



Woody James

United States Navy

Coxswain

Pacific Theater

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Interviewer:
Rick Randle

THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Rick: We have with us here Woody James, we're glad to have us here with us today. Woody is that your given name or [**Woody:** that's it] Woody James. Can you tell us where you grew up and a little bit about your early life and how you first found out about Pearl Harbor and the war?

Woody: Well I grew up in a little town in Alabama called Gilbert Town 100 miles north of Mobile, up in the Piney Woods. That's where I was born and raised. My mother and dad separated when I was five years old. My mother moved back in with my grandfather and grandmother so my grandfather raised me and I have great respect for him. Raised on a farm during the depression. I was born in 1922 and I grew up in the country with a bunch of friends and we covered a whole territory. Everybody knew who we were and it was a wonderful childhood growing up, we had a lot of fun. My father emigrated to the west – Elko Nevada and worked for a railroad. In 1938 I came out to visit him and stayed with him for awhile but it didn't work out and I went back to Alabama and my mother was sick and she passed away in June 1940 and it was kind of devastating to lose her.

Rick: How old were you at that time?

Woody: Fifteen, but the following year I came back to visit my dad again and went to work for a contractor '*Gibbon and Reed*', they were doing the airport in Elko Nevada and I went to work for them and we transferred into Salt Lake after we finished that job for a couple three weeks then we're building airport number two out in West Jordan and we went from there to Las Vegas and they were building Nulles Airforce Base, they had the contract for that. And I was there when Pearl Harbor happened and we finished the job in January of '46, I went back to Alabama and went to work in Mobile until September of 1942 and then joined the Navy. Three weeks in boot camp and nine day leave, four day train ride to Oakland and aboard ship and went to Pearl Harbor.

Rick: Well now, you were very young when you joined [**Woody:** um hum 18] 18.

Woody: I was stationed in Pearl until I went aboard the USS Indianapolis in 1943.

Rick: Let me ask you this, what were your thoughts when you first heard of Pearl Harbor when you were a young man?

Woody: I didn't know where it was, I didn't know anything about it and it was just...and that was in all the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed you know and my reaction to it, I really don't remember, I just...it was just something that happened.

Rick: Were there a lot of friends or...running to sign up or enlist?

Woody: No, my cousin that I hung with in Mobile, we worked together and roomed together, he got drafted and I says *'what the heck I'm going to join I don't want to go to the Army I'll go in the Navy'*.

Rick: Okay then take it from there then, you signed...you joined up and then?

Woody: I joined in September. September the 11th 1942 and I was stationed in Pearl Harbor attached to the Fleet Camera Party until I think it was August 1943 I went aboard the USS Indianapolis and I was aboard it until it sank. During that time it went through quite a few battles starting with the Gilbert Islands. It was the flagship of the 5th fleet. Admiral Sprewins aboard and we covered the whole pacific. He was a fighting Admiral and if there was something going on he was in on it.

Rick: And so your job on these invasions was to bomb the islands and shoot your guns in there to...before the invasion occurred?

Woody: Then support for the troops after they landed. Convoy duty, everywhere we went we had a convoy with.

Rick: What was it like aboard ship? Tell me about the food and the bunks and what it was like living there.

Woody: Well the living quarters were...wasn't all that big and they were bunks hanging from the ceiling four deep. [**Rick:** they were hammocks?] No they were...they had springs on them but they hang them with chains starting at the ceiling and they go down. Four deep, about four apart with a walkway between them and there was about 38 or 40 of us in one compartment.

Rick: How many personnel aboard the ship?

Woody: 1196. We covered all the islands practically from the Gilbert Islands on to the Gilberts and the Marshals, the Carolinas, the whole ball of wax. During the war the Indianapolis won ten battle stars and that don't mean an engagement you get a battle star, it went for the whole operation, an island operation for two weeks or however how long it takes you win a battle star. I was aboard it for eight of them.

Rick: For eight of those engagements. So you were onboard that same ship right up through 1945 then?

Woody: Um hum, right up until it sunk, July the 30th 1945.

Rick: Okay well lets go back; that spring you were called, you were in San Francisco...

Woody: Um hum, well in March, the 31st day of March in 1945 we were covering operations at Iwo Jima and Okinawa and we pulled out of Iwo Jima and went with the carriers to Tokyo. We were with them for three different raids that they made on Tokyo, the carrier raids on Tokyo and if you've ever heard of the USS Franklin, the aircraft carrier that lost so many lives from burning, we were five hundred yards from it when it got hit.

Rick: Well you had experience with Kamikaze Pilots then too I guess?

