Oral History

Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Felix (George) Appleton, USN

Interviewed by
Floyd C. Cox
Naval Historical Foundation

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Oral History Program
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Felix (George) Appleton, PhM2, USN

Felix (George) Appleton, Pharmacist's Mate Second Class, USN, born in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee in 1924, graduated from University of Tennessee in Knoxville and then the University of Tennessee Dental School in Memphis, TN in 1957.

Entered the US Navy in August 1943 as a Pharmacist's Mate. He was assigned to LST-523 and took part in the invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944. As a Pharmacist's Mate Second Class he helped to tend to the wounded troops that LST-523 received immediately following the Normandy beach landings, as LST-523 was converted to a temporary hospital ship. LST-523 was ferrying wounded troops back to England and new supplies to Normandy as part of a convoy, and during the fourth trip back to Omaha Beach it hit a mine and sunk in two pieces. He was injured in the sinking and was awarded the Purple Heart as a result. After a brief period in England, he returned to the United States where he spent most of the remainder of his service in Chicago as ship's company at a at a V-12 school.

Following the war and the end of his Naval service he attended the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and completed a Bachelor of Science degree in bacteriology. He worked as a bacteriologist for the East Tennessee Baptist Hospital in Knoxville, TN, as well as a consultant for Blount Memorial Hospital in Maryville, TN. He then entered the University of Tennessee Dental School in Memphis, TN, graduating in 1957. He opened his first dental practice in Loudon, TN, from 1957 to 1969. He moved to the Fort Worth, TX, area in 1969 and opened another dental practice in Richland Hills. He was a lifetime member of the Fort Worth District Dental Society, Texas Dental Association and American Dental Association. He worked as a dentist for 37 years, retiring in 2002.

In addition, he involved himself with a number of volunteer and community activities throughout his life. He was a member of Rotary International and Lions Club, and served as a city councilman in Loudon Tennessee, receiving the Distinguished Citizen's Award. He served as one of the dentists who responded to both the Branch Davidian siege in Waco and the Delta Flight 1141 crash to help identify victims. He was a Fellow in the American College of Dentists and a Fellow of the International College of Dentists, as well as serving as the vice-president, president-elect, president, and past president of the Fort Worth District Dental Society.

Dr Felix George Appleton resided in Fort Worth, TX with his wife of 56 years, Nadean Cary Appleton, until his death in 2010 at the age of 85 and her death in 2013. He is survived by his son, Gregory Scott Appleton and wife, Kathy; son, Bryan Cary Appleton and wife, Leisa; daughter, Betsey Carol Appleton; and grandchildren, Kallie, Scott, Erin and Zachary.

Subjects Covered

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Born in Lawrenceburg, TN – Struggle to get "4-F" status overturned and enter Navy
Navy Boot Camp – Hospital Corps school – Convoy to England
Submarine attack warning – general quarters – multiple ships sunk

Arrival in Plymouth, England – trainings until June 5th
Decoy convoys to confuse Germans before D-Day

Night of June 5th – off Normandy Beach
General Quarters - Too many ships and too crowded to unload
June 7th - Off loaded troops onto LCTs – LST 523 set up as a hospital ship
Took 49 causalities onboard

Multiple convoy trips to England and back to Normandy
Multiple LSTs hit mines during convoy trips
Major storm – aerial attack on LST convoy

Confirmed assigned to LST 523 – 20 corpsmen and 3 doctors per LST
Discussion of routine leading up to mine hit
Story of Dr Glasscock surviving the mine hit and sinking
June 19th - LST hit mine – total darkness

Discussion of Normandy landings - LCVP details

Recovery from mine hitting LST – abandoning ship – life rafts
Pulled from the ocean by an LSM
Taken ashore to Army hospital
Outfitted by Army Supply station – return to Southampton via LST to survivor's pool

Discussion of conditions of LST 523 right before mine hit
Full cargo load of combat engineers and explosives
7 miles from the beach – 60 to 70 feet water depth – slow moving

Discussion of number crew members killed in mine explosion
Mine vs Torpedo that hit

