



Cal McPhie

United States Navy

Petty Officer

Pacific Theater

Date Interviewed: 2/13/05

Location of Interview:
Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:
Rick Randle

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

Rick: We're happy and honored to have with us Mr. Cal Mephie who was a Submariner during the Second World War. Cal was a graduate of West High, a native Utahn and has been active in the community ever since the war. Could you tell us about where you were on December 7th, 1941 and what was going through your mind and that kind of thing?

Cal: I was born and raised in Salt Lake City. At the time that the Japanese attacked I was at home. Of course, we were all concerned about the country.

Rick: How old were you?

Cal: I was about 18 at the time. We were seeing other men go and then when it got close to our time, I enlisted in the Navy.

Rick: I understand that there was a great deal of patriotism, all of your buddies joined up?

Cal: Right. So I enlisted in the Navy and was sent to Ferragut, Idaho to Naval Camp up there. While I was there I volunteered for sub duty, there were only 3 of us that did out of 120. Instead of going to sub school in Connecticut I was sent immediately to Midway Island and I was Ships Company there for 3 months.

Rick: Where did you go to embark for Midway?

Cal: Out of Oakland.

Rick: What was it like going over, were you on one of these Troops Ships?

Cal: Yes, I was on sort of a supply ship and troops. We stopped off at Pearl Harbor and then we went right onto Midway. Midway at that time was in blackout conditions. There are 2 islands there; Sand and Eastern, pretty barren there were a bunch gooney birds there. It was a base for subs coming in and off of patrols; they'd get supplies and fuel.

Rick: What year was this?

Cal: This would be early 1943.

Rick: So the Battle of Midway had already occurred and they were still in blackout conditions and turned it into a submarine base?

Cal: Right.

Rick: What were your duties there?

Cal: It was to help supply the ships and any maintenance work that was necessary.

Rick: Were you disappointed that you weren't actually placed on a sub right off the bat?

Cal: I don't think so, I think I was more disappointed not being able to be sent to sub school but they needed to fill a quota on that sub base in Midway. But I was there 3 months before this Finback submarine came through and they had to replace one of the sailors because he was chronically seasick. So the exec of the boat came down and interviewed two of us and I was selected to go. So I went on that submarine for the rest of the war.

Rick: So you were put on this USS Finback without really any basic training and submarine warfare, how did you handle that?

Cal: What the purpose of the qualifications to be a submariner is you have to learn every

compartment throughout the whole entire boat. In case, when you go into a dive into what we call silent running, here all the doors are closed and if you happen to be passing through one and they close the door you have to operate every piece of equipment in that compartment. So it takes you two runs to learn it all and to pass the tests. Part of your job would be mess cook or lookout and it just took those two patrols to do it. If you didn't qualify in two runs they would put you off.

Rick: Tell us about the submarine that you were on, how big it was, how many men, living conditions, and so forth.

Cal: It was what we call the Gato Class; its tested depth was 300 feet. There were a few times where we went to 450 feet when we were being depth charged. It was a diesel boat with 4 main diesel engines, 2 evaporators for making water from the sea and also battery water for the batteries. It had approx. 70 enlisted men and 7 officers. Our battle stations were such that your main job, in my case was running the forward engine rooms and making the water for the boat and everything. But when they sounded the diving alarm and everything was shut down as far as the engines go then you ran to the position that you were supposed to be at for battle stations. Mine was on the stern planes so that when the boat goes into the dive your planes are at the back and are driven by the screws, and they react quickly. When you start the dive, the bow planes are rigged out as you go down. So then you go down to whatever the Skipper calls for.

Rick: Tell us about your sleeping quarters.

Cal: I told my wife, my girlfriend, that my bunk I slept in was right next to a 3,900-pound torpedo. Anyway, I slept in that same bunk all the time I was on that sub and slept right next to a torpedo the whole run. Now there are 6 torpedo tubes in the forward compartment and there are 4 in the after compartment, but we carried a total of 24 torpedoes.

