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James Herod's WWII Naval Experience

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Student Interviewers Name: Milan Pino

Interviewee Name: James Vernon Herod

Time and Location of the Interview:

The interview was in one session and lasted approximate one hour. It was conducted in the lobby of Morning Pointe of Collegedale at Greenbriar Cove in Chattanooga, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee participated in the interview.

About James Vernon Herod:

James Vernon Herod is a World War 2 veteran, and possibly the youngest veteran to have seen actual combat. He was born in Chattanooga Tennessee on November 9th, 1926. He grew up during the depression. He joined the Navy in 1944 and achieved the rank of Petty Officer Third Class. After the Navy, he studied nuclear energy, and worked as an architect. Questions ranged from his early childhood to his teen years, and includes stories of his service and a near death experience. The interview was conducted on November the 14th, 2016 at the age of 90.

JH: I was born in Chattanooga Tennessee. ‘matter fact at the corner of uh 23rd and 4th Avenue, right on the corner. hat’s where I was born, and uh that was ‘course back during the depression, or just before the Great Depression, so that’s my birthplace, Chattanooga Tennessee.

MP: Ok, I understand you were a teenager during all of World War 2.

JH: Yes I was. ‘Matter fact I went to school, grammar school. We used to get little boo.. a little paper called the Weekly Reader, and it would give us the news up to date on what was happening in Europe, and and involving the war, World War. Eventually World War 2. Yeah I was acquainted with what Adolf Hitler was doing and from the very, very, very, beginning almost, that, umm, the clemence of his domain. Yeah, I knew about that and was aware of what was going on, as a young kid even at probably at 9 or 10 years old.

MP: Did you hear about Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini as well or were they...

JH: Oh yes we read.. I liked geography and I liked history and even as a teenager I loved, I kept my mind studied on geography. It was an interesting subject. So I knew about Mussolini, and, uh, how he was acting during that time of turmoil that was encountering, the world, at that time.

MP: Do you remember what you were doing when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

JH: Yes I do! On December the 7th, 1941 I was at the old home place and we were having a reunion on a Sunday morning and it was December 7th 1941 at Oak Ridge, and, uh, right

near Oak Ridge is the old home place and we got the news that afternoon that Pear Harbor had been bombed. There was four of us boys and I remember Momma started cryin, and um on the way back home to Chattanooga, we encoun... we had a radio at that time, and it was rare to even have a radio in an automobile at that time. But we did and we picked up the news what had happened in Pearl Harbor and it's interesting to note my ancestors, the people that lived here at this old place, they, uh, were instrumental in developing the atomic bomb that would eventually be made..

MP: Oh really?

JH: At Oak Ridge, yes.

MP: Wow... so how, how did you feel about the Japanese Americans being relocated due to the fear that there were some maybe spies or something like that?

JH: Well we read about the Japanese in the evening or little weekly paper, and we were getting that also in the Chattanooga News Free Press at that time, and uh so at that time we didn't have even a radio in the home, let alone television. So the newspaper was a good omen to what was actually going on and it kept us update to things and I remember momma reading us the newspaper at night and, uh, in the evening we got home from school and describing to us what was happening in Europe. I was interested even as a young kid what was taking place in Europe, and basically all over the world at that time.

MP: Did you have any friends that had to move due to...

JH: Uh, well, I had friends that in my neighborhood, there was twelve of us boys. I was manager of a little ball team. They were on my ball team. (chuckles) And some of them were real close to me, 'matter fact there were twelve, and most of them served on my ball club, and I lost most all of those during World War 2. 'Matter fact the next door neighbor, he pitched on my ball team, he was a real good pitcher, he was killed by the Japanese in one of those islands in the Pacific during World War 2, while I was there at that, in that area.

MP: Well I'm sorry to hear that... so when did you enlist, or were you drafted?

JH: I enlisted. I knew that eventually I'd be drafted. I was going to high school. I was studying art and I was an art student, and I knew that I wanted to go. I was a poor boy, and I just wanted the thrill of traveling 'cause I had never gone anywhere to about anything at that time and I wanted to go off to... I actually wanted to go to war. So my dad he uh, he signed for me, and I was seventeen years old at that time.

MP: That's very young! So, you joined the Navy is that correct?