Woody: I looked one right straight in the eye. That's why we were in Vallejo. We got hit with a Kamikaze plane at Okinawa on the 31st day of March 1945. It was early in the morning and we had just secured from general quarters, pulled out of the battle line – the battle line circled the island, we just cruised around the island covering the troops on the island. We secured in general quarters and pulled outta line and was having breakfast and when they do that there's only a skeleton crew standing to watch us. And I was standing gun watch...captain on a 5 inch gun and I looked up and I seen that plane come out of the cloud but I only got half a gunning crew and I couldn't get trained on it anyway and I stood in that spot and I looked and I looked and my brain finally told my feet *'you better move, it's gonna hit where you're standin'*, and I moved. And I had a set of phones on plugged into the bulkhead and I hit the end of that phone cord going up deck to get under shelter and it jerked me over and backwards on the steel deck and bounced my head and the kamikaze hit on the other side of the ship. It didn't hit on my side at all. It had two bombs on it. One bomb went through the ship, through the mess hall, through the sleeping quarters, through the deck and out the bottom before it exploded. When it exploded it ripped one huge hole in the side of the ship. It knocked the two propeller shafts on the port side out and we limped into a little harbor and salvage ships came in and patched the hole and we limped back to Vallejo for repairs. And while we were there it was decided that the Indianapolis was picked for a mission and in June (we didn't know this but they told the Navy yard) speeded up, *'the Indianapolis has gotta be outta here by the fifteenth of July'*. So they started working around the clock, double shifts.

Rick: And none of the crew knew any about this huh?

Woody: We had no idea what it was. The crew was living in barracks on the beach with just enough guys aboard ship to stand watch. They'd come from the barracks over to stand watch and go back to the barracks, there was nobody living aboard ship practically – dry docked. So we knew there was something going on that they were in such a hurry

you know you just know that but nobody tells you anything. And we came out of the yard on the 15th of July and it went for a one-day shake down cruise and we still had yard workmen aboard ship working on it while we did a one-day shake down. We came in off of that and they called the Skipper over to Naval Headquarters and told him to put it against the Parrot Hunters Point, that they would be cargo loaded aboard ship, to be delivered to the island of Tinian.

Rick: Okay now Hunters Point is right near San Francisco and you had no idea what the cargo was or?

Woody: They didn't tell anybody. They told the Skipper he didn't need to know just take it and deliver it as fast as you can get it there, *'the time you save will shorten the war by that much'*.

Rick: And did they bring these bombs aboard on crates covered up or?

Woody: One huge crate was probably eight by ten by ten and set it in the hangar deck. We had two planes aboard ship for observation and the center of the ship called the *'quarter deck'* was also a hangar deck. They'd set the planes there and put them in the hangar just after that so that's where the crate was stored in the hangar deck. The other one was a cylinder, that big maybe like a beer keg, you've seen a beer keg. About the size of a beer keg and they brought that aboard, *'guard that with your life. If anything happens, above all save that'*. So they put a strap over it and welded the strap to the deck.

Rick: And so as far as the crew knew they had no idea what those...

Woody: They had no idea, we just got the cargo that we gotta deliver to Tinian and there were speculations, sailors can figure anything out you know. We had scented toilet paper from MacArthur and Mae West costumes and you name it we had an answer for it.

Rick: But in reality you had both bombs on board? [**Woody:** One] Oh just one?

Woody: Didn't have one. In the crate they was one and part of one. The one that was dropped on Hiroshima we had the complete bomb. They other part they flew the rest of the other part in and it was dropped on Nagasaki.

Rick: So you had a portion of the second bomb but not the whole thing.

Woody: That's what they tell us. And we sailed from San Francisco on the morning of July the 16th and arrived in Tinian on the morning of the 26th of July.

Rick: All right, tell us first about...you had to circle in the bay didn't you waiting for completion of the atomic bomb test in New Mexico?

Woody: No we were at the pier. We were at the pier and an army truck showed up with a cargo and they unloaded it and we sat there until they got word to sail and that word came from Almagona New Mexico where they had just dropped the first one to test it.

Rick: To test it – on the day before I think [**Woody:** the same day]. The 16th then huh?

Woody: Well then a few minutes after they detonated the first one we sailed.

Rick: You had everything all ready to go and the bombs on board and just waiting to hear from that test huh? And then you sailed directly to Tinian?

Woody: We went to Honolulu about a half a day and topped off with fuel and some provisions and left there then straight to Tinian.

Rick: Did the Captain you think knew what was on board?

Woody: He didn't know either. They told him he didn't need to know. They had...came aboard with it was two officers who called themselves '*artillery men*', they were scientists and we didn't know that.

Rick: Did they stay on board with you?

Woody: We transported them to Tinian. They were there to...one of them armed the trigger [**Rick:** while you were going over], no aboard the '*Enola Gay*' after it was loaded off deck, then he armed the trigger. They came aboard and were introduced as artillery men from the army. So it was a hush hush deal.

Rick: Okay, now you went to Honolulu and just picked up supplies and fuel I guess.

Woody: Um hum, yeah just supplies and fuel. We were there about a half a day.