Rick: Are those dangerous if you bump them or anything or do they arm them just before they shoot them?

Cal: Well some of the danger comes if you put the torpedo in the tube, what we call a hot running torpedo, and it starts making its run and you either have to fire it or get it back out of the tube and disarm it, so that's the dangers of torpedoes.

Rick: When you volunteered to be a submariner and there were only 3 of you out of 120, did you realize that it was a much dangerous job and that you were putting yourself in harms way probably more so than others?

Cal: I really don't think at that age we really realized what we were getting into. The qualifications also is that you had to be in top physically condition because there are no doctors on subs and you had to be in good mental condition because if you can't stand being tied up in one of those subs, you can't afford to have a man you can't trust when you get into tight situations.

Rick: How often were you able to take a bath or shower?

Cal: To take a full shower would be one day out of port and what the enlisted men had two basins and we have what we call condensate water which is water that can't be used in the batteries because of the salt in it. And so what they would do is you would throw the water over you then lather up with the soap then throw more water over and that was it. And about one day out of port you could take a shower because you'd be running out of water with that many men for our capacities.

Rick: With 77 enlisted men, how many bathrooms did they have onboard?

Cal: They had 2 in the men's quarters and one up in the officer's quarters.

Rick: In those days there were no females onboard the sub?

Cal: I hope there won't ever be.

Rick: How about today's nuclear subs?

Cal: I wouldn't want to see it. I think it's too tight of quarters and to have to make room for additional beds.

Rick: Now compare the length of your sub and the size of it versus our modern nuclear subs today.

Cal: My boat was 311 feet long, it had 2 periscopes, it had a radarscope and it could dive 300 feet was our tested depths, 400-450 sometimes when you had to go that deep.

Rick: How big are the nuclear subs?

Cal: The Salt Lake City, which is a nuclear attack submarine, is 360 feet long. The Russians have a double hauled sub that had a hot tub in it and they can jog around the missiles.

Rick: Now I understand that these submarines went on war patrols, how long were they?

Cal: Where anywhere from 45 to 75 days.

Rick: The average enlisted men would do 3 war patrols and you did 5?

Cal: Well what happens is that they figure after 3 runs that your percentages are going to get you. So they would transfer you either onto another sub or onto the sub base or the sub tender. I don't know why I lasted all 5 runs on that ship, from the time I went on until the war ended; maybe I was hiding or something.

Rick: That's interesting but shows your dedication of service. Now tell us about these war patrols, lets start right from the first one and go through all five of them and give us as much detail as you can about those.

Cal: What happens is that when you leave the dock, the minute you leave a harbor then you are on your own because there could be Japanese subs waiting just like we wait off their shores. So you'd be under constant conditions of war, but we'd go out to an assigned station of so many hundred square miles, we would keep in touch with COM sub pack (?) in Pearl Harbor and they would advise us if a convoy was starting out from a certain port. And they would pass through our areas we'd take a crack at it and then we'd pass word back to COM (commander, submarine force, US Pacific Fleet) sub pack where it was headed and how many was left. Then they would advise the next sub in the next section that they were coming. So we knew pretty much the time they left port until we got a hold of them, they would know what was going on.

Rick: Where did you go on your first mission?

Cal: I went to the Carolina and Truck Islands was my first one, my second was to Palau, my third was to Hirojima before they ever invaded it. We stayed for about 45-50 days there and 4 of the days was spent rescuing pilots that had been shot down. We rescued one pilot with his two crewmen and then we found out that George Bush had been shot down, he had lost his two crewmen and we could never find them and neither could the pilots that were patrolling the area. And he had hit a radio tower on Chichajima so he was on fire and then he came to see subs there do rescue work. You'd think they'd have a problem with us; there was Japanese patrol boats and also Japanese submarines around there. So what they would do, these patrol boats would try to get these pilots in their rafts that were shot down. George was in his raft and these fighter pilots scared them off and then we moved in. He had been in the water about 3 hours I guess, so then we moved in and got him and took him aboard and submerged again so we could do some more rescue work. The next day we had a fighter pilot shot down off of Mt. Suribachi on Iwo and the current was dragging him into shore and the shore batteries were firing at him. So we

