

**Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series**

**Robert Chester interview**

**Conducted by James Newberry**

**October 31, 2017**

**Transcribed by Mary Kate Keappler**

*Robert “Bob” Chester was born in New Jersey in 1927. Chester enlisted in the United States Navy at age seventeen and served in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Chester married his high school sweet heart after returning from the war. They had two children who graduated from the University of Georgia. Chester worked for over forty years in the explosives and chemical industries. Chester currently lives in north Georgia near his children.*

**Full Transcript**

Interviewer: And, this is James Newberry with Robert Chester and we’re going to try this again. This is Tuesday October, 31<sup>st</sup> 2017 and we’re at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University and, once again Mr. Chester, do you agree to this interview?

Chester: Yes sir, I do.

Interviewer: Okay, and thank you so much for sitting down with me.

Chester: You’re welcome.

Interviewer: Could you tell me your full name?

Chester: Robert Eugene Chester

Interviewer: Okay, and what’s your birthday?

Chester: August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1927.

Interviewer: Alright, excellent, and where were you born?

Chester: In Camden, New Jersey.

Interviewer: Okay, what were your parents’ names?

Chester: Mary and Harry Chester

Interviewer: Alright, and so, what did they do for a living?

Chester: Well Mother was just a house wife and Dad was a, uh, bus mechanic, worked on the public buses that would go up and down the roads. You know? He was a mechanic in a bus garage.

Interviewer: So you had been born in Camden but your parents made a decision to move, where did you go?

Chester: Yes, so I was probably a year old and they moved out in the country, away from the city.

Interviewer: Okay and can you sort of tell me about the area that you were living out in the country?

Chester: Well it was farm, farm country, James, and a lot of tomato fields and sweet potato fields and that thing. And the soil in southern New Jersey for tomatoes, and especially sugar corn, is terrific. And the farmers would contract these tomato fields out to the Campbell Soup Company, which was headquartered in Camden, and as I got old enough to uh... maybe twelve, thirteen, fourteen years of age, to pick tomatoes, there was no mechanical pickers, they were all had picked, we would go out and pick the tomatoes and so forth and they would be bussed up- or uh trucked up- to Camden to the Campbell Soup Company to be squished and boiled and so forth and it smelled great in Camden in July, August, September when the tomatoes were being picked and, but I would earn extra money to take my girlfriend out to a motion picture show and buy her an ice cream sundae that sort of thing in the early '40s when I started high school.

Interviewer: Excellent. So, um, you were also close to Glassboro, New Jersey. How large was this town.

Chester: Yes, Glassboro, at that time, probably had a population maybe of 5,000 I would say. But where we lived in the country was about six miles west of Glassboro in a foreign country.

Interviewer: So, you talked a little bit about working for Campbell Soup but that didn't come along until high school.

Chester: Yeah, well okay, working for... I worked for the farmers but the tomatoes went to Campbell soup so I can brag a little bit that I picked tomatoes for Campbell soup.

Interviewer: And let's talk about your schooling starting with first grade.

Chester: Okay, it was rural, I was five in August so I was allowed to start school in Sept. we always... the schools up there (and they still do) start school after Labor Day and so I started in a one room school, kinda ramshackle. The windows were on the south side to let as much heat in as you could in the wintertime and it had a wood stove at the north side of the building and the fourth graders would help the teacher with the stove. Now, there were four rows of desks, one teacher, a lady, Mrs. Patton, and she taught four grades, all at the same time, and if you passed one year you moved over to the next row of desks for the following year. And so that, and of course there were outdoor bathroom(s) if you want to call it that and an outdoor pump that froze that in the wintertime and so forth and uh but uh that was the first four years of school and so forth.

And then the next four years, fifth through eighth, I went to a larger school. It was brick, had indoor bathrooms, indoor fountain, boy we were really living large. You know? But one thing I have to mention, James, is that the first eight years of school, this was in southern New Jersey, about 20 miles from Philadelphia, were segregated. And the black youngsters at that time, their schooling and their buildings were even worse than ours from that standpoint. And my first integrated school was the four years of high school in Glassboro.

Interviewer: So you had been going to school in more rural areas and in high school you went into town?

Chester: Yeah, bussed in. And I bussed, all twelve years of schooling, I bussed to school. Even starting at first grade and so forth.

Interviewer: So in those earlier school years, when you were moving sort of from desk to desk after passing a grade, how did you feel about the education you were getting or did you feel anyway about it?

Chester: I was too young. It was too young but apparently I made out okay from that stand point. The only thing, we had uh in later years, James, we had a party or whatever for this teacher. She had retired, and so some of the old students wanted, and we gave her her first television, it was black and white. And what she remembered about me and she told, and my wife and I, my bride and I attended the uh this commemoration of her if you want to call it that. And she remembered from first grade that about 1:30, 2:00 in the afternoon, I would put my head down on the desk and go to sleep, because I was only five and my mother had been putting me in to bed for naps. So she remembered I'd put my head down and would take a nap in first grade.

Interviewer: It was what you were used to.

Chester: But I was used to it, you know, but somehow or another I got through four grades but uh and so forth. But my bride got a big kick out of that and so forth. But we gave, we gave this teacher her first television which was black and white.

Interviewer: Oh wow. Well, one of the things that we try to convey with students is the difference in technology from today (Chester laughs) and the 1930s and so, you know, at that time there were certainly some big things going on in Europe, um, and politically and socially. How did you learn about this? Were you interested at all?

Chester: I was always interested in history and still interested in history and the times that we're in even today uh, James, and I try to keep up with it as best I can. We had a radio at home, of course there was no television in those days, and you could change something on the dial and get some short wave in, which was a big thing, and you could listen from short wave coming from different foreign countries. And I was old enough, reading magazines and newspapers, to realize that things

in the mid-30s were getting pretty tense in Europe, and so forth, from Great Britain, Nazi Germany and Italy, and so forth, the Italians had gone into Ethiopia and had raised Cain in the middle 30s, and so forth, and so, as an eight or nine or ten year old youngster in the mid-30s I was aware things were going on and so forth.