Rick: And then you left for Tinian and how long a trip was that?

Woody: Well we were 72 hours from San Francisco to Honolulu which would have been...we left on the 16th and 17th, 18th – that was the 18th then we delivered the bomb on the morning of the 26th. We dropped anchor in...

Rick: About eight days from Honolulu to Tinian? [**Woody:** um hum] Tell us about unloading it and stuff; was there anything unusual about taking that off?

Woody: Not really, we anchored in the harbor about ½ a mile out ¼ mile out and they sent a barge out to retrieve the crate and the cylinder and the crate unloaded real well and then they put the cylinder on the crane and then the cable was too short. They got down to so far from the deck and they run out of cable.

Rick: And so they couldn't get it on board the?

Woody: They couldn't unload it so they had to bring it back aboard and put a choker on to stretch the cable out and back over they got it down.

Rick: And in Tinian they didn't have dock facilities where you could pull into a deep port, they had to keep out?

Woody: Yeah. Well I think they had some docks but they were...the transport ships had them plugged up you know. Supply ships and...

Rick: How did they finally get that cylinder on board the little ship?

Woody: Well they hoisted it back on board and set it on deck and put a splicer cable in you know and hooked on to it that way and then back over the side.

Rick: I wonder if those guys that were loading it and unloading that realized...of course they didn't realize they had an atomic bomb on there.

Woody: No, nobody knew what it was.

Elizabeth: Did anybody tell them to be careful?

Rick: I keep thinking of these construction workers...but I guess the bomb was unarmed and nobody had any ideas that the valuable cargo they were trying to unload.

Woody: No they didn't. Anyway we unloaded that then they sent us down to Guam and the Skipper went in to get...they called him in to headquarters to put in for his orders and to go to the Philippine Sea – The Lady to join the 7th fleet for practice which we dearly needed. We left San Francisco with new equipment, a bunch of new guns, new radar, new everything and no time to...for...

Rick: It was just a straight shot to get that cargo out there.

Woody: It was just a straight shot to get that cargo out there and we needed training real bad. And while we were in the yard being repaired they transferred a lot of people off. A lot of people went to other ships and what have you. We sailed from San Francisco with, they figured about 45 percent of new crew, kids out of boot camp aboard ship. No training of any kind.

Rick: And no experience in battle like you had?

Woody: Right and we needed training. A refresher course for all of us and it was for the preparation for the invasion of Japan which was scheduled for November the 1st.

Rick: So you left Tinian on the 28th of July?

Woody: No we left Guam on the 28th of July. We were at Tinian on the 26th and went to Guam and spent the night or the next night anyway. We left Guam on Saturday morning the 28th of July. There's always been a discrepancy about whether we got sunk on the 30th or the 31st. We were on the other side of the International Date Line. We were actually sunk on the 31st but they call it the 30th.

Rick: Did you realize that you were in dangerous waters?

Woody: Nope absolutely not. When we left to Guam or while the Skipper was getting the orders he asked for an escort and they said, "*you don't need an escort, it's a clear lane, there's nothing out there*". So we sailed at so many knots in a zigzag course which the order read '*zigzag at your own discretion*'. Which means if it's dark and you can't see anything secure from zigzagging and run a straight course which we did. It was dark...I stood the 8 to 12 watch that night and it was so dark I couldn't recognize you from me to you. I could see your outline but it didn't, I couldn't even come close to recognizing you. So we skirted from zigzagging and when the submarine spotted us, their Skipper testifies, that for just a moment against the horizon a light spot and we were

in it while he was looking through his periscope he got a fix on us and it would have made no difference if we were zigzagging or otherwise.

Rick: And if it wasn't for that moment it was so dark he could have missed you?

Woody: Right. So that's the way it happened and he fired six torpedoes at us and two of them hit.

Rick: Now where were you exactly when those torpedoes hit?

Woody: I was underneath the overhang on number one 8H gun turret. Inside that turret was my battle station and I slept on deck weather permitting all time. I'd just got off watch, a guy relieved me and I got off watch, went below and grabbed a blanket off my bed and just got to laid down underneath there and had my shoes tucked under my head for a pillow *'man this feels good'* and the first torpedo hit *'what the heck is that'?* So I tried to get up from under the turret and bouncing you know and the second torpedo hit. I did get up under the turret and walked forward because it was a 20mm gun mounts on the bows and there was a bunch of guys that slept there by their gun mounts all the time. So I walked up there, started walking up there to see if everything was okay with them but there was no bow there. It was gone. About sixty feet of it. The first torpedo hit in the aviation gasoline storage and just chopped sixty foot of that bow off, it's gone. The Indianapolis had no air-conditioning system and like all the others they run what they call *'modified yoke'*. Everything below deck was wide open, no doors closed you know from compartment to compartment they were always open to try to get circulation for...to help cool it. But the first torpedo hit and immediately the second one hit and it knocked all the power out and the bridge couldn't tell the engine room to shut down, reverse, speed up or anything. No communication, everything had to be by mouth. So we were still running 17 knots with the bow chopped off like a funnel scooping water and everything below deck was a fire. It was an inferno below deck. They figure the best estimate - that there was about 300 people went down with the ship; about 900 went in the water.

