Charles R. Thomas, Jr. oral history interview

Signalman, Third Class, United States Navy
World War II – Pacific Theater

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Extent: 1:02:14; transcript (19 pages)

Abstract:
Charles R. Thomas Jr. discusses his service in the Navy during World War II. He talks about his prior military training and his training at the Bainbridge company boot camp unit. He describes the late 1944 LCS-37 firing accident. He shares his experiences during the Battle of Okinawa and Battle of Iwo Jima. Thomas outlines the rough circumstances of Pacific theater service, including limited amenities, 48-hour shifts, and the paramount importance of detecting camouflaged Japanese guns.

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	Cinebar Productions
Abstract by:	Aaron Rodriguez, VWM Volunteer

Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: Okay. First thing we'll have you do is spell your name, last name first.

Thomas: Okay. Thomas, T-H-O-M-A-S. Charles, C-H-A-R-L-E-S. Randolph, R-A-N-D-O-L-P-H. And I'm a junior because my father was a World War One veteran, so I better, had the same name.

Interviewer: Now we'll do branch of service, rank and serial number.

Thomas: Okay. I was in the Navy, US Navy. But now, during the war, they were all naval reserve, 99% of them. So, the USNs were regulars, but the whole fleet was manned by reservists on active duty. And I was a signalman, third class... and 9317774.

Interviewer: Let's start right at the beginning. Tell me why you joined up, why the Navy, what your parents said, what was going on at the time? That whole going in process.

Thomas: Well, you know, Pearl Harbor day, I think I was 16, but I wanted to join the Marines or the Navy or anybody that would take me, but my parents would not… you had to have a signed by their parents before they'd take you. And so, I've struggled in high school and sloughed off work and really, really had a poor performance based on... I could see, couldn't see much connection and high school and what I wanted really wanted to be doing. And my mother got me a deferment to finish high school, and I did finish, and I went down to the draft board and volunteered for the draft. And so, they sent me away at the next one and I was inducted on January 31st, 1944.

Interviewer: So, you didn't actually pick the Navy? They picked the Navy for you?

Thomas: We were processed at Camp Croft, South Carolina. And at that time, theoretically, you could pick your branch of service, as a draftee. Army, the Marines always needed some needed people. The Navy and Coast Guard were, they would usually fill up their quotas. And I happened to hit it at the right time. And I had the opportunity of passing through a training area while we were being examined.

And all of the soldiers told me to be sure that whatever I did, don't join the Army. So, I figured the Navy did not have to do too much marching with field packs and all that. So.

Interviewer: So where did they send you for boot camp?

Thomas: Bainbridge, Maryland, Company 40-56.

Interviewer: What was that experience like being away from home and just what was that whole thing like?

Thomas: Well, I'd had a little experience, because I was sent out of town to graduate from high school. So, I had that experience of living away from home and I was used to being on my own, I guess. And about the first day, the company, there was a boot company organized there in the winter and the winter, you know, cold. And they organized the company into three platoons. And then, the chief who was, we didn't call him a DI, but he was that's what later they call him, Dis, but he was a chief petty officer and he was our company drill, drill man and whatever they called him. And he asked for people who'd had previous military experience to step, take one step forward. Well, I'd been in the George Washington High School, Danville, Military Corps. They organized a military corps during the war. And so I knew how to close order drill. And I'd also been in the Virginia Protective Force. Most people never heard of that, but that was the governor's militia organized after the National Guard was federalized. And our job was, I guess, to quell any civil unrest, but our weapons were double barreled shotguns, and our uniform was like kind of kind of like a gray state trooper, but with the four and a half cap, you know.

So, I knew how to close order drill. And so, they picked me to be the third platoon leader. And so, we were not, we were, we were boots too. But the whole company was organized with boot officers. They had a company commander and had adjutant, and we had three platoon leaders. And it may have been some other officers, but I was a platoon leader of Platoon Three. And so, our job was to teach them drilling under the watchful eye, of course, of the chief. We taught them how to drill. And the Navy is not too strong on drilling anyway, but we would march

them to chow and to different classes and so forth. But boot camp was pretty short, and I believe it was five weeks. And that, that... my experience in boot camp was not, not a hard experience at all. I was the one doing the yelling.

Interviewer: Now, when you got through that first five weeks, where did they send you then and what did you do?

