mother signed his and Dad wouldn't sign mine; he says, "You wait until you finish college." And so what I did, I signed up in the Navy B7 program which allowed you to finish college and there were three stipulations to the B7 program, you had to graduate from college, you could not be married before you got your commission, and you had to finish the Midshipman School and if you didn't finish all three of them you went in the Navy as a seaman.

Rick: Did your other friend go in then at the age of 17?

Orson: He went in and he was a pilot on the Hornet and he was shot down midway and he stayed in the Navy and became a full Captain in the Navy.

Rick: And he made a career out of it?

Orson: He made a career out of it, he joined the regular Navy.

Rick: And he joined up at 17?

Orson: Well actually, to this day I don't know why we had to have a parent's signature because we were all over, we must have been under 21 and maybe at that time you had to be 21, because I graduated from high school at 18.

Rick: So you're saying he was older than 18 then?

Orson: Yes, both of us.

Rick: So you went to college and completed at the University of Utah?

Orson: Right.

Rick: And then you joined up, what year was it?

Orson: After I graduated from college I went to work at Hillfield building army barracks and then in August of '42 the Navy called me and I got my orders to go to Notre Dame for the Midshipmen's School. And at Notre Dame there were four of us to a class and they told us at that time, out of the four of you only two of you will complete this course, two of you will be dropped and one was dropped out in Notre Dame and after we were in Notre Dame for about 30

days and then we went up to Chicago to Navy Peer for the rest of our training and one more got dropped out there. And we graduated from our Midshipmen's School on November 14th, and as I told you, you could not be married but Virginia and I were in love in college and wanted to get married right out of college so she and her mother came back to Chicago for my graduation and we got married that afternoon in Chicago at the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

Rick: The day that you graduated from...

Orson: Midshipmen School, we got married. And then the Edgewater Beach, they actually – we were going to back there for our 50th but they tore it down and its all condominiums now.

Rick: Tell us then right after Midshipmen School and you got married, then what happened after that?

Orson: Then I got orders to report to Treasure Island at Mymorfer** and I report at Mymorfer squadron at Treasure Island and was assigned to sweeper there at Treasure Island. And we used to sweep everyday, didn't personally sweep everyday, but the group of us always swept the entrance from Golden Gate Bridge out to the Farralon Islands and back.

Rick: Tell us about these minesweepers, when you say sweep, if a mine is out there and you're floating how...

Orson: Most the mines out of San Francisco we swept for both mort contact mines and magnetic mines and you sweep differently for both of them. But the first sweeper I was on was a fishing boat that had been converted to a minesweeper and the crew in San Francisco, your crew was about 75% fisherman that operated in those areas and they were basically to train the officers on how to handle ships.

Rick: So these mines are set up to explode on contact?

Orson: Right, the contact mines are the ones you remember, they have points sticking up and if a ship hits one of those points the mine goes up.

Rick: How come they don't blow up when a minesweeper gets them?

Orson: Well we only drew 8 feet of water so we were very shallow and most mines are laid deeper than that. And you're sweeping down and one ship's here and another ship's here, your sweep gear is out like this and the only one that's in trouble is the first guy, this one sweeps inside the other one, the pig as we call it, and so you go down and you just clear a channel. When you hit the mine, it went down a cable and it went into a V and a shotgun shell was in there and it triggered that and these steel jaws cut the chain and the mine would float to the surface. And then there was always one ship designated as mine disposal and most the time you got rid of the mines by shooting them full of holes with a 50-caliber machine gun and they sank.

Rick: Well that's interesting, I never...

Orson: Now a magnetic mine you swept differently you had gear that you streamed out thousand feet behind you and two ships, there was a positive and a negative and you sent an electrical pulse out and at the end of that thousand feet you'd put up a terrific magnetic field and when that magnet – the mine was laid and it automatically compensated itself for the earth's magnetism at that point. Then as a ship went over it, the magnetism of the ship would change the magnetic field and would trigger that switch that would've made it explode.

Rick: One of those things that I'm sure that occasionally a minesweeper would hit a mine and it would blow up the ship.

Orson: Yes, when I was looking up on some things there were about 45 YMS's that were lost by hitting mines and particularly over in Germany and that invasion they lost quite a few sweepers.

Rick: There you are patrolling your first duty is to patrol minesweeper off of the San Francisco Bay, did you ever see any mines?

Orson: Never swept a mine out of there.

Rick: Did they think they were going to be dropped from airplanes?

