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AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLEY T. ODOM

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TINSLEY: This is Stanley H. Tinsley speaking. Today is March the 4th, 1994. I am speaking today with Mr. Charley Odom of Knoxville, Tennessee, in regard to his service before, during, and after World War II in the United States Navy.

(Tape paused)

TINSLEY: Mr. Odom, when did you join the service?

ODOM: 1934.

TINSLEY: Okay, did you volunteer?

ODOM: Yeah, everybody was a volunteer then.

TINSLEY: Alright, what branch of the service did you go in?

ODOM: First I went to boot camp, machinist school, and then I was selected for submarine school; and went to diesel school, and then to a submarine.

TINSLEY: Okay, how come you decided in '34 to go in the Navy?

ODOM: Well, I was a high school economic dropout in '29 and I went to work for Standard Oil Company. My dad had worked there for years, and was pensioned off during the Depression so I had to drop out of high school and go to work. One of my fellow workers had been in the Navy and he kept telling me about it and so I quit my job and I was making seventy dollars a month, seventy hours a week; and joined the Navy for twenty-one dollars a month, and then they cut us to eighteen [dollars] ninety [cents] to start the CCC's [Civilian Conservation Corps]. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: (Laughs) Oh, gosh! Oh boy! Oh, those were tough days.

ODOM: Yeah.

TINSLEY: How old were you when you joined the Navy?

ODOM: I was twenty-one.

TINSLEY: Okay.

ODOM: And most of them were seventeen [or] eighteen. I'm a late bloomer. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Okay. Anyone else in your family in the service?

ODOM: Ah, a couple cousins went in the Army.

TINSLEY: Okay. What do you remember about leaving home?

ODOM: Well, I headed out to Hawaii after a year and a half, after all those schools on a World War I submarine, the S-1, number one. I was homesick, even though I was twenty-one years old. I was homesick for a couple years there. While I was there my dad died, and I didn't get to come home. The only way back was the Hawaii Clipper and the China Clipper and the Matson Line, and that took six days and a lot of money, and I couldn't make it.

TINSLEY: I'll be darned.

ODOM: Yeah.

TINSLEY: So you would've had to pay your way back, right?

ODOM: Yeah.

TINSLEY: I see. Were you married at that time? When did you get married?

ODOM: No, I didn't get married until way later.

TINSLEY: Okay. This is probably where you'll start needing your notes. Describe the places you trained, you know, where you went from place to place and that sort of thing.

ODOM: Well, I went to boot camp in '34, in Norfolk. And while there I was selected for machinist school and that was about eight months [that I] went to machinist school. Then I was selected for submarine school and went there. After that I went to diesel engineering school. Then I went to Hawaii to an old World War I submarine, the S-1, number one. It didn't even have a name. (Laughs) So after boot camp in '34 and machinist school in Norfolk, and sub and diesel schools in New London, and six years in submarine engine rooms, I took an exam and got a chief engineer's license for a merchant marine officer. Then I did two years as a diesel roundhouse foreman at DuPont in Memphis. DuPont was making powder for Britain, and the **River** wanted me because I had a license. The Southern Railroad was putting on a new train called the Tennessean that was diesel, and they wanted me because I had six years experience in those engines. I selected DuPont. I was roundhouse foreman. We had three diesel-electric locomotives ...

TINSLEY: Let me interrupt you for a second. Tell us a little bit, if you can, about what it was like to be on the S-1.

ODOM: Oh, well, it was real crude, and hot, this was way before, well, air conditioning never worked on submarines until you got nuclear sub. We had one little one-holer head [restroom], and we slept on top; we hot-bunked, we didn't have enough bunks, and we had one cook. We had two main engines, big old noisy diesels.

TINSLEY: How many people were on the sub altogether?

ODOM: Just forty-two then, on that little one, yeah. That was a World War I submarine. I got promoted on there from fireman third class to fireman second class to fireman first class, and I think I made sixty dollars a month. I qualified for submarines and got twenty dollars more a month.

TINSLEY: I see.

ODOM: They used to bet us a dollar a dime that we wouldn't come up. (Laughter) And that was pretty rough. Then we had a hydrogen explosion in 1936 and they decided to put it out of commission. And we brought it back to Philadelphia and put it out of commission.

TINSLEY: Anybody hurt in that explosion?

ODOM: Huh?

TINSLEY: Anybody hurt?

ODOM: Well, no, but it burnt the hair off my eyebrows, the hair off my arms, and these shirts caught on fire. There was no flame, just heat waves; it was hydrogen. And batteries normally give off hydrogen while you're charging 'em, but these gave off hydrogen on the discharge, while we were running. They reversed cycle some way and it built up over, when it got over three and half, four percent, you could have an explosion. The captain closed the hatch and said, "We're not going to let any oxygen in here, just breath hard." He didn't want the fire to get bigger. Finally he opened the hatch, and then that's when they decided to put it out of commission. It was a pretty old submarine.