Thomas: During, during boot camp, they gave us all the tests, you know, to aptitude test and see try to place them as much as possible with where you would be fitted, you know. And I'm a pretty good test taker. And so, they asked me what I wanted to do and I said, "I'd like to be on the guns. I want to shoot some Japs." And they said, "Well, how about Gunner's Mate school?" I said, "Well, that sounds good to me." So, my, out of my boot company, had only about 150 men, only about ten of us were sent to school. And that was also in Bainbridge. The rest of them went went to sea and most of them went on a single destroyer, *USS Cooper* that was sunk in about ten months later in the Philippines battle out there by, by a Japanese submarine. And I've never heard from any of those people. Never seen any of them can hardly remember the names, you know. But I went to went to Gunner's Mate School there in Bainbridge, and that was a 12-week school. And we studied all of the… everything from small arms to the five-inch, 38. That was the biggest gun we got on.

Interviewer: How long was that?

Thomas: 12 weeks. We would, we would be, we'd take a week on each gun. And at the end of the week, we had an examination. You had a written examination, you know, multiple choice and that sort of thing. But then, the hardest part was the practical exam. They would, the instructors would rig some malfunction in the gun and you had to find it and had pretty good incentive to, because if, if you didn't pass the test, you didn't get liberty for that weekend. And we would go to Baltimore and Washington and Philadelphia. New York was off limits. They had a 50-mile limit on how far you could go. And but, if you fail one of those weekly tests, you not only didn't get to, go on liberty, it was strike one on if you, if you had failed a second one, you were out of the school. So, that was pretty good incentive. I

managed to get through all those. But, but, but later, later that... I'll tell you about how that worked out.

Interviewer: Okay. Then, after gunnery school, where?

Thomas: Well, as Gunner's Mate School, we actually went to Gunnery, Gunnery School at Fort Pierce, Florida. The Navy took over Hutchinson Island down there and early in the war, and they were training LCS crews at the, the gunnery crews, and that was the kind of ship that I later served on. They also had an outfit called a Scouts and Raiders, and they also had the underwater demolition teams being trained there. And but, the biggest group of people there were the people learning how to operate this small landing craft like LCVPs and LCMs. Those smaller craft that you see hauling stuff to the beach, you know. That was the biggest group. Our group was, we were not, we were about the smallest group in the, on the, on the group. And there wasn't much intermingling between the various groups. Matter of fact, we kind of avoided the, the, the Scouts and Raiders and the UDT men, because we we figured anybody that was crazy enough to volunteer for that wasn't, wasn't too good. They didn't, they didn't call them half fish and half nuts for nothing, you know.

Interviewer: What was Fort Pierce like in the war?

Thomas: Fort Pierce, at that time, was just a small eastern, east Florida town. That Fort Pierce, I think that was during the Seminole War. So, the fort had long gone, you know, and but it's right along the beach, the eastern side, east coast of Florida... Vero Beach, Daytona Beach, Melbourne, West Palm Beach, in that line. So, it was pretty crowded. You'd go into town, and it'd be nothing but sailors on the, on the streets. And the, one of the, you can go to the movies if you could get in. And I'd never been around the bars very much. And I had some friends who had been. And so, we hung around the bars pretty good. And, and they... I don't want to tell too much here, but, but it was it was it was quite an experience. You know, I never, I never been, been around bars in my life, you know.

Interviewer: There you were.

Thomas: But the training... you want me to go into the training a little bit? The training that we had was mostly anti-aircraft identification. I mean, that was the main thrust of it. They figured we already knew enough about guns, which we did. And what we had hours and hours of aircraft identification where they would flash a slide on the... silhouette, they really were… silhouette on the screen for a thousandth of a second and you're supposed to tell what kind of plane it was, and whether it was friendly or an enemy. And not only that, but to identify what kind of aircraft it was. And so, the Navy didn't want us firing at friendly aircraft too much. So, the other part of it was physical training, PT and judo and log, tossing logs and running and all that kind of stuff. It was hot, it was really hot. And it was, we lived right on the beach, like if, we thought we were Marines where we lived there and lived in tents with, with the sand fleas. And we also swam at night. And after the recent shark attacks and advice not to swim at night. We used to swim every night, because we're right on the beach. And after the, after things quieted down, we'd go and get take a swim, you know.

Interviewer: So, when you got through there, where did they send you?

Thomas: We went to Norfolk and, oh, we did have some gunnery training in the last, about the last week of it down there at Fort Pierce. We went to a, had a gunnery area set up about eight or nine miles down the island. And so, we would go down there and fired everything the Navy had up to a five-inch, 38. And so, that was the first actual experience that we'd ever had, we'd had firing, you know, the guns, various guns, you know. But we'd fired automatic pistols and they had a grease gun, a .45 automatic gun called a grease gun that it was... had Thompson submachine guns, too. But the grease guns, I don't know whatever happened to those things. They were look, they really looked like a grease gun, but they fired the ACP .45, you know, so... but, I don't, don't remember anybody wearing hearing protection, even, even the instructors. And the sounds of the, I think, the one that bothered me the most was the .45 pistols, being all standing in a line firing those pistols. And I mean, that was the sound was brutal. I found out that on the larger guns, the closer you are to the gun, the easier, easier the sound is on you.

