

**Thomas W. Hennessey
Veteran**

**Wayne Clark, Michael Russert
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed in Kingston, NY
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I: Please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth.

TWH: My name is Thomas William Hennessey. I was born in Brooklyn, NY on December 2, 1926.

I: What was your educational background prior to going into the service?

TWH: I went to high school.

I: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

TWH: I enlisted.

I: When was that?

TWH: May 26, 1943.

I: In the US Navy?

TWH: Yes.

I: Why did you pick the Navy?

TWH: I heard the Navy was clean, and then I found out who kept it clean.

I: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

TWH: Yes, I was in a candy store. It was about 1:00 in the afternoon. My cousin and I were together and he said it looked like he and I were finally going to get a job, because there was no work then.

I: Do you remember your reaction when you heard about that?

TWH: Yes, "where the hell is Pearl Harbor?"

I: Where did you go for your basic training?

TWH: Sampson, New York.

I: How long were you at Sampson?

TWH: A very short time, 4 or 5 weeks, and then we shipped out.

I: Where did you go from Sampson?

TWH: They put us on what they called an express train to California. It took us twelve and a half days to get to California. We stopped for anything. We did our exercises in the Chicago stockyard. We had a wonderful chef on the train. He knew how to make white baloney sandwiches and warm milk. That's about all we got for the whole trip.

I: What happened once you got to California?

TWH: We went to Camp Elliott outside San Diego. We wound up doing nothing. Then we got put on trucks and they took us down to San Diego harbor and put us on LST's. They called them Landing Ship – Tank. We called them “Large, Slow Target”. We went on to Pearl Harbor, another twelve-day trip. Then we spent about a week in a camp in Hawaii. They had us digging trenches. After a week or ten days we shipped out and they had guys filling the trenches back in. They didn't have enough work so they made work.

So, we got onto transports and went all the way down to a place called Manus, in the Admiralty Islands near New Guinea. I was supposed to go on a ship, the USS Hancock (CV-19). It wasn't there. Nobody knew where it was. The place we had was only about a half mile long. The Japs still had the rest. It really smelled there. They asked a bunch of us if we wanted to sign on for a short cruise. So, I got another LST. We only went out a little ways and then found out we made the invasion of Palau. Palau was not a very pleasant place. I think they had about 15,000 casualties the first two days.

I: What was your job?

TWH: I was a gofer.

I: So, you had no training aside from your basic?

TWH: I had fired about six rounds with a 22 at a rifle range. I don't think I hit anything. My cousin was with me all of this time. We grew up together. There was six weeks difference in our ages. We went to Manus together and he got transferred to the cruiser USS Wichita. I was on the LST at Palau and it took a shallacing. That was September, 1944. We came back to Manus and they put me on an aircraft carrier. It was an escort carrier. We went up to the Philippines. We were part of the 7th Fleet. There were three fleets out there, the 3rd, the 5th, and the 7th. The 7th had the landing ships and they called it “MacArthur's Navy”. We made the landing there in October. Somehow, we ended up picking up prisoners. They were guys from the “death march” and all that. We put them on the hanger deck. We took them to Guam, where they had hospitals.

I: Now, what carrier was that?

TWH: The USS Nassau (CVE-16). From there I got taken off with a bunch of other guys and put on an LCM which took us to Ulithi Harbor in the Caroline Islands. Finally, I found the USS Hancock. I went aboard and the OOD looked at my papers and said “5th Division”. So, I went to the 5th Division, and nobody was telling me what to do for about two weeks. I just had a place to sleep. I had no working parties, nothing. So, I found this boatswains mate and asked him what I was doing there. He says “what's your name?” I said Hennessey. He says “you're not in my division”. So, who am I supposed to be with? He looked it up and told me I was supposed to be in 3rd Division. So, I get down to 3rd Division and he says to me “Where have you been?” I said I had been in the 5th Division. Well, you are in the Gunnery Division. So, they transferred me and made me a 3rd loader on a quad 40. Then I worked my way up to 1st Loader. We made a couple strikes in the Philippines. I think we were off French Indochina. The ship was so big. You were only

involved with your immediate gun crew. I had guys in my own division that I didn't even know their names. I was on quad 40 no. 6A.