TINSLEY: Okay, back to, did you go to DuPont or Southern Railway?

ODOM: It was DuPont. We had twenty-one miles of track right north of Memphis, and we had three locomotives, then we eight little gasoline locomotives. We made powder and dynamite for Britain. And then of course, after Pearl Harbor, I had a deferment, but after Pearl Harbor I had to go back. I wanted to go back. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Right.

ODOM: And I had married my wife, she was an RN [registered nurse] from Lenoir City [who] went to UT in Memphis. They didn't have a nursing school here [in Knoxville] then, except for Old General [hospital]. She was a Red Cross Army Reserve, ready to go to war, and I married her, and they wouldn't take married nurses in World War II. (Laughter) She threw that up to me for forty years. But some of her classmates were prisoners in the Philippines, so that helped some. And I went back in forty-two. Let me give you a little bit off my notes here.

TINSLEY: Yeah, okay, fine.

ODOM: After six years I was discharged and made first class machinist's mate. I took this chief

engineer's exam. In 1940 I got my license, and I wrote the Navy and asked them what they would give me if I reenlisted. Of course they needed me; they were putting submarines in commission, and I'd had six years on a submarine and I was ready for the top enlisted rank. So I went back and became a chief petty officer. I went to Cleveland, Ohio, and followed my General Motors big diesels right to the Portsmouth, New Hampshire Navy [Ship] yard, and put the submarine in commission in '42, and went to the Pacific. I was gone two years; I'd just been married seventeen months. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Gosh!

ODOM: Most of the men on the submarine were twenty or twenty and a half. The average age was twenty and a half, including the old chiefs and the officers. We had three chiefs and I was twenty-nine, and they called me the old man, the old chief. (Laughter)

TINSLEY: Twenty-nine!

ODOM: Twenty-nine, yeah.

TINSLEY: Oh boy. Well let's see, were you all in action out there in the Pacific?

ODOM: Yeah, we took the *Billfish* [USS *Billfish* (SS-286)] to Brisbane, Australia from Panama. It took us thirty days. Then we went on our first patrol run up off of Indochina, which they call Vietnam now. Then we came back into Perth, Australia on the Indian Ocean. I operated out of there all during the war. We had submarines operating out of there and out of Pearl Harbor. Later the ones in Pearl Harbor kept jumping the islands with submarine tenders as they went towards Japan. When we got out of Panama we'd never heard a depth charge, so they dropped a couple about a mile away, and we thought that was awful. We didn't know they were that far [away]. We found out real quick when we got in a war zone that they were way off. (Laughs) And, you want me to go on into some of the patrol runs now?

TINSLEY: Let's see just a minute. The crew in the sub, were they from all over the country or a certain part of the country?

ODOM: Yeah, a lot of them were farmers. In fact, I liked to get a good farm boy who'd worked on plows and machinery and tractors. Then I had some that couldn't do anything with machinery, so I just made operators out of 'em. I let 'em run it and watch the gauges, I wouldn't let them touch the engines. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Did they get along pretty well?

ODOM: Oh yeah. We had to in submarines.

TINSLEY: I'll bet.

ODOM: If you couldn't get along, you got out, because one man could kill everybody in there

by opening the wrong valve.

TINSLEY: Tell me about some of your patrols.

ODOM: Well, I'll go with this one here.

TINSLEY: Okay.

ODOM: We left Perth, Australia and about a thousand miles north at Darwin, Australia we topped off with fuel. Then we left the Indian Ocean and started through Lombok Straits. That's a real narrow thing about a half-mile wide, and the Japanese had artillery on both sides. It's between the Bali and Timor Islands. We were trying to get to the Makassar Straits, which is north of there, that's where the first big carrier sea battle took place. The tides of the Indian Ocean rushed through that little channel and we'd lose control when we submerged, we'd broach. The bow would stick up, and the Japanese would shoot at us. So we had another option. We'd go through there at midnight at twenty-one knots, so we ...

TINSLEY: On the surface?