If you're behind it, that is. But then, we left there and... we also had gas masks, training. And then, we went to Norfolk by train. And it was the train system was

in pretty bad shape in this country then, because they had resurrected every old car they could find, you know, for transportation. But we rode up to Norfolk and went on the *USS Wyoming.* It had been a battleship during the World War One, but they had converted it to a training gunnery training ship. I don't think it was classified as a, as a, as a battleship then, but it had a marine detachment on it and had, you know, hundreds of trainees on it. And we would go out in the Chesapeake Bay and fire at aircraft targets all day long and stay out there. We stay out, come in on Friday afternoon. So, I was on there about three weeks, I believe, but I found out that living on a big ship is quite different from living on a, on a, on a base or in a, on, on land... was really, really crowded on those things.

Interviewer: Now, what was it like being on those big ships?

Thomas: Well, they had us, the, the right many, the trainees that I was with, we came aboard about 4:00 in the morning after nobody would, nobody could feed us, you know, after this long ride up from Florida. And we would, we never did get any chow that night. We finally got in to the ship at about 4:00 in the morning and went aboard. And they directed us to go below. And so, we went below and later we found out we were, our bunks were in the barbettes. And the barbettes on big ships like that, that's what the turret, up on the top side, it rolls, it rolls on that. And it's about 15in of steel. So, a cylindrical thing. and they had cut that, converted those into all, the ammunition hoists and all that come up through those barbettes and what, they had taken all those out and they had replaced the, I believe, the *Wyoming* had 11-inch guns originally, but they had replaced those with five-inch anti-aircraft type guns, dual purpose. And what they had, the beds in there, I guess, must have been ten high. You know, you'd have to just climb up them, you know. And but, it was crowded, you know, the whole thing was crowded, and the Marines were yelling at us and we had lots of, “Now, hear this,” and, “Sweepers man your brooms,” and it was it was, it was quite an experience.

Then, we went to Solomons, Maryland. And at that time, Solomons was the, one of the larger amphibious training bases on the on the East Coast, and it's on the Chesapeake Bay at where the Patuxent River comes in. Patuxent River Naval Air Station is right across the river from it. And but, they had hundreds and hundreds of amphibious ships there then, and they, also they, they taught, they did amphib

training, they called it there. And we had all that down at Fort Pierce. So, we had gunnery, that's where the gunnery group came together with the rest of the people that were going to man our ship, you know. And I forgot one thing we were identified at, at Fort Pierce as LCS Crew 35. Well, none of us knew what an LCS was. Nobody, none of us had ever heard of it. And the questions, we found out that means Landing Craft, Support. That still didn't mean anything. So, we were actually, we were the gunnery crews and the LCS... don't know about it, must have been 25 or 30 of us in our, in our group. We had eight... we had 18 go down from Bainbridge in the class went from down to to Fort Pierce where we joined a bunch of men right out of boot camp. Naturally, we considered ourselves variously superior in all ways. But they were, our whole group was about 30 when we got to the Solomons, and that's where we joined the communications group.

All the officers, we had a gunnery officer… he was down in Fort Pierce with us, but he was the only officer, ship's officer we'd seen. And we found the captain who was a lieutenant, JG, 24 years old, and we trained on the LCS 1. And we made rocket runs, simulated, on Virginia Beach. And the way they did those we made landings would go in and beach on the… of course, the ship and the LCS is 158ft long. Had the same hull that an LCI had but configured differently below and topside and everywhere. We, our purpose was strictly for, to provide gunfire support. Previous to landings… and we will stay in close after the landing and providing what they call “call fire.” That's what we were trained for. And. LCIs had had a same length, 158ft. They were carried troops, mostly, and they had a crew of 20 men. Our ship had a crew of 70, in the same space, with large spaces for food and ammunition and water. And it was always pretty crowded. But I'm getting ahead of the story. After the training at all, we trained on the US, on the, on the USS LCS 1, one, number one. And the crew of that ship watched us. You know, they trained them how to, you know, tie up and cast off and into engine room group was down in the engine room and the communications people were in their places.