went in at periscope depth, we were advised that he was there, so we went in at periscope depth and made an approach on him but he didn't want to grab it because he thought it was a Japanese sub. So finally as the shells were getting close to him and close to our periscope he thought he better grab on, so we made the approach on him and he grabbed onto it in his life raft and we turned around and headed back to sea until we could get out of range. Then we planed up to 53 feet, which is where the hatch can be open on a conning tower, and he was hanging in the shears with his life raft and when the guys opened the hatch he had a pistol pointed at that first guy that opened the hatch. He said, *"I would've shot you if you had slant eyes."*

Rick: I bet he was relieved to know it was an American sub.

Cal: So we kept them and we finished our rescue work around those islands and then we moved onto our regular patrol area that we were patrolling for another month and we sunk a couple of ships and got depth charged each time. And finally we got released from that area and went back to Midway Island and put them ashore and of course they were the first ones off.

Rick: How long was George Bush on your vessel?

Cal: One month, all 5 of them.

Rick: Did you make dives while they were there?

Cal: As we were being attacked by patrol boats and that sort of stuff we'd have to dive.

Rick: Of course in those days we didn't know that George Herbert Walker Bush was going to become a President of the United States.

Cal: Just another pilot.

Rick: Tell us what happened after he became President and remembered the crew of the Finback.

Cal: When he got into office he sent each one of us a Christmas card every year and he had a big plaque thanking us for rescuing him. He sent letters, very appreciative and the press never knew about it, it was a personal matter.

Rick: Did he ever have any of you visit the White House?

Cal: I had an invitation, in fact I have it right here, but I had an invitation to attend the inaugural but I couldn't afford to go at that time.

Rick: That's interesting. Have you ever heard of anyone being rescued by grabbing onto a periscope?

Cal: It was the first in Naval history.

Rick: Has there ever been any since?

Cal: I think there was one other, but not a mile offshore.

Rick: How often did you have to surface to charge your batteries?

Cal: Well you would try to stay on the surface as long as possible during the daytime especially if we were roaming to meet a convoy. And if planes would come in on you then you'd have to dive and when you felt it was safe to come back up again you would come back up. So you would surface at night right at dusk to get rid of your garbage that you had to get rid of so that you'd be miles away when dawn broke and they could track you with your garbage so you'd always get rid of it right at dusk. We'd charge our batteries on one main engine or auxiliary and just get a full charge going.

Rick: So you had to be concerned in each of these missions of being shot at by another submarine with torpedoes, depth charges from Japanese destroyers and mines, and then airplanes that even though you were submerged could see you underneath the water.

Cal: In some of the South Pacific areas the water is so clear they could see you settled way down, so they'd drop aerial bombs.

Rick: Tell us about the risks involved, there were how many submarines altogether and how many were actually sunk?

Cal: We had about 265 subs at any given time one third would be in port doing refit or overhauls or doing trial runs and the rest would be out on stations out on a certain area. We lost 52 boats for a loss of 3,505 men and they're all down there still what we call "*Eternal Patrol*". They've never been brought up.

Rick: As I understand, 1 in 5 didn't ever come back.

Cal: We were 1.6% of the armed forces and 1 in every 5 and that was the reason for putting you off of a boat after 3 runs as a rule.

Rick: There is a monument in Utah, tell us about that.

Cal: I belong to the Utah Chapter of Sub Vets of WWII and we have a memorial out at Camp Williams, the vet cemetery this side of Camp Williams and all of us guys were in our 70's when we built this memorial. We it to the Submarine Harter, the Skipper must have been quite a fighter because he sunk 5 destroyers in 5 days on his 5th patrol. Then on his 6th patrol he went out with the Wolf Pack, one of the subs, and he got caught by a destroyer and was sunk in 900 feet of water and they're still there.

