

**William P. Coyle
Veteran**

**Mike Russert
Wayne Clark
Interviewers**

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Home Interview, 1370 James Street
Elmont, New York**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

WC: William Patrick Coyle, I am seventy-seven years old, and my place of birth was Astoria, Long Island.

Q: What was your educational background before you entered service?

WC: I had about I believe four months to go [of school] when I was called into service.

Q: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WC: I'll be truthful, I was out fishing with my brother and we didn't even know what happened. We stopped to have a drink or two when we came home at this bar and people got disgruntled with us and we didn't know what was going on so they said, "Didn't you know that Pearl Harbor was bombed?" which we didn't at that time. Everything got quiet after that. So, that's where I was, with him.

Q: Do you remember what your reaction was at all?

WC: T'ed off, I was t'ed off. I was only eighteen years old and I was mad as hell, I should say.

Q: So you were drafted?

WC: I was drafted. In fact, I waited. I wanted to join the Marines but with my being a little underage my mother said no because my father died and everything like that.

So she said we'd have to just wait. So I went down three times to find out a way to get in touch with me and he said, "Don't worry, Whitey, we will." About two weeks later I was drafted. [Laughter]

Q: Okay, so you were drafted into the navy?

WC: Into the navy, yes.

Q: Where did you go for your basic training?

WC: Samson, New York. I was there for six weeks, I believe, and from there I was home for about a week and then I had to report for duty after that. From there they took us down to the shipyard where our ship was being fitted for everything, radar and all that. So while we were there we would train, and I believe it was in Houston, Texas, right around there. And I was there for I'd say about six to eight weeks. After the training we all boarded and headed for the Panama Canal.

Q: Okay, what ship did you work for?

WC: The USS LeRay Wilson Destroyer Escort 414.

Q: You were the first crew?

WC: We were the first crew, right.

Q: What kind of shakedown cruise did you have on the ship or did you do that on the way over?

WC: We did that on the way over, more or less. And they came back to be fitted out for some other reasons, I think depth charges and for these hedgehogs. When they get fired up they come down in a pattern, a round pattern, and when one explodes the rest of them will go off. So we had a pretty good ship there.

Q: What was your assignment on the escort?

WC: Well I couldn't make petty officers so I was with the deck apes in the beginning and then I used my time for cooking. I was cooking with them as an apprentice there. So I'd done that but we had all the third-class officers and everything. I guess when a lot of ships would destroy these fellows were already set for our ship so none of us could get any higher than where we were. So I still came out as seaman first but when we did come back, they said, "Bill, stick it out for six more months and you'll make third-class." I said forget about it, I had enough to get out, that was it.

Q: So you went through the Panama Canal?

WC: We went through the Panama Canal.

Q: Where did you go from there?

WC: We went to Pearl Harbor, that's where we went, to Pearl Harbor. We were there for maybe about a month and doing a little training here and there. From there we went to quite a few islands, I can show you on here where we went.

[Indicates map]

W: On that map.

WC: Yeah, on that map.

Q: Why don't you show that now then?

WC: I've got something like twenty-four islands we went to as we went along... First was Galveston, Texas. Then we went to Boston, then it was Panama, Pearl

Harbor, Manus, Bougainville, New Guinea, Hong Kong, Saipan, Yokosuka, Tsing Tao (China), Huludao, San Francisco; we went to Houston, Bermuda, Norfolk (Virginia), Eniwetok, San Diego, Palau, Ulithi, Leyte, Guam, Okinawa, Tokyo, Taku, and Luzon. That's the way we went. I was over there for a good two years and we saw quite a bit of action.

Q: Where did you see action?

WC: I saw action in the Pacific, there, at Luzon, Okinawa, Leyte; we got hit with a suicide bomber at Luzon. We were blocking an entrance with another destroyer escort. We would meet, make our turns, and go back out to stop any chances of any torpedo boats getting through or anything while our boys were landing in there. It was at that time that (unclear) we had to keep a watch and this thing dropped down over a mountain and came at us at about twenty-five feet above water and caught us at mid-ship. It was heading for the bridge where I was handling a gun crew there, twenty-millimeter. When we saw it and I said to the guy - his name was Brogy, he was a cook - I said, "Jesus, Brogy! Here he comes." And we heard the officers holler, "Commence firing! "All twenty-millimeters, all forty-millimeters, and five-inches were firing at them. We couldn't stop him, he was all aflame. One wing went off and as the ship started its turn - which it had to do, there's no changing of anything - midship came around and it was on one of those guns that I was on at least two weeks before when I was put up forward at the bridge. And he was heading right for the bridge because if they knocked that out, they knocked out a lot of parts on it. And then you have the after-steering on a ship that (unclear). So he caught her mid-ship and he took all the guns there. There were ten twenty-millimeters, thirteen forty-millimeters. Seven were killed, some were wounded, and some were lost at sea at that time. We also had a few of them come over before that time, planes had just dropped bombs and he must have missed us by maybe forty or fifty feet. The last bomb was dropped and he was so low [the bomber] that he couldn't pull out and he hit a mountain side there and exploded. That was at Luzon. You gotta hear the clapping and the hootin' and hollerin' there. But our ship, in all the time out in the Pacific, was under eight hundred and fifty air raids. I have that on record.

