

Interview with Charles Browning
Interviewer: Luther Amos
November 11, 2006

Interviewer's Notes: Charles Browning's son, Mark Browning, was also present for the interview.

Q: What wars did you serve in?

A: I served in World War II.

Q: Can you explain how you became involved in the military?

A: I graduated from high school and within a few months we were in World War II. In November of 1941 the war started, and I was still in high school a few months at that stage and so I became quite vulnerable age factor I was 18 or 19 years old and I came involved within a few months. I had signed up for the United States Navy. I didn't get into uniform until late 42, 43 even though I signed up within a few months. I signed up in January of 42 which still took that long of time before the United States Government could put everything together.

Q: Was there any reason you joined the navy instead of any other branch?

A: I sort of preferred the navy over the army or over the air corps. I don't think the air corps existed at that time or at least the United States Air Corps was there as a branch of the army.

Q: What was the public perception of the war at that time?

A: The nation became all concerned about us getting ready to go to war so the sentiment for the nation was entirely on the side of military service or some kind of service for the country, so everything was in favor of defending the United States.

Q: Did it change over time or did it basically stay the same?

A: It held that way during World War II. It was pretty much the sentiment for our country to make America strong.

Q: Where exactly did you go when you were sent off?

A: When I signed up for the United States Navy I had just got out of high school and I was in college, so it took a while to get all of us enlisted and put together. So, for a while they allowed us to continue college and the following summer, they were ready to call us in. Many of us went on to different colleges in uniform, as we continued our liberal arts studies. We also did military studies and had military requirements every few days while we were in school to get us ready to be a part of the military. As I went on to military, they sent me up to Plattsburgh, New York which is up awful close to Montreal up toward the Canadian border, there was a military compound on Lake Champlain where thousands of us young men came to be a part of the United States Navy. After that military assignment I went from Plattsburgh to the ocean down Mississippi River to New Orleans and boarded an LST and went out on the ocean around to the Panama Canal. Even that was dangerous then. We didn't know whether we were secure or not, but we went that way and went on out and touched California before we headed out to the far pacific.

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Q: Describe arriving and what it was like when you arrived on the LST?

A: When I arrived on the LST down in New Orleans. That was totally new to me, and we did a little shakedown there to see if the ship was alright for the sea, and we had the shakedown in the Gulf of Mexico and then after we got the ship ready for the sea then we went down to the Panama Canal and up to the California coast and got ready to go out to Hawaii and further. Then our ship joined a bunch of other ships and we went in big flotillas. When we sailed across the ocean, we couldn't take one ship across at a time or a submarine would just blast us out the ocean, so we went in big numbers.

Q: Tell me about boot camp or your training experiences?

A: That pretty much was when I went to boot camp was called Plattsburgh, New York way up on Lake Champlain and up there at boot camp we learned how to do military maneuvers, learned how to dress and learned how to do the proper things and then sailed out on a ship so we could learn how to sail the ship across Lake Champlain and see how to make it go forward, backwards, and turn around and do all the things that had to be done in the running of a ship.

Q: After training, on the LST what was your job assignment?

A: On board the LST my job assignment was an officer of the deck, to see that everybody on the ship did their duties so I was pretty much in charge of the seamen on the ship who had assigned duties. I had to see that they carried out their duties to keep the ship moving.

Q: Did you see combat?

A: We made several invasions when we were in the Pacific. Yes, we went in convoys and big flotillas of ships, and we assembled at Hawaii, and then went to New Guinea where we assembled again. Then, we made the invasions of the islands of the Philippines. The Philippines were still occupied by the Japanese at that time, so we went into the Civic Bay which is in the southern part of the Archipelago of the Philippines which were in the lower islands. We moved around through Archipelago up to the big island of Luzon which had that big city of Manila on Manila Bay and all that was still occupied by the Japanese, so we went into Manila Bay with the rest of our ships. We landed along the shores near Manila and we sent troops ashore to invade and move inland in the island of Luzon to run off the Japanese. Many of our men were killed as they went forward on that island.

Q: How was being in combat different than what you expected?

A: Well I was just a young kid out of high school and college and I'm getting into this thing called war which was totally a different world. So, to see all of what we saw when we moved in that island of Luzon with our army men on the ready, loaded guns and ready to fire their guns it was a new experience. We had to shoot at the enclosed occupation of Japan and some way or another they occupied the island up into the north side into a cave system and we shot different types of ammo into those caves. In fact, as we put some men ashore, they went to those caves with what you call flame throwers and it was a mean piece of equipment. It shot this fire into these caves, and then we moved to the next cave and the Japanese who were in there were incarcerated with our system. So, we pretty much cleared up the area that we were ready to invade in that manner. We did use some fire equipment from afar and we would shoot these exploding bullets into cave encampments.

