

Robert Mitchell
LST 534 Crew Member

Robert: I am Robert Mitchell. I was on the LST 534 from the time it was commissioned until they decommissioned it.

Linda: What rank were you?

Robert: Motor Machinist, second class.

Linda: Were you a Motor Machinist when you first got on or was that....

Robert: No, I was when I first got on. 18, so that I didn't get drafted.

Linda: How old were you?

Robert: 18.

Linda: Tell me, you joined the Navy when?

Robert: One week before I was 18 so I wouldn't get drafted.

Linda: Where were you living then.

Robert: Spokane, Washington.

Linda: Did you know Duncan Robey?

Robert: No.

Linda: He came from your neck of the woods.

Robert: I thought he lived in Tacoma but I guess he lived in Yakama.

Linda: Where did you go to boot camp? I mean you went somewhere to an office in Spokane, Washington and signed up for the Navy and then what happened?

Robert: Well I actually signed up twice. I signed up in Spokane and then they took me to Cheney for a recruiting drive down there and I signed there too. But I went to Faring, Idaho for Boot Camp.

Linda: What do you remember about boot camp?

Robert: Standing out in the middle of the woods with a dummy rifle for hours on end.

Linda: And did you think oh my gosh what does this have to do with the Navy?

Robert: Yeah. Pretty hard to stand on water and guard it.

Linda: But you knew you were going into the Navy?

Robert: Oh yeah I was already in it.

Linda: So when you graduated, or whatever they call it out of boot camp, is that when you put on a train and sent to Evansville or did you get...

Robert: No, I went to the University of Illinois to diesel school. I think that was 6 months or three months something like that. I don't know. It wasn't very long.

Linda: Is that what you wanted or did they tell you

Robert: No I wanted to go on an aircraft carrier. I had already taken aircraft engine training before I went into the service. They told me after I got aboard the ship I could ask to go to an aircraft carrier. Every time I asked they just ignored it.

Linda: Laughed and said ha ha you are on an LST.

Robert: Yeah, we are building up the LSTs. You are on it.

Linda: So you ended up after diesel school then...

Robert: Then I went to Evansville. I think I got two weeks at home and then I had to come back and report in Evansville.

Linda: And you got there by train?

Robert: I think so, yeah.

Linda: You and about 100,000 other men going in there to get on LSTs.

Robert: I don't know how many of us there were but they had a few of them around.

Linda: Do you remember anything about Evansville, the weather when you got there or

Robert: No.

Linda: It would have to have been cold because the LST left around the first of January, around the tenth, to go down to New Orleans.

Robert: I don't remember. I went back to St. Paul, Minnesota for one winter and that has all run together now. I know it was lousy weather back there.

Robert: All your cold weather days are lumped together into don't talk about them, right? Do

you remember going down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

Robert: Well I remember hitting the bottom of the river a few times. Going on a sand bar. Opened fire on a flock of ducks on a riverbank. That's about all I can remember

Linda: Were you thinking what is happening to me. I am on board a ship that they...

Robert: I wasn't thinking too much about it. I was wondering where we were going but that is about it.

Linda: Where were you spending your days at that point, down in the engine room?

Robert: Yeah. I don't remember if it was four hours on and four hours off. Now I can't remember then.

Linda: Do you remember, who did you report to. Do you remember that?

Robert: No. I read the list of officers today, well some of them I recognized, others I didn't.

Linda: Alex Fielder got on in the Pacific. Alex Fielder wasn't on in the European Theater, was he? Alex Fielder, the engineering officer, he wasn't on in Europe was he?

Robert: I don't believe so. I think he was with us in the Pacific.

Linda: So the sequence of events was it got launched, sailed down to New Orleans, and you spent a couple of months down there doing practice runs and getting provisions.

Robert: We went to Pensacola. We took on food and stuff like that there. New Orleans I don't remember what we did there. We did a little fooling around. Playing with guns and that kind of stuff. But it is hard to remember.

Linda: Yeah, I know it is but you are doing pretty good, actually. You said you didn't remember anything and you are remembering some things. Do you remember going after Pensacola and getting in the convoy and going across to the...

Robert: No, we went to Rhode Island, loaded up with ammunition. I can't think of the town now.

Linda: Providence? I mean I don't remember that either.

Robert: No, it seems to me it had a red in it. The names was... anyway we loaded up with ammunition and then we joined the convoy. Did we go to Boston? I don't remember.