Story of JJ Miller
Bow stayed afloat for several days

Southampton – Purple Heart award – return to United States on Queen Elizabeth
Arrival in New York and transit to Norfolk, VA
Medical inspections – leave – reassignment to Great Lakes

Request transfer away from Great Lakes – Reassigned to Lambert Field in, St. Louis
Reassigned to Chicago at a V-12 school for remainder of service
Discharged in Memphis – 3.5 years service

Discussion of decision to enter dental school
Worked as dentist for 37 years
Enjoyed time in Navy and medical career– Story of emergency room patient

17 February 2004

FELIX (GEORGE) APPLETON (LST 523)

Floyd C. Cox,
Interviewer

COX: Today is February 17, 2004. My name is Floyd Cox. I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. We are here in Haltom City, Texas, today on behalf of the Naval Historical Foundation of Washington, D.C., to do an oral history with Felix, known as George, Appleton, concerning his experiences during World War II.

George, I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to visit with you today, and I'd like to start off—if you would tell me a little bit of your background: where you were born, your parents' name, a little bit about your schooling and the type of work you did before going into the Navy, and so on.

APPLETON: Okay. I was born in a little town in middle Tennessee—Lawrenceburg, in Lawrence County. I did my schooling there through high school. My parents were Felix C. and Flora Appleton.

COX: What year were you born, George?

APPLETON: July 21, 1924.

COX: Did you complete your high school there in Tennessee?

APPLETON: Yes.

COX: What year did you graduate?

APPLETON: 1943. And then I went into the Navy right shortly after graduation.

COX: Why did you pick the Navy?

APPLETON: It just seemed like a good thing to do. I have no particular reason other than that. Some friends of mine had gone into the Navy, but also I had some in the Army, some in the Marine Corps, and all that bit.

I was made 4-F in my first exam because of surgery I'd had resulting from a gunshot on Thanksgiving Day of 1941. They thought that would be maybe a six-month deferment. It turned out they made it permanent. So I went to my physician right after lunch one day, one o'clock, and I spent from one o'clock until five arguing with him that I was fit and needed to go. I wanted to go. He was pleading the case that my father had died when I was thirteen and left my mother with my brother five years younger than I. But I had two brothers-in-law and I was insisting that they could meet Mother's needs and it wasn't imperative that I stay on the scene there, and I wanted to go to the Navy. About five o'clock they were ready to close the office and he said, "Well, if nothing else will do," the Doctor said, "I'll fix it up for you."

So I went over to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and that's where I was examined and sworn into the Navy. We got a nine-day leave there, and when I went back to Chattanooga I was sent to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Spent the night there. My first meal with the Government, at Fort Oglethorpe—we got there too late to eat at regular mealtime, and we had a thick slice of bologna and a piece of bread. We had a water faucet out in the grass there that we could get water from. That was my introduction to the military.

COX: Where did you take your boot training?

APPLETON: We left the next morning going to Bainbridge, Maryland, which is out of a little town called Perryton. I did my boot training there. Upon completion of boot camp we had another little leave. I think it was a week or something of that order. Went back and they asked where we wanted to go, what we would like to do. I had two rather diverse desires. One of them was to go into the hospital corps school, and the other was to become an electrician. They're not much related, and I don't know really why. I liked the idea of medicine; I guess that came from my experience with the gunshot and the hospital associated with it.

From hospital corps school we were moved—I guess it was our whole class that graduated—we went to Memphis Naval Air Station. There was a hospital there outside of Memphis, in a little town called Millington. We stayed there for about six weeks, maybe eight. Then we were transferred to Lido Beach, New York. We stayed there while different drafts were made up and assigned to different areas of duty.

That's when we found ourselves assigned to a group called Foxy 29. We took hand-to-hand combat training. We went out to the rifle range and did that. That convinced us that we were going to be going to the South Pacific, because of many reports that the Japanese were using the little red cross on our helmets as targets. That went on also in the European theater too.