One of our own aircraft came in and landed and came abreast of the island. Everybody walked out to service the aircraft. They opened the bomb bay and a 550-lb. bomb fell out. I'm not sure but it killed 96 guys and wounded 300-400. Damage Control did a great job, as usual. They got the fires out, put down new decking and got rid of the old stuff. They gathered the dead and identified who they were, and took care of the wounded. We stayed with the fleet.

We went back to Ulithi and came back out and then we got hit with a suicide plane. It hit the side of the ship.

I: That was a Kamikaze?

TWH: Part of the plane came down on the flight deck, but nobody got hurt. Then we took another one. He came in and hit right on a gun mount. He dropped a 500-lb. bomb. There was a marine standing there and it came down and dropped through the catwalk right next to him and didn't go off until it hit the water. He was standing there with his mouth wide open. I talked to him at a reunion we had in Charleston. He turned out to be a police captain in New York City.

We did more bombing runs along French Indochina and then we went up to Iwo Jima. That was pretty bad.

I: What happened there?

(pause in recording)

TWH: We went up to Okinawa. The invasion of Okinawa was on Easter Sunday morning, April Fool's Day, 1945. Funny that they came together. The first seven days it was hell. There were suicide planes all over the place. A couple carriers got hit pretty bad. On April 7th we were off the coast of Okinawa. We were just finishing chow and were walking up to where our gun was, when the general quarters alarm went off. So that we wouldn't get over-excited they would say a "bogie" or "unidentified aircraft" was coming in. We were crossing the hanger deck when the alarm went off, so we started walking a little faster. Then, we heard a 5-inch (gun) go off, and that meant he was in the fleet. Then I heard the 40's going off, which said he was getting close. Then I heard the 20's and I knew he was after us. So, we ran along the hanger deck and the guy with me split and went where he was supposed to go. I got up onto the bow and I climbed over that railing and jumped into the gun tub, grabbed the phone, and said we were manned and ready. My guy gave me his angle and he was coming in about 40 feet off the water. He was coming in from the right and the ship was turning toward him to give him only a bow shot. When he was about 400 yards out we hit him. He pulled back on the stick and went up in the air and straightened out again. Now he was coming over the top of us. We all dove on the deck because we thought he was going to land on the gun mount. He went over the flight deck at about 15 feet I guess, and he dropped a 500-lb bomb. It went through the flight deck, into the hanger deck, and killed about 45 guys from my division.

The plane went down the flight deck flipping over and over. At the far end of the flight deck we had about 30 or 35 planes loaded with bombs. He went into them and they went up and the gasoline went up, and all the ready-service ammunition went up. Then a million gallons of high-octane blew up. I've got to say, I've had better days. But, as usual, the guys did a good job of getting the fires out, taking care of the wounded and gathering the dead.

I: Did any other ships come to your aid?

TWH: Oh, always. We were flag ship. We had the admiral aboard. As soon as we got hit, a tin can or cruiser came alongside and took the flag officer right off. They don't stay with us. We had a heck of a time for a while. Tin cans were picking up guys. We had a couple hundred guys in the water. They were blown over or jumped over because of the fire. We were hurt, but we stayed with the fleet until the next afternoon I think. They got a relief carrier out there to take our place. There were supposed to be four carriers there and we didn't want them to come over and take a photograph of fewer carriers. There were four there, but they weren't workable. So, four others came out and they pulled in and we pulled out. We went to Ulithi, but they couldn't help us. You know how big an elevator is? We had one blown right off the ship. We went back to Pearl and we were the first carrier to go into drydock at Pearl during the war.

They gave us a ten-day R&R and we went to this camp. We had no duty, no chores or anything. They changed things around and brought us back to the ship. The Captain and Exec were professional Navy and they wanted that ship to get back out there to be in the end of the war. That was their life. So, everybody from Commander down was pitching in, doing whatever needed to be done. In about a month they had us fixed up. The night before we left these trucks came down the dock. They had these big wooden crates, longer than this room. They picked them up and put them on the flight deck. We didn't know what was in them. They put Marines on them to guard them. The next morning we left. A few days later we hit Wake Island. That was a milk run. Everybody going back to the war zone hit Wake. We went on to the Philippines and they took the crates off. Then "Tokyo Rose" came on and said "welcome back to the fleet Rocket Roger. You know what I'm talking about Hancock. We know you've got rockets". That is what it was. They were putting rockets on our planes.

