

Transcription: Joe Felton

Today's date is Thursday, March 5th, 2009, and my name is James Crabtree and I am interviewing Mr. Joe Felton. We are at the Courtney Texas Veterans Home in Temple, Texas. This interview is being done in person, and with that said, sir, thanks for taking the time to talk to us today. Usually the first question we always start off with is just tell us a little bit about your background, like as a child, your family, where you're from, that sort of thing.

Joe Felton: Well, in Dallas, Texas, I went to all the normal schools, grade school, high school, and two and a half years of college, and what else do we need to know there?

Well maybe just tell us a little bit about your childhood and if you had any siblings or -

Joe Felton: Well I have one sister, and was there in Dallas, and really like any other child did, everything else went along pretty smooth. I didn't have any real problems.

Where were you when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

Joe Felton: I was in Dallas, Texas, at my dad's house, and it was on a Sunday, I can't remember the day it was.

Yeah, December 7th.

Joe Felton: Yeah, December 7th, and that's about it. What else did we do that day? We didn't do a whole lot more, but anyway, that's when I found out about it.

And how old were you, were you in high school when that happened?

Joe Felton: I was about probably 14, around there. I say that, I'm not sure.

What were your thoughts when you first heard the news?

Joe Felton: Well, I was surprised in one sense of the word, but I didn't really have too much worry about it. I knew if it was gonna be it would be, so you know -

Did you have any worries or thoughts that your dad or any of your relatives or possibly even yourself in the future would be going off to war?

Joe Felton: Not really, I really didn't. I figured if they needed us, we'd go.

So how did it come about that you ended up going into the military? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Joe Felton: I volunteered. I was in the Navy.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Joe Felton: Well I'll tell you the truth, I can't remember a whole lot about it other than I volunteered to go into the Navy. I didn't want to go into the Army because I didn't want to

march, really, so I went into the Navy, and sure enough I had to do some marching there. It's been a while so I'm not sure where it all took place, but it was in California and I can't remember what else took place there.

When you decided to go into the Navy, did you tell your parents that you were going to enlist?

Joe Felton: Yes, I did.

What was their reaction?

Joe Felton: Well, they weren't too excited about it at first, but they finally signed the deal allowing me to go in.

So were you right out of high school?

Joe Felton: I was 17, yeah.

So I guess your parents had to sign a waiver?

Joe Felton: Yeah, they did.

So they signed the waiver.

Joe Felton: He did, my dad did.

And so you finished high school and then pretty shortly after that you were on your way to basic training out in San Diego.

Joe Felton: Yeah. No, I had two years of college.

OK, where had you gone to college?

Joe Felton: At Texas University.

OK, or University of Texas?

Joe Felton: University of Texas at Austin.

Yeah, that's where I went to school. So you were at UT?

Joe Felton: Back in the 40's.

Sure, but you were at UT and you'd had two years of school and then you went ahead and enlisted.

Joe Felton: That's right.

Did you enlist out of Austin? Was there a recruiting office in Austin?

Joe Felton: It seemed like, I don't believe it was Austin. I want to say Oklahoma and I don't know why. Out somewhere in Oklahoma I believe.

OK, so you put school on hold and you entered the Navy. After you finished your basic training, where did you go to next?

Joe Felton: Let me think. Well I can't think right now.

On this form here that they had given us, it says USS Arapaho – was that a ship that you were on?

Joe Felton: Yeah, that was a seagoing tug, that's right. The Arapaho, but I don't know how long I was on there, but I was on there a while.

Tell us about what that was like. Do you have any memories of the crew?

Joe Felton: Well what I was is I was the Navy mailman. I got the mail for the ship and the officers aboard, and we had, I'm trying to think what his title was, but anyway he was in charge of some other tugboats, so I was on his staff, too, and I went to get the mail, and guard mail, and anywhere he'd want to send me, I'd go.

How big was that vessel? You said it was a seagoing tug.

Joe Felton: It was a seagoing tug, yeah, it was pretty big. I'd say 200 or 300 feet long and about 35 feet wide, and almost 100 something people.

So it was a pretty good-sized crew.