Rick: As I understand, on one of your patrols you were coming out of a bay in a convoy on the surface and the last submarine that was behind you got sunk.

Cal: That was on my 5th patrol and we went into the east China seas with a wolf pack of 7 subs and while there we did whatever damage we could do, then on our way out you have to come through an area called Takira Straights and they have shore batteries on both sides and we all came out and our tanks were blown as high as we could ride so we could get speed. And our top speed was like 20.5 knots and we were the 6th one out and the 7th one got sunk.

Rick: By air?

Cal: By shore batteries.

Rick: That's interesting. I know you got a flag pole that's outside your house and you fly it half mast at many times.

Cal: Our National Organization has asked us to fly our flag at half-mast on anniversary dates of the sub that was sunk that certain day in the year it was sunk so I fly it at half-mast.

Rick: So on the days that these ships have gone down you fly your flag at half-mast. There's people that are born after 1940 that don't know very much about the war and we have a younger generation here that doesn't know about it much, what advice or information would you give to these young high school students today concerning the war and dedication?

Cal: First of all, get a good education. If you're interested in the Navy go into the sub service.

Rick: Is it as dangerous today, obviously we're not at wartime, but its all nuclear subs but I guess if we were in war it would be as dangerous as it was when you guys were in.

Cal: Well I'm sure it is and I think people don't realize what these subs are doing during this so called "*peace time*". The areas they are covering, the countries they are covering and it really is protection to our country. We had a job, I might add, that my 6th patrol was going to be – we were in Pearl Harbor and our patrol, we were supposed to lay off the Japanese homeland and plot kamikazes coming into our invasion fleet that was going to invade Japan. And luckily the war ended so after the war then we took our subs, about 8 of us went around through Panama went up the east coast to New London, Connecticut and we trained regular Navy how to handle submarines, how to dive them and what to expect. Then in '46 I was discharged.

Rick: Now there were some benefits to the submariners during the war as to food and maybe R and R, do you want to tell us a little about that.

Cal: We had a high priority even though we're carriers; if we needed a part or anything else like that we were given top priorities. Because when we're out we're thousands of miles ahead of the fleet or airplanes or anything, there was no diving belt or rescue if you were sunk, there's no way for a boat to get to you to help you. The other benefit, I might mention, is that we had a one armed bandit (slot machine).

Rick: You had good meals aboard the sub?

Cal: Very good, as long as the run would last. If you got toward the end of one of those runs that you were making 70-75 days, the food got a little bit mild.

Rick: Then you'd come back and go 2 weeks R and R and in some of the best accommodations they could give you?

Cal: When we were in Pearl we would leave the boat and the crew that was going to be transferred would stay with the boat until it was repaired for all the things that we had to get repaired. And then we would go over to the Royal Line Hotel and stay there for 2 weeks and then we'd come back to the boat and then we'd take her out on trial runs and

we would take the men that had repaired our boat, take them out with us so they had better know that they better repair it good or they're going to go with us.

Rick: Did you dive down with those guys?

Cal: Yeah. What they do on trial runs, they test all the engines and every working part and they throw depth charges at you to get the new crew accustomed to the sound and what to expect, because if you're in silent running you can't have a man panic because he doesn't know what's happening and he makes some noises and then they can ping in on you and then they come after you.

Rick: How many times were you depth charged during your 5 war patrols?

Cal: Just about every run and every time we went after a convoy or a ship.

Rick: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your service?

Cal: I think it's the best group of men.

Rick: You still have reunions and meet together?

Cal: We meet once a month at a buffet restaurant on Redwood Road. We open the meeting with prayer, have a pledge of allegiance, have a dinner or lunch, then we sit around and lie a lot.

Rick: You've been called the greatest generation, how do you feel about that and give us your comments on that.

Cal: Well I think, for instance, I had two brothers out at the same time in the Pacific and I think we were protecting our country, we were protecting our family and I just think there's that kind of a feeling about everything.