So, we went up to Okinawa, and then we went up off Japan. You went three days of strikes and then pull out for one day to get re-supplied. We did that from late August until September 15th. We were about 35 miles outside of Tokyo when they told us the war was over. The captain came on and said "we just got the word. The Empire of Japan has surrendered." Then he said "well done". Then we went on to attack because not everybody had yet gotten the message. We were in Tokyo Bay when the Missouri came in. I ended up in Yokohama. Tokyo and Yokohama were levelled. The captain was a great guy. He went over to fleet headquarters or something and he came back, and there were guys lined up on the hanger deck with their sea bags. He said to the officer of the deck "what's going on?" The OOD said that we got orders from 3rd Fleet that all men with less than 18 months of sea duty were to be transferred to duty in Japan. The

captain said “the hell they are!” He said they are going home with us. Then he asked if anybody had been transferred. The OOD said yes, about twenty guys. The captain said to have the motor whale boat go and get them back. So, he got them all back, and I guess he stepped on some toes. He came on the horn and said “I guess you’ve been wondering, and I told you when I came on board that there would be no scuttlebutt, and you would get all the stuff straight from me. We have been transferred to duty here in Japan. We will have six months of coastal patrol duty off the coast of China. But hang on guys. We can’t do anything about it, so sit back and enjoy it. But give me time. I’ve got people I know”. Sure enough, about a week later we came around and back into Tokyo Bay. They took all of our aircraft off. Then they came with bunks. On the hanger deck, which is high, they welded bunks ten high. The gun sponsons along the sides had the guns removed and were converted to heads. They built 3 or 4 galleys on the hanger deck. We picked up 5,000 troops. Then we went back down to Okinawa for something, and then went on to San Pedro. It was Navy Day, 1945. We dropped these guys off and then we went to Manus. We picked up about 5,000 people and the Captain decides to make a baseball field on the flight deck. It was to be officers against enlisted men. So, they were playing ball and the Captain got up. The sun on the equator was horrible. He couldn’t even see the pitcher because of the sun. He put his hand up and stopped the game. He went over and picked up the phone and talked for a minute, then he turns the whole fleet around so he could hit the ball. He hit it, and after he had run the bases he picked up the phone and ordered them back on course. The guys were calling him “Captain Frivolous”. He was a good guy.

Then they took the ship up to Bremerton and they were going to decommission it. We went to a place called Port Townsend, up on Puget Sound. We offloaded all of our explosives and we went back to Seattle.

I was to be discharged and was put on a train. There were millions of guys. I wound up in Lido Beach, Long Island. There were lines you wouldn’t believe. There were Navy lines. Then there was an “H” line. They went from east coast to west coast. You stood in line for hours and hours, and days. I finally get up there and the guy gives me my stuff and I said wait a minute. This and this are missing. I asked if he could fix it. He wrote something down and said to go to a barracks there and they would take care of it. I had been there for three days waiting in line. So, I go down there to this barracks and there are all kinds of sea bags hanging there. I asked the guy there if he was the barracks boss. He says no, I’m waiting for my discharge to get straightened out. I asked him how long he had been waiting. He said two and a half weeks. I said you gotta be kidding me. Are you almost done? He said they had not even started. I said give me my stuff. I went back to the line and told them everything is fine.

So I am on a train and end up in Brooklyn at 4th Avenue and Atlantic. I had no idea where I was. I saw these two merchant marine sailors, and they had patches that said Sheepshead Bay on their arm. I decided I had to follow those guys because they would go right by my house. So I got on the train and got off at Newkirk Avenue, and walked about eleven blocks home. It was 3:00 AM. I rang the doorbell and my sister answered

and I said “your brother’s home!” and she said “which one?”. I said second one top and she said where have you been and what happened? She said Eddie called and he’ll be home tonight. Billy called and he’ll be home in two days.

So, I bounced around for about seven years. I couldn’t get my act together. I was going to go back into the Navy. I got drunk one night with another guy and we woke up at his house. We needed a drink on Sunday morning. We were in bad shape. His brother said there was a place over in Whitestone, Queens called CYO. So, we went over there and it was a Catholic Youth Organization. They had tea or Coke. So, we were there thinking about how we could kill his brother, and these two girls walked in. So, we picked them up and went out with them. We had a lot of money and spent most of our pay. I went to my sister’s house that night and said “I met the girl I’m going to marry”. She says “is she in an institution?” I married her and soon it will be 50 years.