When we finished with the training there, which was about two months' worth, we shipped out from there to pick up our ship at Bayonne, New Jersey, which was 523. There were forty hospital corpsmen in that draft, and we boarded the LST as passengers. We went from Bayonne, New Jersey down the Hudson, up to Boston. Spent a couple of days there. Then went on over to Halifax, Nova Scotia. We were there maybe a day and night, and then left, went out to sea and joined a convoy going to England.

COX: Were you part of the crew now?

APPLETON: No, we were still passengers until we arrived in England and started the schooling at different locations.

COX: Passengers. Forty corpsmen divided into two groups of twenty each.

APPLETON: Yes, so we took the northern route, this convoy did. We were three ships from the back, the end of the convoy, and three ships in from the port side, which is the left side. The ships—I don't know if that's just the way I was seeing them, but they were lined up like a series of diamonds. One, two, three and four. All spaced out like you took little diamond blocks and spaced them, kind of like putting up tile, I guess.

We weren't out to sea more than, I guess, three or four or five days till it was posted on the bulletin board that we were going to encounter a submarine wolf pack. And truly, we did. We'd go to general quarters—that's your assigned battle station—at sunrise and sunset, because the submarines would come up with the sun at their back. It made seeing them much more difficult, when the sun was rising or setting. So we kept losing a ship, one at the port side, one at the back side, stern of the convoy.

COX: By that you mean being sunk?

APPLETON: Yes. We had little destroyer escorts, they called them, from England. That was our protection and escort over there. We were advised that if somebody fell overboard or whatever, the convoy would go on. These little escorts would try to pick up survivors if there were any, but in that cold water they said you would have no more than five minutes to be rescued.

COX: Pardon me, but do you remember how many ships were sunk in your convoy there?

APPLETON: No, except we wound up on the outer edge, both from the port side and from the stern. Very fortunately, we ran into this tremendous storm. At one moment you'd be down with nothing but water around you, down in the trough of the swell, and then you'd ride up and crest. The LST is 328 feet long and 60 feet wide. You could stand up there and look out when it crested, and you'd see it bend—that's kind of a weird feeling—because the hull wasn't any more, I think, than a half-inch. Somebody raised some question about the safety of that. They said,

well, if it didn't flex and bend, that it would break. So anyway, we rode the storm for three or four days and that was the end of our contact with submarines.

Then we got on up, I guess farther north, and we ran into these ice floes. I guess you could call them icebergs; they were huge. My bunk was against the outer hull, and it wasn't exactly a lullaby to lie there in your bunk and hear this ice crunching along the side. I could not help but remember the story of the Titanic, and that meant that the ice was no more than a half-inch away from me.

But the storm abated and we went on after nineteen days and arrived at Plymouth, England.

COX: Let me ask you, George, was the ship carrying any cargo?

APPLETON: Yes, we were fully loaded.

COX: What type of cargo did they have?

APPLETON: I don't know. I have no idea, and they wouldn't tell us.

At the end of that trek I was beginning to feel sorry for Columbus and his crew taking such a long time getting over from Spain to America.

We pulled into the harbor at Plymouth. We anchored outside the harbor and looked in, and it just looked so peaceful and quiet. I was beginning to wonder if this war thing—we'd heard about Plymouth being one of the most bombed cities in England at that point. London, I think, finally took that position. But it just looked so quiet over there, and we were far enough out that all we could see was just some buildings. They really were hulls.

We did finally pull on in, and they assigned liberty and we got to go ashore for the evening time, and found out that it really had been bombed out. Entire blocks wiped out.

From there we went to a little town called Foy for training in gas warfare. How to protect yourself, protect the other crew members, and to decontaminate, and how to treat gas incidents if it should happen. We continued taking training like that until June 5, when we loaded up for our beach landing.

Prior to the invasion, convoys had been sent out in an attempt to confuse the Germans about the landing day. One such convoy was intercepted by E-boats (E-boats are like our PT boats). The results were distasterous for the U.S. convoy of amphibious crafts.