Linda: They did stop in Boston.

Robert: I was trying to think of where they loaded that LCT that we took across.

Linda: You know actually it is in the deck logs down there. It has been a while since I have read the deck logs. But you did, I think it was in Boston.

Robert: I know I have been to Boston. That was about the only time I could have been there I guess.

Linda: Yeah, I think it was then. Do you remember what happened in the convoy when you were going across?

Robert: Well we hit some pretty rough weather trying to go from the galley which was on the main deck down the ladder to the tables was like walking on air. Half the time you were, the stairs were straight up and down and you were hanging onto the roof of the entranceway in order to stay on the ladder.

Linda: How many times did you lose your food.

Robert: Do you mean spilling my tray or the other way?

Linda: Well both.

Robert: I never got seasick. I was lucky. I was one of the few that didn't. I don't know. But I imagine I spilled a few trays of food.

Linda: I heard some funny stories about when the cooks would make spaghetti. I have heard funny stories about trying to carry the spaghetti down the galley steps and also some stories about after you ate spaghetti what the topside looked like.

Robert. No I don't remember that.

Linda: Did you have good sleeping on 534? Did you sleep good?

Robert: Oh yeah, when it wasn't vibrating. Every time it would ride over a rough wave you would hear the throttle hit 1200 and then when the stern came down it would just shake.

Linda: That must of made you feel pretty good.

Robert: Oh yeah, you always knew it was still there.

Linda: You remember Captain Olsen?

Robert: Vaguely.

Linda: You had the two Captains on the 534, were Olsen and French.

Robert: Yeah.

Linda: Do you remember both of them?

Robert: Vaguely. But I never had too much to do with them. In fact, I am having a hard time remembering the engineering officers.

Linda: Coles. Was Coles an engineering officer?

Robert: That is when we went to Europe I think.

Linda: He is deceased I think. I don't think he is around anymore and I have not spoken to him or found him. Coles.

Who was your best friend on board the ship?

Robert: Probably him. Either him or Jorganson.

Linda: Jorganson is deceased but we found his daughter Francis and she is sending me pictures and writing me a story about what he told her about his time on board. So that is pretty cool, isn't it?

You got a letter from me, right? What happened that day?

Robert: My wife says you going to call her and I say sure. You sent the letter to the Veterans Administration but I think it was dated in February and it didn't get to me until what last month or the month before.

Linda: Yeah, I was beginning to think I never was going to get any of those letters back.

Robert: My wife was real happy. She wanted me to call right away. I put it off a couple of days.

Linda: Why did you put it off a couple of days?

Robert: I don't know. Just one of those things you do. No particularly reason. I often wondered where some of the guys were. Then after I talked to you I decided I was going to do what I could.

Linda: Well I appreciate that. When you were headed over to England in the convoy you said you remembered the bad weather. Do you remember getting attacked by the submarines.

Robert: Yeah, it seems to me like somebody said there were a couple of torpedoes that either went by us or under us or something. Somebody else was talking about a forest of periscopes out there and mainly scaring the hell out of all of us. And I know they got the ship along side of us. And I guess those were the ones that went by us. And I guess that is about all.

Linda: Do you remember when the ships beside you blew up and people were dying. Did you

see any of that?

Robert: I only knew about it because they were telling us over the telephone. I was down in the hole, I couldn't see nothing going on.

Linda: I just now thought of that perspective because if you are facing danger which that was danger, and you are able to look at it and access yourself that is one thing. I mean you face that danger one way but if you are down in the engine room or down below all you do, you are relying some communication of somebody who is seeing something somewhere else, that must be kind of scary.

Robert: I learned to smoke that night. I never got sick either. I don't know, somebody had a pack of cigarettes and we finished them up.

Linda: Do you smoke now?

Robert: No. I quit in 1955.

Linda: Good for you. It is not good for you smoking. When did the story about the ice on the inside of the ship happen? Did that happen in the convoy?

Robert: Yeah.

Linda: Tell me about that.

Robert: Well we were sent down to paint the shaft alleys and it was just cold outside and I don't remember – most I remember about it is getting a cheap drunk from paint fumes. I know the Captain was forget what they called it now, Captains Mast is that it.

Linda: Captains Mast, yes.

Robert: And he was going to have us all up for being drunk and then he found out what was going on and he dropped it. But I have been on better drunks than that one because that one made you sick.

Linda: But how did the ice get inside the ship?