Interviewer: Did your family have a radio?

Chester: Yeah, we had a radio and so forth.

Interviewer: What were the times of day when you listened in?

Chester: Uh, it would be in the evening, you know? A majority of time it would be in the evening. And you would try, and it had a short wave situation on the radio I remember, going, I'm trying to remember. This is going back a long way now and so forth. But, uh, I remember hearing the crackling you know of the stations coming out the different countries overseas and so forth. But I was always interested in history and still interested in the times, and so forth, I try to keep up with the times as they are today.

Interviewer: Well, let's talk about a particular event when you were at the beach and you saw something in the sky, tell us about that, from, you know, start at the beginning and sort of roll that out for us.

Chester: Okay, we lived about 50 miles west of Atlantic City. And to get down there on the beach, we south Jersey people called it going to the shore, we don't go to the beach, we go to the shore. Uh anyway, we went to the shore one day with Mother and Dad and I was playing on the beach, and this was about the mid-30s- 1934, 35, 36 right about I was about eight or nine years old and I was playing on the beach, and it was a beautiful sunny day, and all of the sudden a cloud. And I looked up and here it was the Zeppelin von Hindenburg and the German skipper had brought her in, would bring her in from Germany with wealthy German passengers aboard, and he was making a right turn to go up the beach to show these wealthy passengers the boardwalk and the hotels in Atlantic City, of course this was well before casino time, and I could read, the altitude maybe 4 or 500 feet, very, very low, you could see the gondola, and you could see, could see, maybe you could see the passengers, you know, looking out the windows, I'm not too sure about that. But I could read von Hindenburg on the fuselage and the, on the nose, with the four fins, was the Nazi swastikas and I remember that very, very vividly and so forth. And he would take, now Lakehurst was maybe 40-50 miles up the beach, Lakehurst Naval Air Station where they would moor the Zeppelin. That would be about the only place in the United States where they could moor this and let the passengers off to probably bus them into New York City or whatever. But I remember that very vividly- and it's still etched in my mind.

Interviewer: Did you have any sense of what happened later to the Hindenburg?

Chester: Well, yes in '37 she went down with a severe fire and there was casualties. I think there were about forty-some people killed and I think there may have been one US sailor killed. Now, when she would moor at the naval air station of course the sailors there would help moor her along with some civilians, you know, that worked for the Zeppelin Company or whatever. But she went up and there was lightning storms at that particular time and so forth. They had a big hearing, of course, with our navy department, the German engineers came over and they concluded that it was a lightning strike that the hydrogen went off. Now, you've got to remember that they were fueling this Zeppelin with hydrogen. Our government refused to sell the German government helium. We had the dibs, if you want to call it that, on the helium worldwide and we refused to sell the Germans helium so the only thing they could use was the hydrogen which, of course, extremely flammable.

Do you mind if I expand a little bit more on this, James, at all? Some years later, a NASA scientist, this was probably in the 80s I saw this on the PBS station up home in southern New Jersey where my bride and I lived in Glassboro. This was probably around 1990. This young NASA scientist,<sup>1</sup> he was fascinated by the Hindenburg situation, and he had a theory that possibly that there was something else besides the hydrogen that went up and he got some material in from the navy archives in Washington and took it into a laboratory and he did some experiments with it and he found out that the Zeppelin people had coated the Hindenburg with this coating to try to keep the temperatures down as much as possible because of the hydrogen. And they put this new coating on. Well the engineer, the German engineer, slipped up on one thing. Part of the coating had a element<sup>2</sup> in there that had a low flashpoint and he proved, in the laboratory, that this element in this coating went up prior to the hydrogen. And he went over to the Zeppelin archives in Germany- and the Zeppelin people are still in business today, and so forth, and they allowed him to go through the archives. And he established in these archives that the German engineers, when they went back to Germany after the hearings here with our navy department, they went back and they did their experiments and they discovered the same thing in the late thirties around 1937-38 but Hitler refused to let them, let that out at all and they kept that secret because of Hitler and so forth. And of course with the war, these archives were beyond touching and so forth. But this NASA scientist around 1990 proved that there was something else beyond the hydrogen that went up and it was a part of the coating, and I saw this on PBS station around 1990 up home.

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<sup>1</sup> Addison Bain

<sup>2</sup> a butyl-based coating

Interviewer: So you mentioned Adolf Hitler. Is that a name that you knew when you were eight or nine years old?

Chester: Yes, it was coming through in the papers, magazines, radio. You know it was...

Interviewer: What did you associate the name with? What feeling?

Chester: Well the fact that he was, you know, a very heavy handed dictator at that time and of course, the British and French didn't want another world war. World War I had devastated the population of those three countries: Britain, France and Germany. They didn't want the war but Hitler changed, changed a lot of minds.

Interviewer: So, we're gonna advance a couple years. The war begins in 1939 and then we move to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. So, what are your memories of that event?

Chester: Okay, I was 14 at the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, a sophomore at Glassboro High School. Now the attack was a Sunday. On Tuesday we were called down to the auditorium by our principle and you sat with your class. And the juniors and seniors, sat on, in the auditorium, sat on the ground floor and we had a balcony and the sophomores and freshmen and sat up in the balcony, and you sat with your class. Our principle, Mr. Lutz, had a sense of history and he had a radio in the middle of the stage at the front of the auditorium, he had a radio set up. And we listened to President Roosevelt ask congress to declare war on Japan. Now this was live coming on the radio from Washington. And it was a pretty dramatic moment. And for those of us who were in that auditorium at that time, now this was December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1941, uh it was something you would want to remember and for the males, those of us, the males in the auditorium, you kind of suspected that maybe down the road that your life was going to have a dramatic change and it did.

Interviewer: What was the, I mean, that feeling would have been on your mind... were there any other feelings going through your mind? Fear?

Chester: No, we were excused from the auditorium and the principle spoke and he said, "I would advise you to go home and talk to your parents and maybe go to church" and so forth you know but that was about it. And, of course, the following day school went on and so forth. But of course the immediate mobilization you know almost took place almost immediately, you know?