I: When were you discharged? What month and day?

TWH: May of 1946.

I: You said your brothers were in the service also?

TWH: In reality they were not my brothers. During the depression, all of our families moved together. Then all of our mothers died when we were small. My mother died when I was three. My one aunt took us all in and raised us. People would wonder why we all had different last names, so we never mentioned it. We just said we were brothers. The two oldest guys were. Eddie, he was at Casserine Pass, then went to Sicily and all the way up the boot of Italy. He walked into Germany. He was combat infantry. He wound up on Okinawa. The other guy, Phil, was a top turret gunner on a B-17 in 1942. You were supposed to do 25 missions. He did 27. On the 27th they got clobbered over Bremerhaven. The pilot and co-pilot were killed, the navigator was killed and the two waste gunners were killed. The tail gunner was ok and the bombardier was ok. Phil took out five F-109 planes. Then he dropped down to the waste gun and shot down another 109 and crippled another. He moved into the front and moved the pilot. He was a tough sergeant. He flew the plane to England. He couldn’t land it, so he had to crash it. He got out. He got hit 4 or 5 times, and got frost bite from losing a boot and glove. He wrote home to my sister and told her that she might hear from the government that he got hurt, but don’t believe it. So, he came home.

I: Did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

TWH: No.

I: Did you use the 52-20 Club?

TWH: I signed up for it, but I never got a check.

I: Did you join any veterans’ organizations?

TWH: I joined the American Legion, but most of the guys in my post were WW-I, so it wasn’t my thing. I was too busy. After I got married I had two full-time jobs. I used to pick up bodies at night for undertakers. I drove a trailer into New York City. Then I lucked out. I got a job driving a bus in Manhattan. It was a good union job. I made good

money. The hours were my own, whatever I wanted to pick. I worked there 30 years. Then I said to my wife, let's move upstate. We had family in Amsterdam. They had a camp on Staten(?) Island. It was a typical camp, nothing matched. We bought a place over in New Hampshire. I said there are too many people waiting to get this camp. Then suddenly everybody died. It was down to my wife, her sister and another person. Her sister lived in California, so it was no good to her. So, we bought the sister out and then we had leverage with the other one. We said we will use it February through October and you can have it November through January. You can't get in there then. So, we bought her out and we used it as a camp. Then five years ago it got washed out in that storm. My bride said why don't we build a new house? I said who? She said you, me and Tim. I said "you and me can't go to Price Chopper without getting into an argument. How the heck are we going to build a house?" I said I would stay here and watch TV and you two do what you want to do. Two and a half years went by and she said I could come up. I stood on a hill looking and said Mother of God, how big is that place? She said "you mean square feet?" I said yeh. She said she didn't know, but it has five bedrooms. It has three full bathrooms, one with a hot tub. There are two full kitchens, one on the main floor and one in the basement. The living room had a big fireplace and 22-foot ceilings, with a balcony. The master bedroom was up on the balcony level. I asked my son why he built that closet so big? He said "Dad, you are always telling me to think". I was having a lot of trouble with my leg due to diabetes. He said he could put in an elevator later if I lost my legs. I said I was happy to hear that. So, that is where we live now. My son has a motorcycle shop on route 30. My wife is a nurse at the VA. She is going to retire next year. Another son is retired from the Navy and has a home in Los Vegas He does something with the Navy, as a civilian. Right now, he is in Seattle. I have a daughter that lives in New York City. She's the apple of my eye. That's it, and I'm here.

I: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?

TWH: I guess I grew up a little bit. I met a lot of guys.

I: Have you stayed in touch with any of them?