Joe Felton: Oh yeah. Well, I don't think we ever went over 100.

You mentioned that you were a seagoing tug, was that ship off by itself a lot in delivering the mail, or were you in convoys?

Joe Felton: Well, what they did is they pulled barges and they pulled other ships, where they were, and sometimes they'd go off and leave me and I'd have to manage to get back some way or another and I did always. They'd leave me at air bases or wherever we were, and then I'd get a flight back or get a boat back or something. But they did that quite often. In other words, I'd go get the mail and then they'd leave, they may go somewhere, and then I'd find out where they went and then I'd get sent over there. Like they'd go to Guam and I'd be maybe in Okinawa.

So you'd have to catch up –

Joe Felton: Yeah, and get a ride or catch up or whatever and get back to where I belong.

While this was going on, was your ship ever attacked or were you involved in any actions?

Joe Felton: I think one time we had a kamikaze try to hit us, but I think it was shot down, in fact I know it was. That's all, just that one.

What was it like day to day aboard the ship? How did you pass the time or how did you stay busy?

Joe Felton: Well, I wanted to go back and work, do you know what fenders are? They put over aside the boat to keep ‘em, well I wanted to go back there and do that, but the problem was, this commodore, he didn’t want me doing any of that and he made me sit down there on the rail and wait for whatever he wanted me to do. I was back there working, and he wanted to know who sent me. I said nobody, I just went back there. Boy, he really got upset with me. He says you’re not supposed to be back there.

So your task then was basically handling the mail for -

Joe Felton: Yeah, and then guard mail, too. Otherwise they’d send messages to one another and I’d take them.

I imagine that was a pretty big logistical shore having the mail come in from families back home that you got to deliver to other ships. Was it just yourself or did you have some other sailors?

Joe Felton: No, just me.

Really, just you. And how many other ships would you deliver mail to, or just your ship?

Joe Felton: Well, usually I delivered it to one, just to one, and that was – I forgot the name of it now – the USS Prairie I think was the name of it, and then I’d pick up mail there, too. Now sometimes they would send me other places, but it was rare. I wouldn’t go as much.

And how did you end up with that task of handling the mail?

Joe Felton: I’m trying to think how it is. I can’t remember now.

Now the fact that you’d had a couple of years of college, I imagine a lot of the other sailors enlisted had not been in college before.

Joe Felton: No, that’s true.

Did they treat you differently because of that?

Joe Felton: Not much, but a little, yeah. Like I say, I delivered mostly mail for the commodore, and well I was on his staff and I’d do whatever he wanted me to do. If he wanted me to go here or there, and I’d usually go to the other ships where they had a commander or officer.

Were you on the Arapaho for the duration of the war?

Joe Felton: Yeah, I guess so. I wasn’t on any other ship, so I’d have to be.

And do you remember where you were when you found out that the atomic bomb had been dropped?

Joe Felton: Yeah, I was in Okinawa.

Tell us about how you heard about that.

Joe Felton: Well, we heard about it really on the radio, that's how I heard about it. Then as it drifted on down we got more information, but that's how I first heard about it, on the radio.

At that point, did you think the war was gonna end?

Joe Felton: Yes I did, I thought well, that'll be ending pretty soon. It didn't but -

Where were you on VJ Day when they finally announced that Japan had surrendered?

Joe Felton: I was in Okinawa.

OK, so you were ashore?

Joe Felton: No, I was still aboard the ship.

OK, but at Okinawa.

Joe Felton: At Okinawa.

Were you guys anchored in the harbor?

Joe Felton: Yeah, and we'd get up and get around and tow things. I forgot, he wanted to do everything, our commander did, so we were pretty well, we were active, real active, and we pulled barges and different things.

Was there any sort of celebration that you can remember?

Joe Felton: Yeah, sort of. It wasn't a big one, but we did have some, I remember now, I loved it.

After Japan had surrendered, how much longer was it before you were able to return back home?

Joe Felton: Well, it was quite a while, I can't remember exactly, but I think it was probably about oh, six months or so.

And then you returned back with the Arapaho, or did they send you back on your own?