Interviewer: How did that change your high school with, with the boys being called up? The boys of age?

Chester: Okay, the draft had started, James, in 1940, as best I remember the draft and so forth. And what they did, if you were in high school, they would let you finish high school and you would be drafted at eighteen. But some fellas left high school early and enlisted. If they were seventeen you could enlist and so forth. And they

would come back to school in their uniform after boot camp and so forth. But that's how it would be and of course, the mobilization, just like a big ameba or a mushroom it just kept going on and on and on you know?

Interviewer: And you mentioned some of the upperclassmen who went on to serve. Did you know anyone who was injured or lost their life in the war?

Chester: Yes, um, one of the fellas who was two years ahead of me was on the carrier Franklin and she was kamikazed in 1945 off the coast of Japan and there were almost 800 killed on that carrier and this fella James Redmond was one of them and I knew him, he was a good football player and uh....

Interviewer: It was affecting people there...

Chester: Yes, and he was killed on the Franklin. And of course, there was several others killed that attended Glassboro High School. Mostly army. But I remember, Jim was, and of course, I was a navy vet. But I remember Jim was killed on the Franklin off the coast of Japan.

Interviewer: So you were fourteen...

Chester: When it started.

Interviewer: ...in 1941 and I assume, you know, that's three more years before you could enlist so tell me about those years in Glassboro and also at home. How the war was affecting you, your family... In what ways did you contribute to the war effort?

Chester: Well, of course there was rationing with the sugar, and the butter, and the gasoline and so forth. That started pretty quickly. The, uh, I guess the contribution before going into service would be to buy defense stamps, they would try to help fund the war you know with defense bonds and defense stamps. You could buy them for twenty-five cents and we'd have a booklet, you know, we would contribute what we could, you know, from that stand point. But other than that it was just to finish your education. Now, I graduated out of high school at sixteen, because, starting at five, I just went through the years, you know, and so forth. So at sixteen when I graduated, our graduation in 1944, was on D-Day June the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944. And, uh, so immediately afterward a majority of the males who were old, I was one of the youngest in the class, and a majority of the males started enlisting and so forth. And I was seventeen the following August of '44, which I was able to enlist in the Navy. I went down to Atlantic City and enlisted down in Atlantic City. And so there were about five or six of us up at Sampson New York Boot Camp which is up in the finger lake section, the wine section, of New York State. And there were about five or six of us up there at the same time in boot camp going through at that particular time.

Interviewer: So, you definitely expected to serve. Were you eager?

Chester: Oh, absolutely. It was, It was the thing to do. You wanted to get out there, you know, because, because of the Japanese, German Nazi situation, and uh it was just, it was just, you know, just the way it was and so forth. But of course, prior to this time as a junior and senior, I was dating the young lady who eventually became my bride and so forth. So that was, pick tomatoes to earn money to, you know, take her to the movies and so forth...

Interviewer: How did you feel about leaving her to go enlist and go to boot camp?

Chester: Well, it was.... I was anxious to serve and so forth, and she said she would wait for me, and she did. So, it was an adventure and so forth...

Interviewer: And you went down on your seventeenth birthday. Tell me about that day, I know you didn't drive yourself.

Chester: No, at that particular time in New Jersey, you had to be seventeen to get your driver's permit. So my mother drove me down to Atlantic City, I enlisted down at the navy enlisting station down there in Atlantic City and then we went from there to the license agency and I got my permit so I could drive. Now you had to have your permit for thirty days and then you could take your driver's test. During that thirty days, if you drove, you had to have a licensed driver with you and so forth. And so between the time I enlisted and I got my call up to go up to boot camp, I had time to get my driver's license to uh to drive a car, get my license. I got my social security number at that particular time and so forth. I didn't have enough money to buy a car or anything, I borrowed my parents' car, very reluctantly I might add, and so forth but shortly after I got my driver's license I went off to boot camp at Sampson, New York.

Interviewer: Well tell me about boot camp. What was that like?

Chester: It was, it was not bad. We were treated fine, we had our chief who was in charge. I believe was a uh gym teacher out of High School, he was made... of course he had a college education, and uh he was made a chief. And I guess there were probably about 150 to 200 of us in boot camp, you know, in our company and so forth, but it wasn't bad. And we were up in, as I said, the finger lake section on Lake Seneca, in New York State, in New York State. We were just above Cornell and Ithaca University in that area up there and so forth and we went through boot camp. I don't remember anything outstanding about it. We would march and we would go to the pool and swim and learn how to take our dungarees, we call them jeans now, but they were called dungarees then to tie them up and we could jump off a, uh, tower there at the pool where they would inflate so it would help us float if we were, our ship was torpedoed or something where you could use your clothes, as uh, to help you float in the water, you know, for a temporary period. But you would learn how to do that and of course, you would have to shave every day. Now, I was only seventeen but you had to shave every day and make sure, and your bunks had to be just right and so forth. And you would learn how to roll

your clothes. Now I don't know, James, how familiar you are with the Navy enlisted clothes. But, we'd turn them inside out and roll them to put them in a sea bag and the seams are inverted on the outside. Now, I have my dress blues at home in my apartment and they're still rolled the same way. Now, I rolled these dungarees now, I've got a uh, I rolled these right side out, which I've got a little bit of a crease here. But you learn. You live out of a sea bag and you had to roll those clothes up you know, to conserve as much space as possible because you didn't have lockers or anything of that nature aboard ship. But, you learn how to do that and I still have my blues rolled at home and where that flap is in the back that you see on the navy uniforms... when I, when I pull that jumper out right side up, that is pressed perfectly, the seams are down the arms, inverted, down the legs are inverted and so forth. But that and, you didn't need an iron. That's how you took care of your clothes.

Interviewer: Well, how was the food?

Chester: It was okay. You're seventeen at the time, you know? It was, it was okay. I didn't remember anything extraordinary about it. We survived. And you know, I weighed about 140-145 pounds at the time. So...

Interviewer: Well, how long were you there?