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Q: How did you stay in touch with your family?

A: I didn't have a marriage at that time. I was just a young kid out of college, and I had my mother and my daddy and sisters at home, and I would send mail, but it would weeks before we would hear from each other. The mail didn't move very fast

Q: Have you ever heard of the term V-Mail? (Pause) Is that a term that you are familiar with?

A: We had some kind of mail system that we used I don't remember if it was v-mail or not. It was a certain type of mail that was photographed and sent home.

Q: What was the food like?

A: They didn't do too bad when I was in the United States Navy; they had good storage, our ship had good refrigeration and good storage. They took with us what our commissaries thought we would need for "sustainment" for long periods so we would go long periods and not touchdown anywhere and then after a several months we would go back to a place call Guam or maybe as far back Hawaii and get refreshments and re-storage to be able to go again for a long time. And then as we got further at sea and further across the ocean very big supply ships came along with us and they'd be nearby, and we would pull up alongside them every so many weeks and get refurbished. We get new food brought onboard of our ship and they tried to keep all Americans well feed during the war.

Q: Was the food packaged food?

A: A lot of the food was packaged. Everybody had fresh food, too, some way or another. The American system would get it out there and we would get some on our ship. We liked fresh tomatoes, but we didn't get them too often, just only so often we'd get this real fresh fruit, oranges and bananas when it was available, on our ship.

Q: Did you have any rules to follow?

A: You had to be obedient and of course we had 110 people on our ship, that ran the ship. Then, our ship was an attack ship so we had to take 4 or 500 marines on there and we'd keep them with us for several weeks at a time, or on another invasion we might take several hundred army men on board, and they would bring with them their tanks and their armor and their trucks whenever they would need to move across land when we made an invasion. They would have to have food while they were with us too, so we'd be the host and they would be our guest and we would see that they were well fed during their visit.

Q: What were your living conditions on the ship like?

A: They did pretty good. Everything was built on the ship to prepare to keep us in living quarters the same in army men quarters, so it had to have a double duty they had to be ready to shoot guns at the same it had to be ready for us to go back into the ship and be secure and then we had to come out on deck and stand by the guns and always be on the ready day and night. We'd had what you would call a night shift too. Two hours you'd watch, two hours off, four hours watch, four hours off and that kind of thing and then always scanning the horizon scanning the front to see if the enemy was nearby.

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Q: Did you ever have any interaction with civilians while stationed?

A: We went on the islands, of New Guinea and the islands of the Philippines and there were some civilians, but our ship duty on the ocean we didn't have much to do with going on the land and occupying the land. Our LST ship carried a lot of invasion troops with us like marines and like army, and they would go ashore.

Q: So, you would drop them off?

A: We would drop them off and then go on the ready as they went to the land. They'd go on their arms and a lot of times they'd be in a tank and they had tanks and guns slanted like this as they moved forward on to the land. [Slants arms downward to show gun direction.]

Q: How did people entertain themselves on the boat?

A: A lot of us did things that would be comfortable like card playing because that's about the only type of entertainment that you could take with you. When you lived at home you could like go out in your backyard and do other things that take a lot of space; you had to do things that were restricted and that was what the most entertainment that our soldiers and sailors had during this time.

Q: Can you tell me a story about the group of navy men you were with?

A: We had 110 men on our ship; it was an LST. The city of Evansville built 167 in preparation for war service. I was only on one and we sailed not so much around the world our main service of activity was the Pacific Ocean even though we went through the Atlantic as we prepared to go around to the Panama Canal. Our main service of activity was the Pacific Ocean and the islands in the Pacific which were occupied by the Japanese, and we would have to have a scrimmage or a battle at different islands as we moved west ward toward the continent.

Q: Was there something special you did for good luck?

A: (Laughs) Nothing, it was a scary world new to all of us just young kids.

Q: Describe the day your service ended.

A: I came back to the States. I came back to the States in late '45 after the war ended in August or September of '45 and then it took a few months to get ourselves put together and get ready to sail back this way and we sail back to the States. We got to the United States near the last of December of '45 or the first January of '46 and we went in shore in San Francisco and saw some of the world that we had left behind some three years before. I stayed on that ship for three years. Went on in early '43 and stayed all '43, all '44, all '45, all the war years I stayed on that ship, not only me but the other 115 guys that were with me, we stayed on that ship all that time we didn't have anything but war duty. So, when we got back it was a hilarious time to arrive at San Francisco and the world of America which we had left a few years before we came back to enjoy it.

Q: What did you do in the days and weeks afterward? Immediately upon returning.