And the captain of our, and his name was Kenneth C. Huff. And I'm still in touch with him, by the way, and on email. But, but that was the first time we'd ever seen him or any of the other officers. And he got the crew together for the, first time the crew had been assembled, I guess, in the in the crew's mess quarters. And

also, there was, it was the largest open area in the whole in the whole ship. But he got, we all crammed in some kind of way. And he made a speech about, you know, how we'd had good training and best was expected of us and we'd all to pull together and make a good crew and all that. So, and with that, he was gone. And so, but then, we went from there to Portland, Oregon where the ships were being built out there. And this was about August, late, late August of 1944. And see, all that time I'd been to boot camp and service school and gunnery training and all that, you know. But we were, at this point, we were getting ready to have our ship, get a ship. And so. We drove these troop sleepers from Washington, DC, to Portland, Oregon, and they were in no hurry to get us there.

I don't know where, I don't know where all we went to, but we went up, you know. You know, without a map, you don't know where you are, you know. And much of the Midwest looked exactly the same to me. But it was on that, the ship's officers used that time to assign men to various functions and get up a watch bill, I believe they called it. And that's when I found out that I was not assigned to the gunnery division. And that reason I wasn't, I'd never known that. But they sent 18 of us out of that same class to the same ship that had complement for eight gunner's mates. And at Solomons, we had, joined by two rated gunner's mate at that point, more experienced fellows, you know. So, that cut it down to six slots. One of the, one of the slots went to a one of the men who had not even been to Gunner's Mate School. And the rest of it was put in the deck division. Now, I don't know whether the officers picked, passed me over, because my name was far down the alphabet or my grades in schools were middling, I'd say. As soon as I found out that a gunner's mate was a gun mechanic, and you kept greasy hands all the time, I kind of lost interest in it. Well, other people do the shooting, too, I found out. The gunner's mates serve as gun captains and it’s their job to maintain it, you know. And as, as they told us in Gunner's Mate School the, you got with the amount of steel, fine steel, I guess, you got two enemies. What, what rust, what rust will do, it’s rust... salt water and salt air would do to good metal. It says you only got two defenses. Excuse me. Not two defenses... you got only one defense, and that is put grease on the gun, plenty. Can't overdo it, he said, “It's like making love to a widow. You can't overdo it.”

So, but anyway, so, I found myself assigned to the deck division, which meant that I would be regular seamen handling the lines and that sort of stuff. And I thought I was, they made it very clear in Gunner's Mate School that the Navy didn't want to waste their training money on people not doing their job, you know, not going to be assigned to it. And also, we, and when we came out of school, we were promoted. I was seaman first class at that point, which is about third grade, I guess. And the, oh, we also had a, in brackets after my name, GM, signifying Gunner's Mate School, see, that I was a graduate of a Class A school. So, so, I had that. It was in the Bureau of Personnel, I had that GM on my name, which will come into the story later. But anyway, I was put into the deck division and the coxswain was a gentleman from Portland, Maine, who took an instant dislike to me, I guess, because I maybe complained a little bit. And also, he thought anybody from south of Baltimore had never had shoes on. But one day they had me, after the ship was commissioned and we were in Portland there for about a month while the ship was being finished. And so, at the end of a month, we put the ship in commission.

And from that point on, we lived aboard the ship. And they, you know, took on supplies and ammunition and checked out the compasses and all that out in the Willamette River right there at Portland. But during that time at Portland was when I was having a hard time with our coxswain. And so, I found out one day, accidentally, that one of the signalmen wanted to, didn't want to be a signalman. He told me he'd been to signal school, but he told me, he said, “I don't want to be up here with the officers. You've got to, you've got to be, you’re up there too close to the officers. And they were forever asking me what the what the message is, right while I'm trying to take it,” you know. And he said, “I'd rather be a seaman.” So I said, “Well, would you want to swap position with me?” He said, “Well, if they'll let me, I will.” So, we go down to see the first lieutenant who is the deck, in charge of the deck division. And we ask him, and he said, Well said, “It’s all right with me.” He said, “I've got a seaman either way.” And so, they said, “Just go see the communications officer, Mr. Stewart.” So, Stewart looked at me and. And he said, “You know, signals?” And I said, “No, sir, but I believe I can learn.” And he said, “Well said. And I don't want this man in my, somebody doesn't want to be in my division. I'd rather have somebody that wants to be in my division.” And I said, “Well, that's me.” He said, “Can you spell opportunity?” I spelled it

for him. But then the captain of the ship decided that he was going to learn signals better than the signalman. He wanted to be able to read the messages himself. And so, he didn't want to take one of the trained signalmen and work with them. So he figured he would learn himself and teach me at the same time. So, every afternoon a call would come for me to come up and practice with the captain. So, that met with a lot of scorn from my shipmates, you know.