Chester: At Sampson? Oh, I was there, was about 12 weeks- we go through boot camp. I got out in early December. You got a two week leave, came home and spent about two weeks. And I had been, when I, when we finished boot camp I had been assigned to Gunner's Mate School. And the Gunner's Mate School was also at Sampson so I went back about the middle of December and I mess cooked for a couple of weeks and then about the second day of January in 1945 I started Gunner's Mate School there.

Interviewer: Okay, so what was Gunner's Mate School?

Chester: Okay. Gunner's mate, you're, it's the ordinance gang aboard ship where you take care of the weapons, the guns aboard the ship and the ammunition and so forth. You had to learn how to take care of this. And, also during that time, we had to learn how to identify aircraft; the German aircraft and the Japanese aircraft and so forth. Now, you see today Mitsubishi automobiles running around the streets and so forth, well Mitsubishi was a bad name in those days because they made Japanese Eurofighters and bombers and so forth and so on. But, you had to, they would flash these on the screen, you had to identify these that was part of the training as a gunner's mate because you would be manning guns, you know, out at sea for any battle situation and so forth.

Interviewer: So you were operating the guns?

Chester: Well, we were training, we were training. Yes, but we would, aboard ship you would be operating, yeah. When we, when you would get out of school. But you

would go through training, you had to go through training, it was a stiff training, and it lasted about 12 weeks or so.

Interviewer: So, I guess I'm just clarifying. You said you knew all about guns and you knew how to identify the planes and that was so you could shoot.

Chester: Right, right, yeah. You didn't want, you didn't want to shoot down friendly aircraft for sure.

Interviewer: Um, you're talking a little bit about the training and this is early 1945. So what was going on with the war and what were your expectations for serving.

Chester: Well, of course the war was drawing to a close. We knew this. The D-day landing had been made. The Battle of the Bulge had passed on. We uh, at this particular time, Iwo Jima, the Battle of Iwo Jima had not occurred nor Okinawa, which followed Iwo Jima. Well, we expected to be going aboard some type of ship that we would have to serve and of course, as time went on and the Iwo Jima invasion had closed and the Okinawa invasion was coming up, the thought then was that there was going to be an invasion of Japan scheduled for roughly October of 1945 and this is what the navy and the army and the air forces were gearing up for because they knew they were going to be pulling people back from the European theatre and those people were going to be assigned to the Asian theater for the invasion of Japan and this is what they were gearing up for and what they were doing, what the navy was doing at that time, was getting as much anti-aircraft protection aboard ships as they could because of the kamikaze situation and this is what our schooling was being trained for was manning anti-aircraft situations, you know, 40 mm and 20 mm anti-aircraft weapons.

Interviewer: I see, so let's talk about you finishing up this training. Then, at what point did you get orders to ship out?

Chester: Okay, finished up the training probably around April of 1945 and I eventually got to New York City and waiting for a ship and probably about four o'clock in the morning I got orders to report to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and I went aboard a destroyer, DD-438 the USS Ludlow. And what had happened, she had gotten back from the Mediterranean, the ship had spent the entire war, essentially, in the Mediterranean and they had taken the torpedo tubes off and replaced it with anti-aircraft mounts, 40 mm, and were getting ready to ship- to go and, I went aboard about four o'clock in the morning. And this was probably late April, May of '45. And uh, a couple hours later, 0600, we were underway down the Atlantic, down the Hudson, past the uh Statue of Liberty out in the Atlantic and down to what we call GTMO, Guantanamo Bay, for firing exercises.

Interviewer: So, I know it was you and a bunch of other, sort of, newbies.

Chester: Yeah, there were a few newbies.

Interviewer: Well were there other guys that were more, more seasoned?

Chester: Oh yes. Yeah. The uh, there were maybe, I don't know, maybe ten or fifteen of us new boots, recruits that went aboard and so forth. But mostly the crew was uh that had been on the ship for at least a while.

Interviewer: How, what was the relationship between the older guys and the new ones?

Chester: Over all pretty good. I mean, you know, you were aboard ship and you were depending on one another. You had to keep the, that ship was your home. That was between you and the sea. And uh, you wanted to survive. So, you got along, you got along. You had to, I mean you were dependent on one another to do your job and to keep that ship afloat because... Destroyers were called tin cans because they have, they don't have any armament. And you had a thin hull between you and the sea and that was it. It was not like a battleship or heavy cruiser that were, that were built for, for heavy duty for heavy warfare. Destroyers were in and out and they were, they were, they were like maybe like in the Indian days, they were scouts on the outside of a task force and so forth. But uh, and up and down rock and roll if you see a battleship at heavy weather, they're just rolling along fine but the destroyers were up and down, and it's, it's, it's, it was rough sea duty.

Interviewer: What were your accommodations on board?

Chester: (laughs) Oh boy, you had, eventually I got a rack. Now the racks would be about four or five high and uh they were, they would have, it would be springs, it would have a real thin mattress on it, and chains on chains, and like that, you would climb. And you would have, you would be assigned to a rack and that was it. Of course, you had your sea bag close by and that was how. The ship came first and you had to have fresh water for the boilers and so forth you would have... You would have desalination accommodation on there to take sea water and make fresh water out of it for the boilers. The ship came first, then the officers, then the chiefs, and then the enlisted people for fresh water for showers, for eating, for brushing your teeth, and for shaving, and so forth and so on and we would get maybe fifteen or twenty minutes fresh water in the morning and about fifteen or twenty minutes fresh water in the evening for showering and so forth and so on and it, you moved. You had to keep moving. But the ship came first because that was between you and the sea. That was your home. You had to take care of it. You didn't want a fire aboard and you didn't want anything to upset that home. That ship was your home and you had to take care of it.

Interviewer: So you arrived in GTMO and what did you find there?

Chester: Well, at that particular time, of course, our relationships with Cuba were much, much different than it has been over the past fifty, sixty years uh and it was a very quiet naval base. But we went down there for firing exercises and we would go out during the day to train recruits like me and also to update the rest with firing

exercises of our main weapons the five inch 38 and the 40 mm and the 20mm and we would come back in now at that particular time, you could go off the ship and go in the ship store or whatever there at the naval base, but you could also go across what boarder there was and you could go into a little Cuban town. I never did, some of the fellows did. But there, it was friendly with the Cubans at that particular time.