ODOM: Yeah. We did that. Even then, after they got radar that was hazardous too. But right at the first of the war, they didn't have radar. Then we hit Makassar Straits, and we went in there about four or five more days. And they had destroyers there, we got depth charged, we were beat up before we ever got to our station. Then we had to go through Balabac Straits, which was narrower yet. That took us over to the South China Sea. That was south of Palawan and north of Borneo, and we lost several submarines there from mines. When a submarine hits a mine, it goes down in a few seconds. If it's on the surface, the only ones saved are maybe the lookout and the officer of the deck up there. Then we got on station. We had a fifty square mile area to patrol, and there were other submarines all around us. We attacked convoys going from Borneo and other islands carrying oil and rubber to Japan and Hong Kong and all the captured countries up there. They hugged the coast, which was shallow, and that's how they missed us. We hated shallow water, so after we shot torpedoes we'd have to turn around. If we could, we'd stay on the surface and put all four main engines on and go out to deep water. 'Course they'd be chasing us and we'd submerge in deep water. And the battery, of course submarines then used batteries to submerge, they would last about an hour under eleven knots, which was about our top speed submerged. But if we ran two knots we could use them all day. We usually ran two knots, used evasive tactics, and everything was silent. We had silent running. Sometimes a shipmate would stir his coffee in a big Navy cup and make noise. The sound studies had proved they could hear that at a hundred feet back at New London, so we'd jump on them when they did that. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: (Laughs) I don't blame you.

ODOM: And ...

TINSLEY: What were you on, the *Billfish*?

ODOM: Yeah, the *Billfish*.

TINSLEY: Did you all have any ships to your credit?

ODOM: Oh yeah, she sank seven ships during the war.

TINSLEY: Seven ships.

ODOM: I've forgotten how many tons. She made about eight patrol runs and it usually took, by the time you left Perth, Australia, and stayed on station fifty days, you were about sixty, seventy days gone. Our families didn't hear from us for ninety days. They didn't know whether we were dead or alive, and we operated alone. There were other submarines maybe fifty miles away, maybe, but everybody that saw us, we were the enemy to them. Even Naval planes, U.S. Navy planes, bombed us, Australian planes bombed us.

TINSLEY: God!

ODOM: We just had to submerge when we saw an airplane. We had identification friend or foe signals, but that didn't work. They didn't keep up with it, we did. (Laughs) We kept up with it meticulously. It was all in a book in code. So submarine chasers could make about twenty knots, and we could outrun them at twenty-one knots with a clean bottom. And later on, you'll see this did not refer to personal bottoms but to the ship's bottom, barnacles. (Laughter) We engineers had to know a few tricks. We had a tactic called an end around and we would go over the horizon, seven and a half miles, where they couldn't see us, the curvature of the earth. We'd stick the periscope up and follow these convoys and get ahead of them, submerge, and then fire at them.

TINSLEY: I see.

ODOM: This might take eight to twenty-four hours, so all the engineers had to be in the engine room. We were pushing those engines for everything they had. We'd dog down the governors, to get ahead of this convoy. We had to know a few tricks to keep from blowing up the engine, exceeding the BMEP we called it, the Brake Mean Effective Pressure. These were two thousand horsepower, sixteen cylinder, V-16 engines [from] General Motors, just like they had on locomotives. The pistons were eight by ten inches. It was over a hundred decibels in the engine room and that's why I'm wearing hearing aids. (Laughs) Ten years of that.

(LOUD, CONSTANT RINGING NOISE)

TINSLEY: Can you hear that? Something's going off ... now it stopped.

ODOM: I don't know what that was.

TINSLEY: Hmm. Real high pitched noise there, I don't know. I thought maybe it was a kettle or something.

ODOM: I don't have any idea what that was. (Laughs) There's nothing to...

TINSLEY: Well, must not amount to anything.

ODOM: Smoke alarm's down the hall. My washing machine's running could've been something on that. Let's see, where were we? We were making an end around ...

TINSLEY: Yeah.

ODOM: Of course, this was our forte, the engineers. This was our glory and our payday to get that submarine ahead of them. We stayed back there, and the cooperation and hot coffee and the adrenaline kept us going, and we'd stay there and watch that engine like a hawk. I even had a stethoscope I'd go around listening with to make sure something wasn't going wrong. I had twenty-one men. I had six good first class petty officers, so I could get a little break sometimes. [I could] go up and get a cup of coffee. We turned our hats around on watch. We just didn't get relieved, and we put sockets on the governors. Then we submerged, and all the glory went to the left-arm ratings, I mean the right-arm ratings. They were the torpedo men. They got the torpedoes ready, and glory shifted to the right-arm rates. They made ready the tubes with a sixteen fish, and each one had a warhead of five hundred pounds of TNT, and we carried twenty-one of these. These warheads had been bunkmates, as they protruded into the bunks, and we'd throw our arm around them and caress them and have wild dreams. (Laughter) From the time the captain said "Fire one!" we shifted from hyper to super-hyper. This was what a lot of us had trained for, for six, and eight, and four years. Each submarine had a nucleus of old submariners who were twenty-five to thirty years old. They called us old folks. We were pre-war people, and they had divided us, spread us around on other new submarines. We trained novices right out of diesel school, submarine school, radio, torpedo, sound, signal, electrical school. These were special people, they'd been chosen for submarines. For selfish reasons, we saw that they learned their job because we had vested interests; over twenty years of our lives! (Laughs) We knew what came next after the first torpedo was fired, and sometimes even before the destroyers came and the destroyers' escorts were alerted, the depth charges rained down. After firing, we went deep and did silent running. The engines were one hundred and fifty degrees, and they stayed that temperature for about six or seven hours in the engine room. The engine room was awful hot. And the air-conditioning would have, if we could run it, taken days to cool it off, but it made too much noise, so we couldn't run it. One time, the most I was ever down was Armistice Day, November 11, '43, and it could have been worse; it could have been Navy Day. (Laughs) But we were down twenty-seven hours.