Then on the night of the 5th we were carrying in combat engineers. I think that's what that load was. We loaded on the 5th, crossed the Channel at night, and we arrived at the beach off of

Normandy—we were going into Omaha Beach—about daylight. Looking over there you could hear the guns. Then that quit. It was just quiet. A little destroyer pulled up—I didn't know he was there—off to our starboard side, and fired across our LST. We were close enough that we got the muzzle blast, but it was quite a shock. That was kind of like a whistle at a ball game. Then all bedlam broke loose.

I've never seen as many ships in my life as there were around, all shapes and sizes. We had battleships a good ways out, and they were firing over us. It just went from bad to worse then.

We were supposed to go on to Omaha beach but there was so much traffic there and the first ships that went in, the loss in life and materials, the whole bit, was just disastrous. If you've seen the movie of "Saving Private Ryan," that's as close to how it really was, I guess, as it can be.

COX: What were you doing on the ship at this time? Were you assigned yet? And if so, what was your duty?

APPLETON: We were at general quarters. We went to our battle stations.

COX: Which was?

APPLETON: My battle station was forward just beneath the forward starboard gun turret. There were more anti-aircraft 20 and 40 mm guns than anything else. We stayed at general quarters until, well, it got to the point where the debris and wrecked ships, you couldn't get in. So we actually landed on, I guess it was the next day.

COX: So that would be the 7th?

APPLETON: Yes. Sitting out there waiting to get in. Then we off-loaded onto LCTs and that sort of thing.

COX: Smaller craft?

APPLETON: Smaller craft to take our troops and tanks, trucks, and all that material to the beach. Then when we got those off-board, then we cleaned up the tank deck and mopped down the deck—the seamen did that with disinfectant—and we set up as a hospital ship.

We took on board ninety-four casualties. One came on board deceased, and then I lost my first patient that I took care of. He had a three-inch gash in his chest, and we just weren't equipped to handle that kind of surgery. We did have a surgery table set up and our boilermakers had made us a sterilizer. We didn't have a steam sterilizer. We did have facilities to boil

instruments, but steam sterilization is much, much better, so our boilermakers made one. So we had that advantage.

You did whatever there was to do. One of our casualties was a little eighteen-year-old kid. We were all kids, I guess, but I felt more grown-up, if you remember when you were that age. He had stepped on a land mine. Those things had, I think it was three little prongs that stuck up. He stepped on it and happened to hear it click, so he yelled for everybody to hit the dirt. And he stood on that thing and it blew up and just riddled his foot and injured his leg up to here. That was one of our amputations that was done.

I stayed with this guy that had the chest wound until he died; it didn't take him long to pass on.

COX: Did you have surgeons on board, too?

APPLETON: Yes. We had two Navy doctors and one Army doctor on board. The Army doctor was called a surgeon, and I think our Navy doctors—of course they'd had surgical training too, but I think the Army guy was more specialized than the Navy.

One of my patients had a bullet hole in his helmet, and the metal of the helmet had pushed inward. I thought the guy was not in a real bad way. He had this hole, cut, in the back of his head. I thought it was where the helmet had cut him. So I started using a clamp and a razor blade—we didn't have regular razors—and was cleaning it up, and I kept hitting something that sounded metallic. I got the blood and sand and hair moved away a bit, and it was a bullet sitting in the back of his head.

COX: In his skull?

APPLETON: Yes. It didn't penetrate the skull, but it was inside the tissue there. So I retrieved it and I told him to hold his hand out, that this was a souvenir he probably would want to keep.

We had all sorts of things. We lost a total of three, as I recall, that died. One of them with gangrene, and then the chest wound, and the one that we took on board that was deceased. We did a mid-thigh amputation, a foot—the guy that stepped on the land mine—and an arm, I believe was it.

COX: Now, did the LST take on any fire from shore batteries at this time?

APPLETON: They were firing all around, but everybody kind of seemed to ignore it. I mean, you had a job to do. You were busy working. We left England, we were at general quarters until we got there, and then it was a full seventy-two hours before anybody got a break on it. Then we got four hours off and eight hours on, and rotated through that way. I don't remember how long it took for us to get assigned—it wasn't long, though—until we were assigned a convoy to go back,

take our patients back to England, re-load, and come back. We made three and a half trips. First went into Omaha.