Interviewer: So you didn't go off?

Chester: No, but I didn't, I didn't go off base, I stayed pretty close to that ship.

Interviewer: And you slept on the ship?

Chester: Oh yes, you slept on the ship. Of course there, incidentally, no air conditioning. So, if you were in hot conditions it was, that was, there was no, there was no. The ship was, the keels laid<sup>3</sup> in '39 and she was commissioned in Bath, Maine and she was commissioned in March of '41 which was about eight months bef- prior to Pearl Harbor so this ship was out to sea in the Atlantic convoy duty, any submarine, prior to World War, our with the Japanese attack our, and, but, 'course, the German and Brits were at it at that particular time. And, uh, but the ship was commissioned in '41.

Interviewer: Was it a matter of days or weeks that you were in Cuba?

Chester: We were only there about two weeks and then we went through the canal and into San Diego for about four or five days before going out to Pearl. But we were only in GTMO about, about ten days to two weeks. That was it for firing exercises.

Interviewer: What was the need to stop at San Diego?

Chester: I guess for fuel and for provisions and give us a chance to get off, you know? Get our liberty. I remember going to Mission Bay in San Diego. It's, Mission Bay is one of the nice beaches there in the San Diego area and so forth. But uh, I stayed pretty close to the ship and so forth.

Interviewer: How did you feel during that long journey? You know, you're starting in New York, Brooklyn and you've got a long way to go.

Chester: Yeah, it uh I guess at that particular time, I was seventeen James. It was still an adventure, it was all new and I was trying to get over being sea sick and so forth. Uh, but it was, it was our way of life because I was now a sailor and this is, I was aboard ship and this was it.

Interviewer: Did you feel any homesickness?

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<sup>3</sup> A term to describe the beginning of a ship's construction

Chester: I would suppose, yes because I missed the young lady that I had been dating, I missed her. And so, and so I missed her, but not over all too much. Every day was a new adventure and I was seventeen. It was all a new experience, you know?

Interviewer: Could you communicate with people back home?

Chester: Uh, via letter that was about the only way. The only time you could maybe make a phone call- if we were in San Diego I could make a long distance call home. I don't recall doing that. I probably didn't have the money to pay for a long distance call. We weren't making much money in those days. I think, in boot camp, as apprentice seamen I think we, I think it was twenty-one dollars a month and I think, uh, when I became a seaman first class and went to sea I think it was maybe thirty bucks a month, you know? You're not making much money and so forth. The, but that's, you know, that's, money was scarce you know?

Interviewer: So you next arrived at Pearl Harbor and it's, I guess it's three years since the attack by then (inaudible) war.

Chester: Yes, well I, yeah let's see it was Sept... Sept... or uh December of '41, so we're, we're talking uh...

Interviewer: Over three years...

Chester: Yeah, a little over. Yeah a little over. Let's see '42. Yeah, we're in say June or July of '45, yes.

Interviewer: What did you find there? Was it, how busy was the harbor?

Chester: Um, well we tied up with three or four other destroyers and were waiting for orders. Uh, and occasionally you would see a ship coming in that had been out in combat, had been battered up some, you know. They were back for repairs and so forth. But we were, pretty quickly, we were out training with the task force with air craft carriers, larger ships and so forth to training to work with a task force and also for the invasion of Japan and this is what we were training for prior to the dropping of the atomic bombs.

Interviewer: So, when did you leave Pearl and what did you expect going from there? What did you expect to do or take part in?

Chester: Yeah, I would say we left Pearl somewhere, again James, about the best I could say maybe July of '45 and so forth. And I remember, I remember, the atomic bombs being dropped and one way I could remember. The first one was August the sixth of 1945, I was seventeen years of age. Now, three days later they dropped the second one on Nagasaki, I had turned eighteen between on August the eighth. So I remember turning eighteen between the times of the first, the first atomic bomb and the second one, I turned eighteen.

Interviewer: How did y'all get that news?

Chester: Well, I guess our radio people aboard ship, you know, spread the news throughout but that was the only way, you know, that we would get it. If our radio people you know receiving messages, you know, from Pearl or from wherever they would be getting their messages and from the radio shack.

Interviewer: What was the reaction?

Chester: Well, everybody was wondering what was gonna to happen because about a couple of weeks later the Japanese surrendered. But, it was, it was, I think the reaction was that "this is probably gonna, probably gonna end the war."

Interviewer: How did that change your situation and what the future would be for you? I mean I'm assuming you avoided taking part in any sort of invasion.

Chester: Yes. I would say there's, there was relaxation aboard the ship especially from the older sailors and the officers who had been on the ship for a while. Uh, that they realized what was going on and I think there was a relaxation to some extent aboard the ship in regard to what everyday life was like aboard the ship. It looked like the war was gonna come to an end and we weren't going to be taking part in an invasion but we didn't know that until the Japanese surrendered. But until that time there was still a preparation that possibly this could come off, you know, but until they surrendered we didn't know.

Interviewer: Do you remember V-J Day?

Chester: Yes, I guess to some extent. We, we were at sea, I wouldn't say there was a celebration such as there was back in the states as we see, you know, on the old new reels and so forth and so on. It was just another day at sea and so, our orders were changed. We were pretty much put on convoy duty then to get occupation troops into Japan because the formal surrender wasn't signed until September one. And of course they wanted to make sure the Japanese were going to quiet down and wouldn't be a problem. You know? And they weren't.

Interviewer: Well tell me about your arrival in Japan. Where did you land and what happened?