TWH: There was a guy on my gun crew. His name was Frank Arizio(?). With all the hustle and bustle, I get up one morning and Frank is gone. They transferred him. I knew he lived in Queens, but I had no idea where. I went through the phone book, and everywhere I went for sixty years I looked and looked. I couldn't find him. About two years ago, one of our guys went on the Intrepid in New York City with his daughter. His daughter was 45 and she was wearing one of these USS Hancock hats. A guy looked up and asked her where she got that hat. She said her father was on that ship. He was a plank owner. He said he was a plank owner. I asked her what his name was. She said it was an Italian name. I asked if he had mentioned a division. He said Third Division. That was my division. She said it was Frank Munzo maybe? I asked if it could have been Arizio. She said that was it. Do you have any information? He said he had it all at home. When we got home he gave it to me. He lived ten miles from my daughter's house. I went down to my daughter's on a Friday night. I got up at 5:30 in the morning and went over to his house about 7:00. I bang on the door and yell "open up!". He comes to the door in pajamas, opens the door and is all ready to start yelling. I walk right past him

and say “Hi Frank”. He says “Tom? Where did you come from?”. I stayed there 3-1/2 days. The kicker was that, when I was driving a bus I drove past his house three times a day. I asked him how long he had been living there. He said since the war ended. I asked if he ever rode a bus. He said never. I’m still in touch with him today.

I call John Finn twice a week. He was a good Chief. On the 15th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, I was in Hawaii with my wife and John was there with his wife. We were in different hotels. The phone rings at 3:00 am and John asked what I was doing. I said “big shock John, but I’m sleeping”. He tells me to get up, get dressed, and meet him downstairs in twenty minutes. We’re going to Pearl Harbor. I said there are 180 seats on the Arizona (memorial) and the whole United States wants to be there. How the heck are you going to get me on there? My wife says get dressed and go. So I get dressed and I go down, and a car drives up with a Navy Captain driving. John is in the back seat and says come on, so I get in. There is a line a mile long and three abreast waiting to get on the base for the ceremonies. We had a special gate that we went through. We went through three check points, because the President and Vice President were going to be there. We got to a fourth checkpoint and there was a lady Marine Major. Boy, was she a good-looking woman, and snappy with those whites on. She looked at me and asked my name. I said Hennessey, Thomas W. She said my name was not on the list. The John turns around and says “he’s alright lady. He’s with me.” She says “pray tell, who are you?” He turns around and she sees the medal around his neck. She says “oh, you must be Mr. Finn”. She salutes him and he said “that man was my gunner and I don’t go anywhere without him”. She said he should have called my name in. He said he didn’t even call his own name in. She said they knew about him, but not about me. He says “you tell George that I was here, but I couldn’t make it.” We start to turn around and a guy comes up and asks what is going on. She says this man does not have a pass to get on the base. John says he is with me. He asked for my social security number, and I gave it to him. They had computers there so he goes in and comes back and says to me “without thinking, state the last two digits of your service number”. I said 86. He said to let us on. She says “sorry, but I’m in charge”. He says “no, you are not in charge. I am, and you have 30 seconds to issue his pass or I will have you forcefully removed”. She was doing her job. So, we get on, and as I’m walking down the gangway this guy elbowed me in the ribs and said we Irish got to stick together. So I got on and was sitting close to George Bush, and had Dick Cheney on my one side and Colin Powell on the other side. For a kid from Brooklyn I felt like I did pretty good. Every time we go out to California we visit.

I: He had the Medal of Honor when you were at Pearl Harbor. Did he win that when he was on the ship with you?

TWH: No.

I: Did he get it after the war?

TWH: No, he was with a PBY squadron at Kaniowi(sp?) on the other side of the big island. They got attacked five minutes before Pearl Harbor. He was hit 21 times with shrapnel. They claimed that he got the first enemy plane. Being a typical Navy Chief, he

was ordered to a hospital and he didn't want to go. He went to the hospital, signed himself in, then turned the page and signed himself out and came back again.

I: Was he awarded it while he was on your ship?

TWH: No, it was awarded in 1942 when he was aboard the USS Enterprise.

I: So, he was a Medal of Honor winner when he was on the Hancock with you. How did he act toward others and how did they act toward him?

TWH: I'll tell how he acted. When the war was over, they gave us slips to authorize the ribbons. It gave your name, rank, and how many stars you got, and all that. The Captain has to sign it. The Captain signs his and calls Lt. Finn to the quarterdeck. He comes up and the Captain shakes his hand and says he never knew he had a Medal of Honor winner aboard. Only a few of us knew, and we were sworn to secrecy. He didn't want anybody to know. He gets \$1,000 a month. It goes back to the Civil War, when they gave them \$10 a month. Now we have a Congressman who wants to tax it.

That's my life story.