COX: On June 6.

APPLETON: Yes, then Utah. Back to Omaha.

COX: Was that the next day?

APPLETON: Oh, it would take you a day to get there and back. To England and back. Southampton was where we went back to. It was on our fourth trip in. We still were in this diamond-shaped thing when we were underway getting there.

COX: The convoy.

APPLETON: They had a pattern to line up so that everybody wouldn't go straight in. I thought we were closer in, and I just wasn't good at making estimates of how far out we were. I think where we hit the mine it was about seven miles out. I think that's what National Geographic—did you find that?

COX: No, I didn't.

APPLETON: I have a copy. The first trip in, an LST off to our starboard, right, side hit a mine, right alongside us. And it sunk. We had a machine gun blow off of that ship, came over and hit ours. It just squatted in the water and down it went.

The second trip, one off the port side hit a mine. Third trip was one dead ahead hit a mine and sunk.

COX: At that time did you get to thinking: When is our turn?

APPLETON: No. I thought we were through. One here, one there. There was nothing going to sneak up behind us, you know? But we took ours. That was questioned. I didn't hear anything about it until, I don't know, maybe two years ago, that some German had a submarine there and he was decorated for torpedoing our ship.

COX: I haven't heard anything about that.

APPLETON: I have a thing here that's written up. Supposedly there are people who were out there with us that saw the torpedo going through waves. At this point there was one of the major storms of all time building up on the day that we got hit, the 19th. June 19th.

COX: Now, on your other trips back to the beaches did you pick up casualties again?

APPLETON: Oh, yes.

COX: So every trip you...

APPLETON: One of them I think we didn't have—if we had casualties there weren't many of them. There was nothing like that first round in. There just wasn't that much to be done on that.

COX: Were the guns on your LST firing towards the beachhead?

APPLETON: We had some air raids. But at that point I think Germany was running short of fuel. There'd be one or two. One dropped a bomb and it was at dark. This friend and I were standing up topside on the open deck listening to the plane buzzing around, and we heard a bomb start whistling as it came down. We both hit the hatchway at the same time. Neither one of us got in. But it hit off to our stern and I don't think it did any damage to anybody.

COX: What was your rank during this period?

APPLETON: I was a third-class pharmacist's mate. And then when I got back here I made second-class.

COX: During this period were you assigned to the ship yet?

APPLETON: Oh, yes.

COX: Oh, you had been assigned.

APPLETON: They split the forty up into groups of twenty, so twenty of us stayed there. We became ship's company.

COX: Twenty corpsmen on a ship?

APPLETON: Yes. And we had three doctors; there were two Navy and this one Army captain.

COX: The reason they assigned twenty of you is that you were hauling back casualties each time.

APPLETON: Yes.

COX: Okay. Because an LST normally did not have twenty corpsmen.

APPLETON: No, no, no. Except for that sort of deal; we were converting to a hospital ship, essentially. Usually, there was one first-class pharmacist's mate assigned. During break times when we weren't actually carrying patients to or from, I'd go down and help him hold sick call.

On the day we were hit I'd just finished lunch and was going back up. This doctor—Vito Stabile was his name. Real nice guy. He was blown up and off the ship over into the water. When we hit the mine it blew the ship completely in two, and the stern, it didn't go anywhere. It just sank right on the spot in very little time. The guys on it had practically no chance to get off.

I was on the bow section, and as I'd left lunch I saw Dr. Stabile, and he said, "If you guys want any rest, now's the time to get it." He said, "We're going to be getting a load of patients this time." I remembered the seventy-two hour stretch on the first one, so I went down and climbed in my bunk. Normally I would have gone on down to sick bay and worked with Pharmacist's Mate Graham. That's where he was, and he didn't survive this. Had I been there I wouldn't have survived it, because that's just the area that hit.

Where we hit the mine there's a hold where they put cargo down through. I guess it must be twenty feet square, thereabout. And that's the section that just blew out. Right in front of the bridge, the superstructure. All of the officers were up there. That's where Dr. Stabile was, where Dr. McLean, the Army surgeon, and Glasscock. Glasscock was an MD; he was from Arkansas. Stabile was from Connecticut, I believe, somewhere up in the Northeast.