Orson: You want to remember it was a very busy harbor, a lot of ships landed so it was swept everyday just to make sure. Now there were mine fields on both sides of the channel that were our minefields, but you had a channel that you swept right out to the Farralon Islands turned around and came back and swept the other way.

Rick: Well that's interesting, then how long did you do that?

Orson: Well I was, let's see – the first ship I picked up in San Francisco was this converted fishing boat, then I went aboard one that was built as a minesweeper called an AMC and it was 91 feet long and I swept there for six or seven months and then I got orders to pick up a YMS 70 that was attached to the 7th Fleet. So I looked up where the 7th Fleet was and it was called McArthur's Navy and it was operated out of New Guinea. So I left San Francisco on a troop transport and it took us 28 days to get Brisbane, Australia and then I picked up another ship that took me to Buna, New Guinea where I picked up the YMS 70.

Rick: Let me go back, you were married at the time; was your wife with you down there in San Francisco?

Orson: In San Francisco, but when I got orders to come home my sister happened to be visiting us and she came back to Salt Lake and Virginia was pregnant and expecting in January; this was about July or August of '43.

Rick: Okay, so when you were shipped overseas let me get that story right again, where was your wife?

Orson: We were living in the Marina District in San Francisco and one of my sisters was down visiting us and I got my orders to go overseas so Virginia and my sister Carol came home together to Salt lake.

Rick: And I guess that was a pretty shocking thing, your wife being pregnant.

Orson: It was part of the service. And then I was in San Francisco for about two weeks then they put me on shore patrol duty while I was there and then I got the ship that went to Brisbane, Australia.

Rick: Okay and then tell us your experiences after that. You got to Australia...

Orson: Well we got to Brisbane, Australia and I picked up a ship called a Myzar and it was a ship that the Navy had taken over from United Fruit Lines prior to the war it was a passenger banana boat that hauled bananas up from South America and it was great duty because it auditoriums, they had movies every night, it was a refrigerated ship, they had all the fresh fruit in the world and fresh milk, and it was a great trip from Brisbane up to Buna. In fact, every time I got to ask for a change of duty I always asked for the Myzar – never got it.

Rick: And then when were you, you weren't Skipper of the ship at that time were you?

Orson: No, I was a Jr. Officer and an interesting thing, the day I reported aboard the YMS 70, now the YMS 70 was 136 feet long it was 24.6 feet wide and drew 8 feet of water and it was rough duty. When you got in rough seas the things spent more time underwater, I always said we should've been paid submarine pay because it rolled and tossed and turned because of all the heavy minesweeping gear we had. Now the day I reported board in Buna, New Guinea the Japanese used to call and tell you what time they were going to come over and bomb you, and so they said they'd be over at 1400 that day.

Rick: Now wait a minute, they would call who?

Orson: They would call the ships in the harbor and say, "We'll be over today at 1400 to drop bombs on you." Well they didn't know that a P-38 Squadron had moved into the Buna airfield so prior to 1400 the P-38's were up in the air waiting for them and we watched them while they shot ten of them out of the air and two of them got away and they never called us again after that.

Rick: I was going to say, that would be kind of a stupid move.

Orson: And what we did from then in New Guinea, basically what we did we towed gasoline barges at night up the New Guinea coast to the PT bases that were up behind the Japanese lines and we'd tow them up at night and lay two in the daytime and then tow the empties back at night. And going up New Guinea was very interesting because the charts of those days were all old British charts dated about 1800 and they'd show perfectly clear water and there'd be reefs breaking the water.

Rick: So the charts were worthless?

Orson: Oh yeah, so you had to be very careful. And then our Navy came in and made all new charts and so that made it much nicer and we operated all up and down the New Guinea coast. And one of the other things we used to do since we were shallow, we used to go in a pull landing barges off the beach that got stuck, because we could get in close and our screws were made to pull like a tug.

Rick: How long was the minesweeper?

Orson: 136 feet.

Rick: And how many men were on it?

Orson: We had 30 men and 4 Officers.

Rick: And what were the accommodations like?

Orson: They were, the crew all had bunks but we had, when I became the Skipper of the 70 why you had your own little stateroom with a bunk in it and a desk. And then the other two Officers shared one and the Jr. Officer always had to sleep up on a cot because they only had room for three Officers.

Rick: Your first duty there in New Guinea was hauling the gas.

Orson: Right, pulling those barges up, gasoline barges up for the BT boats.

Rick: Then what happened after that?

Orson: Then we operated and I got attached to the Australian Navy for a while and that was lousy duty, they worked our little old behinds off and never worked for themselves.

Rick: For the Australian Navy?