Rick: That was just minutes I guess [**Woody:** twelve minutes] twelve minutes before that ship sunk and I guess when you saw the bow was that the first time you realized that there was...

Woody: Yeah...no hope you know but it was only a few minutes until word of mouth passed to abandon ship and we did. My friend and I, Jim Newhall and I were together and we went over the side of the ship holding hands.

Rick: You just jumped off the side?

Woody: Just jumped over the side. And when that bow blew off the lines, the life lines around it of course they were around along side the ship and when we jumped off somehow I got tangled up in one of those cotton-picking cables. So I'm trying to get loose and the only way I could get out of it, it was hanging onto my pants somehow; so anyway I pulled my pants off. That's where I left them.

Rick: Then you made it from the cable?

Woody: Yeah. I made it to the surface and swam out a ways from the ship, flipped over on my back and looked back and about a third of it was sticking out of the water on an angle. About that much of it sticking out. The screws were still turning. It was just light enough that you could see that and you could see bodies jumping off of it still.

Rick: We're talking a big battleship, which is...

Woody: A heavy cruiser 600 feet long. Anyway I looked back at that and the only thought in my head *'I'll be damned. It looks just like it does in the movies'*.

*****Tape Interrupt*****

Rick: Well let's go back now to where you had just...you and your friend had just jumped off the side of the ship and you turned around and saw this ship sinking.

Woody: I seen that and like I said my only thought and then I gave my lifejacket away just before we jumped off of the ship.

Rick: So you had no lifejacket. What about your friend?

Woody: He had one on, I went over without one and of course when I got tangled up he'd already swam out a way and I lay there for a second and something bumped me – a potato crate. They're about that long octagon shaped about so big around with slats, little slats. There were no potatoes in it but it was an empty crate and that was my life raft. It held me up. And I'm all alone, nobody around, I don't hear a thing so I let out a big yell "*is anybody out here*"? In a great big old gruff voice "*HEY WOODY OVER THERE*" – by buddy Jim Newhall and I swam over a little ways and there was quite a group of them and lifejackets everywhere. So I got a lifejacket and put it on and turned my potato crate loose. Of course the first question was '*did we get a message off? Did we get an SOS off?*' Everybody talking '*oh yeah, I'm sure we did. So nothing to worry about we'll be picked up tomorrow. They know where we're at*'.

Rick: Was the water calm or was it kind of rough?

Woody: There was about five foot swells.

Rick: So that's a pretty good swell then for swimming in it.

Woody: Pretty good swells, um hum. And it stayed that way the whole time we were in the water from three to five foot swells all the time. Anyway there was quite a group and the next morning when we could have a head count there was about 150 people in this group, which became known in the books as '*Dr. Hanes Group*'. He was the senior officer; well *the* officer but there was a couple of more. The Commander Lifty was there

but he was wounded real bad and he died a couple of days later and Dr. Hanes took over. But the next morning came and like I said we had a head count and about 150 of us and we found a piece of rope, a line and kind of tied everybody to it so we'd stay together and that lasted for one day I think and the rope disappeared and everybody's on their own. But we stayed close together then the first day in the afternoon or about noon somebody started yelling "*Shark, shark, shark*" and they came. A whole school of them with their fins sticking out of the water that high. And pretty soon somebody let out a scream and all the guys just quiet. Just as quiet as it is hear, just the lapping of the water, that's all you could hear. The Chaplain happened to be in our group and he started repeating the 23rd Psalm and everybody within hearing distance joined in. We were all denominations but everybody joined in and that became our prayer for the next five days with the lifejackets off of bodies that were cut in half by sharks. Guys died from wounds that they received aboard ship.

Rick: Now your group – there was 150 and there was 900 that you say so there were other groups consisting of the 750 others.

Woody: Yeah, they were scattered all over. When we were rescued they said we were scattered over a fifty-mile radius – fifty square miles.

Rick: When these sharks were coming could you see the fins from a long way off?

Woody: Yeah you could see them coming.

Rick: And you had some up close to you as well?

Woody: Close enough to pet, right there. They'd swim by me, go to him, bite the guys leg off or....'why me'? You know and it happened more than once.

Rick: So these guys would just scream and then their whole body would go under for a while.

Woody: Um hum, yeah and then come back up. I pulled lifejackets off and the guy would be cut in half. Take the lifejacket off and it flipped upside down. We tried to keep everybody in a group and we did for the second day it worked pretty good and the third day and all the time there were highflying planes in the daytime but they couldn't see us.

