

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret.) ROBERT WORTHINGTON, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with CAPT Robert Worthington, USN, (Ret.) telephone, San Diego, CA, 13 April 1993. CAPT Worthington was diving officer aboard USS *Silversides* (SS-236). He took the only known photographs of an appendectomy performed on a submarine. The operation was performed by PhM1c Thomas Moore on 24 Dec 1942.

CAPT Worthington, what do you remember about how you became

involved in the historic appendectomy?

I was the number three officer on board. [Creed] Burlingame was the captain, [Roy] Davenport was the exec, and I was the gunnery and torpedo person. I ran back and forth between diving stations as diving officer and took the pictures.

I guess you know that those photos you took over 50 years ago are quite historic. There the only ones I know from the war that were taken on a submarine with a surgical operation in progress.

I was a nut on photography. I enjoyed doing the processing in the sink in the wardroom pantry.

Were you the vessel's unofficial photographer?

Oh yes. I was all the time. I used to take photographs of all the crewmembers out on the cigarette deck during a patrol and then develop them in the wardroom at night, in the pantry sink. I'd then give the crewmembers copies to send home with their letters when we got back to port. I also took all the periscope photos.

I read in the book about the *Silversides* that one time you came up to take a look at a target and that you then photographed it through the periscope.

When I was aboard the *Pollack* (SS-180) before I went to the *Silversides* before the war, there was an officer, Warren Walker, who was a photography nut. He was developing the technique for using a Leica to take pictures through a periscope. Later on, we got adapters manufactured and used other cameras too. In fact, by the end of the war we were also using movie cameras.

What kind of camera did you use?

It was a Kodak Medalist 620 camera.

Did you use a flash?

No. I didn't have a flash. For those pictures of the operation, I used one-fifth of a second.

You must have had the shutter wide open on that camera.

It was wide open at 3.5. And our film speed in those days was 25, you know.

Yes, but the pictures are very sharp.

As a matter of fact, I think one of the officers who came aboard later, Gene Malone, who lives out here, has my Medalist camera.

What kind of skipper was Creed Burlingame?

He was a great skipper, very non-reg and had his own definite ideas about how to do things. As a matter of fact, on our first three or four patrols, we averaged 67 percent hits and

actuations at a time when everybody else was having trouble with the exploders and not getting results. Instead of setting the torpedoes to run under the ships as we were supposed to and relying on the magnetic exploders, Creed didn't believe in those newfangled things and he was setting them to run shallow and hit. We did very well.

When did you become aware of the fact that there was going to be an operation in the wardroom of your boat?

There was no meeting to discuss the thing. The captain made the decision and that was it.

And then you got involved.

I got involved simply because...everybody on board was involved, or felt they were.

What was your role in all this?

Well, I didn't have a role in the actual operation. I just popped in with my camera and took my pictures. The rest of the time I was acting as diving officer.

Do you remember how many exposures you may have shot? We have about five or six. Were there any more?

I don't think so.

Well, you certainly got a great close-up of that appendix.

I asked them to lay the appendix out there on the sheet so I could take a picture of it.

What are your recollections of that wardroom?

I stuck my head into the forward entrance of the wardroom and just leaned against the bulkhead and took my pictures.

Do you remember what kind of lights they had set up in there?

Not specifically. It just was very bright.

In the operation that Lipes did on the *Seadragon*, they used the floodlights normally used for night loading on the pier.

I think our bulbs were replaced with 150-watters, the biggest ones we had on board. I don't think we had anything else.

After it was all over with, the patient was sent up forward and put in a bunk in the forward torpedo room.

That was a couple days later. He was moved right from the table onto the wardroom transom which was a built-in settee right alongside the table. Normally, three or four officers sat on that transom for lunch. It was kind of a built-in bench on the outboard side against the hull. On the inboard side that bordered the passageway bulkhead there was a bench which was removed for the occasion. Moore was standing where that bench

normally was. He had his back to the passageway bulkhead.

How long did Platter remain on that transom?

A couple of days. As I recall, it was just the following day or later the same day. No, it was the following day that we had the... Actually it is described in the book about the *Silversides*. It was a plane bomb that was close aboard which knocked him out of his bunk onto the deck. The books says it was Moore who picked him up and put him back in. But I don't believe that was the way it happened. As I remember, he was rolled out of the bunk onto the deck and he picked himself up and got back in. Because we marvelled how he did this just a few hours after the operation.

He didn't fall that far then.

No. He was just 18 inches off the deck.

Still not a comfortable thing when you've had an appendectomy.

Not at all.

Do you remember what kind of reception Moore got when you all got back to Pearl?

I do remember that Moore had a friend or relative over at Kaneohe, one of the bases on the other side of the island and he went over there for a couple of days to visit. His relative was attached to the hospital staff. Moore was telling him about the operation and the young man told Moore not to brag about it around there. "With all the facilities we have," he said, "we had a nurse who had appendicitis the other day and the patient died. So we're feeling pretty bad about that now, so don't tell them about doing one on the wardroom table and having it come out satisfactorily."

How long were you on the *Silversides*?

I was on there for its first nine patrols, for 2 1/2 years; I put her in commission. I went back from there to new construction and was executive officer of *Sea Poacher* (SS-406) for one run and then I got command of the *Balao* (SS-285) for the last four runs. I had a total of 13 runs.

You fired a lot of torpedoes, I bet.

Yes, quite a few.