JH: Yes I did I joined the Navy, and I went off to Great Lakes, Illinois. That was my boot training there in Great Lakes. So uh that's where I served. Did my training in basics right outa Chicago.

MP: Do you remember anything about that basic training?

JH: Oh yes yes I do! (Chuckles) It was a thrill. I did things that uh, that I had dreamed of. I was a sentry and (inaudible) and I was involved in a lot of activity there at Great Lakes and we went through our basic trainings and I enjoyed it very much!

MP: Ok so after basic training, did you go straight into the Navy on a ship or did you do something else before that?

JH: Well, uh, I came home right after my training, and I went back to Great Lakes and I was sick for about a week. I was in the ward there, and the barracks that I trained with, they shipped out. And so I was a little bit late, but a little later on I rejoined them in California and of course we boarded the ship there, and I knew exactly what was going on most of the time as a young kid. It was a thrill 'cause I never traveled and I wanted to go. I wanted to serve my country too.

MP: That's great! Can you tell me a little bit about the ship, what kind of ship it was or the name of it?

JH: The ship that we were on it was built by Bethany Steel out in Pennsylvania and we boarded it in San Pedro, California, and it was new. An enemy destroyer. The destroyer had about, uh, three gun turrets on it, double barrels, and uh we had depth charges and all of that. I was new there and went to the commentary area, and they classified me as jack of the dust. That's one of the best first jobs I took. I was in charge of the stores on the destroyer. It was a heavy destroyer, we had about 320 men on that destroyer, which is a small ship compared to a battle ship or an aircraft carrier, but nevertheless, it was a good ship. It was heavily fortified. I slept in my barracks, high range projectiles coming down right by my head and powder casings below me. So that's where uh that's where my barracks were.

MP: Huh, that's interesting... So you started in charge of the stores, did you move up in rank after that?

JH: Well yes I moved up as a cook, and I was commissioned, but I say as a cook I was in charge of the same things as Sargent raiting I was Petty Officer Third Class. That carries the same rating as a sergeant. It was a lower class but I did quite well there, and uh I was in charge of about four men. We were in charge of the meals, the meals for most of the ship of about 300 men...

MP: We were talking about you were a cook, but also carried the same rank as a sergeant.

JH: That's right. I was in charge of four men who worked under me in the galley, and that was my first job.

MP: So what kind of food did you make? Because I'm sure you had to cook for a lot of people, you said about 300.

JH: Oh we served a lot of things. We served the Navy beans, we served oatmeal, we had just about every good thing you could think of. Uhh... we had a baker there, he made the bread for us, so we did quite well.

MP: During your time on the ship, did you see any combat?

JH: Yes I did, ‘matter fact on the ship we lost uh.. we escorted the aircraft carrier from California to Honolulu, and we lost planes every day, and we buried men at sea, and uh every day we’d lose a plane. They’d disappear and we’d go out and find them. Most of them were dead, most of all of them were dead. And so on the way to Honolulu, Pearl Harbor, that’s what we encountered there. It was an everyday process that we lost planes.

MP: Was there a specific mission or a specific thing that you guys did that really impacted you?

JH: Well the thing that impacted me was the thrill in adventure into the unknown at that time, I say unknown, I kept up with Pearl Harbor. I knew when Pearl Harbor happened, and yeah it was a thrill to me. I knew that we were on our way to Japan and when I left San Diego, ‘matter fact I knew geography. One sailor came up to me and said “Well what’s that over there, what city is that” I said “That’s San Diego” he said “What is San Diego?” I said “That’s a city!” So when San Diego sank into the ocean so to speak, I cried. I cried so I left uh... I didn’t want them to see me cry so I left, and I remember that very incident that happened.

MP: How long were you on that ship?

JH: I was on that ship for about twenty... uh, twenty-two months, something like that, and I sailed, if I remember I sailed over 50,000 miles.

MP: That’s a lot of miles!

JH: It is a lot of miles and so we were busy every day doing something and so we came into pearl harbor that was a thrill. They cleaned up Pearl Harbor considerably at that time, but it was still lethal and we didn’t know what was going to happen.

MP: And did you stay in Pearl Harbor for a little while?

JH: We stayed in Pearl Harbor a little while. We did some training there. ‘Matter fact we did basic training... military training, yeah.