Orson: For the Australian Navy. And I'll say this to you and I never could understand how a Navy could operate that would drink warm beer.

Rick: So the Australian's used to make the American's work while they stayed in port?

Orson: Yeah at least that's my experience. Then after that I got stationed at Admiralty Islands at Manus Harbor in the Admiralty's and Manus Harbor was a big harbor and there was a lot of fleet ships in it, and we swept that channel everyday just to make sure. And then I used to run back and forth to Hilandia, New Guinea and in the meantime McArthur had moved his headquarters from Sydney, Australia to Hilandia, New Guinea and I don't remember why I went over to Hilandia as often, I don't think we were taking messages but we went over there quite often. And then coming back from Hilandia one time we pulled into Manus and the harbor was just loaded with vessels and there was a signal to send to communiqués off over to the beach to pick up some secret orders which we did and it was the orders for the invasion of the Leyte Gulf to

leave the next morning for Leyte. And we'd been at sea for about four days and I was low on fuel and water and I went over to try and top off on fuel and water but there was such a big line I couldn't get in and they said, "Well we'll refuel you at sea." Well we left Manus Harbor and the first day out we got caught in a typhoon and we were in the typhoon for about 6 or 7 days.

Rick: Low on gas, did your motors quit working?

Orson: Let me go back a little further though. YMS 70 when it was built it was built by a bunch of cowboys down in Orange, Texas and when it came out the Navy wouldn't accept it because it leaked too much. So they sent it back to the yard and they drove 250 wedges into it and from then on we called it the Flying Wedge because you could get, in rough seas you could lay there and pull these wedges in and out and stick them back and forth. So when we were at sea we'd pump 24 hours a day just to keep her dry. We got in this typhoon and I was getting low on fuel and there were at least 200 ships in this convoy heading up to Leyte Gulf and we were about right in the middle of the convoy and I told them I have to have fuel so they sent me back to a fleet tug that was all steel and we were all wood. And normally in rough seas they used to float a line back to you and then pump the fuel back to you, well the Skipper didn't want to bother he just said to just come alongside. So we went alongside and he just beat the devil out of them. He was steel and I was wood and he pulled three mustanchants down, he pulled one of my bits right out of the deck and we just banged and banged and banged, and three times we parted a 21-inch line.

Rick: This was right during the typhoon?

Orson: This was in the typhoon on the way to Leyte Gulf and finally I told him I have enough fuel we're part company.

Rick: So your ship was leaking all the time and you had to run with those pumps constantly just to keep...

Orson: And after we got back into our station, now another thing about being part of the 7th Fleet, we had no radar. The 7th Fleet was like belonging to the French Foreign Legion as far as the rest of the Navy was concerned. And let me give you an example, when I wanted to take the engines down and repair them so I called over to the fleet repair ship and asked them if they had the parts and they said yes they had the parts. So we went ahead and tore our engines all down, went over to get the parts and it was part of the 10th Fleet and they wouldn't give them to me because we were the 7th Fleet, we were McArthur's Navy; and so I had to get really mad and they finally gave me the parts. Well anyway, after being alongside this tug then we went back to our station in the convoy and as I said we had no radar so keeping station in that storm was something else. And I hadn't been to bed for about three or four days and I had to move my mattress up into the wheelhouse I said, "I gotta get some sleep." And I told the Officer Deck, I said, "Now don't lose sight of that ship in front of ya." And he got so nervous he put a great big fender on his stern because he thought I was always going to ram him. Well, this was the day before we were due in Leyte Gulf, well the next morning came along and there wasn't a ship in sight, we had been right in the middle of that convoy. Somewhere during the night we got right through that thing, now I hadn't had a sight for 7 days because of the storm and here you are in Japanese waters and wondering where in the devil you're at, knew that you were close to Leyte Gulf. And so I figured out, well the wind had blown us to the right the tide had carried us to the right, so I did a 90 degree left turn and we were heading out and all of a sudden I saw a big mass go across the horizon and I said to myself, "I hope its ours." And everyday the recognition signals changed when you're on these kind of trips so we made sure we had the correct one and sure enough a ship challenged us and it was one of our cruisers. We gave them the right answer and he told me how to get to the convoy. Now this was the morning of the 17th and we got in there and they told us to start sweeping; now we were still in 25-30 foot waves and to sweep was almost impossible. So we streamed our gear and the sweeping you couldn't do it so they told us to recover our gear and while I was recovering our gear the ship was losing, it wouldn't answer to the helm. And I get on the top of a great big wave and it was just roll like this and it would just stay there and then it would slowly come back and one of the crew members came up and said, "Mr. Blackett you better come down and look in the 4th crew's quarter." So I went down and the water was up to my knees and it was coming in so fast we couldn't keep up with it. And each time, by now we'd recovered our gear, but each time it rolled it just stayed there longer and

