Sylvester Sessions – Life during WWII

By Sylvester J. Sessions

October 27, 2002

Box 1 Folder 21

Oral Interview conducted by Aubrey Anne Sessions

Transcript copied by Maren Miyasaki June 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
AS: Okay, what is you name?


AS: Where [were] you born?

SS: Butte, Montana.

AS: Okay. And when were you born?

SS: April 23, 1923.

AS: How old were you when Pearl Harbor happened?

SS: When Pearl Harbor happened? Let’s see in 1941…So that would be, I would be 18.

AS: Eighteen okay. And how did you hear about Pearl Harbor after it happened?

SS: I was ridin’ in my car, through collections.

AS: Through collection?

SS: And I heard it on the radio.

AS: You heard it on the radio! What did they say?

SS: They just said that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I didn’t know what Pearl Harbor was.

AS: Yeah! So what were your thoughts after you figured out what Pearl Harbor was?

SS: Well, uh...just like most people, you know being devastated. And didn’t know what it really meant to me, you know what it was going to mean to me. But, uh, to the country we knew we were in bad trouble because we had no defense on the West Coast.

AS: And, had you decided to go into the armed services before Pearl Harbor or did you decide after Pearl Harbor?

SS: Oh, after.

AS: After? And what made you decide to do that?

SS: To serve my country.

AS: To serve your country. And what branch did you go into?
SS: The Navy.

AS: Why did you choose the Navy over everything else?

SS: Because I figured as long as I was afloat I had a nice bed to sleep in. I didn’t want to be slogging in the mud and be in the Army.

AS: Yeah, and when did you join, do you remember?

SS: March 17, 1943.

AS: And, where were you trained at?

SS: Farragut, Iowa.

AS: And where did you go after that?

SS: I went to Iowa State College.

AS: And why did you go to Iowa State College?

SS: I went to the electrical engineering school there.

AS: What made you decide to do electrical engineering?

SS: Well, I had my choice of several things to do. I just chose the electrical field.

AS: Okay, and where did you end up eventually serving?

SS: Well, I served places.

AS: Okay, what were those places?

SS: Well uh, I went to Iowa State College and went to schooling. Then I went up to Chicago for advanced schooling. And then I went to Seattle, Washington and joined a squadron there. And then I went down to Klamath Falls, Oregon for advanced training, and then down to California to two or three bases down there. And then I went aboard a ship at San Diego and went to Pearl Harbor. And uh, we did training over there, and then I went aboard ship and… on an aircraft carrier. From there we went to the Philippines and joined the fleet.

AS: What was the name of your ship?

SS: The USS Cowpens.

AS: Okay, what was the special training that you received to do electrical engineering?
SS: To do electrical work, that was at Iowa State. Just regular electrical work, motors, controls, and stuff like that. And then I went up to Chicago to become an aircraft electrician.

AS: Okay, what was your rank?

SS: Aviation Electrician’s mate, First Class.

AS: Okay, and so you basically just worked on the planes?

SS: Well, I was with the squadron. I was the only electrician with a squadron, and I was in charge of anything that had to be done on the planes. Well, then I didn’t have to work on them. I just turned them over to the shipboard electricians to do it. But I was in charge of all of them.

AS: Okay. Now you had electrical training, but did you have any combat training?

SS: Well, you get that in basic training.

AS: You get that in basic training. What did that entail? Do you remember?

SS: All the different things, how to march and shot. You know, marksmanship, all that kind of stuff.

AS: Okay. And were you married while you were serving?

SS: Yes.

AS: And, did you get married before or after you entered the armed services?

SS: Before.

AS: And why did you decide to get married then?

SS: Because I had already put in three years of courtin’ this girl, and I didn’t want to lose her. I wanted to marry her.

AS: (Laughing) Well, I’m glad that you did. Um, how did you feel leaving Grandma?

SS: Terrible. Every letter I got, it was terrible, but you had to serve your country, you know?

AS: True. And how did Grandma feel about you being in the Navy?
SS: Oh, uh. Just like I felt because she hated that we were apart. But she knew that I was doing my duty to my country.

AS: What did she do while you were gone?

SS: She just took care of our little boy. And she lived with her folks so she helped her mother do the house work, and take care of her other brothers who were smaller than her.

AS: Yeah. And, did you make any new friends while you were serving in the military?

SS: Oh lots of them, yeah.

AS: And how did those relationships end up turning out?

SS: Well, uh, I kept in contact with some of them for a few years. And I named my second son after one of them, just a good relationship. It was nice to know someone else. But I haven’t heard from any of them for years. I suppose a lot of them are dead by now.

AS: Yeah. Do you suppose that the war made your relationships stronger with those people?

SS: Oh sure. Yeah. You always have good feelings when you serve together, you know, especially when you are aboard.

AS: Did it make your relationships stronger with your family, especially Grandma?