Joe Felton: No, let's see, they sent me to a place in Oklahoma, and I'm trying to think of the name of it right now, I can't, but anyway that's where they sent me.

OK, just individually, they sent you on your own.

Joe Felton: Individually.

Did you take the Arapaho back to San Diego or to California?

Joe Felton: Let's see, I was on the Arapaho, I believe it was in San Francisco before I left.

OK, and then they sent you back to Oklahoma and you got discharged.

Joe Felton: But I remember it was at Christmas time and everybody else got off but I had to stay aboard on the skeleton crew, so I stayed aboard, me and two or three officers, and we didn't do very much but we had to stay aboard.

How was it that you were chosen to stay on the ship for Christmas?

Joe Felton: Well, I really don't know how they did that, somebody picked and said he'll stay.

Pulled your name out of the hat, yeah. When you got back home, how long was it before you were able to see your family and friends?

Joe Felton: Well if I recall, it was pretty soon.

Tell us about that day. I'm sure it was a great day.

Joe Felton: Yes it was, and I'm trying to think what all did happen, but so much went on, and I saw so many people I can't remember all the little details, but I was really glad to get back.

While you were aboard the Arapaho and you were handling mail, were you able to get much mail from your family back home?

Joe Felton: Oh yeah, I got letters all the time, quite a bit, and of course I handled it for all the other people.

So you were probably a pretty popular person, the importance of mail and boosting morale.

Joe Felton: Yeah, one time I never will forget, boy it was really a problem. I came back and I didn't have any mail for them but they didn't know that I had guard mail underneath me and that was tied to me, I had to take off my shirt and everything and they tied my guard mail around me, and I had guard mail, and they threw me overboard. Oh, I'm telling you, that commander, he really did have a fit. He had everybody on the man dip, I thought he was going to throw them all overboard, he was so mad, because see, they didn't know that I had other mail wrapped up around me, but I didn't have visibly, you could see it, it was tied around my waist.

Did you tell the guys that before they threw you over?

Joe Felton: I said don't throw me overboard, I've got mail. Where you have it? And so they threw me overboard.

Did it ruin that guard mail?

Joe Felton: No, it was protected.

So they threw you off the actual ship?

Joe Felton: Mm-hmm, right there off, it did really create a problem, too, because boy, I'm telling you, I can't remember if it was the commander or the officer of the deck, but boy they

really, they called everybody back on the fan tail and they kept 'em back there for quite a while, and they were really upset, because see, they didn't know I had the guard mail because you couldn't see it, it was tied around my body.

I assume the ship was anchored at that point?

Joe Felton: Yeah, it was anchored.

If they would have thrown you overboard while they were moving, that would've been an even bigger problem.

Joe Felton: No, it was anchored in Okinawa.

I imagine they probably got officer's mess for that or something along those lines.

Joe Felton: Yeah, they did, they had some real problems, yeah.

Wow.

Joe Felton: He was really upset. They never did know I had guard mail. I had to tie it inside, and visibly you couldn't see it.

Is that the way you always carried guard mail?

Joe Felton: That's the way guard mail was carried, yeah.

And where would the guard mail be coming from? It was basically just messages from commands and ships?

Joe Felton: From the commander, one of the commands, like I'm trying to think of the name of that ship where they had the guy that was in charge, and then he sent – now one time, we had, they had, well let me put it this way. When they were bringing ships into a port, whatever port it was, the guy in charge would be on our ship and we'd set out there and tell everybody where to go. We had quite a few officers aboard, and I wasn't an officer, but we had quite a few. Then of course I went up to the guard room, up to the officer's quarters a lot with mail and stuff. Then they'd send me different places.

Now aboard the Arapaho, what were your living conditions like? Did you have a rack that you slept in or a hammock?

Joe Felton: Yeah, a regular rack. I believe they were either two or three, I can't remember, and I was up on the top.

So you didn't have to share your rack with somebody else like when you were on duty somebody else would be sleeping in it?

Joe Felton: No, no. But there was always somebody below me or above me. I think they were in three's if I remember. I can't remember exactly.

And how was the food?

Joe Felton: Oh, the food was really good.