Robert: Just from cold weather. Moisture. Plus there was a lot of water at the bottom of the alley.

Linda: If it froze the

Robert: It wasn't from sweat because none of us were working very hard.

Linda: Then you landed in London or over in Falmouth, England. Remember that day, landing in London, a foreign country.

Robert: Not really. Wasn't too impressed with the place. They drove on the wrong side of the street.

Linda: And you spent time there making practice runs and stuff and building up. You got there around March. D Day didn't actually happen until June so March, April and May you just...

Robert: Well I think they were practicing loading and unloading, and go out on short runs. I don't remember if we ever practiced hitting the beach in England or not. I don't think we did.

Linda: That was your purpose hit those beaches.

Robert: We were supposed to get in on a beach and get off the beach except we had a little trouble getting off the first time in France. The water was three hundred yards behind us.

Linda: You mean you were beached?

Robert: We were beached twelve hours I think it was.

Linda: What beach were you at do you remember?

Robert: I have tried to figure it out. All I know is we went in with the English and I don't remember what beach they were on.

Linda: You went into Gold Beach.

Robert: Gold?

Linda: With British troops.

Robert: There was a big cement building there. I don't remember what it was. I think it was a schoolhouse or something.

Linda: Do you remember the anxiety building up to D Day?

Robert: No.

Linda: Do you remember going over on June the 6th?

Robert: Well they left out of off the East, Southeast Coast of England. Ipswich, is that it?

Linda: Ipswch, uhuh.

Robert: I don't think any of us knew where we were going. Maybe some of them did, but I didn't. And the next thing I know I was sitting there off the beach in Normandy.

Linda: You were kind of lucky that you went into Gold Beach at the time that you did. You know the 534. Although a lot of people were, you know there were a lot of Army being shot down there. Have you seen the documentary?

Robert: I sent for it but I haven't seen it yet.

Linda: You are going to get to see it here. Do you remember being homesick.

Robert: No, I don't think so. I was always glad to get home but I don't think I was ever really what you would call homesick.

Linda: Christmas, 1944 you were in Europe in probably Falmouth or somewhere like that. Do you remember Christmas on board the ship that year.

Robert: No.

Linda: Because December 26th, the day after Christmas is when the 534 got its orders to go back to the United States.

Robert: I didn't know that either. All I know is we went back.

Linda: Well was that a happy day.

Robert: I suppose. I don't know.

Linda: Did you have a girlfriend back home that you wrote to or got letters from or anything.

Robert: Yeah, my wife.

Linda: Oh you were married then? Were you married then or did you marry her after you came home?

Robert: Well twice.

Linda: Well that's good. You are consistent.

When you got back to Hoboken. You know the 534 went into Norfolk and dropped off some people and stuff and then went up to Hoboken for repairs and re-outfitting. Do you remember going on leave or anything?

Robert: Yeah I think I went on a 30 day leave and when I came back they were putting wiring and that kind of stuff. I remember one of the electricians that was working on the wiring was standing there and a coil of wire was sitting there on the deck and he was waiting for somebody come and carry it down because he wasn't allowed to carry it and I kicked it down the hatch. He didn't like that.

Linda: You say here is how you get it down there. Did you have fun at any time on the ship?

Robert: I suppose a lot of times. Spent some time gambling which you weren't supposed to do.

Linda: And after the outfitting got all done, and oh I forgot to ask you. Did you go into New York City were you were in Hoboken?

Robert: You mean on Liberty. Oh yeah. Went several places. I don't remember the names of them. They are all beer halls.

Linda: When you left Hoboken the ship sailed down around Florida, through the Panama Canal. Do you remember going through the Panama Canal?

Robert: I remember watching it go by. I know I went out and bought my wife some silk socks and they never got home. I lost them before I got back to the ship. That was one of my better drunks.

Linda: So you were 18 and having a good time, huh?

Robert: Uhum. I think we went from there to San Pedro or San Diego.

Linda: You came into San Diego here. Picked up new crew.

Robert: Some.

Linda: Did you eat pretty good on board the ship.

Robert: Yeah, I had my trouble eating.

Linda: The cooks were pretty good, huh?

Robert: Not too bad.

Linda: Well when you left San Diego you went over to Hawaii. Is that the first time you had ever been to Hawaii?

Robert: Yeah.

Linda: It must have been pretty neat.

Robert: Well I have been there since and it has changed a lot.