Chester: We were, first we had taken some occupation troops into the Philippines and so forth. We were in the Philippines for a few days, our skipper got us to Manilla and we were there at Manilla for about four or five days. The city was in horrible condition, the combat there... the Japanese had just made sure that city was just devastated. And I remember, I only went, I only remember going ashore once in Manilla and it was, what little I saw was in pretty bad condition. And the one thing I remember that was pretty sad. I remember a youngster coming up to me and selling either his sister or his mother, you know, for prostitution. What they were looking for was money, they were looking for cigarettes, they were looking for food. These people were devastated, the Pilipino natives. And I just turned away and went back to the ship. But this is what these youngsters, they were forced to do it because they were starving. You know? The situation was bad.

Well we left Manilla and it seemed like whatever island we would go to in the Philippines it seemed like it was almost always a jungle situation. It probably wasn't. I remember, I remember, we stopped, the skipper stopped we anchored off a beach one day and we, I don't remember whether we swam in or motored in, but it was a beautiful beach and we were swimming, playing softball. And there was a native village with the thatched homes, you know, and roofs and everything but it was just a beautiful tropical scene that you would pay a lot of money to go to today, you know, for a vacation. I remember that one, one thing.

But we got orders to pick up a convoy to go to Japan to convoy troops into Japan. And, so we had to fuel up and we had to locate a Navy fueling barge and we located it and it seemed like it was in the middle of the Jungle it was a US Navy fueling barge and they could fuel ships on both sides. Port and starboard. And we pulled up to fuel at this navy barge and on the other side was a destroyer. It was a Japanese destroyer and here they were getting her enough fuel to get the ship and the crew back to Japan. They're, they were devastated. The Japanese country had been bombed pretty heavily by the B-29s out of Saipan and the navy planes off the carriers and this Japanese destroyer compared to ours was a rust bucket. They had run out of paint, they had run out of everything. But it was still, if it had it been at sea it was still, it still would have still been a problem and so forth. But of course the surrender had been signed and they were getting enough fuel to get back to Japan. When we pulled up there were about four or five Japanese sailors out on deck. Now, you've got to remember, James, the Japanese military, both army and navy, the enlisted people were treated very, very harshly. And I think it contributed, and I think our psychiatrists have and our military historians have established that they were treated so severely, the enlisted army and navy, that it made them even more savage when they would treat prisoners of war which probably contributed to the Bataan Death March and so forth and so on. Well, when these, our some of our sailors tried to swap hats with these Japanese sailors and as soon as they started that, these Japanese sailors disappeared. They, they didn't want to be confronted by their navy chiefs, or their first class petty officers, or their navy officers, you know, talking to us or anything else. They got out of sight because they didn't want to be disciplined so there were no hats exchanged. But it was really something to see this, this Japanese destroyer being fueled there to get it back home. But, uh we picked up our ships that we were to convoy into Japan and away we went.

Interviewer: And what did you do in Japan?

Chester: Okay, we went, we went to two different places. We went to Wakayama and dropped off the ship. And then we went to the Kure naval base which had been bombed pretty heavily by the our, the US Navy aircraft off the carriers and so forth and so on. And Kure Naval Base was only maybe ten miles or so from Hiroshima. And I know there's talk, well today, most people I guess say *Her-*

*ohshima*, but President Truman called it *Hero-sheema* and that's good enough for me.

President Truman became quite a hero by dropping those atomic bombs because it saved us the invasion of Japan. It saved, there were a lot of lives lost to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but there were an awful lot of lives lost with the fire bombing raids out of the B-29s under General LeMay also in Tokyo and all the cities in Japan. But, it would have even been worse with an invasion, with a kamikaze situation. But, we were in Kuri for a few days. One of our, maybe a couple of our officers were able to get over to Hiroshima. Probably they weren't supposed to be there because of the radiation but they were able to take some pictures. And I have in my ship's book a very small black and white picture of Hiroshima a few weeks after the bombing and, of course, it was level and so forth. And uh...

Interviewer: Did they tell you about people they encountered or victims?

Chester: No, no, I never had any conversations with the officers about that or anything, no. And uh, the, I remember that. I remember also the skipper had a barge, or a small boat, come out to our ship and he dumped on our fan tail a whole pile of Japanese rifles and bayonets that had been confiscated and they said "help yourself." So I, you go in a pile and pick out a Japanese rifle and bayonet. And I brought the rifle home, the bayonet disappeared somewhere. And I brought the rifle home, I never had, never got ammunition for it or anything and I eventually gave it to my son. It's in Ellijay, Georgia right now where my son lives with the Japanese rifle.

Interviewer: So they were handing that off as a, like thinking you can take this as a souvenir.

Chester: Souvenir yes, yes.

Interviewer: Um and, you said you were in Kure.

Chester: Kure Naval Base, yes.

Interviewer: Did you have a job to do there, your ship? Or were you just docking?

Chester: Well, when we went in of course the mine sweepers they go on in ahead and make sure there were no mines and so forth. One of the things I remember as we were getting the troop ship close to where it could moor or anchor or wherever the ship was gonna be. We were, we were probably on its port, port quarter and there were a lot of Japanese fishing boats running around, and running around you know. And a skipper or one of the officers up on the bridge had gotten a megaphone out and was trying to "just get away" motioning for these Japanese fishing boats to get away. Now they didn't want one of these fishing boats to either go up against this troop ship or our ship with a mine. They didn't know. Well eventually they broke out a rifle on our bridge, fired a few shots and those, those fishing boats scattered.

Of course, you know, this happened back around 1990-92 over in the Middle East where the destroyer had a small motor boat go up with a mine and there were seventeen American sailors killed. This was about 1990-92, I forget the name of the destroyer. But it blew a hole in the side and there were seventeen American sailors killed. Well our skipper didn't, this was of course 50 years before, didn't want something like that to happen to our ship, the troop ship or whatever.

Interviewer: Were you able to go on land?

Chester: Yes, I got, I got off, there were a few of us, I guess we got in a motor boat or something. There was an island out in sort of the, off the Kure Naval Base, an island a little bit away, not very far and we went, we walked around this island a little bit. And I remember one thing. Some Japanese farmers had planted sweet potatoes and we pulled up a few. And we were, we chomped on them a little bit, you know raw sweet potatoes, eh, its okay, you know? But we got back aboard ship, our ship's doctor found out about it and he chewed our butt. And he explained, he said, he said, "these people use human excrement. They're using human manure" he said "and their stomachs are used to this." He said, "yours' aren't." He said, "you shouldn't have been eating these sweet potatoes and don't do this again!" Of course, this was a commissioned officer, a medical doctor and so forth but uh, don't eat the sweet potatoes. I remember that.