Really?

Joe Felton: Yeah, it was. They had, I don't know why it was so good, but it was, it was really good.

So you had some cooks that knew what they were doing I guess.

Joe Felton: And then I had a friend up in the officer's quarters that he was always saving me stuff and bringing me stuff, and that was really nice of him because they had a little bit different situation than we did.

Yeah, had the officer's mess, yeah.

Joe Felton: Then also I was down in what they called, not the officer's, I can't think of what you call 'em now, anyway, the other non-commissioned officers, they were down there in their group and they had a whole room all their own, and I was down there for a while.

Yeah, the petty officers?

Joe Felton: Yeah, I was down there. I was their chef or took care of their food.

Well that's not too bad.

Joe Felton: But I didn't prepare it, I'd just go get it and bring it in.

When you were aboard the ship, I guess you were aboard for a year or two, a couple of years?

Joe Felton: At least a year, I'm sure.

Did you guys ever have any liberty or R&R time?

Joe Felton: Oh yeah, of course my problem was, it was hard for me, when my time to go, well I'd have to go for the captain to go somewhere, so it was rare, and so I was really having a problem. So I went to him and I said look, every time my side gets to go, I'm having to go somewhere and I can't go. And he said well, I'll fix that, so he gave me open gangway, so that meant that I could go when I had an opportunity. There was only two people, one officer and me, that had open gangway that could go anytime.

And where did you go on R&R? Did you go back to Hawaii if you could?

Joe Felton: Yeah, if we were in Hawaii, of course I'd go back in Hawaii. We had a place called Mong-Mong, it was out in the Pacific in the Marshall Islands and they had beer and other things that went on on that island.

I imagine it had to have been just a nice feeling to be on solid land.

Joe Felton: That's right, it was so different.

How long would the R&R periods last for?

Joe Felton: Oh, not very long, I'm trying to remember.

A couple of days?

Joe Felton: Yeah, a day or so.

How long were you on the ship between R&R's? Would you be out there for several months?

Joe Felton: Yes, I would, I was.

And then while you were aboard the Arapaho, how much news were you able to get in terms of what was going on in terms of battles and the war?

Joe Felton: Apparently we were able to get pretty much because we kept radios on all the time, and we'd hear that day, so we really knew what was going on all the time.

Did they ever send you guys movie reels so you could watch a movie reel aboard the ship?

Joe Felton: Oh yeah, we had movie reels all the time. I'd go get 'em.

Were those in big canisters?

Joe Felton: Yeah, well not real big, but they were in canisters, and I'd get those and guard mail, and when they had beer, it would be responsibility to see that each man got their two or three or whatever.

How would they show the movie reels?

Joe Felton: Back on the fan tail.

Back on the fan tail. They'd set it up and show it. That's great.

Joe Felton: It was, it was great.

I guess kind of an open ended question, but what were some of your favorite memories from your time in the Navy? Do you have any particular memories or anecdotes that stand out to you?

Joe Felton: Well not really, and then a lot, too, but I can pin any one particular thing down. When we were in, we didn't get to go on land very much, and so when we did it was nice to be able to go to Okinawa or Guam or one of those places, and then we'd go in. And really there wasn't a lot to do other than to get off the ship and go.

Were there any times during the war when you were aboard the ship that things seemed kind of down or were you ever worried for your safety or your ship's safety?

Joe Felton: Well, once in a while I would get into a situation that we'd kind of worry a little bit about it. And then too, we were real vulnerable with these planes coming and trying to hit us.

Kamikaze's.

Joe Felton: Kamikaze's, yeah. In fact, we shot one down, and that kind of worried us a little bit. We never knew when, where they were coming from. Now they also had, well a two-man sub, what did they call 'em, those, but we didn't ever have too much problem that way because we could see what was going on.

Do you remember where your role was during the battle stations when something like that was going on?

Joe Felton: Yeah, I was on the bridge. I was a talker for the captain. In other words, he'd tell me to tell somebody, and I relayed all the messages.

Did you have to use the type of microphone as well?

Joe Felton: Yeah.

Tell about that. Did you have to have training for that?