COX: Did any of those fellows survive?

APPLETON: Glasscock did. He was from Little Rock. I saw him somewhere afterwards. He was telling about his time when the thing blew up. Said he was blown up through the halyards and the lines that carried the flags up, you know? He said on the way up he thought: This is quite something. You survive a blast like that and get blown up and that doesn't kill you, and now I'm going to get killed when I fall back down and get crunched on this steel deck. But he rolled down through those lines enough to break his fall, and he really wasn't hurt.

We had life-belts with little CO_2 cartridges in them. You just squeezed that and it would perforate these cartridges, and that would blow the life-belt up with air and make a good flotation device. He squeezed his and nothing happened. He had two duds in there. But he said that wasn't too bad because we had the little tubes with valves on them, where you could open that up and blow the thing up by mouth. Are you familiar with those? He tried that and discovered that his were corroded and he couldn't turn them. He said he was thinking then that, here I am, I survive the blast, get blown up, then fall back down uninjured, and now I'm going to drown like a rat. But he said he saw a fellow over there with a Mae West vest on. He checked him and he was dead, and he said I decided that he wouldn't mind if I traded with him. This, to some people, may sound crude but you do find, you have to find, humor or you'd go batty. So that's how he got off.

COX: Now, you were in your bunk. How many decks below the top deck was that?

APPLETON: It was only one deck down. But it broke. I wasn't asleep. I saw the flash, and then the most noise I think I've ever heard. And everything went black. Have you ever been in Carlsbad Caverns?

COX: No.

APPLETON: Ever been in a cave, deep where they turned the light out?

COX: Total darkness.

APPLETON: Yes, that's what total darkness is about. That's the way this was. I was no more than ten or twelve feet from where it broke. But there was enough metal in there, I guess, to protect me to some extent. I got a little puncture wound in the knee and that's how I came to have a Purple Heart.

I started going topside. I don't know what you call these little wheels you can turn and open a hatchway, like a lid? Bill Emmitt, from Mount Pleasant, Tennessee, came back. He's the only one that knew where I was. The others had been either thrown over the side or had jumped over, or whatever.

It's rather amusing. They were telling that—I got up a little late to witness it—but the senior officer in a deal like that, it's his responsibility to call for Abandon Ship. Well, this guy got off and was out in a raft. We only had one officer up forward. And he remembered that he was supposed to give the order to abandon ship, so he did from his raft. He did his duty.

COX: George, I'd like to back up a little bit, to June 6, the Normandy invasion D-day, and ask you: Did you see a lot of carnage on the beach at the time? Tell me a little bit about what you witnessed.

APPLETON: We weren't in to where we could see the small boats that we sent in loaded with Army personnel.

COX: What were these boats called?

APPLETON: LCVPs.

COX: How many men would they carry?

APPLETON: They had a crew of three, but they were designed to carry thirty-three. Thirty other people, troops, in.

COX: How many LCVPs were assigned to your ship?

APPLETON: Four. We weren't positioned where we could see that much that was going on. All you could see over there was you could hear it, and see the smoke. There was a lot of smoke going up from ships that were set afire and blown up.

COX: Did all your ships, your LCVPs, make it in safely and back?

APPLETON: Well, the first one we sent in hit a mine that was tied on—what do you call those...

COX: Those obstructions?

APPLETON: ...obstructions they had? They were metallic rails that, if they didn't rip the bottom out of the small boat then it would blow it up. They had mines tied to them. After we got the ship unloaded we started cleaning up and fixing up to receive the patients.

COX: This one that hit the mine—were there any casualties?

APPLETON: They all were killed.

COX: Everybody on the landing craft was killed.

APPLETON: All of them. Had forty-six at one point.

COX: So you had three of the four that were assigned to you were left and they continued to shuttle troops back and forth to the beach.

APPLETON: Yes.

COX: Can you describe what the water might have looked like at that point in time?