Rick: Friendly planes would be flying over and you...

Woody: We were right in the traffic lane for everything and you know planes were going and coming but they didn't see us and on the third day guys started drinking saltwater. You have to remember there was no water, no food, no nothing for the swimmers. The few people that had rafts, there was a little bit of provisions but very little. But the groups that were without that had nothing and the guys started drinking saltwater. Saltwater will kill you, it eats your insides up, it does funny things to you, it makes you do things that you'd never do otherwise. You go completely out of your mind. And there were fights started. Some of them were serious. My friend Newhall and I decided it was time to move away from this group – if there's going to be any survivors we'll be two of them. We swam out a ways, a little ways, tied our lifejackets together so we wouldn't drift apart at night and low and behold we hallucinated and talked about it and I remember as though it was right now. We got picked up by a Chinese aircraft carrier. China didn't have an aircraft carrier but we got picked up by one and we were aboard this carrier and Jim is an inquisitive guy, he's got to know everything that's going on. So I'm laying on a cot, just a canvas cot and I'm laying there about half asleep and Jim comes back and he said *"Woody, we've gotta get off of here"* I said *"why"*. He said, *"well I just been listenin to them officers up there and their not going to let us off, they're gonna keep us prisoner, we've gotta escape. You're a ?sailor?, you know how to run a boat and I'm a gunners mate, I know how to fire a gun so we're gonna steal a 40mm gun and mount it on the back of one of these [they had a whole bunch of little boats you know] we're gonna steel one of those and mount that 40mm on it and we'll shove it over the side and while you run the boat I'll fire over to Vandalia to give us that much more...the recoil from this 40mm will make us go faster"*.

Rick: So you were hallucinating together of the same thing?

Woody: We were hallucinating together and talking about it. So about that time we come to or we could see the aircraft carrier going away from us. I don't remember being in the boat or getting in it at all, we didn't talk about that but we're in the water and this aircraft carrier's going away from us and he looked at me and I looked at him and "*We made it!*" "*Yeah we did*".

Rick: That was the third day?

Woody: That was the third day, late in the afternoon of the third day. Then the fourth day came – more screams and more sharks, fewer guys in the water, another high flying plane then low and behold about noon time another plane but he's not near as high as everybody else had been flying. But he flew over us and we had choice words for him believe me; telling him how blind he was. And low and behold he turned.

Rick: So you thought he was going to fly away and he turned back.

Woody: We thought he was going to fly away but he made a circle and we seen him, he came back with his bomb bay doors open. When he flew over us the first time he seen an oil slick. He was having trouble with a trailing antennae on his plane and he had left his seat, turned it over to the co-pilot and left his seat and went back to help the crew to try to do something with this antenna – a steel cable that runs out with a weight on the end of it to keep it stretched out and the weight broke off, they pop off. So they was trying to get the cable in and they had...the bomb bay door was open and they were flying along and he happened to look down and he seen an oil slick which means a submarine's in trouble. So he runs back to the cockpit and by then he's way out there and turns around and he comes back ready to drop a bomb on this submarine. But he's low enough now that he can see what's on the water and he seen human beings and the sharks eating the human beings. And he said that's the most devastating feeling he ever had in his life was the

first glimpse of that. Of course he radioed for help right away and back at the island of Tinian where his base was they just patched one CBY out – PBY to investigate. Of course Captain Gwen stayed on the scene until the PBY got there which was a couple of three hours later, three hours or so. But on his way out he over flew a destroyer that was on the way in to Palau and they talked and conversed on their radio and found out they knew each other and Captain Mark told the skipper on the destroyer that *'I'm going to so and so to investigate bodies in the water, probably a couple of fly boys down out there and go see if we can help. You'll probably be getting orders pretty soon yourself to reverse course and go'*. But he didn't wait for orders, he immediately turned his destroyer around and cranked it up to top speed and headed our way. The PBY arrived on the scene and the first...the guy that spotted us was low on fuel and he talked to his commander and his commander came out in a plane and relieved him about the time that Captain Mark got there. So they over flew the whole area.

Rick: PBY's can land on the water?

Woody: Um hum. They're not supposed to land at sea. But anyway they over flew the whole thing and we were scattered like I said and there was a single guy here and a single guy over there and then there was guys in groups – three, four, five in a group and Captain Mark decided that something has got to be done – the sharks are eating those people up. And the Navy regulations say, *"do not land a PBY at sea"*, period. They're made to land in the harbor and taxi up the ramp on the ground. They have wheels and pontoons you know. So anyway he decided to land and he radioed back to his base that he was going to land and his commanding officer got that message immediately and he went ape – *'I'll court marshal him. He's not supposed to land and he knows it'* and all this kind of stuff and he got that one immediately. He landed the plane and taxied and picked up the first survivor and found out who he was and what ship he was from and he broke the next regulation. He sent a clear message, a clear voice message back to his base *"people in the water are from the USS Indianapolis – NEED HELP"* and the guy that received that message is still sitting on it. He never delivered it to the commanding officer at all.