Joe Felton: Well, no, not really. I don't know how I got that job really. But they picked me for it and I like it because it was real nice, it was real easy, to tell you the truth.

So you were on the bridge any time of battle stations.

Joe Felton: Well that's true and that made it nice because I knew what was going on. I was right there. I mean the captain, he'd tell me, he'd relay a message to me and then I'd relay it to whoever it was to go to. I was right by his side all the time. I knew exactly what was going on.

Was he the captain of the ship the entire time you were aboard?

Joe Felton: I think he was. Yeah, he was. I can't remember his rank. Well, then there was the other officer, I forgot what they called him, and he sometimes ran things but not much.

Was that the executive officer?

Joe Felton: Executive officer. Actually that's who it was.

It's interesting being able to hear your stories about your time in the service kind of helps us piece it together.

Joe Felton: Yeah, but I had a pretty good job. I mean I really knew what was going on, and I'd go take the mail up there to headquarters, and then I'd take it up and take it back, and then I'd run errands for 'em if otherwise he wanted to send a message to the commodore or somebody, he'd send it by me, and that's what was called guard mail.

Exactly. You mentioned earlier when you guys got back home, you went from San Francisco back, so did the Arapaho, did it go to San Francisco?

Joe Felton: Yes, it went to San Francisco. No, let me think. I don't think it went to San Francisco. It went to, come to think of it, I thought it went down to Diego, I'm not sure.

San Diego?

Joe Felton: San Diego, and then, some way, I can't remember how I got up to San Francisco, but they sent me up to San Francisco.

I was just gonna ask about what it was like for you and the crew when your ship finally returned back to the main land.

Joe Felton: Oh, it was really nice, except I didn't get to get off during Christmas and I had to stay aboard, but it wasn't too bad because we got to do things. Of course I was disappointed, I was wanting to go home and get off, but I had to stay aboard.

During that time that you were in the Navy and aboard the Arapaho, were you married or were you dating anyone?

Joe Felton: No, well I was dating when I could, but I wasn't married.

So there wasn't a girlfriend that you were writing letters to or anything like that.

Joe Felton: Well, I wrote some to a girlfriend, yeah.

Were you able to get mail from her?

Joe Felton: Oh, you bet. We were going to get married. When I come back and I didn't have any mail, they'd throw me overboard, and that's the time that I had guard mail. Oh boy, that really created a problem. He was really upset.

What did you do after you got back home and got out of the Navy? Did you go back to the University of Texas?

Joe Felton: No, let me think what I did do. I was head of the Better Business Bureau for quite a while, so that's what I did for a long time.

Was that in Dallas?

Joe Felton: It was in Abilene, and I had the Better Business Bureau there, and that was quite a job. I don't know if you know what a Better Business Bureau did, but we were busy.

So you were in Abilene then pretty much the whole rest of the time after you got back from the war.

Joe Felton: Yeah, I was.

But you never ended up going back to the University of Texas?

Joe Felton: No, I didn't go back. And I can't remember why exactly, but I didn't. It could've been money, I just don't remember, but I did go those two years.

Yeah, that's great. Well I really appreciate you taking the time to sit and talk with us.

Joe Felton: I just hope I answered what you wanted me to.

No, this is your interview, so this is for you to tell us anything that you remember.

Joe Felton: I enjoyed being on the Arapaho. It wasn't a very big ship. We didn't have over 100, I guess not quite 100 men, and everybody knew everybody and got along real well that way. Of course I knew 'em all because of the mail, but we got along pretty good.

Did you keep in touch with any of those guys after you got back home?

Joe Felton: I did one fellow for a little while, and then it turned out, his name was Berardi and he was from Pennsylvania, but I've forgotten now, we kind of parted there.

So after you got back home, it wasn't too long before you left the ship, and then yeah –

Joe Felton: No, it wasn't. The ship is now down around Orange, in fact it is in Orange.

Oh really, what is it doing there?

Joe Felton: That's where they put it. It's solid, it doesn't move anymore, it's stationed there.

It's like a museum ship?

Joe Felton: Yeah, I guess so. They just keep it there.

Have you ever been back to see it?