APPLETON: Like it was blood.

COX: Like there was just a lot of death and destruction.

APPLETON: Oh, there were body parts floating around. There were some people that didn't have packs on for whatever reason. They had lost them or what have you. But mostly there were just body parts.

COX: Well, let's skip back to the 19th now, if you will, the day that LST 523 hit a mine. You were woke up in an abrupt manner, to say the least. You were one deck down in total darkness. How did you find your way up?

APPLETON: Well, the lockers and bunks that were in there—I was down at one end of the quarters at that point—they were welded to the deck. But from what I could feel—I couldn't see—everything was tumbled around. I hadn't been asleep. When I tried to get up I was waist deep in debris. I couldn't find my shoes, I couldn't find my medical kit, I couldn't find my life-belt. So I decided that maybe the smart thing to do was get my way out. That's when I found this little

wheel and I turned it to open it up. When I got it open Bill Emmitt was there. He had started back to look for me.

COX: This is the end of Side 1, Tape 1.

(Start of Side B, Tape 1)

APPLETON: So he asked if I was all right. I told him yes, I was okay, and we climbed out and went topside. Most all the Navy guys were gone. They had already gone over the side and gotten in rafts or whatever.

There were a few Army guys just walking around. There were two that had this guy by the arms holding him up out of the water at the edge of where the ship had broken, but they couldn't pull him on up. But when the waves—they would come in and go out—when they went out there was nothing left of the lower torso. They were just holding his arms and chest. But you couldn't get them—they were just dazed, but they wouldn't let go. So Bill and I tried to get some of the others. We went over and put two life rafts in the water on the starboard side. The other rafts had left, apparently, from the port side. These two rafts were there, so we thought if we put the rafts down these guys that were up there walking around could jump in. You'd talk to them and they'd look at you, but it was as if they couldn't see nor hear.

COX: Just a blank stare.

APPLETON: Blank. So Bill and I thought, well, if we go over and get in the raft, maybe these guys would jump in and we could get them off. In the meantime there were other small boats from other LSTs and ships in the area that were coming in to rescue. Our rafts were tied to just one line. This is again, I repeat, this is when the storm was coming in and the waves were, I guess they were eight to ten feet high. The wave came in and brought Bill's raft right up under him and he turned loose and dropped in. I don't think he got wet more than waist high, you know? I thought that was pretty keen—I'd try it.

So here my raft came up and it tipped off just as I swung over. It tipped and slid down the wave and back away from the ship. And all this gunk and stuff that was on the water came up and greased the rope I was hanging onto, and I had an express elevator down. I had to go swim for my raft.

But we still couldn't get these guys—they wouldn't even look at you. So we thought, well, we'll leave one raft here and we'll take the other one and get away, because when a ship sinks there's a suction to it that can pull you down. And there were these ragged edges where the break occurred, that we were drifting into because the water was running up inside the bow section. Our bow doors were closed, and that's pretty much watertight then, so it didn't sink as quickly as the stern section did. As a matter of fact, it stayed afloat for a few days.

Anyway, we cut one raft loose and started paddling back away from it. We picked up a soldier whose face looked like he'd been hit with a broadaxe. He was cut all the way down.

COX: All the way from his forehead to his chin?

APPLETON: His chin. But he was still alive and, despite that, it looked like in pretty good shape. We pulled him aboard.

I had the paddle and I saw—it looked like a wig floating out there. I took my paddle and touched it and this hand came up and took hold of the paddle. I pulled it over and a body came with it. It was Dr. Stabile. So we hauled him aboard. He was unconscious, and he died at about ten o'clock that night.

We were picked up by a small boat. It was bigger than the LCVP. It was an LSM, really. They had picked up another one of our guys. They took us over to another LST and were going to off-load us onto it. Well, the waves were so high at that point—the storm was getting stronger all the time—that one minute you'd be looking up at deck level, and then the swell would go down and you could see the guardrail and the propeller screws.

They tried that for a bit and gave up on it. A Duck, an amphibious Army vehicle, pulled alongside and they put us on it and took us in to the Army hospital on the beach, which was about a mile in. I'm guessing here; I don't know how accurate my judgement may have been. But anyway, it was away from the water.