Linda: I can't imagine being a young person from some city in the United States and going to Hawaii for the first time.

Robert: Well I went back there not too many years ago. Went down some of the same streets that I could remember and they didn't look the same at all.

Linda: You were looking through different eyes.

Robert: Just like when we went through New Orleans I went to that Creole Coffee Place. I thought it was great and when I went back to New Orleans a second time I found that place I went to and that stuff was lousy.

Linda: Yeah, when you are 18 everything is nice, right?

Now when you left Hawaii you were headed over Guam, Siapan, and you were headed to...

Robert: Well we went by Johnson Island, and I guess from there we went to Guam. I don't know whether we went by, we went by one other island but I can't remember what the name was.

Linda: Did you know that you were headed over to Okinawa?

Robert: No. Went to Guam and went ashore there I think once and I have been back there and I have seen some of the remaining gun installations when I was there the first time. Then we went from Guam I think Tienan, Siapan, and from there to Okinawa.

Linda: Did you know what you were carrying?

Robert: I think it was aviation gasoline.

Linda: And then you knew you were headed with fuel on board into a place that had suicide bombings. How did you feel about that?

Robert: Well I had heard about suicides before I just didn't believe them. I didn't think anybody was that nuts but I found out I was wrong.

Linda: Do you remember the day the Kamikaze plane hit the 534?

Robert: I remember I was working on a smoke generator. We never did get it to work and after that thing, things got kind of hectic.

Linda: What do you remember about that day?

Robert: Well fighting fire and I gave my camera to one of the kids in the small boat and he took some pictures and then gave me the camera back when they came back aboard. That is about all I remember really.

Linda: You told me when I talked to you on the phone that you didn't remember if you remembered my father or not and then after I talked to you after I sent you the packet you said "I remember your dad". What do you remember about my dad?

Robert: Well I really never had too much to do with him as far as I mean we just weren't together much you might say.

Linda: Do you ever remember him taking you ashore.

Robert: He probably did and I don't remember and I can guarantee that I don't remember coming back.

Linda: Well you know you were on the ship with about 30 guys that were on from the early days and my father was on the whole time too.

Robert: I think I was on until I think I came home in November if I remember right. I know I got hit on June 22nd because it was a month before my daughter's birthday.

Linda: And do you remember the end of the war?

Robert: Vaguely. I think I was in – no I doubt it. I think the war ended before I got to Astoria, Oregon.

Linda: Yeah, if you were on the ship until November then and the war ended in August so you were still on the 534.

Robert: Like I said, I think it was in, I came home in November but we were onshore for awhile before that because Stewart Gray and I had taken our pup tents and put them together and made a hut on the edge of the cliff. We were sleeping above the military camp.

Linda: A little condo going there huh?

Robert: Yeah. I don't know where we got the materials to build it but we had screening around it.

Linda: Just you and him?

Robert: No. There were a whole bunch of us on the hillside. I don't remember where we went. I guess we stayed aboard ship after it was hit. I don't remember.

Linda: Do you remember the typhoons.

Robert: Yes.

Linda: What do you remember about that?

Robert: A wild ride on a ship being held up by two by sixes. Half the equipment didn't work. A couple of big holes in it. It was God to get it up on the beach.

Linda: That paints a real rosy picture.

Robert: Yeah, it wasn't very rosy then. It was a lot of metal and junk flying around. We weren't the only ones on the beach. There were quite a few of them on the beach.

Linda: All of the crippled ships landed up on the beach, right?

Robert: No, some of them weren't crippled, they just couldn't, they decided to beach them. I guess rather get beat to pieces.

Linda: Can you still hear that sound when the two ships were hitting each other and the metal against metal, can you still hear that sound in your mind?

Robert: I haven't even thought about it much. Now that you have mentioned it I probably will.

Linda: Now that I have been talking to you, you will be think about all those things again.

When you went back home did you contact any of your shipmates ever?

Robert: A few of them. I had a lot of addresses and I had a bunch of pictures that I was going to send all these guys I had addresses and somehow I got them lost I didn't ever get them sent out.

Linda: Do you have any pictures now, today?

Robert: With me today, no.

Linda: I mean at home?

Robert: I probably have some at home if I ever find them.

Linda: Do you ever think about that your involvement; think about what you did, to help win World War II.

Robert: No. I was just there.

Linda: When there are other wars that happen now, does that bring you back to those days.

Robert: Only when my two boys were in. I worried about them a little bit.