longer and you'd get on top of these big waves and you knew it was going to capsize. And so it was about 5:30 in the evening, it was still a little light, and I said, "Well let's abandon ship." And I called the other sweepers that we were working with and told them what we were doing and they stood by and we went to the life rafts. And the life rafts got on top of these big waves and the wind was blowing about 70-80mph and just take the rafts and just roll them, just throw them end over end and you'd just hang on to the rope. And then finally, and there was a YMS 341 that was picking the raft I was on up out of the water. And someone got the idea, "Well let's throw a grappling hook over and catch the raft so it can't get away." They could only catch one person at a time and then they'd part and I'd say, you want to remember these were big waves. So they threw this grappling hook over and then we started to go apart and I could feel something sticking into my arm, and I look down and the grappling hook had gone through my lifejacket and was starting to penetrate my arm right here. So I had to let go of the life raft and pull the grappling hook out and then all kinds of things go through your mind, "What am I going to do when I get washed up on the beach, I have no shoes on, I've thrown my 45 away because it was too heavy..." and I saw a life ring there and I grabbed onto the life ring and I held on for dear life. And it so happened that the life ring was tied to the 341 and they spotted me, the only thing is it came up on the other side. And so they started pulling and they pulled and when the ship went up on a great big wave I could look right down the keel to this stern and I just held on and they kept pulling and pulling me up on the other side and got me onboard.

Rick: Did you get everybody rescued?

Orson: They picked all the ones up on my raft and by now it had gotten dark and the other sweeps had to quit and we had one raft out there with 7 men still on it. And so we had to just hope that they'd be alright, then at 2 o'clock in the morning the storm went through and Leyte Gulf became like a millpond. And when it got light we spotted the raft with the 7 men with sharks swimming around them, and we got them off but we did lose a man. Now the YMS 341 that picked me up out of the water got caught in the typhoon at Okinawa and they never found a soul off of that, the whole ship went down. And they picked men 100-150 miles at sea with an arm and a leg gone out off Okinawa. And one of the Officers that I had onboard my ship, he was assigned to another sweeper in Okinawa, they lost 110 ships in Okinawa by the way. And one of

the big repair ships, when the storm was high and dry up on the reefs and this sweeper, the YMS that this the Officers that I had, when the storm was over they were being blown towards the shore and one of them panicked and jumped overboard and he drowned; the rest of them stayed with when they were high and dry on the beach leaning against the coconut plants. So that's the power of those storms.

Rick: That's a unique experience. So every one of your guys got saved and they found those guys in the life raft, were they just hanging on the outside or were they in it after the storm?

Orson: After the storm they were up in it, but sharks were swimming and that was your biggest problem when you were out like that were the sharks.

Rick: And you could actually see the dorsal fins swimming around?

Orson: Yeah, I've seen them. Then after, let's see – this was now three days before the invasion where we lost the ship on the 17th and they invaded Leyte on the 20th of October. Well we were with the sweepers and actually we were sweeping, the battleships and the cruisers were out here and we were sweeping in here. The motto of the minesweeping was, where the fleet goes we've been.

Rick: You had to go first; did you run into any Japanese fire?

Orson: Oh after, yeah. Anyway we were sweeping inside of the cruisers and battleships and when you'd get broadside of those ships and they'd fire those big guns it would actually move our sweeper in the water, it would actually push it in through the water and you could see the shell leave the gun and it would be white and then it would turn red and then it would disappear just before it would hit the beach. And this was, like I say, 2 or 3 days before the invasion. Then after the invasion they had the big naval battles there in Leyte Gulf.

Rick: Yeah, they were some of the biggest in the war.

Orson: The Japanese were coming up through the Surigao Straits, the Japanese battleships. And we knew they were coming so our ships crossed the T, which was the best thing you could do, and we sank those ships in Surigao Straits. And then they had the big aircraft battle north of Leyte Gulf. And they almost got rid of the 7th fleet but we came through on, let's see what was it, I think we lost 9 ships and the Japanese lost 27, and they lost 4 carriers and their big super battleship. And after the invasion we went aboard the carrier of the white planes, it got damaged by a kamikaze plane. And they were heading to Manus Island for repairs and I was able to put the whole crew onboard and we went back to Manus Island, and then they couldn't repair them in Manus Island so they were headed to San Diego and we got to stay aboard and head to San Diego.