I remember one other thing, James, there was a huge log on the beach of this island and the Japanese fishermen would tie their fishing boats up to this huge log, this log was long and huge and so forth. And there was some sailors I think from maybe, maybe from our ship, maybe from another ship had started a small fire. And these Japanese fishermen weren't very happy about that fire because it was near that log where they tied their ships but they didn't, you know. But it was damp there and there was no danger of that log being... but they weren't very happy about that little fire the sailors had started. You know? I remember that about Kure.

Interviewer: So, was this sort of a time when you were sort of biding your time because your role as a gunner's mate was not as...

Chester: Stressful

Interviewer: You know, the fighting had ceased.

Chester: Yeah, right. We would, we, our navy chief. The chief of the ordinance gang, he was a little short, stubby fellow from Baltimore. Francis Fox, I remember his name well. Tough, he was regular navy, I was navy reserve. He was regular navy, he was tough alright. But, he would make sure that he kept us busy and so forth and so on and we couldn't let things rust and you had to take care... You just had to take care of your ship. It was home. You had to take care of whatever was there. And so, it wasn't as intense, but you didn't loaf, you didn't loaf.

Interviewer: About how long were you there....

Chester: We, in Kure?

Interviewer: Or, yeah I suppose.

Chester: Or in Japan, in Japan?

Interviewer: Yes.

Chester: I guess we were there...I'm guess-timating maybe a couple of weeks at most. But we got orders to go up to the Aleutians. And uh, we went with three other destroyers and there were four destroyers and we were all dispatched to the Aleutians. And uh, we were, we had uh, we had uh, typhoon, not too severe on the way out of Japan. Battered up the ship quite a bit. We lost some life rafts and the ship was battered up some. And of course when you got up to the North Pacific the water's rough and your ship is up and down. And you're, and the ship I was on, the Ludlow as I mentioned was commissioned in March of '41 it was one of the older destroyers. Not as, there were plenty of older destroyers used during World War II even some of the old World War I four pipers<sup>4</sup> as they called them. But, we couldn't go fore and aft, we couldn't go from aft, the after part of the ship to the fore part of the ship under cover. If you wanted to go from that spot to the other spot, you had to go up on deck and use life lines. Well if you're in heavy weather, you're going to get washed overboard. So, if you're stuck in one part of the ship or another you were stuck there until you could get in calmer weather, calmer water. And uh, when you got up in the North Pacific, it was a wild, wild time. If you remember the television shows in recent times, the Alaskan crab fishermen going out, do you remember those shows? And they would show, they would show them how rough that water was. Well, that's how rough that water was.

Interviewer: So you mean when you can't go from fore to aft, there's, it's coming over? Spraying?

Chester: Oh yeah, the water's coming over, oh yeah, the water's just, you're getting, the water's just coming over.

Interviewer: So you could be swept right off?

Chester: Oh you would be swept off, you couldn't survive. So you, if you were stuck in one place, you were there until the weather cleared enough that you could get fore and aft.

Interviewer: Is there, is there sickness?

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<sup>4</sup> The word used by the Navy to describe destroyers with four funnels

Chester: (laughs) You better believe there's sickness. Even the old salt<sup>5</sup> with sickness and so forth. Uh, to give you a little bit of history about the Ludlow, James... About the time that the war started, I don't know whether the name, your mother and dad would remember the name, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. An actor, actor. Well, he was commissioned early in the war and he made a trip with the Ludlow, on the Ludlow from the east coast up to Iceland on a convoy situation in the North Atlantic. We the North Atlantic is just as wild on the water as the North Pacific is and he got back his statement was, he said "these destroyer sailors need to get submarine pay, they're underwater all the time." And when you're in heavy water, yes the ship is like this and like this (gesturing) compared to a battle ship which is just riding along you know? It, and so forth, it, that's the way you went to sea.

I remember when we left the Brooklyn Navy Yard, went down the Hudson, got past the Statue of Liberty and got in the Atlantic and were start... I could start to feel it in my stomach that quick. I had never been to sea before, I'm wondering what I got myself into. But when you got into heavy weather people got sea sick, I don't care who they were, they got sea sick.

Interviewer: Okay, so I want to, I wanna touch on a story that you mentioned but you didn't go into detail on it when we spoke before. This was an incident with an underwater mine.

Chester: Oh yes. Okay. We were, we had been in the Aleutians and we had, we were headed to Kodiak, Alaska. We went into Kodiak and uh, then we were, we went down to Seattle. And this was our first time back to the states. Now remember at this particular time, this was 1945, there were only 48 states. Alaska was still a territory, as was Hawaii. And any personnel, military personnel stationed in Alaska or Hawaii at that time, they got overseas pay because it was not one of the 48. So we went down to Seattle for 48 hours we got port and starboard liberty. Twenty-four hours for the port side of the ship, which is left, port and twenty-four hours for the starboard. And we were headed back to Kodiak and fortunately our look outs, day time, spotted a mine and it was a Japanese mine and I remember seeing that off in the distance and it was, it was pretty large. We had to fire on it, you couldn't leave that for shipping, for any shipping or for military situation and we kept firing on that until eventually we blew it up and I remember it was like you would see at the Ol' Faithful out of our state park there out west going up, you know, the geyser goes up every hour, every fifty-five minutes whatever it is. When that thing went up we could feel that aboard that, if we had hit that mine, I wouldn't be here today with you, James, because our ship would have been broke in half, it would have gone down. It was just, would not have survived.

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<sup>5</sup> A sailor with a lot of experience

Interviewer: So, tell me about your return home and what you were feeling when you were returning. You came back through the canal and then I believe you went to Charleston. Why Charleston?