Rick: What was the reason for not delivering it?

Woody: Who knows, who knows? The mistakes that were made and covered up are absolutely unbelievable. Anyway, he landed in the water and he taxied around and he picked up 56 people before nightfall and about midnight the Dual showed up on the scene but on it's way in he had picked up Captain Mark's message and of course there were message now going everywhere and he kept in touch that he could visualize what it was like out there with all these bodies in the water and he was getting to what he thought was pretty close and he says "*I can't run in there running this speed. I gotta see what I'm doing*". Navy regulations say '*do not under any circumstances turn the light on at night in enemy territory*'. You can understand that. He turned one on and pointed it forward, put lookouts on the bow to watch for bodies in the water so he didn't run over anybody. Then he conversed with his officer of the deck and said, "*Well we've got one light on, two lights can't be any worse than one. Lets turn another one on*". So they turned another one on and turned it toward the sky and reflected it off of the clouds. We could see that for miles and miles – the prettiest sight in the world bar none.

Rick: How far away was this?

Woody: Thirty miles.

Rick: Before you saw it huh? And you were in your fourth day?

Woody: Yeah. Fourth day, fourth night or the fifth night we were in our fifth night we had just gone through the fourth day.

Rick: Without food or water?

Woody: Without food or water. We were dehydrated. I could take my skin and lift it that high. We were all dehydrated out and the weight loss – I lost 65 pounds in that five

days. Anyway he arrived on the scene about midnight and then a couple of hours later a couple of the ships joined him. There was I think five rescue ships on the scene before daylight.

Rick: And were the waves still running about three to five feet.

Woody: They stayed about the same all the time we were there. No rain, it never did rain. It sprinkled a little bit once or twice but in the afternoon of the fourth day when they were...all the planes, they diverted all kinds of planes over us and dropping survival gear, little rubber rafts and a raft fell close to Jim and I. Jim was burned and he was in pretty bad shape and I tended him a lot. The little raft fell a little ways from us and we started swimming to it and I got about half way to it and I gave completely out. Just *'to heck with this, I can't go any further'* but Jim made it and kept yelling, *"come on Woody you can make it, come on Woody you can make it"*. And there were two other guys that made the raft about the time he did so there were all three in it. Then in the opposite direction there were two guys in the water so Jim said *"we're going to go pick up Woody"* and the other guys said *"no these guys are right here, we'll get them and they can help paddle then we'll go get Woody"* and he says *"it aint gonna work that way, we're gonna go get Woody first"*. And aboard those little rafts they had the same things they have today, these little aluminum oars, two piece that you put together and there was two of them and Jim threw one overboard and put the other one together with his sore burned hands and he says *"guys we're gonna go pick up Woody, you're gonna paddle by hand and if you don't you're not gonna appreciate what's gonna happen with this oar. That I can guarantee ya"*. So they picked me up and that's how I survived.

Rick: You'd have been a gonner wouldn't you?

Woody: I'd have been a gonner. So I owe Jim Newhall my life. He swears that it's the other way around but we finally agreed *'you can save mine if I can save yours'*, so that's the way it happened.

Rick: Well then you paddled...you had one oar and how did you get back to the ship?

Woody: Well we just kind of floated then and what we did is paddled over and picked up the other two guys and before the night was over there was nine of us on that little three-man rubber raft. Then at about nine o'clock in the morning the Doyle came by and we climbed the rope ladder.

Rick: They came close enough to where you could just raft right up to it and climb up the ladder? [**Woody:** Yeah, um hum] Give us your thoughts as you were doing that and getting on board.

Woody: Well it was a great feeling to be rescued I'll tell you. I had my birthday suit on by that time. There was a lot of other boys on the same boat, we kept shedding clothes and trying to tie them on our head to keep the sun from frying it. Back to the beginning, the fuel tank ruptured when the second bomb hit so the water was covered with burning fuel. Thick black burning fuel. We were all covered with it, which was a godsend if we had not had that the sun would have literally fried us. It was hot. I climbed the rope ladder and got aboard ship and saluted the flag, saluted the officer of the deck. I had a Boatsman Pipe on, I was a Boatsman's mate and I had a Boatsman Pipe hanging around my neck on a lanier and that's the only thing I had on and to this day I don't know why but I pulled it off and hung it around the neck of the Boatsman Mate of the watch.

Rick: And you could still walk after being in the water?

Woody: I could walk barely. I ended up with...well they cleaned us all up. We got aboard ship and they assigned a guy to each one of us to bathe us, get us clothes and find us a bed. The first thing they did was offer me water. One tablespoon full of sweetened water and I couldn't swallow it, couldn't swallow at all.

Rick: Your tongue had swollen probably and...