Rick: So where were you, you were on that aircraft carrier because they couldn't repair and this was before the atomic bomb dropped I guess...

Orson: This was, I got the dates written down, but it was like November 7th we left Manus Harbor and we got into San Diego like November 27th of '44.

Rick: And so then where were you when you heard that VE Day occurred?

Orson: Well, after we got to San Diego I had to go to Washington D.C. with my executive officer to report on the loss of the ship and to write any of the parents of the crew but we didn't lose anybody. Then I went to mine warfare school in Yorktown, Virginia and while we were at Yorktown President Roosevelt died and also VE Day. And so I asked for a sweeper in the Pacific because we had driven Virginia and my son my Scott and he was a year old when I saw him for the first time. We drove an old Packard back to Yorktown, Virginia and I needed time to get them back to Salt Lake so I asked for a sweeper in the Pacific to give me the travel time, well I got one in Panama and that gave me three days for travel time. We drove day and night and I can remember, and Virginia and I can both remember in the rain going sound asleep driving, so someone was watching over us. Got to Salt Lake, my sister had airplane tickets for me and I got the ticket, flew to Miami and then sat there for two weeks waiting for a plane to Panama.

Rick: Where were you when you heard of the first bomb being dropped on Hiroshima?

Orson: Well let me just go this way. I picked up another YMS 67 built in Orange, Texas again only this one didn't leak but the engines didn't work very good, they were always breaking down; and that was in Cocosola, Panama and we operated out of there. And then the war was over in Europe and so all the sweepers were coming from Europe and heading through the Panama Canal and heading out to the Pacific. And so we got orders to take the ship up to Terminal Island and they put 22 of us sweepers in a locket of time and then we headed through the Panama Canal. An interesting thing, on Cocosola side in the Caribbean the tides varied 6 inches, on the Pacific side they varied 22 feet. But we got through the canal and were heading up north to Terminal Island and we were off the coast of Mexico when we got word of VJ Day.

Rick: Tell us in detail about going to the Panama Canal.

Orson: Well when we got orders to go up to Terminal Island and going through the Canal they put 22 sweepers in a locket of time and the pilot was on my ship and I thought, "I hope the engines don't break down." Because every time we went to sea they broke down. When they were in dry-dock the Navy crew there put the wrong keepers on the valves and we kept losing the keepers, so every time we'd have to take the engines down and put a new keeper on them and we thought we had them all corrected. Well we went through the Canal and like I said, I was hoping 'cause the pilot was on my ship and there were three of us tied aside one another and whenever he would move he'd use my ship for the maneuvering. But we got through the Canal, got into the Pacific and headed north and my engines conked out or one of them did. Now they would no longer let the small crafts travel by themselves like they used to, you always had to go in a group. So in the group there were five of us in this group together, so I had to let them know that one of my engines was gone and we were operating, we had twin screws so we were operating on one. And I had a brand new Chief of Machinists, a young man from Wyoming, 'cause the other Chief would not keep the ship clean and so I got rid of him in Panama, but anyway this young fellow says, "Give me a couple hours and I'll have that engine fixed." So he took it, the valves down and got it and then about two hours later we were back cruising with the other five ships and 10 knots, we cruised at 10 knots. Now we were coming up the coast and we

stopped in Nicaragua to refuel and then we stopped in Manzanilla, Mexico to refuel but off the coast of Mexico it was VJ Day. Now the nice thing about it was you now could run with your lights on, there were more blackouts. So you could have all your running lights on and you could see the other ships and you could have your portholes open and you could have air and it just made it nice. But I thought, "We need to do something to celebrate VJ Day" so the Quarter Master came to me and he said, "Well I have a letter that tells us that we need to get rid of all of our pyrotechnics." Now we had a pretty good size pyrotechnic locker and so I signaled the other four ships and said, "Well why don't we get rid of our pyrotechnics tonight in celebration." Well they didn't believe me on this letter and they wouldn't do it, so I said, "Well when it gets dark you standby and I'm putting on a fireworks display for you." We shot every pyrotechnic we had and it lasted for two hours, but we put on quite a little show there were parachute flares, everything.

Rick: Why did you have those pyrotechnics on that minesweeper?