MP: Did you have a group of guys or a best friend that you hung out with?

JH: Oh yes.

MP: During that time on the ship?

JH: Yes, yes, I did, ‘matter fact we would go on liberty together and uh... yeah, I had about five or six that were real close to me, so we did quite well there.

MP: Did you have a favorite place when you did go on liberty that you remember and that you would like to go back to maybe?

JH: Well, I’ve gone to so many places on liberty that I can’t remember all of them but many of the islands out in the Pacific I went, and uh the supply bases I went. ‘Matter fact we had anchored at the dock and uh refuel our ship with the goods that were needed to go

on towards Japan, and that's where we were headed. We were actually headed for the invasion of Japan, that's what we were geared for.

MP: Do you remember hearing about the bombing of Hiroshima?

JH: Well, Hiroshima... on August the uh... on August the 5th, 1945 we were blowin up mines on the coast of Japan with our crew and, uh, accidently, we rammed into the (inaudible) oil tanker and it was a huge oil tanker. It was much heavier than us and it was capsizing us and uh... I, it was a scary ordeal. I went to my battle station. I had my life jacket there hangin' on the bulk head under the um superstructure there. I got on gunner number 2 on our ship, I was a gunner and also a loader on the 20 millimeter and I had my K-rations and everything and even a little flashlight hooked onto my life jacket and I could not swim. A lot of people laughed that I could not swim. I said Im not worried about that, aviators couldn't fly either so (chuckles) that was my answer to that! But anyhow, the ship, it crashed into us, and it was pushing us over into the ocean and I remember, it was three big jumps and the fourth one, actually the third one, yeah the third one, my feet was in the water. My head was under the superstructure and I looked down at the water and the water was right down at my feet and uh I knew I was gonna die. It was a gruesome feelin. I thought about momma, I thought about home. That's the first thing that comes to your mind, you wanna go home. You want momma, and, uh, I knew I was gonna die and I looked down and the only thing I could see was the water under my feet, and I said, oh God. We had already gone over the 45 degree. 45 is where we usually sink a ship but it was still pushing us over and I said oh God, that was the shortest prayer I think I've ever prayed, and I said oh God and when I said oh God the anchor was torn loose from our bow of our ship, it went over into the wreckage of the oil tanker, that anchor did, and it grabbed us and it kept us from capsizing and it pulled us back into a straight position. I couldn't hardly believe it. Some of the sailors already made an escape route bail out, to abandon ship on the stern of it, and um, at that time I wouldn't tell anybody cause I didn't want to let them know I couldn't swim (laughs) A big sailor that couldn't swim!

MP: Yeah!

JH: Well I never taken swimming lessons, I lived in a poor neighborhood, back then we couldn't afford to go to a swimming pool to pay swimmin so uh, anyhow the anchor was torn loose it saved my life and um the ship straightened up, it ripped a big hole from the bow of the ship, damaging the bow all the way back to about mid ship and just opened up a big gash, and this is what happened. It was a miracle He saved my life.

MP: Yeah definitely.

JH: And I've often thought of that I didn't actually realize what was happening until later years in life, and I didn't even talk about it and found out later this is what actually happened, and uh it was some ordeal and uh and so...

MP: Do you mind me asking if either then or now you were a Christian?

JH: Well, I was a Christian then, I was a weak Christian, you've heard of weak Christians?

MP: Yes I have.

JH: Well I had been baptized but I thought it was my duty to serve my country and ignorantly I felt that that is what I needed to do, yeah I'm defending my country and that's what I wanted to do. That's why I was there, um, I never regretted it. The Lord had been with me.

MP: That was definitely a miracle, what happened that day. How did you react to victory day or when the Germans surrendered?

JH: Well getting back to that first, I guess you want to know what happened after that.

MP: Yeah.