They, they wanted... I didn't have much choice. And also, I remembered the kind words of the coxswain when I told him that I was transferring to the signals. And I can't make that quote right here, but we don't want to have to. You'd have to edit it. But he, he told me, I'd be back. He didn't. That was, that was the… words to that effect. So, I learned signals. The condition I had of getting in and being accepted in the signals was, I had to learn how to stand or watch on my own in 60 days. So, that meant learning, not only the Morse code, the blinker lights, semaphore, those were the two flags, and it also had flag hoist. That's why you see the flags running up the ship. Well, that was the easiest one of the bunch. You had to learn to learn all the flags and the numbers and, but you had a big code book. You'd look them up and you'd get a... but each flag by itself means, means something by itself. For example, the Baker flag, the red Baker, the B flag, means dangerous activity, loading ammunition, taking on fuel or something like that. So, when you see the Baker flying, you know that, oh, we fired at targets sleeves, you know, aircraft, drone sleeves, we'd be flying the Baker flag. But a whole string of flags, you look **i**t up in the code book, you know.

But the Morse code, and it had, you had to use it in blinker, you know, with the signal lights. And so, I caught on to it fairly quickly. But I was, you know, a lot of the messages are routine, a lot of routine stuff going on. And you know, request permission to come alongside and all that kind of stuff, you know, and affirmative and negative and port side, too, and whatever. So, I learned how to do those pretty well... **w**ell enough. I made the, I made the deadline. Now, I don't know how detailed you want me to be in all this.

Interviewer: Well, now, what was the date at this point?

Thomas: That one ship was commissioned on October 3rd, today, that's right, 1944.

Interviewer: And when it was commissioned where did it go?

Thomas: Well, we went, after the, getting the ship provisioned and all that, we went down to San Diego for more sea training, you know, and went down the coast. And that was the first... none of our… when we set, set sail there from Portland, none of the officers had ever been to sea, including the captain. He'd been on, he'd been a co-captain, I didn't know that at the time, but he'd been, he had at his early career, was at Yorktown Mine Center down there, and he'd been the co-captain of an oiler that never went any further than Chesapeake Bay, you know, mostly around the yard there, you know.

Interviewer: And here you are charging down the Pacific.

Thomas: So, here we are going down to, well, the, with an ensign who was an insurance man here from Richmond. And but, he was, he was a conning the ship. And I'm up there with him. And, and I had a lot of trouble, I had trouble with seasickness when I first, first went on the thing. And I was sick at least two days. So, but after **t**hat, I kind of got my sea legs again and I, I got them. I never... I have a tendency to motion sickness. Anyway, I didn't think about that when I joined the Navy. But anyway, we, we went down with another ship, another LCS 36, who was commissioned right behind us. And so, we were leading the way, and off the Oregon coast there they have a lot of shallow water that extends pretty good ways off the coast. So, the captain was worried about running aground. And one of the LCS was lost during the war, was, was hit one of those reefs out there and was ruined, you know, and they had, they had to just scratch it, you know. And so, everybody was pretty nervous. And one of our men was, had some kind of illness. And we had one doctor on the, I mean, not a doctor, he was a medical, you know, a pharmacist mate. And he was our medical person. And so, he got him put ashore at, at San Francisco. But we made it down there and spent... **a**nd that was, I guess November, late October, we were in San Diego. And through all of November and most of December, training off, off California at some of those islands that, around San Clemente and those islands, not San Clemente, but they got a whole lot of other islands around out there. And we used them for target ranges. And it

would make these rocket runs on the beach. And as we understand... beginning to dawn on us that this may not be a too good a place to be in, you know.

And the ship was made out of this quarter inch steel, you know, it didn't have any armor. It had armament, but no armor. And I think this thing only had was the shields in front of the 20mm, you know, so. We would make those rocket runs and fire on on these islands and it was pretty barren on those islands where it wasn't Inhabited. And they decided to make a training film. And we were the, our ship was the star. And they were, you know, filmed us going through all of the motions. And that's where I got those, those Navy photos, you know. But they, let's see, now... we, we spent, our ship was not only that organized with in a division of ships. And we had six ships and now, the same kind of ships, in our division. Anyway, we set out from San Diego to Pearl Harbor in December, early December. Took us two weeks to get there, and that was the first open sea voyage we had. But the officers had learned a lot during that time, including how to how to go in column and do flanking movements and all that at night with no lights on. And that's kind of a hazardous undertaking for somebody that's not too sure where they're going. And so...

Interviewer: When Pearl looked. Like when you got there.