A: During the days afterward we stayed in California for a while and pretty soon we took that ship around the southern part of the United States and around to the canal and around up the eastern coast

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of America to the Carolinas and we put it in dock in Carolinas for keep sake in what you call moth balls. We sort of painted it with a preservative so it could be kept in reserve in case we needed it again, so then we left that ship in reserve in the dock there in the Carolinas. Then we boarded trains to go from there to Chicago to the Great Lakes, which was the melting pot of all the United States Navy after the war; all the sailors came toward the Great Lakes. In California it might have been a different place but in the eastern United States all of the sailors came to the great Lakes to be discharged from United States Navy and sent home to a civilian life and that's how that transition took place.

Q: After being discharged did you stay in contact with other soldiers from the ship?

A: I stayed in contact with one or two sailors that I spent those three years with, but you'd be surprised how many cities and states we dispersed to. I didn't have anybody from my own city, didn't have anybody from nearby really. Maybe Chicago which was 300 miles away. A lot of went to New York, a lot of people went westward toward California, Arizona, Nevada. Wherever they went home, they all dispersed so our contacts with soldiers, sailors' sort of diminished and disappeared. That is no longer a part of my life and then I became total "civilian wise" if that's a word (Laughs)

Q: In what ways did your service affect your life?

A: I'm sure its affect had discipline. It was ground into us by living in close quarters with a whole lot of other men and having meals together in that manner and big areas where they had fixed for our meals and living in big dormitories and other places where we lived. Methods of life on board ship, which was different than most when we got home, so I had to readjust to the life that I once knew before I went to the war.

Q: How do you think people in the U.S. would act today if they were asked to make the same sacrifices as the civilians made during WWII like rationing?

A: I think it would have an effect of all the people today, and they would have to bring themselves around to be obedient to the new rules, and they have to abide by rationing abide by the different demands of livelihood it would create. It would be no longer the total liberty of living like we live, loosely. We'd have to watch out for everything so we could conserve our energy, conserve our food, and conserve all of the things we had in case. It's always a in case idea because if the enemy became a little more powerful than we they may overtake some of the things that we have, so that always has to be a precaution.

Q: In the aftermath of 911, many people compare the attacks in 2001 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Do you think they were similar?

A: They had some similarities. We had to all of the sudden be prepared and be worried about what might take place. The bombing of Pearl Harbor was of course far from the mainland of the United States, so we had that comfort. Whereas the 9/11 thing was in the heartland of our country so it would have had a different personal effect on everybody who had to watch what going to take place next. In our time in Pearl Harbor we had all of the United States to get ourselves ready with encampments, with our training places, many places.

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Q: What do you think about the way the war is depicted in movies and songs today? Do you think it gives the war a more realistic image or a nonrealistic image?

A: That question has been asked a number of times I know when they were showing, Flags of our Father it depicts pretty well what the world would be, pretty much what we saw when we went to war, the thing is that take place, would be depicting very much what would take place if it were to happen.

Q: Is there something that you would like to add that we did not cover in the interview?

A: No

Q: Tell him about Okinawa.

A: I played a major role in the invasion of Okinawa on Easter Sunday of 1945, the last major invasion of World War II. the biggest invasion of all time. Basically, I think maybe even by some scope and by some measures bigger than D-Day and moving into France and the ending of the European war. The invasion of Okinawa on Easter Sunday of 1945, thousands of ships invaded that land. They must of open their eyes to see something that they could never envision, this big armada coming in on their land of Okinawa because they have wakened a sleeping giant, and here we come by the thousands. These people wouldn't have a chance standing against this big, big vast movement coming their way. That was our steppingstone toward Japan, which did not materialize as a war machine because that ended the war, that activity there. Actually, the war ended there in August of '45 or September of '45. We moved into Japan just as a peace movement and we moved in thousands of, ships into Tokyo Bay to say, "Boys here we are and here were coming in". We sent the surrender troops on to a ship, a big ship called Missouri to get everything signed up and I was within a couple hundred feet of that taking place. Only because our ship had to be anchored there and located there after we all moved into Tokyo Bay.

Q: So, this attack was one of the last attacks?

A: The Last attack was in Okinawa. We attacked Okinawa moving into Naha. The name of the big city there and Okinawa is just an island some distance off of the mainland of Japan, and it was destined to be a steppingstone for our airplanes to get ready to bomb and attack the heartland of Japan. We were there nearby and the atom bomb was created in the days of Harry Truman in the White House and it was the biggest bomb for prepared for Americans to use and there was a debate whether they would go ahead to use it or not but finally they said were going to use it so they sent that airplane with that bomb and it was a force unequal on the earth at that time. They bombed that island there not far away and it awakened all those people to how dangerous this is, so that made them say well we better not continue this war so that took the Japanese to conference to say that we want to quit and So the atom bomb played a major role in that final days of World War II.

Q: I want to thank you for your time.

A: you've been Interesting. (Laughs)

Q: Thank you, I've Learned a lot today.