JH: We went into um, we had to drive down for a week and they fixed us up, and in the mean time the Indianapolis came to Tinian which was just a little way from us and they delivered the atomic bomb, and we were neighbors to them when we came back, just about hundred miles from Guam, to, uh to Guam from Tinian and the Indianapolis was there. The Indianapolis they went towards the Philippines and we went towards Japan and the Indianapolis, the Japanese' sank the Indianapolis out there and I think it was 800 men that lost their lives out there and we went over towards Japan, and uh when we got to Japan, that's when the uh, that's when the Enola Gay flew over us, and bombed Hiroshima. I'm trying to make it clear that after this ordeal, where we were off the coast of Japan, and we had this incident that happened on August the 5th, it was the very next day that the Enola Gay flew over us and bombed Hiroshima, and then I came back within a week or so, I was in Japan, and the armistice had just been signed. We went ashore and the Japanese they fled, they didn't want to see us, they were afraid of us. And that's when I went into Hiroshima and encountered the destruction there in Hiroshima where they had... you could see permanent shadows there where the bomb went off in the sky, and infused the ground around the power poles and left permanent shadows there on the concrete and fused the ground, and that's what I encountered there at Hiroshima. And the interesting thing about Hiroshima, on August, uh December 7th 1941, right at Oak Ridge, and the atomic bomb plant had never even been built at that time, but my folks, they helped build that atomic bomb, and so on December the 7th, my relatives helped develop that atomic bomb at Oak Ridge, and we used it on August the um 6th by the Enola Gay. It flew over us right there close. We didn't know that it was the Enola Gay but it was there and uh, it meant that we didn't even know what it was, if we had we wouldn't have gone into Hiroshima I'm sure.

MP: Yeah I'm sure! So when they did drop the bomb, could you hear an explosion or could you see anything?

JH: No we probably could have seen the light cause we weren't far from it and you got to remember, we were blowin' up mines and we were losing men, 'matter fact I went up on deck there one day, and saw two of our planes come down and they crashed into each other and all the men were killed in that wreckage.

MP: Ok so back to the victory day, how did you react to the German surrender and basically the end of World War 2?

JH: Well it was a jubilee an I remember Dr. Butz he was a friend of mine he he's deceased now, and he was in the cabinet of General Douglas MacArthur. And I used to go there in Tokyo, and I say it was right across Hirohito's mansion, uh his limousine was parked out there. Dr. Butz was in there then. What happened was that Dr. Butz in the headquarters at Honolulu at that time and they were getting ready to embark on the venture of invading Japan, that's what we were headed for. Okinawa had already taken place with Desmond Doss and um, when they got the news that the atomic bomb had hit on Hiroshima there was jubilee and he told me about that jubilee they encountered there. Yeah it was a thrill to know that was over. And then later of course when the Germans surrendered, and I say the Germans surrendered before that. Yeah, I remember the German surrender, but we were still overseas at that time. At that time while I was overseas, I lost 12, 12 of my close friends from my neighborhood. They had died, 12 of them, and Robert, he was the closest, played on my ball team, he was killed on one of those islands while I was out there.

MP: Was he part of the Army?

JH: He was the Army, yeah, I was in the Navy of course.

MP: Were you the only one of the 12 that joined the Navy?

JH: Uh, no. There were several others, and as far as I know right now, I'm the only one that's livin.

MP: Oh really?

JH: Yeah, and um, possibly, I don't know of anybody else any younger than me as a VFW that encountered uh combat service and I was in combat. I was, we were bombarding Japan with our big battle wagons. We were getting ready for the invasion. We were going o invade Japan, and if we had, then I probably wouldn't have been here, my daughter wouldn't be here (laughs) grandchildren, I don't know what would have happened but it would have been a different story.

MP: Definitely! So how did this whole experience impact your personal life?

JH: It's been very remarkable to me and not knowing what an atom was, I couldn't understand it. The general population couldn't understand it I think. That to think that it is really creation being in reverse, it's 'matter actually turning back into energy. And later on at Loma Linda, California where I took proton treatment, and that boiled me quite extensively. The proton treatment is the proton is shot in there, and the electrons are pulled away from that, and it causes an explosion... They shot that proton in there and conventional radiation, the 'matter turns into ashes, and the proton, it doesn't. It just disappears.

MP: Oh really?

JH: Yes, its creation in reverse, ‘matter turns into energy. It’s gone. And when it’s gone it dissipates. It’s gone. So, it disappears. So that fascinated me so consequently I had been studying nuclear energy for many many years. It’s a fascinating study and that’s what I did when I went to Loma Linda I knew that it would dissolve...