Orson: Just for signaling and that, you know you had signals if you were distressed you'd send up a certain red flare on a parachute, you had all kinds of different things red, green, yellow, and white and some of them you'd shoot up in the air just to light things up. But anyway we shot these things off for two hours, we shot everything we had and then we pulled into Terminal Island at San Pedro and there were 22 Officers waiting there. Now the YMS 67 had a lousy reputation, the ship was dirty, it did not have very good seamanship, but on the way coming up from Panama we holy stoned those decks and they were just nice and white, we painted everything and we practiced straightening gear. When we got into San Pedro these Officers, like I say 22 Officers came aboard these five ships and the first thing they checked was your pyrotechnic locker and I was the only one that had gotten rid of them; ours was empty. And then they made me one more day go out and stream sweep gear which we did and we did a good job and then I never had an Officer onboard again after that and the other guys, all the time they were there they had to go out everyday and do some and they let me go into a private dry dock and go over the engines once again and make some other repairs. And we'd bribe the guys and end up putting an awning over the fantail and a few things like that.

Rick: Did they say anything to you about not having your pyrotechnics or did they applaud you?

Orson: They applauded us they said, “Well at least you read the letter and got rid of them.” So they patted us on the back. When we pulled in San Pedro the ship was clean and looked great.

Rick: I just can’t imagine if you’ve got a crew of guys heading towards Japan for the invasion and then hearing that VJ Day had occurred what that must have been like.

Orson: We all started figuring out how many points did you have. When I left San Pedro heading to Hawaii all I needed was two more points to get out and it took us ten days to get to Hawaii and an LST went with us to refuel us at sea and I don’t remember how long we were in Hawaii. And then from Hawaii we went to Anawitauk and here again we went as a group. The day we pulled into Anawitauk I had all the points I needed to get out of the service and so I asked the fellow that was in charge of our convoy would he endorse my orders and he says, “Well I’ll endorse them,” but he said, “my orders are that no Skippers will be relieved until we get the ships to Tokyo Bay.” We were going there to sweep our mines. So that convoy went on and I stayed in Anawitauk and I was there for about a week and then another group came in and I was assigned to that group to head on over to Okinawa. Then the day we were leaving, that morning we were going to top off on fuel and water and the beach signaled over that there was a message there for the ship so on the way to get water I dropped the communications Officer off and he went and got it and when he came back and he was grinning, it was my orders to be released.

Rick: So you didn’t have to go to Japan?

Orson: I didn’t have to go one foot further west. And I had written my wife and told her, “Well I won’t be home for at least another six weeks.” Actually in Anawitauk there are Officers that had been there for four or five, six weeks waiting to get off the island. And in Hawaii there were people that had been there for a couple of months waiting to get back to the mainland. So I just made up my mind well at least I wasn’t going any further and I’ll stay in Anawitauk, so I went and checked in at the BOQ and I thought, well just for the heck of it I’ll go down to the

transportation office and see what's going on. I went down and they said, "Where's your gear?" And he said, "Go get it and you're on a ship in the morning, to Seattle." And it was an ammunition ship but who cared. And we got into Seattle and they wouldn't let us into the port of Seattle because of the ammunition so we had to stay out a place called Point Discovery but they sent an LSI out to pick us up and we went into Seattle and checked in. And another fellow onboard this ammunition ship, he and I became friends and he was going to San Francisco, he lived in San Francisco and he was being discharged at the same time. So we both went back to transportation and they said, "Well we won't be able to get you out for four or five days." And we said, "Well just endorse our orders, we'll get ourselves out." And they endorsed our orders but they said, "Don't come back because we won't get you out." And we went and got on a train from Seattle to Portland and had nothing to further, but we talked to the conductor on this train and told him what our problem was and he said, "You just stay on this train and when we get into Portland I'll go talk to the other conductor." He went over and he signaled us to come over, the conductor says, "You two just go sit in his room and after we get going I'll find you someplace to sit." And we got into San Francisco on a Sunday morning. And he went home and I went to the discharge center and I thought, "What the heck I don't want to go look up a room because they'll assign you someplace." And so they assigned me a hotel for the night and they said, "Well what are you doing for the rest of the day?" And I says, "Nothing." And he said, "Well let's get started on your paperwork." So I spent that afternoon doing that and then the first thing Monday morning I walked in there and someone hollers out, "Orson Blackett!" And it was a gal from the University of Utah her name was Maude Matthews and she knew Virginia and I and she says, "Give me your papers." And I was a on a train home to Salt Lake by noon. But it was a good experience, I saw a lot of country and some of the waters were so clear it was unbelievable, on Anawitauk we were anchored in 60 feet of water and you could see your anchor on the bottom and parts of New Guinea the water was just as clear as a glass of drinking water, and the water was deep right up to the shore, sometimes you could tie up to the trees it was that deep.

Rick: Tell us about meeting your wife and when did she know you were coming back?