TINSLEY: Good god!

ODOM: And we'd come up sometimes. We came up two or three times and they were there, and we'd have to go right back down and got another depth charge. Some boats stayed down longer, and fifty-two of them are still on the bottom out there. Nobody can describe a depth charge to a layman so he can understand it. You just have to live through it. They were pinging

on us with sound gear, and ... this pinging noise was nerve wracking. Sometimes they would drag grappling hooks, and they'd run down the side of the submarine and they wanted to hook and then put a buoy on it, so they'd know where we were. All that stuff was nerve-wracking. We engineers tried to keep the lights burning. We had special light bulbs, but even then the depth charges would knock them out. And we led damage control parties to fix the water, air, and oil leaks. We had three air systems: six hundred pound, hundred pound, and three thousand pound air. We used that to blow water out of tanks when we wanted to come up. These damage control parties consisted of an electrician's mate and a machinist's mate, and anybody else that wasn't too busy on their station, we'd take them with us. We had these big, long, wooden, ice cream cone shaped plugs, and we'd drive them into leaks with a sledgehammer. This is a real war, not the Hollywood radio glamorous war that you civilians knew. In combat there are many surprises. Your personality traits come to the fore and people that you've been shipmates with for years, you couldn't understand why they acted that way. And you yourself would either have extreme bravery or extreme fear. You never knew how you were going to act. All the protective armor was stripped and we were exposed for better or worse. You couldn't have any shams or screens 'cause this was not "All the world's a stage." There were no actors, it was the real thing. (Laughs) Sometimes these mild shipmates would become leaders, and some of the hard rock toughs would become the followers. (Laughs) Things changed. We wanted to help shipmates, but you were too busy doing your job, and helping a shipmate was like trying to comfort a crying man; it was a difficult thing. It's a helpless feeling, but if behavior didn't endanger, we overlooked it. You overlooked a lot of things with men who've faced death. After we got through the depth charge on this twenty-seven hour one, we surfaced and had breakfast at dark, and charged the batteries, charged the air tanks with air compressors, and made bread. I was an engineer; I had to make fresh water. We could make six hundred gallons in a night if we didn't get chased down. The batteries got about five hundred of this, and the mess cooks got the other hundred. So we didn't have any, the only bathing facilities we had were if there was no enemy around, we could run the air conditioning, take the condensate, and shave with it. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: I'll be darned.

ODOM: That was condensed human sweat! And the engines, we had sixty-four ten by eight pistons, and we were running on four engines, two on propulsion and two on battery charge. Each one had a 1040 KW [kilowatt] generator on it. They would pull fresh air right through the boat and suck up all these odors we'd been breathing; battery gas and bilge fumes, and the head's vented inboard, so we had to breath all that stuff. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: God!

ODOM: And sweat, human sweat. Fear smell is one of the worst things you've ever, and we were a bunch of gamey young men, and it was awful. This was way before deodorant. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Oh yeah.

ODOM: There was no bathing. The cooks and mess cooks could bathe occasionally. Once in a while we'd take a saltwater bath, but some of us got seasick when we surfaced. I got seasick for

twenty years. I'd get over it in a day or two. So not only did the *Billfish* have positive buoyancy when we surfaced, but we did too. If you had a good cook, he was a good morale man. That was the main thing. We had no doctor, no chaplain. We did have a pharmacist's mate, who was a medic in the Navy back then. He was a chief with eighteen years in. All he wanted to do was stand watch in my engine room or shoot a machine gun. (Laughs) These were not his duties. He came under the Geneva Constitution [Convention]. If you hurt your finger he'd say, "Go back and look in the medical locker and get you an aspirin." (Laughter) After a good attack or a sinking or a severe depth charge, he'd go up and talk the captain out of some medicinal brandy. We had some little one ounce bottles of medicinal brandy, and the captain had them in his safe. So he'd get each of us a little one ounce brandy. Nobody drank on a submarine, but this was just a little special thing after a depth charge or something. It was a morale builder. Our pharmacist's mates had been trained for independent duty, like small ships without a doctor or submarines. They also served with the marines, they had special training. And several of them, there were several appendectomies performed by those men during the war.