MP: So you had gone to Loma Linda to study nuclear energy.

JH: That’s right. They had turn that thing into nothing, just disappeared. And that fascinated me. And there were no ashes. So its ‘matter actually turning back into energy. So it’s just like when God said let there be light, and ‘matter came into being. So you can not have light without ‘matter, and light is a reflection of ‘matter. Energy is just power. There is no light in energy, light comes form reflected ‘matter. Anyhow that fascinated me and I studied that for many years, and I’ve done a lot of research in relationship to the Bible study about how God is going to destroy this Earth, so it’s quite interesting.

MP: Yeah that is very interesting! Did you get a degree I any type of physics or something after that?

JH: No I really didn’t. I’m self-educated, and artists, I’m an architect. I’ve done a lot of architectural work. You couldn’t go anywhere without seeing any one of my structures.

MP: Oh really?

JH: Yeah, I’ve done about 80, or 100 places in Collegedale. I did part of O. D. Mkee’s Bakery. I did the first two story building over at four corners. A lot of buildings I designed and the military park there, imagination station, the court house, and a lot of that was my undertaking. So I’ve done a lot of cartoon work. A lot of my work has hit the White House. ‘matter fact the president quoted me once on national television.

MP: Oh yeah?

JH: Yeah, he did. ‘matter fact it was on national television. I’ve had a lot of study in that, but any of the proton treatment I’ve had in Loma Linda has been very successful. I got away from meats, and meats is of course the prime causer of prostate cancer all the time. So I got away from that, and my PSA has been normal for 20 years.

MP: 20 years? That’s great!

JH: I was on protocol for 12 years. They finally called me. They said they’re through with me (laughs) It looks like Im going to live a while.

MP: That’s very good to hear!

JH: So I was grateful for that. (Chuckles)

MP: Definitely! So back to the architecture, do you have a work that you are very proud of or that is your favorite maybe?

JH: The work that I do?

MP: Yeah

JH: Oh I've done a lot. Well, I've done a lot of blue prints. And I've done a lot of architectural drawing. 'matter fact the first house that (inaudible) and Sharon, I drew the blue prints for that house. And it was developed right out here up the road. Its part of this property. That's the house.

MP: Those are newer homes, right?

JH: Yeah yeah. Then I did work for Jack Mckee, Betty. They live in that now. O.D. Mckee of course I did his home. I've done a lot of architectural work around Collegedale. That's been my life work, and I've done lot of free hand drawing. What I propose to do now is put some of my cartoons on display. I'll probably do that here eventually and some other things. That's one reason I wanted to be here if I could, and to help people too.

MP: Well, if you do that I will definitely come by and check it out. That sounds really cool! We're kind of winding down here so, what do you think is the biggest misconception about World War 2?

JH: Right now? The biggest misconception right now?

MP: In any time period before...

JH: Well I think the biggest misconception today, people in general, and Im talking about generally speaking, people don't know where they are. They're confused. They don't know where they're going. We know where we came from. We know where we are in the stream of time, no question about it. We know where we're going. We don't have to worry about it. We know where we came from, where we are, and where we are going. We don't have to worry about it. That's the beautiful part of the whole thing.

MP: Just like you knew when you were younger you definitely wanted to join the war effort.

JH: Yes from a very early age and 'matter fact I took a course in California when I was in the Navy and it was on aircraft. And I knew every aircraft from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, United States, Brazil, some of those foreign countries, and I did a 100 on that. I made 100. I knew my aircraft. Growing up in Chattanooga, I've seen some of that take place. I've seen four big air crashes in Chattanooga when I was a kid. Some of them bombers. So I knew the B-25 that (inaudible) used when they bombed Japan for the first time, right after the war started. It took them by surprise. That was the missile B-25. And the Liberator was the one they used extensively in Germany and the B-19 ofcourse they used in Germany also. The B-29 is the one they used in Japan. So I knew my aircraft. As a young kid, and im just telling you part of the story, when I was growing up. I was growing up during the depression, we had very little. But you know what? We were happy. We didn't know that we were poor. We were happy, so that makes all the difference in the world.

MP: Do you remember anything about the Great Depression that carried on to today? Any life lessons or something like that?