Orson: Well when we came in on the aircraft carrier in San Diego I was able to let her know and she flew down to San Diego and met me there and then from there I was heading to Washington D.C. and she was to Salt Lake, we got to Las Vegas and they kicked her off the plane. And I says, “You stay on the plane, I’ll stay and I’ll kick someone else off.” So she went on and I stayed in Las Vegas and she got into Salt Lake about three in the morning, of course all my family was down there but I wasn’t there. But then I caught the next plane out of Las Vegas and my dad and my sisters and my brother were all there and then I had to leave. But to answer your question, after I lost the ship I wrote and told her what had happened but it took six weeks for a letter to get from the South Pacific to Salt Lake City. In the meantime the Salt Lake Tribune had called Virginia wanting to know if I’d survived because they heard that the YMS 70 was lost and that I was the Skipper of it, and that was the first she heard and there was an article in the paper also about it. And my brother in-law was a hand radio operator and he called around through some of his friends, because he had a very powerful set, and found out that we all survived then told Virginia. And of course she was absolutely flabbergasted when the Tribune called her to find out if I had survived.

Rick: That’s a great story. (Background questions)

Orson: I hope that I’m not speaking out of terms, but McArthur was very egotistical and he and the Navy never got along. But the 7th Fleet was his Fleet to do with what he wanted and very consequently we had, to give you an example – we had no recreation equipment, we had no radios to play, we had no baseball bats, we had no books, we had nothing, no radar, you were just there at his command. And it was just a pain and it was not pleasant duty at that time. Now when I picked the sweeper up in Panama it had radar and everything else so it made it much nicer to operate off of. But McArthur he was just, well one of the problems was, he took all his family to Sydney, we were all out there without ours, he took them all to Hawaii and New Guinea and he had all the help and family all the time, but he did return to the Philippines and I shall return.

Rick: So your saying the Navy discriminated against that 7th Fleet because it was McArthur’s?

Orson: That's right, it was known as McArthur's Navy.

Interviewer: You said that when there were sharks in the water that you'd been there.

Orson: Coming up from Panama and that you used to see sharks swimming alongside the ship and if you threw garbage over they were there to gobble it up. In New Guinea we used to fish, at night we would have a light over there, one of the interesting things in the harbor the Army always ran the water taxis, not the Navy but the Army ran them. And we always anchored the last ship out to be away from the rest of the fleet we always anchored out and in and when the water taxis, they'd go from the harbor out to our ship and we'd allow them to tie up alongside our ship and then we always fed them and took care of them because then we always had a taxi available. And if we wanted to go, we had no movies onboard but if we wanted to go to the CV camp for the movies the water taxi was there to take us and this type of thing. And another thing, to show you what would go on and how the Japanese would come over; one night at the CV camp watching the movies and they were all just logs you sat on, the Japs came over and started bombing. And everyone just tore and I told our crew, "You just stay right here and get down behind these logs and don't move." About 200 guys got arms and legs broken and got trampled on. When it was all over we just got up and got back in, the taxi went back to ship. And whenever we'd get tired of the ship we used to go on the beach and eat lunch with the Army and it made the ship look very good. They ate on tin plates and I would not allow tin plates, we ate off of china. There were actually 30 men and 4 Officers and we all ate exactly the same food.

Rick: And so that's how Army guys ate...

Orson: We were glad to be back onboard ship where you had a clean bunk and clean everything. And we had good food. The Jr. Officers job was to make sure we had good food at all times. Now there was one other interesting thing, one time while in New Guinea we got low on food and I remember a tanker, a civilian tanker coming in and you could tell it had come from the States and so we signaled over and asked them if they had any food they could spare. And they said, "Oh sure, come on with us." So we sent the boat over and they gave us boxes and cases of candy bars and fruit cocktail and everything else and they said, "We'll only be here for a couple

of weeks.” Three months later they were still swinging around their anchor, they hadn’t unloaded their fuel yet, I don’t know how long they stayed there, they were still there and I bet they were sorry they gave their food away. But we used to scrounge food everywhere, we’d go over to the Army and bum a side of beef from them and then we’d bring it back and butcher it ourselves and I have nothing against the Australians so don’t get me wrong, but the food that they canned and the meat you got from them was terrible. We used to take it and throw it overboard.

Rick: Did you ever, when you were in Port at New Guinea, did you get off and go into any of those New Guinea towns?

Orson: Yes.

Rick: What was the population there, tell us about the natives.