Q: Were there fires caused from this?

WC: Oh yeah a fire was caused; it hit our torpedo tubes with the fire but our guys put that fire out in quick time. Nothing exploded or anything, but all the ship was a mess and everything. Then we had to go back to be refitted at Pearl Harbor and then we came back out.

Q: How long did it take them to fit the ship?

WC: Maybe a month or so. Then we came back out and that's when we met part of the Jap fleet, coming in the back way.

Q: Where was this?

WC: At Surigao Strait, they called it.

Q: Part of the Leyte Gulf fraction.

WC: Yeah, the Leyte Gulf.

Q: Could you describe that for us?

WC: It's pretty hard but twenty miles away they started to fire with one of their biggest battleships that they had at that time. We were only DE's and destroyers, bringing in these three CV's - small carriers. And they caught us there, so they started to make torpedo runs and when I was up on a bridge, I'm sure I heard somebody say to the skipper, "This is a suicide mission." I think the 413 was the one that went out and I think we were in thirteenth position. Either we were told to take off and 413th order with them, but they made a torpedo run. We were right behind them, say maybe a half a mile when they called us back to protect the carriers. They made a torpedo run, turned sideways, they threw their torpedoes, they deadened a cruiser in water and they were blown. One hundred and ninety men or so went down with the ship. That was one of the battles we were in there. From there we went to Okinawa, which for fifty-two days we were on a picket line and they just came in sunrise and sunset. We were at our gun stations at five o'clock every morning and as soon as sunrise would come up, in would come hundreds of those Jap planes and they'd just come flying around, diving around you. We were under I don't know how many attacks over here but eight hundred fifty we were under all together, our ship alone.

Q: Did you have any near-misses with the Kamikazes there?

WC: Oh, yes, in fact we were coming into a station where we were going to anchor. And at that time it was low clouds, it was a very cloudy day and we got the alarm and I was on war-cruising station up on the range-finder and range-keeper that took care of the five-inch guns. And all of a sudden, we heard this plane up above, and we knew he was around us, and they said, "Just keep wherever you think you hear it." I just kept my eyes on the range-keeper and range-finder. All of a sudden he dove down, spittin' like anything. I fired a round and we blew off a wing. We knew because down he came like that [miming erratic flying]. He tried to make a turn but he splashed into the water. Now we were all hootin' and hollerin' about that day. I made another shot when he was coming down but not thinking I'm three stories up, right. I'm the five-inch guns on a main deck so when he was coming down I let another one, they said, "Cease fire!" So I came over and pushed it up so the gun was face-up. But when you're in the heat of battle there, you're not thinking, you're just looking for him. What happened was we were all standing like that and the big splash went right onto one of our ships quite a ways over but it didn't hit it right there like that. We just went (unclear). We got chewed out after it because I understood after a while that when they're so many miles out and you're going to anchor, you have to change all your ammunition because these were magnetic shells so it shows you how close I was when he exploded up there. So if you're ever in there it's a wonder one of those shells didn't just catch a ship. So that's about some of my experiences...

Q: Were you there for the typhoon?

WC: Typhoon? We rode that baby out! We rode it out and in fact we almost took one of our own DE's. We took it for a sub, because they lost one of their whole masts and everything like that. When we caught it coming up on something like that, we had guns all trained on it. It was just as bad off as they were. But then they said, "Don't fire! Don't fire!" It was one of our own destroyer escorts out there. But we rode it out all that time, I think it was five days. And I'm telling you, I *never* saw waves like that in my life. I swear they were forty, fifty feet high because when you looked up, it looked like it would take over your whole ship. Then you'd be up and you'd think for Christ's sake, if you ever jumped overboard you'd break your neck there. That's how deep it was. But I went through a hell of a lot with those guys, we had a lot of good guys. They talked about being a hero, the guys that are dead are heroes.

Q: Now, I noticed you went to China and Japan. When did you go into those places and what did you do there?

WC: Well, I know we went to China for a while.

Q: Was this after the war or were you reassigned?