Chester: For decommissioning, they were decommissioning destroyers at that time and making it a reserve base and so forth. And we came into Charleston, unloaded our ammo and uh, we started the decommissioning process in January of '46 and in February of '46 I managed to get a three day liberty and went home and spoke to my girlfriend's parents and asked if I could marry their baby daughter and they said yes. And it was, Crystal would appreciate this, it was on February 14<sup>th</sup> that I asked my bride to marry me. Now isn't that romantic? I was a romantic devil. And she said yes and so I went back to Ludlow. I had to go back after three days and I was discharged a short time later and we were married the following year in 1947. So that, but we decommissioned there. I sort of fell in love with the city of Charleston and we honeymooned there in 1947 with a 1935 Ford Coupe that I bought off my dad for 125 bucks when I got out of the Navy. So, I'm sorry<sup>6</sup>.

Interviewer: No, you're fine. So, what were your plans after the war beyond getting married? Did you have a plan what you were going to do?

Chester: (laughs) No, to get a job. I was not a good student and I didn't want to embarrass myself with trying to go to college, even with the GI Bill. I just, I wasn't so, eventually, I spent forty-two years in the explosives and chemical industry. I had twenty-three years at an explosive, DuPont plant on the Delaware River. This plant was started in 1912 prior to World War I and survived all of that time and I worked there twenty-three years and as a lab technician and a lab supervisor and resigned in 1970, business was getting pretty poor. And I went, there was a brand new chemical plant with the B.F. Goodrich Company up the river a little ways on the Delaware River, I put nineteen years in there as a lab technician and a lab supervisor. A total of forty-two years in the explosives and chemical industry.

Interviewer: And you had a daughter and a son...

Chester: We had a daughter and a son. We were married '47, our daughter was born in '52 in a little town called Elmer, New Jersey. It was a little farming town, they put a hospital in there. And she was born there, our doctor in Glassboro was headquartered there you might say, with his office in Glassboro. And our son was born there in '56 at Elmer, New Jersey and the hospital is still there, expanded quite a bit and so forth. But, both the children were born there in Elmer, New Jersey.

Interviewer: Well, what's interesting, and this will help to understand how you eventually came to Georgia, later, later in live. Both of your children attended the University of Georgia. And why did they make that decision?

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<sup>6</sup> Apologizing for tearing up

Chester: Our daughter was the oldest, she learned to play, we had a string, we had a lady, a string teacher across the street from us who taught violin and viola and our daughter our...my bride was, my bride was a musician, she played piano. And we bought an old upright piano and started both our children in basic piano, she taught them and then she would turn them over to a professional teacher and the string teacher 'cross the street from us taught our daughter violin and viola. And, our daughter also became one of the top twirlers, baton twirlers in the state of New Jersey and we took her down to different universities, South Carolina, Duke, Wake Forest, North Carolina and so forth but things just seemed to click in Athens with the University of Georgia. They needed string players for their symphony orchestra and she qualified with the twirling and she became the head twirler with the red coat marching band and she played the viola with the symphony orchestra and she also became the president of her sorority. And our son, he liked the looks of the Georgia co-eds so he came down three years later and played tennis for one year for Dan Magill who was a long time tennis coach and public information director at the University of Georgia and he liked it down there pretty well. He played one year but his studies, so forth, he had to concentrate on them. He graduated. Our daughter got her master's, she graduated '76, '75 graduated in '76 with a master's in speech pathology and audiology and our son graduated in '79 with a degree in, uh... I just forget the major at the moment and they both married Georgia graduates so our daughter in law and son in law are also graduates out of Athens so that's how they came down here.

When my wife's health deteriorated in 2008 up to 2012, I decided that we had to get down here where the children could spend her last years with her.

Interviewer: Was it hard to leave New Jersey?

Chester: Yes it was, the home that we left was the only home that Betty and I owned in our lifetime. We were there fifty-six years. We had fixed it the way we liked it. We had spent a lot of money like it on renovations and additions and so forth. And all our friends were there but it was more important to get her down her close to the children. Our daughter lives in Roswell, our son in Ellijay. And they chose The Lodge at Bridge Mill here in Canton to live in. They scouted it, Betty and I didn't come down to scout it or anything and they felt we could handle the freight there. So that's where we've been and I've been ever since February of 2012. We left Glassboro February 20<sup>th</sup> of 2012 we drove away and Betty died February 20<sup>th</sup> of 2016 exactly four years to the day we moved down.

Interviewer: Well, thank you for sharing. And I want to ask you one other question and this is about your service, your military service. Can you tell me why you think it would be important to share this story, to remember it and for young people to know about it?

Chester: Sure. I'm trying to relate it to today, James, this is the first you might say that I've given some thought to it. Our military today is strictly volunteer and quite a bit of our military in those days was volunteer, now there was a draft, yes but there was an awful lot of volunteer. And I would think it would show possibly the young people today, those getting out of, especially getting out of high school that the military can be a good career and there's a lot of good training to be acquired in the military and so forth. In all disciplines, whether it be computer or aeronautics, or whatever it may be. And there are some of us that are not college material and they could be trained in the military or, if they don't want to do that, they could go to say technical schools. But, the volunteerism that I think that occurred in World War II, I think would be important to show to those youngsters today to the young people coming out of high school that they don't have to be possibly burdened down with the college situation, with the loan situation that we're hearing so much about. That there is another way that they could be very productive citizens. And I remember there was a youngster that grew up on our street who grew up with our children who went in the Navy in 1974 and was in, and served on nuclear submarines for six years and he's now a professor at West Chester University in eastern Pennsylvania and so forth. But, he acquired a thirst, you might say, for knowledge with that navy situation. And so, I think, I think the young people today, that they could go, if they aren't, if they aren't ready for college, they could go to a technical school to get into different things where they could use their hands or they could go to the military but a volunteer situation. And I hope I haven't expanded too much on this but uh...

Interviewer: Perfect. Well thank you very much Robert "Bob" Chester. I appreciate this.

Chester: Yes, I appreciate you and Crystal putting up with me. You know? I hope, the breaking down, I'm sorry for.

Interviewer: We appreciate it and we can conclude there.