SS: Well yeah. It made it so we appreciated each other a lot when we came back.

AS: Okay. How did you feel about the people that you were going to fight against?

SS: I hated them. Because of what they did to us over in Pearl Harbor. I still don’t like ‘em.

AS: You still don’t like them?!

SS: Nope.

AS: That’s okay.

SS: That’s terrible to say because of the church. You’re supposed to forgive everybody, but I still don’t like those people.

AS: That’s okay! How did your view…did your view of them change at all throughout the war?

SS: Like what?
AS: Did you end up not hating them so much? Did you end up hating them more?

SS: I hated them worse.

AS: How come?

SS: Because of what they did to our people down there. The atrocities that they did to our soldiers and stuff in the Philippines, prisoners of war and stuff like that. They were just a terrible people, not the average person in Japan, I suppose. I am talking about the soldiers.

AS: The soldiers. Do you think that they were that way because of their training or do you think that is how they all felt about Americans?

SS: You know it’s what Japanese are. Why the ones I fought against. I didn’t fight against the Germans. But the Japanese are very devoted to their homeland, like we are. And therefore, if they told them to jump off a cliff—they had those kamikaze pilots who’d just dive their airplanes right into your ships and kill themselves. They are just like the people in Palestine, those that blow themselves up so that they can kill a few of the people over there.

AS: Okay. How well prepared physically were you to fight the war?

SS: Oh fine. I was just a rough and tough young guy that worked all my life driving trucks and stuff like that while going to school. I was in good shape.

AS: How about…what about emotionally?

SS: Oh yeah. I’d been around, you know, around the farms and stuff where you learn about death and stuff from cattle and things like that. You get experience pretty fast living on the farm.

AS: True. How often did you get leave while you were in the military?

SS: How often what?

AS: How often did you get leave while you were in the military?

SS: Well, you are supposed to get thirty days a year, but you are overseas so you don’t get it until you get back.

AS: True.

SS: Yeah. I only had one thirty day leave in three years.
AS: Wow!

SS: And that was after the war was over. I came back, and they gave me thirty days leave and then after that, after I was through with my leave they discharged me because I had been in long enough that I didn’t have to stay in any longer.

AS: What if you had had to stay in any longer? Would you have reenlisted?

SS: Sure, but my wife wouldn’t let me. (Laughing)

AS: Well, Grandma! How long were you on the ship for?

SS: Seven months.

AS: Seven months, total?

SS: Yep. That’s all we had to stay. See, I was with a squadron. That’s with pilots, and two different types of airplanes, that are on an aircraft carrier. And, you get relieved every seven months. You only have to stay on there seven months, and then a new squadron comes in, and you go back to the states. And, then you are assigned to another squadron, and after about a year or so then you go back out again. But I never did have to go back out again.

AS: Okay. How many people are in a squadron?

SS: Oh, lets see. There were about, in a torpedo squadron which I was in, there was about 20 pilots, and about 40 enlisted personnel, which were radio men and gunners, and then we had 10 people who were just maintenance people like myself. There was only one for each trade. The metals men, the pharmacist, and I was the electrician, and so on and so forth. Total, I’d say for the torpedo squadron…but you’ve got to count the fighter squadron too, so you’d just about double what I say because you had the same amount of people, so I’d say total we probably had about…well, I’d have to take that back because the fighter squadron they didn’t have the gunners mate, and they didn’t have the radio people. We had 24 and 48 which would be about 75. We had about 100 in our squadron and they had about 50. So I’d say about 150.

AS: So did you get close to most of the people. Did you know most of them?

SS: Sure. You didn’t get to be…it’s just like going to school. You had three or fours people that you was always with, but you just knew the rest by name.

AS: How did your life change as a result of World War II?

SS: Oh, first of all that’s why I don’t like Japanese. They cheated me out of three years of my life with my wife and family. And, uh, the only way it changed me was that it did do this much for me…it gave me my trade. I got out of the service and became an
electrician you see. So if I hadn’t have gone in the service I wouldn’t become an electrician, I would have probably been just an ordinary worker.

AS: And you couldn’t help Dad with all of the stuff that he gets ya…that he asks ya to help him with.

SS: Yeah! (Laughing)

AS: Dad wouldn’t know electrician stuff either. How did you keep in contact with your family while you were out on the ship?

SS: You write letters, and then your letters are all censored. They have a board of officers that go through the…they have to sit there all day long and read the mail and if there’s anything in there that you’re telling your family that could cause problems as far as the war was concerned why they mark it out, or cut it out, whichever one they are doing, so that the people in this country don’t know everything that is going on. You weren’t as well informed in those days as you are today, because of television. You know today if somebody gets killed over in Palestine you hear about it right away. In those days it took maybe two or three days before you heard anything. You heard it on the radio. We didn’t have television.