Woody: I had ulcers in my throat, saltwater ulcers in my throat. My neck was as big as my head and I couldn't swallow at all and I couldn't until the next day. Just take liquid and let it soak down. So from there they took us in to the island of Palau and by then Palau had pretty much closed down, everything had gone to the forward area up to Okinawa and around. The hospital barracks were still there but no doctors. They had some corpsmen still left and we were there that night, the next day and the next night, then the next day the hospital ship came in and picked us up.

Rick: How many men of that original 1200 ended up surviving?

Woody: 317 of us came home. When they picked us up there was 321 live bodies that came out of the water. Two died aboard the rescue ships on the way to the hospital and two died at the island of Palau after we were there waiting for the hospital ship to come in and pick us up. 317 came home. Today there's 99 of us left.

Rick: How about your friend?

Woody: Jim died in August of 1995. We remained friends. Jim and I were closer together I guess than any two brothers in the world. We did a lot of visiting back and forth and kept in touch. We had a reunion in '95 and Jim wasn't able to go to it, he was in the hospital in Phoenix. I went to the reunion and that's the year we dedicated the monument.

Rick: Tell me about when you first heard about the atomic bomb.

Woody: We heard about it after we were at the hospital in Guam. When the hospital ship came in and picked us up they took us to Guam at the naval hospital there and we were there and I'm not sure, I think – well I know we did. On the 6th day of August they dropped the first bomb and it was on the news that an atomic bomb had been dropped. On the 14th when they declared the end of the war and President Truman announced, then

it was announced that the USS Indianapolis had been sunk and that it was the ship that delivered the atomic bomb. That's when we first found out.

Rick: That's the first time you realized that you had a big part in that.

Woody: That's the first time we realized that we had anything to do with it.

Rick: And you delivered that bomb on the 26th of July and the war ended basically on the 9th of August and VJ Day was the 14th?

Woody: The 14th, yeah. Now back to the rescue, we got picked up and of course Captain McVey survived and everybody's first question was to anybody was *'why were we not picked up? Why were we left out there?'* The Navy told us *"you did not get an SOS message off, we didn't know you was in trouble"*. We got to the hospital at Guam and somebody instigated a court of inquiry to find out what happened. The group that went to Palau got delivered to Guam aboard a hospital ship. The other rescue ships went to...I never can pronounce it; it's in the Philippines anyway to the hospital in Lady Gulf. They flew all of those guys back to Guam. They wanted all the crew to be together for a court of inquiry. They had us all write letters to what we'd seen, what we thought, what the weather was like and we did and they held a court of inquiry and they ended up charging Captain McVey with a failure to zigzag and the loss of life and the loss of ship.

Rick: Was he with you in the hospital? [**Woody:** yes he was] So he was over at Guam with the rest of the group?

Woody: Yep, he was there. Anyway Admiral Nimitz says *"No. No court marshal"*. He was recommended for court marshal and Admiral Nimitz says *"no, no way. Maybe a letter of reprimand at the most and send him back to duty. Put him back to sea where he belongs"*. And it was left at that then in December Admiral King who was over Nimitz got the Secretary of the Navy forestalled and the court marshal was ordered for Captain McVey and it was held in December of 1945 in Washington DC. They flew the Japanese

submarine skipper to Washington to testify against Captain McVey. He did not testify against him, he testified for him. He said *“it would have made no difference whatsoever if he was zigzagging or not. Once I had a fix on him it made no difference”*. Our submarine skippers testified at the same thing that zigzagging was obsolete, made no difference. But they convicted him. McVey asked for an attorney, a friend of his that was a good attorney. Admiral King denied it and appointed him an attorney that had never faced a trial so they convicted him and put him back to duty and he was stationed in New Orleans for awhile and time goes on and in 1960 the crew got together. We finally got together and we had our first reunion in Indianapolis Indiana. Captain McVey came but he didn't want to. The reason being, when the Navy convicted him a lot of people convicted him also. A lot of the parents of the people, the personnel that didn't survive...

*****Tape Interrupt*****

Rick: Captain McVey was court marshaled and then you had a reunion?

Woody: Yeah, we had a reunion and he came to it in 1960 and we asked him for his permission if we could do something to fight to get his name cleared, to get the court marshal reversed and he said *“No. Don't do it, it won't do you any good. You can't get anyplace”*. We had a reunion in 1965 he came again and we asked him again and he said, *“well do what you can but you're not going to get anyplace”*. So we started in 1965 contacting our congressmen and senators, anybody we knew to get some help to reverse his court marshal. We got no place. In 1968 he killed himself but we were still working trying to get him exonerated. Also in '65 we had two resolutions – one to clear his name and one to build a monument, someplace in the United States we will build a monument to the 883 shipmates we left at sea. In '95 we dedicated the monument. In 1997 a young boy from Pensacola Florida watched the movie Jaws.