TINSLEY: Is that right?

ODOM: Yeah. Men who faced death are more tolerant of each other. We thanked God that we'd gotten up. We had control over fear and rage. Once during a depth charge, our yeoman, who was the ship's writer, answered the call of nature when they dropped a three hundred pounder right over his head. Had he been standing up, it would have driven him to his knees. (Laughter) All stopped. He answered no calls for a week, a paradox to which you would think the reaction would be. He was that scared. We wore service stripes on our uniforms and each one meant four years service. These were found in other articles of clothing some time after a severe depth charge; we called them hash marks. (Laughs) Ninety percent of our senior officers were academy graduates. Most of them were lieutenant commanders and commanders. Dozens of them were ready to be kicked out of the Navy when the war started. They hadn't been promoted and they became some of the top scorers in the war. Some of them just couldn't stand depth charges, so they had to get out of submarines. They went to surface craft or submarine school or some place. But most of them came back for a second chance, and all combat submariners deserved a second chance. It's just, you're under so much strain. One of our typical runs is we left Fremantle— Now, well, I've already gone through that, went to Darwin and topped off with fuel and our main targets, I gave you that, let's see ...

TINSLEY: On average, how long were you away from your base, how many days?

ODOM: Sixty days.

TINSLEY: Sixty days.

ODOM: Yeah. It took us two weeks to get there, or ten days, and we were on station usually fifty days, if we could. But we got short [on] food, we didn't have any storage room. And after we got all of the food we could get on that submarine, I had five gallon tin cans of coffee behind my all my engines and all kinds of food behind the engines, and if anything had happened and we couldn't have got back, they would have had to take it all out to work on 'em. We'd load up

everything we could. Then the cook would say, “Now, there’s twelve cases of sardines on the dock. If you can store them, you can have them.” We filled our lockers up with sardines. (Laughs) In Fremantle, Australia after we finally relaxed, after we came through Lombok going into the Indian Ocean coming back to berth, sometimes we were afraid of Japanese submarines. Our submarines sank a lot of Japanese submarines and that was an awful thing, a dog-eat-dog, it was all underwater, using sound gear, and that’s what they use now days but it’s more sophisticated, and they never surface. But we’d hear them and they’d hear us, and if you could hear a torpedo whishing by, you knew it missed. (Laughs) Then we’d shoot at them, and that was nerve-wracking. In Fremantle, when we got back to Perth, Fremantle’s a port for Perth, we tied up to the dock and the chiefs and the first class had the repair orders, so we always had something knocked loose from depth charges. Sometimes they’d knock the big engines right off of their mounts, and you couldn’t use them. Our mail was three months old, and we had radio silence so nobody knew what was going on. And if we had a good run, they’d offer us a commission or warrant officer. Well, in the Navy a warrant officer is a commission officer, but that meant going to surface craft, which is steam, and we were diesel men. We just refused to take a commission because most of our officers were academy men. We’d get back to Perth and have an apple. An apple after months at sea was delicious. Later on, I found out they were granny smiths. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: I’ll be darned.

ODOM: Some old lady out there got a sprout out of a dump and started the granny smith apple.

TINSLEY: I’ll be darned.

ODOM: And a bus took us to Perth, where we’d go to rest, R&R, and we ate at the hotel dining room. I fell in love with Aussie steak and kidney pie. (Laughter) I really liked it. I always watched the menu to make sure when they had it. I got back home, my wife tried it and it tasted like the by-product. (Laughs) Biscuits were called scones and cookies were called biscuits. Some of us went to the beach and we were white. I’d go out and never see the ocean or the sun or the sky for sixty days, ‘cause we didn’t go topside. It was just the lookouts and the OD [Officer of the deck] up there. One time we time we came back in and went to the beach at Perth in December, which is summertime. I spent my whole two weeks R&R with blisters all over me.

TINSLEY: Oh my god.