AS: Did you and Grandma keep those letters?

SS: I think Grandma’s got a couple, not too many.

AS: Did you lose any friends or family during the war?

SS: Yeah, let’s see. Grandma lost a cousin. (To Grandma) Did we lose anyone else besides your cousin who got killed in the Philippines? (She answers) I don’t think so. My brother and I was the only ones in my family. I don’t think in Afton’s family, nobody went into the…well, Johnny, he would be our brother-in-law.

AS: Did you lose any friends that you had grown up with?

SS: Yeah. I had a good friend that I went to high school with. He was a pilot in the European campaign and he was a fighter pilot, and got lost over the English Channel.

AS: Did you lose anybody off your ship?

SS: Oh yeah, yeah. We lost several people. There were two or three guys slept right around where I did there. They were gunner men and radio men. They got killed over [at] Tokyo.

AS: How did you cope with all that?

SS: Oh no problem. You’ve gotta…that’s part of war you know.
AS: Do you think that your religious beliefs helped you cope?

SS: Oh sure. Yeah, if you thought this would be the end you know, at all, you felt terrible. With the afterlife you’d be a lot better about it.

AS: What are some of your most vivid memories?

SS: Oh, I don’t know. Aboard an aircraft carrier, life is very fascinating because of the activity that goes on there, you know. You send out two strikes a day, usually one at dawn in the morning, and one at two o’clock in the afternoon. The launching of all those planes and then bringing them back on the carrier…no matter how many times you see it, it is still exciting. There’s always chance that one of them is going to crash, or fly into the barrier, or whatever, you know. We had one break in two. It hit the back end of the ship and broke in two. The back end of it fell in the ocean, on the back end, and the front careened off to the left and went into the ocean on the right. The pilot never got out. The pilot just went down with the ship. It was a lot of excitement. There’s…it’s not all work too. At night when we’d have movies on the hangers where they pick up planes, that’s if the seas wasn’t too rough and stuff like that. The food was just average food, but it was all good. Lot’s of books to read because in between what we called the hops, which is when you take the first flight in the morning and the second flight in the afternoon if there’s nothing to do, well then you sit around and read books or tell story, or whatever else there is to do.

AS: Did you talk about your family a lot?

SS: Oh with some people, but only with the people you were pretty close to.

AS: Did you have any people on your ship become POWs?

SS: No.

AS: No?

SS: No, everyone went down. They were killed.

AS: Did any big events happen at home while you were away?

SS: Yeah, my first boy was born.

AS: Was it hard to miss that?

SS: He was eight months old before I saw him.

AS: Wow! Was it hard to miss that?
SS: Oh yeah, yeah. There were so many people having it the same way that you know you was out of luck. If you were away, well you were away. They didn’t make any exceptions, well you didn’t get to go unless you was in the same town or something like that. It was just the way…tough luck.

AS: Sorry!

SS: Yep.

As: Did you get to help pick your son’s name?

SS: Yeah.

AS: Or did Grandma make that decision?

SS: No we talked about it. We talked that over before I left, what we was going to name him.

AS: So did you know that…you knew that she was pregnant before you left to go on the ship?

SS: I left in March, and Dennis was born the first of June. Well, he was due in July, but he was born the first of June.

AS: Okay. How did the war end up ending for you? Were you still on the ship when the war ended?

SS: We sent out the morning strike on Tokyo, and we was just getting ready to send the second strike when we got notice that an atomic bomb had been dropped. We didn’t know what an atomic bomb was. And, that we was to not send out any more strikes. And so the—gave the Japanese time to surrender, and they didn’t surrender the first day, so they sent ‘em another atomic bomb, and after the second day they surrendered. I was with fleet, just a hundred miles off the coast of Japan, and so they chose our carrier to go in first.

AS: Wow!

SS: We was the first ship in Tokyo bay after the war ended. The only thing ahead of us was the mine sweepers. They, the mine sweepers pick up all the mines so they won’t blow your ship up. They picked up them, and we was right behind them…we went in at Nakamura and let out all the prisoners. So the reason we got that honor of going in first was because Admiral Halsey, who was in charge of the white fleet, his daughter had christened our ship. When she christened our ship she said she hoped that we would be the first ship in Tokyo Bay, and he remembered that, so he sent us in first.

AS: What were your thoughts on being the first ship in?
SS: Oh, it was fascinating. We went into Tokyo Bay and could [see] Mountain Fujiyama, and you know all the things that we heard about Japan. I had never been to Japan before. We saw the big mountain, and of course when we got in there we got to go inside the town and stuff like that, but we all had to carry revolvers. They said if anyone gives you any trouble just shoot ‘em. But we didn’t have any trouble. They were very glad the war was over, the average person there.

AS: Probably as glad as the rest of the Americans.

SS: You bet.

AS: What were your thoughts when you found out what an atomic bomb was?