Orson: Well they were aborigines and they had been there for thousands of years and one day we decided that we’d hike into one of these villages. We were looking for cat eyes, this was a shell that was out in the water and the snail would pull this and it looked just like a cat eye. Well they make great bracelets and great necklaces and we thought, “Well I bet some of those natives have some of those cat eyes in the village.” So we hauled some sugar and flour in with us and we hiked into this village down these paths right through the jungles of New Guinea and go to them, they had no cat eyes but we didn’t want to haul the sugar and flour back so we gave it to them anyways.

Rick: They were happy to get that.

Orson: Oh yeah. And they were primitive people. And the Australians kept them that way; they were the ones that did all the manual labor. Up in New Guinea the Australians controlled all the coconut groves, that was theirs. And they basically had no docks or wharfs and our Navy came in and built the most beautiful docks and wharfs that you ever wanted to see and when the war

was over the Australians wanted us to compensate for the coconut groves that had been destroyed.

Interviewer: Recreation?

Orson: Recreation, we had very little. Now when we went down, one of our trips we went from New Guinea down to Brisbane, Australia to cross the Coral and down through the Great Barrier Reef and then a place called Townsend, Australia they had a big Navy supply vehicle. Well hardly anyone went in there so the day we came in they were so glad to see us they gave us a truck and we got to drive down through there and pick up anything we wanted. We got baseball bats, we got radios, we got books, we got phonographs so you could have some recreation. And the thing that was interesting, they were just loaded with foul weather gear that was supposed to go to Alaska, but it was sitting down here in a trough out of Australia.

Interviewer: Did you listen to Tokyo Rose?

Orson: Yep, we used to listen to it on the radio.

Rick: They said her intelligence; she'd give reports of where the next invasion was going to be.

Orson: And she would come over and say, "Hey Yank your wife is home sleeping with your best friend while you're overseas fighting." And this kind of stuff, it was a bunch of bologna but we all enjoyed listening when we had the chance to. And we'd fish and you were asking me about sharks, and we used to have a light over the side at night for the water taxi to come up and it used to attract the fish and there used to be a lot of garfish that would come and they had big long beaks and you couldn't hook them so we'd take a boat hook and make a piano wire loop underneath the thing and lower it into the water and then chum it and as they'd swim through the loop we'd pull up and that's how we'd catch these garfish. And it also would attract the sharks, and we caught one shark and he bit right through the line so then we put a chain on as a leader and we got him and they took his mouth and took all the teeth out and mounted him and I had him in my quarters.

Rick: Were these garfish edible?

Orson: Oh yeah, and then we'd fish for mackerel.

Rick: So they'd cook them up for you when you'd catch them?

Orson: Yeah, and the conservation environmentalists wouldn't like what I'm telling you, but when we were at sea we'd pick up schools of tuna on your sonar gear and one time we thought, "Well what the heck we haven't shot our depth charges off for a long time." So we had this school and these K guns that shoot them over the side and I said, "Well let's go have depth charge practice." We shot it and the only thing is, the thing only went out about 25 feet, there was water all at the bottom of the bowl that would put the powder out and that thing went off and we had it set to go off at 75 feet underwater, boy I cranked that thing up to flank speed and flames were coming out of the stack. And it went off and shook the ship up pretty good, but we got about 100 tuna. And we picked them all up and we went back to port and we passed tuna around to every ship in the harbor, they all had fish that night for dinner.

Interviewer: What does YMS stand for?

Orson: Yard Mine Sweeper, and they had no names they just went by numbers, but like I say we called this one the "Flying Wedge".

Rick: That's amazing to me that sending out to sea would take on that much water.

Orson: Well we went into dry dock three different times and they would put us in a dry dock, flood the bilges, but all the way to the ship was down on it, no buoyancy and it never leaked. So they always thought we were crazy.

Interviewer: Which boats in the Navy were more fun for you?

Orson: Where there were always minesweepers swept in groups and we go to know
interrupt and we got to know the other ships and they'd have poker games between them
and we'd have acey-duecey contests, anything to pass the time of day.

Rick: Did you sweep mainly during the day?

Orson: Yeah, most of the time in the daytime.

Rick: Then you'd be at port?

Orson: Be anchored at night. And a YMS drew only 8 feet of water but it had all this up above
and it was just like a sail so when the wind would come up at night it would just "pffff" and
invariably if you had strong wind you'd drag anchor. So the only thing you'd do, I just got to the
point where I wouldn't even get up, I says, "If you start dragging anchor, you come wake me."
Then we'd pull up the anchor and go re-anchor somewhere else and a lot of places had sandy
bottoms so you had nothing to protect you, so you'd drag anchor quite frequently.