ODOM: The Australians put lanolin on me. I didn’t want to go back to the tender and get in the sick bay, so I stayed in the hotel. (Laughs) They put sheep lanolin on me. We used to hear Tokyo Rose’s records on patrol. She had the best records, better than we had. We had a fifty book library we’d change every run, and there were a lot of poker games, and Acey Deucey, and a lot of thousand dollar IOUs because it was worth a thousand to get back. The captain’s favorite record was *The Whirling Dervish*, and mine was Roy Acuff’s *Night Train to Memphis*. I wanted to go back home. (Laughter) If we had an engine break down, we just worked on it ‘til we got it finished, sometimes four or five days. You just drank coffee and worked until you fell over asleep, then somebody would wake you up in a few minutes and you’d go back to work. After a

while in Australia, I'd gotten three of my first class promoted to chief, and we had four chiefs and weren't supposed to have but one, chief engineman, motor machinist's mate they called us then. So, I got to go back to new construction after two years. After a while, on relief crew, I got my orders to go across Australia to Sydney by train. Each state had a different gauge of railroad, so we had to change every state. I took a sea bag full of Navy food, 'cause I'd heard about it before. Two or three times a day this train would stop and these Australian WAC's [Women's Army Corps] would cook in a boxcar. We'd line up with a tray, and it was sheep stew. And I just couldn't eat sheep! (Laughs) The Australians loved it. We had some black shipmates. Most of them were officers' cooks in World War II and also stewards. We had one on the submarine. He'd stare, after the officers got through, they'd dump this sheep stew out on a piece of plastic or something, and these Australian aborigines would come in from nowhere. You didn't see how people could live out there, and they'd get that. And these black shipmates would look at them and shake their heads, and we did too. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: (Laughs) I'll bet.

ODOM: We boarded a maritime ship in Sydney. It was an army ship with civilian crew. Everything we ate was boiled, except the bread. They had to boil it in a steam kettle, nothing fried or baked. We didn't trust those people, so we submariners volunteered to be lookouts for submarine periscopes. We'd started our own watch and around the clock we'd watch for Japanese periscopes. We knew what they could do. After about three weeks we hit San Francisco and I called my wife. She was working in a hospital in Memphis, Methodist. I rode a train called a Challenger to Chicago. It was a coach, and it was a challenge; it took five days. The freights had priority. From Chicago I caught that night train to Memphis. That was on the IC's, Illinois Central, Panama limited. And after a couple weeks leave, my wife quit her job and we went to Beloit, Wisconsin, to Fairbanks-Morris Engine Company. I was going to follow my engines to a new submarine. The war was slowing down. The submarines had sank most of the Japanese ships. The main thing submarines were doing was picking up pilots that ran out of gas, the B-29s. [President] Bush was one of them. The submarine *Finback* [USS *Finback* (SS-230)] picked up [President] Bush. And in below it we rented an apartment, but the Navy couple in it hadn't left yet. Back then they weren't used to sailors, so the landlady gave us her own bed, and she slept on a cot. We were having a second honeymoon. (Laughs) We were there in the hardest part of the war, and after six weeks we went to Philadelphia to put this new submarine in commission. We got down there, and it was the *Sabalo* [USS *Sabalo* (SS-302)]. We got to Panama and the war was over, and what a happy a bunch. We turned around and came back, decommissioned that submarine. It was a brand new submarine. The CNO [Chief of Naval Operation] now, Admiral Kelso, was engineer officer on it in the Korean War. They put it back in commission during the Korean War. After that I became an instructor at the diesel laboratory in New London, Connecticut and one of my students [President Jimmy Carter] was a redhead from Plains, Georgia, he'd just come to submarines. The young submarine officers had to tear down engines and air compressors, and they had to know everything about it. I'd sit up on top of the engine. I was a chief petty officer, and I was the officer's instructor. I had about ten of these young ensigns and junior lieutenants. They were pulling pistons and cylinder heads, so they knew what they were doing when they got on a submarine.

TINSLEY: Was he a pretty good student?

ODOM: Oh yeah, they all were. They were selected, they were the top. I got interested in teaching then. I taught Peruvian officers and Peruvian enlisted men. I took a Linguaphone course in Spanish, and I had trouble with verbs. But I knew all the names of the parts, so we got by. (Laughs) Teaching there for a diesel man was like a commander going to War College. I mean, that was our top, so we really enjoyed that. So after I got out of the Navy, that's why I went to Fulton High and taught for twenty years.

TINSLEY: Where did you teach for twenty years?

ODOM: Fulton High.

TINSLEY: Fulton, did you?

ODOM: Yeah. Yeah, I went to UT [University of Tennessee] when I was a forty-three year old freshman.

TINSLEY: I'll be darned.