Thomas: Well, you know, we're all looking. That was the that was we were there in early December. It almost about three years after the, that, right… three years, yeah, after the Pearl Harbor attack. And I remember a lot of us looking for signs of damage and all that. But if they had it, we couldn't see it. And because they were fully operational by that time. And they put us in West Lock. And West Lock is sort of like Siberia. Most of the amphibious forces went to West Lock. Water was shallower there. And also, it was a, farthest away from Honolulu and all that. But we, and we practiced more and a lot more around there. We'd go out every night, and stay out two or three, maybe, two or three days and then come back in and refuel and replenish and all that. And we had, we added on a, had some work done on the ship. They added some things. And we went into that, into Honolulu, right up to the Aloha Monument. If you've ever been there, it's about at the foot of King Street, and we were tied up there to getting the work done. And I spent Christmas there of 1944. We was tied up at that dock. And then, they, we heard

rumors that there were a big invasion was coming up, but we didn't know when or where or how much or what, you know. But we were still training off to Hawaii. It was one of the Hawaiian Islands we were bombarding, too, and I can't pronounce it right now, Kalului, Kahului or something like that. But it's one of the little, small islands in that chain and. So, we spent days out there doing that.

Then also firing at sleeves, sleeves drawn by aircraft, would come over to the ships. And we had an accident. We were firing at a sleeve coming, coming over... pull, pulling from port to starboard or vice versa. And the ships are in a column, and they're all firing at it. And when they said, cease fire. They got on, the gun director had all these guns for a gun director control, brought the gun around to face up through the column and not realizing that there was still a live round. It was a 40-millimeter gun, you know, with a, about that big and a shell about that long. And it was an anti-aircraft gun, and it was, it fired in clips. And you had a, each, first one in every clip was sand loaded. The rest of them were high explosive. You know, for anti-air, it was a preset range that they went off, they exploded. 4,200 yards, I believe it was. And the, the gun fired and went missed several ships in the column, but it went right into the conning tower of the LCS 37, right about three ships above us, there. And it, it was fortunate that it was not a high explosive. It was one out of four chance, you know, that it was sand loaded. And so, the projectile just came in through the door and open... it was an open conning tower. Came in, and had a back door to it, steel door, like a Dutch door. When it came through that, and it was one of the quartermasters was standing at it. He lost his leg on it, because we never we never knew about that. They never saw him after that. And they had a, you know, inquiry and they ruled that it was an accident, you know, and all that. So, but 37 was, was separated from us at that time. And later joined us. So, anyway, getting back to the invasion, and we left and left Pearl Harbor in January, early January going by Eniwetok and on into Saipan. At Eniwetok at water is just as clear as a bell. We were swimming over the side, you know, and the Pacific sailors were not afraid of sharks, but we were afraid of barracudas. And they always had somebody up topside with a, with a rifle, you know, in case they saw anything in the water. But you could dive down in that salt water and see the whole ship suspended up above you.

And but then, we went to Saipan. And at Saipan and Tinian was when they were having a heavy B-29 raids over Japan and they were having those thousand plane raids over Japan at that time. And coming into anchorage at Saipan, and Tinian is off to your port. And the B-29s were taking off over the, coming out, flying right over our column. And they were fully loaded, you know, on the way to Japan. And it might have been one of those thousand plane raids, I don't know, but it was in the sky as far as you could see. And, and suddenly, one, one of them blew up on the on the runway with a full bomb load. And, I mean, it, it... within a few seconds, the crew, had a crew of 13. They were, they were, their mothers wouldn't recognize them. So, but after a few minutes, they started taking off again. But on Saipan, we, we trained around that. We trained with the Marines, dropped them off at night. No, we, our job was not carrying troops, but we trained to do it and putting them off in the middle of the night. And Tinian town and places the officers went and how deep the water was and had a lot of trouble going aground. But, but then, on about the. 15th of February, oh, we heard that there was going to be an invasion on Iwo Jima. We'd never heard of it. And so, it was the place. And matter of fact, that had been kind of bar talking around in Honolulu. You could, you could… the people were talking about Iwo Jima, you know. It was supposed to have been a top secret, you know. And on the way Eniwetok, the captain had the orders, all the map charts and all that, of Iwo Jima, and he let all the crew come in and take a look at it and had it spread out in the chart room. And some sub, American submarine had been up there too, and laying off the off the island, you know, for I don't know how long for, taking photographs through the periscope and all that.