JH: Oh yes uh... yeah. We had very little but it was a miracle. I remember that... Christmas was around the corner, and we didn't have anything. Momma didn't have no money and my daddy, my daddy was a good worker, and provided for his family pretty good, but he could not stay away from the alcohol over the weekend. It was a Christmas time, and we had left a beer parlor. He took me along to protect him. To keep him out of jail cause if you gotta kid you gotta get that kid home safe. So we came out of that beer garden and he fell on the road, on the sidewalk and tumbled off into a ditch. And I didn't know what to do. So I reached in his pocket and there was nine dollars there. Nine dollars, and I grabbed it, and took off. I got home and I told momma I got the money, and she said well where's your dad. A car drove up, an old T Model Ford I think it was. They brought him home. So he sobered up. The next day momma gave him five dollars, and she kept the rest. It was very little, but we had a Christmas. It was very little but we had a Christmas and we did quite well.

MP: How old were you? How old were you when this happened?

JH: I was probably no more than ten. Ten probably. So we had some rough times during the depression. Sometimes we didn't know where our next meal would come from. And I'm really talking we didn't know. And most of the time we'd have corn bread and milk. That was it, and we enjoyed that.

MP: Do you still enjoy it today?

JH: Oh yes! (laughs) I say a lot better. Yeah 'matter fact we live in a country of abundance. No question about it.

MP: Yeah definitely.

JH: Yeah I remember the depression real well.

MP: So do you think that the United States joining the World War 2 was the right thing to do on our end?

JH: Well, to join war is brutal, but I don't know what you're going to do. When someone trying to break your door down at night, if some drunk comes up and tries to knock your door down what are you going to do?

MP: You're going to fight back.

JH: You're going to take action in some way. You're going to protect your family and I would. I would protect my family. I think it would be cowardly if we didn't. I think God gives us that right to protect our family. So I don't know, I think that we had no alternative. Because they had started destroying us, they had started tearing our ships and mangling Russia at that time. The Germans were destroying our ships and what are you going to do? And see, they don't understand "Thus sayeth the Lord", so you gotta use brutal force I guess sometimes. You hate to do it but sometimes you do to wake people up.

MP: Is there anything else I forgot to ask or anything you...

JH: You know I guess there is a lot and it just doesn't stop. I could go back over my childhood days, it was the most heaviest days of my life. I praise the Lord now that I still got my good memories. I have a sister now that lives in Cleveland. She's 97 years old and lives by herself. Her mind is good and I have a brother. He was a railroad executive, and he made one of the highest scores ever made in the university of Tennessee. And old-timers, we don't, we just don't have it enough. The mind's all clear. It seems that the minds all clear in our family and you know my daddy, he died in '83. Of course he would have lived longer than that if he hadn't drunk all that. (Inaudible) He was good in other ways too. Never made a lot of money, but he was good in mathematics. No metal that he didn't know. And my daddy started out making horse and wagon parts, the hub for horse and wagon, that what he was making. I worked with him in the foundry. I worked with him when I was 12 years old, casing out those red hot irons, and they let me. Back in those days they let you and I did. He was smart but uh, he was a brilliant mathematician. He could figure things in his head just like that. He was good on that. Had very little education but was brilliant in his thoughts. So anyhow, I've always been grateful for that, that God has given me good memory. I could go back and I remember incidents that happened when I was three years old.

MP: Really? Wow.

JH: I remember a cousin of mine. She came out the bedroom, and I was just an itty bitty boy. Bout three, four, well probably not even more than three. I remember her. That was my aunt maybe, no my cousin maybe. I remember talking to her, and she looked at a lamp on the hearth there at the fireplace. She came out the bed room. I remember that incident. So the Lord has blessed me with a good memory, and I think that's very critical because see when you lose your memory, you loosing you. The you is gone. And the reason I study humor a lot, and that's why I want to get over to these people; laughter is the best medicine. When you get people laughing, you'll cure Alzheimer's. You really will. It gets the blood going quicker than anything. It just relaxes your whole system. Some people, they doctor through humor, laughter.

MP: Hmm that's very interesting! Well I just want to thank you for taking the time to talking with me.

JH: Well I appreciate you.

MP: I'll definitely be back to see your work.

JH: Yeah yeah I'd appreciate that.

MP: Thank you for your service!