ODOM: I retired from the Navy, and I still had my GI Bill. So I got GI Bill and my Navy pension. (Laughs) My wife was working at Fort Sanders [hospital]. We have Submarine Veterans of World War II, and we meet in one big convention every year and several little ones. And we'll all be at Norfolk next September. That'll be one of the real big ones. I was on the *Billfish*. The new *Billfish* [USS *Billfish* (SSN-676)] is a nuclear sub, but she's twenty years old, and they usually send the Chief of the Boat. The chief torpedo man is usually the Chief of the Boat. He works with the executive officer, and he's kind of like a policeman. He keeps order, he keeps things straight, and boosts the morale. But he's also a torpedo man. Sometimes they use other ratings. One chapter of Submarine Veterans of World War II is called Diesel Boats Forever Chapter, but the last diesel boat went out of commission in 1990, and no more. I retired about thirty-eight years ago, and when I come up by a diesel car at a stop sign, I'll let my window down to listen to that diesel. (Laughs) That's kind of like an old railroad engineer listening to a steam whistle, I guess. During the Korean War I was on a tanker. I was chief engineer of a diesel electric tanker. We fueled carriers and battleships, and we'd go down the coast and fuel the Nationalist Chinese destroyers. About the only danger we had was mines, we had to watch for mines. If we'd see a mine we'd shoot it in the head, you have a man up on the bow. Because if it hit on a tanker we'd catch on fire. I had seventeen years in the Navy after my tour there. My wife came out there on a freighter. The Navy wouldn't let you come on a transport during the Korean War. We had to rent a Japanese house. Finally we got on the base in an apartment at Yokosuka [Japan]. This house was up at Kamakura, the Hollywood of Japan, but it had straw floors and paper windows. So after my time in Korea, I asked for instructor duty anywhere in the United States. My orders came to "charm school", that's what we called Instructor School, in San Diego. I took an advanced course there and then I had orders to go to the Naval Net School in Tiburon, California. I said, "What in the world is a net?" Nets and booms, nets are [something] you put across the harbor to stop submarines and torpedoes, and booms are big long things like

telephone poles to stop ships. So all the students there were boatswain's mates, who were deck people and riggers, and we didn't have 'em on submarines, so I'd never been around any of those people. They're the ones that blow the little whistle. (Laughs) Before I could teach them, I had to have some courses in seamanship. I had seventeen years in the Navy in the bowels of a submarine. The only knot I could tie was a cylinder head hitch. (Laughter) So I went through the school, and I'm the only engineman in the Navy that went through net and boom school; I got a big certificate in there. We had a lot of foreign students there, Nationalist Chinese, Iranians, Spanish, Dutch, Filipinos, and Brits. We enjoyed teaching the Dutch people more than anybody 'cause most of them spoke English and they were real sharp, really good submariners. Well, these weren't submariners, but they'd had some submarines in World War II in New London as our allies. In addition to net weaving, these nets were made out of one inch cables and they were about a mile long, and we had a big concrete slab we wove them on. I also taught at the power plant on the net ship; it was diesel electric. And the young officers wanted to start a course, so I set one up. Back in '48, I'd had a Linguaphone course in Spanish, and my wife and I went to Key West after that, and we practiced down there. Then we went to San Diego, and we'd go down to Mexico and practice. We went to night school two years taking Spanish, and then I got transferred to Japan. (Laughs) I forgot it all, but a lot of it came back. I was teaching Spanish officers and Spanish enlisted men there in net school. We were 1.6% of the Navy and we sank fifty-four percent of all Japanese sea losses, and one out of four operating submariners didn't come back. We lost fifty-two submarines. I retired in '56 and entered UT. I had a little green beanie on top of my head, and I hadn't been in school in twenty-five years.

-----END OF TAPE ONE-----

TINSLEY: Okay, we can go ahead.

ODOM: In '56 I was offered a job at Fulton High School teaching air-conditioning, refrigeration, and shop math. I really taught 'em physics, but I was told them it was science. I had these boys three hours a day for three years, more than their own fathers saw them. And I was paid on a Master's because of my license and my six year apprenticeship. I'd already taught air-conditioning pumps and coolers and heaters and evaporators and generators and diesel engines. So a degree was not one of my priorities because I was paid on a Master's. So I went to UT nights and summers. The Navy had taught me how to teach and I had five years' experience in the Navy as a teacher. All petty officers were teachers. I was top chief petty officer for fourteen years. But I had to learn different ways to show these high school students to get 'em motivated. In the Navy, we used negative motivation, "you'll get this or you're going back to sea." (Laughs) Poor students couldn't be threatened with that, so I had to change to positive motivation and show 'em some incentive. I retired again in '75. When I was a senior at UT, I failed a hearing test, and I didn't graduate until after I retired from teaching. So all kinds of hearing aids were tried, and none of them worked. Most all submariners out of the engine room couldn't hear [because of] ten years at one hundred and twenty decibels. But it wasn't in our health record. So I fought the VA [Veteran's Administration] for years and years, and two years ago on my final appeal they turned me down.