Rick: Where is that monument?

Woody: It's in Indianapolis Indiana, sitting on the canal bank; it's a beautiful monument. This young boy watched the movie Jaws with his father and in it the shark boat captain if you watch it he's telling about how he hates sharks and he was aboard the Indianapolis, he knows all about sports. So Hunter asked his dad "*is that a true story?*" And he said "*why don't you check it out for yourself and find out*". So he started checking and he got a hold of one of the survivors somehow he found out about him and got a hold of him in Mobile Alabama and it just snowballed from there. He gave him a crews list, he had a list of all the survivors and Hunter got that and he got his congressman interested in it and his congressman took him to Washington and introduced him to the congress and the news media for the first time since the day it sunk picked it up and had something to say. Hunter was on all the talk shows and everything there was and got all kind of coverage and there happened to be a retired lobbyist in Washington that went to school with the McVey brothers and one of them asked him "*would you be interested in helping us get this through*"? "*Absolutely*". He became Hunter's grandfather and they walked the halls of congress and the end results was – in '99, March I think it was 1999 there was twelve of us in Washington for a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee carried by Senator Warner and all of the truth came out. Back to Guam you don't need an escort, it's a clear lane, why wasn't we picked up – you didn't get a message off. Truth. They told us they knew there was three submarines operating in our path and they knew them by hull number and by name. They knew that the USS Underhill go sunk within 70 miles of where we got sunk three days before we did. '*You didn't get a message off*' – there were three stations that received that message that night. One of them in Lady Gulf, the Junior Officer of the deck tried to verify it. It wasn't verifiable by then so they forgot it and said it was probably a hoax anyway. The second one – they didn't even try to verify it they just said "*it's a hoax, the Japanese are trying to get us out there*". The third one – and this one tears me up; Admiral Gillette was in a poker game when his message was delivered to him, he's says "*I don't want to be disturbed, I'll be out in awhile*". The Officer of the Deck took it upon himself and dispatched two sea-going tug boats to investigate. Admiral Gillette came out of his poker game two hours later and read the orders says "*call them tugs back, I didn't send them to sea*". They were called back. Had not they been called back they would have been on the scene at six o'clock in the

afternoon on Monday, the first day we were in the water. He got a letter of reprimand. We were on a plotting board from Guam to Lady, we were supposed to be in at a certain time, the guys running the plotting board, there was an order out a directive out at that time *'you can't report – do not report the arrival of warships'*. Time for us to arrive and we didn't show up *'I can't report arrivals, I can't report non arrival'*. He took us off the board and forgot it.

Rick: That's amazing. Let me ask you one question – I've heard some people say that when President Harry Truman heard about the sinking of the Indianapolis and the number of lives lost that that convinced him to maybe drop that bomb. Is there any truth to that?

Woody: That is the truth that he was on his way home from Yalta – from the meeting with Stalin and okay he was on his way home. On the fourth day or when the Navy first knew about it and he knew about it was on the 5th day of August or the 4th day of August and that is the day that he gave orders while on his way home *'we have lost enough of lives, arm that bomb and drop it'*.

Rick: That was it huh? [**Woody:** that was it] Well Woody tell us how you became a Utahn.

Woody: Well we came home after the hospital in Guam we all came home in September – September the 28th, 1945. They gave us all 30-day leaves and gave us the choice of reporting in at any place in the United States you want to. I reported in the Naval Air Station in New Orleans and they had my orders cut to go to Coronado Island and I told them that I'm due for a discharge and they changed the orders and left me there and discharged me on the 3rd day of December 1945. I told you I had lost 65 pounds and anyway I came back to the states and I was a walking batch of nerves and I started drinking alcohol to try to drown it. And I started rambling around and I ended up in Salt Lake City in March 1945 – broke, hung over and I had to get a job so I did. I had three jobs in 1946 and got fired from all of them so I met a guy and I went to work for him and through his wife was my wife's sister and she was a lot of help. She helped me to start

quitting drinking then she said, “*you’re going to meet my sister*” and I said, “*I’m not going to meet anybody I don’t need anybody*”, you know that’s not right. So anyway I was in a bar one night in Salt Lake. It was early and she and her husband walked in and grabbed me by the arms and said “*you’re going with us*” and they took me down to Orem and introduced me to her sister. She had six children, this one being the oldest and I fell head over heels in love with her and the next day I met all the kids and I fell in love with them and it turned my life completely around. I quit drinking and to this day I don’t know why she did but she married me. We had 53 years, wonderful years together and I have the love and devotion of the kids and the grandkids and the great-grandkids and the great-great-grandkids and that’s why I’m in Utah.

Rick: So you lived in Utah ever since?

Woody: Um hum.

Rick: Well thank you so much, you did a great job. That was a real good interview. I appreciate you coming up and sharing that with us.

Woody: Glad to do it.