Rick: Most of the veterans grew up right during the Depression and then they get 18, 19, 20 and instead of thinking about going to college and getting married, they're going to war. So it really is a big sacrifice that was made.

Cal: To me, they're not doing anything different than was expected of us. The people that join the Nat'l Guard, they were paid for all the time schools they got and all that goes with it. And all they're doing is honoring that commitment and you're defending your country and your loved ones. I think in the days of Japan, if you read the flyboy book you can understand why it was such a vicious war because they were so bad toward the Chinese people and our prisoners, they had a separate camp for submariners because they hated us with a passion. We got 55% of all ships sunk in the Pacific were done by submariners, so they beat us with baseball bats and tortured us and everything. I think people just; the American people have that sort of a spirit.

Rick: Prior to 1943 to mid 1943 German submarines sank 400 vessels within about 40 or 50 miles of the US shores off of New York and the Gulf of Mexico and it wasn't until mid '43 that we developed our submarine fleet and was able to crack that German code and answer that call and then our submarines were devastating. Tell us what you think about that, did you know you were having such a big impact?

Cal: Well each sub had a battle flag and I think we knew what percentages we were getting, what percentages were sunk or damaged and we all had the same purpose in mind to end it as fast as we could so we could get home. The submariners are a highly trained bunch and there was nobody to help you while you're out there, we don't have any ambulances or anything to help us.

Rick: Those 52 boats lost, I would imagine it was just a terrible way to die.

Cal: The one sub, the Harter, the sub that was with him on this wolf pack, he could hear the boat breaking up as it went down to 900 feet. You could hear the boat breaking up and collapsing, it's a terrible death there's no two ways about it.

Rick: During your 4th patrol your boat became famous because you rescued a very prominent individual, can you tell us about that?

Cal: He was a young lieutenant, he had two crewmen and when he was shot down his crewmen we could never find them. We moved in and got him and he stayed with us all the rest of the patrol and we come to find out later on after the war was over that he was running to be President of the United States and of course it was George Bush, the father. And he, during his term in office, he sent us Christmas cards, invitations to the inauguration, letters, very very nice man to talk to, he didn't let the press know that he was sending all this material. So I feel like he was a very grateful man for what we did for him.

Rick: That was off the coast of Iwo Jima.

Cal: Off of Chichijima which is right next to Iwo in the Bonin Islands.

Rick: There was another unusual rescue that your boat participated in; can you tell us about that?

Cal: It was a pilot that was shot down named Breckman, a fighter pilot. He was shot down and was in his life raft a mile off of shore of Mt. Suribachi which is on Iwojima and we were notified he was down so we went in there by periscope depth which is 63 feet and just cruised in on him and made a pass at him and he didn't want to grab it. Then he was being shelled from the shore so we made another pass at him and he decided he better grab on and he did which it was the first time in Naval History that had ever done.

Rick: So then you pulled him out to sea away from the shore batteries and tell us about when you surfaced.

Cal: We brought the boat up to conning tower hatch where we could open the conning tower, the rest of the boat would be under the water of course and he was hanging onto the periscope shears with his life raft and when we opened the hatch he had a gun pointed at the first man that opened the hatch and he said, "*I would've shot you if you had slant eyes.*" So he was just happy to be aboard. While they were there, they all participated in lookouts and also would go through the boat to see how it functioned.

Rick: So when you rescued these guys they stayed on with you until you completed your war patrol and when George Bush was there, there were 4 other rescued aviators.

Cal: And they would stay on until we finished the patrol, which was a month later. Then we left our station and went to Midway Island where we put them ashore and they were flown back to their carriers.

Rick: Did any of them want to stay on and be Submariners?

Cal: No, no, no-no. They did however have kind of a unique situation; because we had had a successful patrol they were entitled to wear their wings as well as their submarine pin. So that made them eligible to wear both pins.

Rick: All right well Cal, thank you so much for being with us today.

Tape End