And they had pinpointed gun emplacements all, all over the place. And there was only one place really suitable for a landing. And so, they had all these gun emplacements plotted. It later turned out, they had plotted about a third of them, you know, maybe a fourth, I don't know. But they did have a, have a have a lot of them zeroed in on that chart. So, we, most of us were beginning to get the idea that this may not be too much fun, you know, So, and because we were supposed to lead the first, go in before the first wave and shoot up the beach and all that. So, we left Saipan about 15th of February, in, in a big convoy of LSTs and loaded down with Marines, they were they were all up on the top side and down in the tank. I mean, most of the equipment, they were carrying, all the equipment there.

The Marines, you know, the bulk of them were being carried by what they call APAs. They were transports. And but these, these LSTs were carrying, you know, the amphibious tanks and all this, you know, the whole. everything on the ship was loaded down. And so, we got there on February the 19th, and that was the day that they made the landing. And the night before, we could see all the flashes... big ships had gone up there and they had been bombarding it for about three days. And but, we could see the flashes and the, you know, like heat lightning on the horizon, you know. And the closer we got, the more you could see them.

And they let us take our water on the LCS. And a lot of ships that fresh water is precious, very scarce, and you just can't take a shower anytime you want to. You take a saltwater shower, but you only take one of those, you know, you're left so sticky, and everything doesn't do any good. But they let us all take a shower the night before we were going to make the landing the next day. And they said that the word was that that would help prevent infection and all that, in case anybody was wounded. Well, so, we, we, we approached, and we went right through. We saw Mount Suribachi off to the left. And, you know, the main beaches were right ahead of it, dead ahead of us. And we as we steamed through the our column, went through the all the transports and the LSTs and all those. And then, we got to a row of battleships that were firing, you know. And after we passed them, they were firing right over our heads, you know, so**.** And it was, you know, very little fire, if any, coming from the beach. You know, we were, we didn't know that, you know, somebody had, and I'd been seeing the newsreels and the movies at home, you know, people, they always shot from the beach, you know. So, but we were not, we were not getting into fire, though. We were expecting it any second.

So, we went in and 90 minutes ahead of the first wave and made our rocket run. There was supposed to be in gasoline drums buried in the sand along where the Marines were going to land. And our rockets were supposed to set those off. Well, if there were any there... but we hit the target now. We hit right where they were supposed to be. And so... and then, we made, I believe, three, three rocket runs before the first wave. Then we went down, and we got about. 800 yards off the beach and turned broadside to the beach to provide... the Marines were coming on with their amtracs. You know, the first three waves when amtracs, amphibious

tanks. And when they passed us, that's when all of us were glad we joined the Navy, you know. They passed right close by us, you know. And, you know, some of them were shaking their fists. And others, others**,** others were giving us the "V" signal. And but, we knew that they were going to be in for it in a very few minutes, you know, so. But still nothing. No, no… a few mortars, you know, would come out and a few splashes in there, but nothing, nothing serious. And but, about the time the Marines got on the beach is when they started, when they really cut loose at them. And so, they were…. our job after that was to provide call fire, they called it. And we would go in close to the beach as we could get. And we had a Marine major was on one of our ships and he was in radio contact with some spotters on the on the beach, you know. So, he would tell us, give us targets to shoot at. And also, we had fired at targets of opportunity, they called them. So, we would see them haul, a gunner would come out, we'd see a gun fire. It was hard. The Japs were, they were great at camouflage and they, you would see the gun fire. That'd be the first time you'd see it. And then, you could if you looked real quickly, you could see him hauling a gun back. And we found out later that some things were mounted on railroad tracks, some of them.

But we spent our time trying to, trying to spot those, those guns, you know. At one I guess at one point there, we, we caught a platoon size of Japanese soldiers. You didn't see them. And they weren't there. And I thought after the pre-invasion bombardment, I said, no, no way in the world anybody could be living over there. But they were still very much alive. And so, we spent our time trying to spot those gun emplacements. And I started to tell you, we caught a platoon size of Japanese soldiers in the open, running up a ravine, going up. And so, we managed to land quite a few 40mm right among them, you know. So, I know we killed quite a few of them, but at least we never saw that bunch again. So, and we put out one machine gun nest and, you know, for sure, you know. You know, you're finding all these things, you don't know what you're hitting anything or not, you know.

Interviewer: Was Iwo Jima sort of the biggest campaign? Was that the, I mean, was that the biggest one you did?