Joe Felton: One time, it's been a long time ago but I did.

How long after the war was it that you went back to see the Arapaho?

Joe Felton: Oh, I imagine about a year. And it's still down there. Somebody was telling me the other day about it, and they have several ships down there. The Sabine River, is that it? I'm trying to think. Anyway it's a big river.

So they just had it there basically in mothballs.

Joe Felton: Yeah.

That's interesting. Well are there any other, really this interview is for you to basically leave any of your memories or any stories you want, because we're going to save these in our archives, so for future generations.

Joe Felton: No, I enjoyed being on the Arapaho. We had like I say, my job was the mailman and I knew everybody. And see, I got to go off more than anybody else did.

I bet they were probably jealous.

Joe Felton: Well they were. Well, they threw me overboard one time, and that's when I didn't have any mail for them, but they didn't realize that I had guard mail wrapped underneath me, and oh, it really tore up that captain. He was furious.

That's a good story.

Joe Felton: Of course it didn't get wet because I had it wrapped pretty good.

How did they bring you back aboard the ship? They throw you a rope?

Joe Felton: Yeah. It was pretty close to the ladder, and I crawled up.

I didn't realize there was a ladder.

Joe Felton: Yeah, there was a ladder there and I crawled up that ladder. Oh that really did tear up that guy, because he knew I had guard mail, but the rest of them didn't because it was tied up beneath me, but it didn't get wet because they wrapped it up real good.

Well that's great. Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today and share some of your memories.

Joe Felton: That was a nice ship, I mean to be on, the duty I'm trying to say.

Yeah, you said you had plenty of mail and good food, R&R here and there.

Joe Felton: Yeah, and like I say, I'm about the only one that got to get off the ship, but we went to all the little places out there in Miriana, is that right?

Yeah, Mirianis Islands? Yeah. I imagine you saw a lot of the Pacific, too.

Joe Felton: Yeah, I did.

That others wouldn't have a chance to see.

Joe Felton: I did. And then sometimes like wherever, our officer, our head, whoever he was, would send a message. Well I'd have to go to where this admiral was, it would depend on where he was, but they'd get me there, and then I'd have to sometimes I'd stay for a week or so before he'd send me back.

That's interesting.

Joe Felton: It was, it was an interesting situation. I kind of enjoyed it. I didn't have any real problems. I wanted to go back and make fenders and do those things, and I was back there one day and boy, he had a fit. He said you sit down there on that rail and drink coffee where I can see you. I don't want you back there. Well, he thought somebody had told me to go back there, and that really did it. But I said no, I just went back there on my own.

That's great. Well sir, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today and I know Commissioner Patterson and everybody at the Land Office and even the state of Texas are very thankful for your service for our country.

Joe Felton: Well I enjoyed it, I really and truly did. My attitude about it was I knew I had to serve and so I served and enjoyed serving. A lot of people didn't. There were some that just really weren't, but I wasn't, I thought I'll just go with it. Being on a small ship like that, it made a lot of difference. If I was on a cruiser or something like that, gosh there are 5,000 people on that. You'd just be one of many. No, my time on the Arapaho was real nice. And it's amazing, it's still down in Orange.

Yeah, I'll have to look that up and try to find out some more information about it.

Joe Felton: Last I heard it was, now. I'm sure it probably stayed.

That's great. Well sir, thanks so much for your time and what we'll do is we'll make a copy of this interview to give to you, several copies so you can give it to your friends and families and we'll mail it up to you, and then if you have any pictures of your time in the Navy that you'd want to send us, we can always make copies of that.

Joe Felton: I don't think I do. I did have but I think something happened to that file. I'll check to see.

Or perhaps we could ask members of your family.

Joe Felton: Well I don't have much of a family, that's the problem. I only had a sister and she never was able to do anything like that.

We always love having the pictures like on this brochure here we got some pictures of some veterans. It's not a problem, but if you have the pictures, we love to get them.

Joe Felton: Well I don't think I have too many, I don't think I have any.

Yeah, well you got my card, sir, and so feel free to give me a call any time and we really thank you again for your service and your time today.

[End of recording]