Linda: Were they in the Navy?

Robert: No, they were in the Air Force.

Linda: When you walked into that room downstairs, who did you see?

Robert: Nobody I knew. I didn't recognize anybody.

Linda: Did anybody recognize you?

Robert: One person I guess. At least he walked over to me but he came in later.

Linda: Well there are pictures down there and the guys are down there talking about the time on board the ship. Did that make you feel good or anything?

Robert:: Well I was kind of happy to hear some of the stories, but.....probably go home and start thinking about things again.

Linda: You don't have to. What was the funniest thing that ever happened when you were in the Navy?

Robert: I don't know. Hadn't thought about it. I can't give you an answer to that.

Linda: Is there anything that stands out in your mind about the 534?

Robert: Not really. I know it carried us through all the time. It never let us down.

Linda: That is pretty amazing considering how they built those.

Robert: Yeah. Even after we were all broken up it still didn't let us down. It put us on the beach. I think most of us were afraid we were going to break in half.

Linda: I interviewed one of the gentlemen that worked at the shipyard in Evansville, the Chief Hull Inspector, and he was telling me how they spent all kinds of time and energy and effort making sure that the weldings were good on the ships so that you guys would be safe out there. That really gave me goose pumps when he told me that.

Robert: Yeah well, they must of done alright.

Linda: In a way don't you think it was kind of neat that the 534 had all of these different opportunities to have disaster happen and it just kind of slipped you by all the time.

Robert: Yeah, we kind of snuck through. We were lucky.

Linda: Do you remember the birth bombs?

Robert: Oh yeah.

Linda: What were they like?

Robert: Well I thought the pilots were pretty good. They were shooting them all down till I found out that they were supposed to shut down and come down.

Linda: Do you remember how they sounded.

Robert: Yeah, in a way.

Linda: How was it.

Robert: It was kind of a rapid rumble.

Linda: Now you had those big balloons over the ship sometimes. Remember that.

Robert: Yeah.

Linda: What do they call those garage balloons or something?

Robert: Garage balloons. I don't know if we ever had them attached to us or not. I know there were a lot of them around London but they didn't go up high enough to do any good.

Linda: You have seem some pictures of bays with the ships in and garage balloons over them.

Robert: I guess they were designed to take the wings off the airplanes but like I said I don't really remember having one attached to us. We might have.

Linda: You did at one time, when you were in England. The deck logs only talk about it a little bit.

So you don't talk about your time during the war to your children.

Robert: No.

Linda: Are they interested?

Robert: Oh, they are busy doing their own thing.

Linda: Because I was interested in what happened to my dad in the War too late. He died before I could ask him all these questions so I am asking you.

What did the coxans do on the ship?

Robert: I don't know. They ran those little boats around ut I don't know what they did in between.

Linda: Probably everything everybody else did. Paint, unpaint, chip paint.

Robert: Probably.

Linda: Well I can't wait for you to see the documentary.

Robert: I am kind of interested in seeing it too. I did think of one thing that was kind of funny that had us all scared when we were going up the Thayne's River. Thayne's River in France? 3 P-47 Thunderbolts came over the ridge and nobody knew what they were

and everybody was ducking. They came right down the river right over the top of us. That was one of the few times I was out when anything was going on.

Linda: That must have been kind of scary.

Robert: Well nobody recognized them at first I guess until they got over us and beyond which we were always looking for trouble anyway. Anything that came at you meant trouble.

Linda: Well I hope you enjoy the reunion and I hope some of the stuff down there helps you put a few pieces back together again. I think the guys, Duncan, it comes back after you start doing all this, doesn't it. You know talking to everybody. Because I have noticed from the first time the guys all got together and this is the third time they have gotten together and the conversations have changed. You know, they all keep adding to the story and remembering different things and don't forget that a lot of this stuff appened from different perspectives, You know you were always down in the engine room and down below deck so you didn't see a lot of what people in the deck division saw.

Robert: I probably imagined more that whatever happened.

Linda: That can be good or that can be bad. Do you have a good imagination?

Robert: I don't know.

Linda: Is there anything you want to say.

Robert: Not really.

Linda: Well I thank you for your time.

Robert: That's all right.

Linda: I will send you a copy of this. Duncan anything you want to ask him?

Duncan: No he has done a pretty good job covering everything,

Linda: I asked Duncan if he had any questions lurking in his mind for you. He said no.

Robert: That's good