Thomas: No, Okinawa. Better get on with it, huh? Anyway, we, we did call fire for about two, 48 hours. And no sleeping, no eating, no anything… just grabbing what you

could grip, you know. And reloading... we fired up all our ammunition a dozen times and go alongside other ships. They were supposed to be 12 LCI-Gs, they were forerunners of the ship I was on… converted LCIs, they made gunboats out of them. And there were supposed to be 12 of them to go and join us on the landing day, but they didn't show up. And we found out later that they had gone in on the 17th of February and put ashore, put them and put the UDT people out. And they told us to put a radio team ashore now. And where they went to, I don't know. But those ships were shot up, badly shot up. Out of the, out of the 12 there, they had lost one. And they had, I think, the captains of all the rest of them got Navy Crosses, except one of them got a Congressional Medal. So, those ships were not, didn't show up with us. We didn't know all that, of course. And we went alongside of them, one, one of them that still had plenty of ammunition to load, 40-millimeter ammunition. And you're alongside at night, you know, and his ships were banging back and forth the rough water in there. And that's when I saw what heavy artillery would do to quarter inch metal. Those LCIs were in bad shape.

So, that didn't help my nerves at all. But, but we, we made after two days, we did salvage. They tried to make salvage ships out of us pulling stuff off the beach. The whole beach was littered with wreckage of small, you know, LCVP, jeeps, tanks, you name it, all. And that sand was real soft and they would sink into the sand. And so, the waves were just breaking all through all this wreckage and these LCVPs coming in with, and other ships, too, other, other craft trying to land equipment and more troops and supplies and all that were being damaged by that wreckage in, in the water. You know, just it was so thick, there wasn't, wasn't any place. And so, they hooked us. We tried to pull some of that off, but we soon found out that our ship was not, that wasn't what it was designed to do, you know. And so, then, they put us out, oh, and we were that was about the third day. And they had not gotten, they were still after the first, top of the first hill. They were still jumping one hole to another. And, and right down in front of us were, there was an aid station, and I bet you there was probably 150 dead Marines down there. And, you know, they had them covered up with ponchos and things and that. And the field aid station there was really, you know, had a line of people working on them, you know, So, that was kind of unnerving, I'd say. So they sent us...

Interviewer: And out of all this, I mean, the next one was even bigger.

Thomas: Oh, yeah, yeah. But we spent a good, several next several days on, you know, patrolling around looking for small craft drifting out to sea and that kind of... had a few air raids there, but they were not anything severe. And, and we rescued one. A, a barge that two SeaBees on it. And we got them in tow, and we towed them back to the anchorage. Their engine had quit on the thing, and we told them back to the anchorage and nobody would take them. So, they told us, go back and take them back out to sea. Well, that's, that was a pretty ungainly tow. So, but during the night we collided with a big LSD, and they are big, you know, five, 600ft long, you know. And anchored out there in the darkness. And we glanced off of it. And that's a long story. But then, we went back to, the after that was over, we went back to the Philippines, this Tacloban area, Leyte and Samar. And it was hot there. It was cold. And Iwo Jima was cold. You know, we'd been in the tropics so long. And you look at it on the map, it's yeah, you know, it's down 45, 50. You know, you stand out there a while in 50 degrees, you get cold, you know. So, down below all of the where the water tanks and things were right below the decks and they were warm and then the cold air was called causing, causing it to condense on just everything was slippery and sliding, you know. So, but anyway, we we excuse me.

Interviewer: We're going to have to bring you back. You know that.

Thomas: Okay. All right. Okay. I'll be glad to do it. Good. I got a whole lot. I got a whole lot more to say.

Interviewer: This is really good. It's good stuff. I mean, this is... because you do you got a lot. You got…

Thomas: Yeah, we have. We had we had a time at Okinawa that was a much worst experience for us at, at Okinawa. Not, not the landing, but we had to do... the landing was nothing. But we didn't know that at the time, you know. But they had us doing radar picket with the destroyers about had 16 stations set up around the, you know, at each point of the compass around the island, about 60 miles, 50 or

60 miles out. And we would go out and be two LCSs, in the beginning there would be two LCSs and one destroyer. And you'd get out there on station and you'd go one direction for half an hour and then you'd do 180 degrees and go back the other way for half an hour. And so, that radar picket line had a… the, the Japanese would put, made all out attacks on them by once, by once a week they would come, come in there, you know.

Interviewer: What we're going to do is we're going to bring you back and take you from after this battle and then down to the Philippines where you did that. Okay. We'll bring you back up.

Thomas: Okay. All right. Great. All right. I was involved in three things. I had major things. We got three battle stars for it, one for Iwo Jima, one for Okinawa. And then after the war, we went a mine disposal group that was, we'd follow along behind the minesweepers. And when they'd cut them loose, we'd sink them, we'd explode them or sink them or whatever, you know.

Interviewer: We got that one, too. Okay, so, that's good.