WC: It was still just before the treaty. When we thought we were homeward bound we were out to sea about three days or so and the skipper piped over and he said, "I know you guys were looking for the homeward bound flags and I hate to tell you this but we're heading for Japan." And that was to invade them. We knew millions were going to die because when you got over there a lot of their windows all had machine guns whether women or men or children were gonna use them on us. They figured at least a million would die.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about the dropping of the atomic bombs?

WC: I was happy as hell. We didn't know too much about it.

Q: How did you hear about that?

WC: I think it came over radio. We got the radio at night because a lot of times we used to listen to Tokyo Rose. And she was to say many a night "the Army or Marines may walk the streets of Tokyo, the Navy never will." We never realized what they meant, but the Kamikazes were supposed to wipe out our name and then they would have quite a bit of the ocean out there where they could take over. And they did a pretty good job on us. I'm sure at least seventy or eighty ships were lost and everything like that through some of these campaigns. Even when we were at Okinawa the fifty-two days, we were always assigned to the next group of ships as you kept going around and always the one behind us got hit. It always seemed to be like that but we had taken that beating when we got there at Luzon. So we knew what to watch out for; we were at battle stations five in the morning until the battle was over and then at night they'd come in again. At sunset they'd come in there and that was a constant problem. That was the greatest part of it all, was the fear, because you never knew when it was your time. And when that plane was heading for us, he was heading for the bridge, like

I said, to knock out everything but as the ship turned, and those guns... I was only talking to fellas before we got into that action and I said, "What do you fear most?" because there were some fellas that came aboard that were in a couple invasions before we were. They said suicide bombers. And those guys were killed, they were good buddies of mine.

Q: Did you ever go ashore in Japan?

WC: Yes, I went ashore. In fact, I was walking with a group of guys and some of these Japanese would come around us and say, "How good are you guys that you're walking around in Japan?" and stuff like that. We knew that there was either going to be a battle or something like that. We'd just holler, "Hey (unclear)!" and our guys would come (unclear). But we didn't do too bad over there.

Q: When did you return to the states?

WC: I think it was in 1946... '46 yeah, I got out.

Q: Did you recall where you were when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt and your reaction to that?

WC: I couldn't swear where we were at that time but I know we all had sickened hearts because you knew he was your leader and now what was gonna happen, you know.

Q: Did you make use of the G.I. Bill?

WC: No, no.

Q: 5220 Club?

WC: I only used, I think two.

Q: Did you join any veterans organizations on your return?

WC: I belong to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the Legionnaires.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

WC: No, I never have. It was only lately we had gotten a call, I let my son take care of it. This fellow claimed he was in an association of people that were on my ship. He was down below and he got that lung problem from being with the asbestos. But he said he wanted me to tell him about it. We really didn't know what guys down below did, what their job was and all that. I was always topside, I was with the deck apes and then I was up cooking and all that. I just didn't want to take a chance to (unclear) in any way. But that was the only time I ever heard from somebody.

Q: So you haven't attended any reunions or anything?

WC: No, I've had too sick of a wife to...

Q: They're planning a reunion though?

WC: Yeah, my son is keeping in contact with them. I don't know if they'll ever get to it though.

Q: So you have a picture to show of your ship?

WC: Yes, this is it. [Shows photograph]

Q: Any idea what happened to the ship after the war?

WC: It's been scuttled more or less.

Q: And you had a special diploma.

WC: This is when I was (unclear) and then once you cross the equator...

Q: How many times did you cross the equator?

WC: God, I couldn't tell you, I really don't know.

Son: Once, you said fourteen.

WC: Well then that's what it was, fourteen.

WC: This is when I just got my diploma, a year ago... So we had Mr. (unclear) help us out on that. He's a terrific man.

WC: This is from New York State, the Conspicuous Service Cross... This is from Mr. (unclear).

Q: And you have your discharge...

WC: Yeah, this is my discharge papers.

Q: How do you think your time and service changed or affected your life?

WC: It helped me grow up fast. I don't think I had any young time to think of anymore. Once you got out into battle, it was scary. You can't say you didn't fear death, you did. We all did. It's just that you didn't know when it was going to be your turn. But I had a lot of good times. I met a buddy of mine on one. I went over for a beer party; I was drinking a can of beer and there was an explosion down there and he hollered, "Bill, hit the sand!" and I asked, "What happened?" He said, "There's Japs up the hill there!" And they'd fly about every so often and then go back in and the Marines go up to get them and can't find them. The way they were dug in there I guess they had it on track. But we had a lot of good times I tell ya.

Q: It also affected your life in terms of high school.

WC: Well, I wasn't able to go all the way through it but my job was for the country at that time. That's all I wanted to do.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

Q: Thank you.