TINSLEY: Oh really?

ODOM: Yeah, and I got all these affidavits from guys that were wearing hearing aids, and from officer's I was on [with]. I even had a study from where diesel engines would tear your ears up from the Navy, after the war they made it. But they said, "It's not in your record, sorry." So I had to go to UT and buy my own hearing aids. Anyhow, I talked to this Ph. D. over there. I said, "You let me go ahead and get my teaching credential. I've already retired from teaching. But I want that credential though. I'll be a guinea pig for your Ph. D. candidates in audiology." And he said okay, so I went over there for two years, and [I would] get in this walk-in freezer and let them make sounds, and they'd check my ear from one ear to the other. At conventions, all the motor mags, that's what they called the motor machinist's mates in World War II, we'd shout at each other, 'cause we all have nerve damage. (Laughs) People would look at us and wonder why we were talking so loud. At these conventions, some of them have latched onto my stories, and they've added to 'em. They'll steal each other's stories. (Laughter)

TINSLEY: Yeah, pilots are bad about that too. (Laughs)

ODOM: The depth charges get deeper and deeper, tall tales grow horizontally, and hidden heroics come to the fore. Some of these submarine shipmates we haven't seen for forty or fifty years, and it's real great to see one of them. The new submarine, the *Tennessee* [USS *Tennessee* (SSBN-734)], went into commission in '87, and we sponsored it, the sub vets of Tennessee. She's a nuclear sub, the seven thirty-four, and she carries twenty-four missiles, each has ten warheads. And I talked to a missile man on there when I went down to visit the *John C. Calhoun* [USS *John C. Calhoun* (SSBN-630)]; I didn't get to see the *Tennessee*. He said he could hit a ball field two thousand miles away and make those war heads go in different directions. This old submarine, the one boat, the S-1, was a World War I veteran. I was on that fifty-eight years ago I guess. One of the old admirals, Admiral Uncle Charlie Lockwood, he was a submariner from the time he got out of the Academy, and he said, "Mutual respect and performance were more important than spit and polish, stuffed shirt-ism was absent, we all were volunteers, and we were all submariners." We were not below-par sub-mariners; we were submariners. We were highly motivated, we knew our jobs, and we wanted to be there. We didn't want to leave submarines. We have an international organization also, even the enemy, Germans, Italians, free Poles, Brits, and Americans. And we meet in Europe, I've never been to one of them, but they meet in England or Germany or France most of the time. Oh yeah, I was talking about my writing group at O'Connor Center. We've got some poets in there, so I wrote a poem about the time Jimmy Carter was running, he was one of my students, and the poets read it. And one of them, Lee Sanders, she's a well-known poet over there, and she taught at School for the Deaf for years. She read my poems, and [said] "hmp!" I haven't done a poem since then, but here it is. (Laughs)

"The plan to push the Navy squeegees,
The sun is studied in Tuskegee.
Jimmy and George mix, I cannot kin.
One carved Washington likes good men,
One is Washington Carver, or has been.
I try to keep it straight, then when nuke and peanut signers
Mix me to peanut South and science, what'll I do?"

(Laughter) We used to quote, after the war, sometimes at our conventions, Emily [Edna] St. Vincent-Millay:

“Down, down, into the darkness of the grave,
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind,
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave,
I know, but I do not approve, and I am not resigned.”

And Ray Zuker, he was that bomber pilot. He’s in my writing group. [Ray Zuker was a pilot, based in England during the war. After 1945 he settled in Knoxville and worked as a businessman. Mr. Zuker passed away in 2001.]

TINSLEY: Yeah, I know Ray. Yeah, I know him. He writes, you know, he’s written some stories.

ODOM: Yeah, he and I both got in the fifty plus, and he’s got a little book he just autographed.

TINSLEY: Right, I’ve got a copy of it. Yeah, Ray’s a nice guy.

ODOM: Yeah, he’s got some good stories.

TINSLEY: Yeah, he gets his group together every year.

ODOM: Yeah, I went to that a couple times over there at the Hyatt, after the parade. I usually wear my uniform to the parade.

TINSLEY: We have a Hawk pilot’s convention every year.

ODOM: Oh, you do?

TINSLEY: Yeah, a couple years ago it was in Atlanta and I went down. But like you say, those stories sure grow horizontal, and one’s stealing from the other. (Laughter)

ODOM: And yours probably grow up and down, too. (Laughs)

TINSLEY: Yeah, that’s the truth.

ODOM: Yeah, they’ll steal each other’s stories.

TINSLEY: I believe we’ve got about everything.

ODOM: Anything else you can ask me?

TINSLEY: Well, you’ve just about got them all real good. Let’s see, let’s put this thing off.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----