SS: Well, it was hard to conceive that there was anything that big. That was all secret. We didn’t even know they was making such a thing. To think it would level a whole city, you know, boggled your mind. Just like anyone else, when you find out there is something that powerful. But we stayed there in Japan, and then the peace treaty was signed. And of course we had to put on all of our dress whites, and stand at attention up on the flight deck when the Japanese ship come over to the Missouri, which was the battleship the peace treaty was signed on, with General MacArthur. We watched them come and go, and after it was over, then the fleet was discharged to come home for Navy Day. Navy Day was in October, and so before we went home and joined the fleet. We went to Okinawa, and left all our planes there because they was going to leave so many pilots on Okinawa so they’d be land based and watch over things over there. Even though the peace treaty was signed we never knew what was going to happen. Then we took a load of sea-bees aboard our carrier, and they slept on the hanger deck. And then we came the northern route with the whole fleet. The northern route was up by Alaska. You go by Japan and then up by Alaska, and then down by Seattle. At each port they were going to celebrate the war over and Navy Day. They’d leave five or six ships off at each port, five or six off at Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. We were the last ones. They let us off at San Diego. That’s the last time I saw my ship. I got orders to come back to Seattle because Afton was there, and then I got my thirty days leave. So, I took the train and came all the [way] back up the coast, even though I had just come down the coast with the fleet. It took a couple of days to get home, and when I got home we came down here to Idaho to see my folks. We spend, I guess probably two weeks down here, and then we went back to Seattle. I went over to the Bremerton Navy Yard and got discharged. I was through.

AS: You were through!

SS: Yeah, and then I went to work at Bethlehem Steel.

AS: So between the end of the war and when you finally got home, how long was that about?
SS: With the fleet it took us about ten or twelve days. And then to go back up the coast on the train it took a couple of days. It was probably, I’d say conservatively, two weeks. Oh you mean from the time the war was over? Oh, from the time the war was over until I got home, it was about a month.

AS: Okay. And then from the time you were dropping the fleet off…?

SS: By the time we left Okinawa and joined the fleet was about two weeks.

AS: Okay. What was…Did Grandma meet you at the train station?

SS: No…let’s see, in Seattle? (To Grandma) Did you meet me at the train station in Seattle Mama? I know, but did you come down and pick me up? Yeah, she said yes. After sixty years it’s kind of hard to remember sometimes.

AS: Yeah, I understand. Do you remember what Uncle Dennis’ reaction was to you since he was already eight months old?

SS: Well, when I got back from the war he was two and a half years old. The first time I saw him I was on my way from Chicago to Seattle to join a squadron, and that’s when he was eight months old. When the war was over he was two and a half years old.

AS: What was his reaction, do you remember?

SS: Oh, he grabbed onto his mother’s leg.

AS: Wasn’t sure what to think?

SS: Oh, he wasn’t too happy to have me around because he liked his Grandma and stuff too much. In fact, when we did finally get a house why he didn’t want to stay there. He wanted to go down and live with his Grandma. He had lived with her for that two and a half years.

AS: What was Grandma’s reaction when you got home?

SS: You mean my wife? I was just talking about Grandma Nielson when I was talking about Dennis wanting to go back down and live with her. Oh, she was…couldn’t wait until I got out of those there Navy blues and got my old civilians back on.

AS: How was home different than when you left?

SS: Oh, let’s see. I guess the biggest difference was having a little boy. Before it was just mother and I, but having a little boy makes a lot of difference because that takes a lot of the mother’s time. You don’t have as much time for yourself. But, we were very happy. We had to live with her mother for four months because we couldn’t get a house in Seattle. There was waiting lines. You see after the war…they hadn’t built any houses
during the war. And then after the war was over all these soldiers and sailors were coming back and so they were taking all the empty apartments that there was. So we had to sign up and wait four months for a place to live.

AS: How was the community different?

SS: Well, see when I left for the Navy, I left from Butte, Montana. And when I came back I came back to Seattle Washington, so I really didn’t know the neighborhood around there. Everybody was strangers to me. You know the reaction of the people was just about like everywhere. Everybody was kind to everybody. They’d all been through the war. The wives waiting for their husbands, or else they got killed or something. So everybody was all very passionate with each other.

AS: What did you do after the war?

SS: I went to work for Bethlehem Steel and stayed there thirty-three years, as an electrician.

AS: Do you still think of your experiences that you had?

SS: Oh, in the war?

AS: Yeah.

SS: Oh sure. They never leave you. Yeah, you dream about them and everything else.

AS: Did you keep a lot of memorabilia?

SS: Not too much. I’ve still got a little, but I’ve given a lot of it away to kids and stuff.

AS: I know we’ve got some. Well, I think that’s all I’ve got.

SS: That’ll give you a page?

AS: That’ll give me a page.