They took my trousers and my shirt and they were going to dry them. They put the clothes in a dry-heat oven, and when they came back they just crumbled like a soda cracker. I had no shoes, no socks, and part of my shirt didn't crumble but half did, and I had this little part that has the buttons on it. All the rest, the right side of it, was just gone. My dungarees, blue jeans, survived, and I put them on and that was the clothes I had. I had no hat, no shoes, no socks. I really was like a shipwreck victim.

COX: You were.

APPLETON: But that night I relived that explosion and all that mess that we'd seen and had, no less than a dozen times. I'd go to sleep and it would all happen again. They had a little Army nurse that was working that tent. I don't know if I said anything or what; that I don't know. But she stayed with me. She would make rounds and then come back by. I'd be awake, and we'd sit and talk. I wasn't sitting; I was laying on a stretcher.

We stayed with that hospital for, I guess, a day. The next day, there were three of us then from the ship that were together. I went down to the beach. I needed some shoes. We went by the surgical tent and there was a whole big pile of clothing, where they'd cut it off people. There was a pair of paratrooper's boots there, and they were spit-polished, shined like you wouldn't believe.

I have a long, narrow foot. I saw those things, pulled them on, and they were a perfect fit. About the time I got one of the boots on and laced up, tied, and was working with the other one, I heard this blast of profanity that you wouldn't believe. It ended up with, "Who stole my boots?" I looked up and there was the biggest paratrooper I've ever seen in my life. That sucker looked like a power pole standing up there.

I said, "Are these yours?" And they were. So I gave them up. I went on down to the beach and they had a Navy so-called supply depot set up. But they wouldn't give me any clothes.

Some Army guy—I don't know what role he was playing—he said, "We have a supply station up here. Go on up there; I think they'll take care of you." So I dressed out in Army shoes and trousers and coat and that little...

COX: Garrison hat?

APPLETON: ...whatever hat it was. So that got me fixed up where I could be more comfortable. We stayed on the beach, I guess it must have been three or four days. Well, it was longer than that. Because of that storm nothing landed for three days after we hit. That's when we went back down there, to the beach.

I got my clothes outfitted and we got on another LST and I have no idea what its name was, or number. We went back to Southampton, and from there into a survivors pool.

COX: Let's go back to right before the ship hit the mine. Was the ship moving at that time?

APPLETON: We had just started to make our move and approach the beach.

COX: So you were lined up with the beach and you were getting ready for....

APPLETON: We were, yes.

COX: So at that point in time they had not off-loaded anything yet, because they weren't in.

APPLETON: No, we were fully loaded.

COX: What was the cargo at the time?

APPLETON: Combat engineers. They had explosives on board. We were close enough in that they had gotten in their vehicles and started their engines and ready to...

COX: Soon as the doors opened.

APPLETON: ...disembark soon as it opened. The way that worked, they would off-load the tank deck first. Then the ramp would go down and the ones that are on the top deck would go down.

COX: So at that point in time they had not off-loaded any tanks?

APPLETON: Nothing. We were at full load.

COX: Full load.

APPLETON: And that's one reason—the truck that was right over my bunk supposedly had TNT and dynamite and something else on it. It was, I guess, maybe a full ton or better size truck. I don't know if it exploded. I guess it wasn't there when everybody got up there. But that's one thing that accounted for the high number of casualties. Those guys on the tank deck didn't have a chance.

COX: If they were in their tanks, they went down with them, then.

APPLETON: Yes.

COX: How far do you think you were from the beach?

APPLETON: I have a report here somewhere. The captain wrote it up from memory, and he said that we were like seven miles out. I guesstimated that the bow must have gone, I was thinking, maybe a hundred yards or so from the stern, from the explosion and all. And his estimate was more like seven hundred yards. But it messes me up out on water. I don't have points of reference that I can go with. If I knew how far it was from here to here, then I could better appraise the situation. But I was well off. I'd take his numbers before I would mine.

COX: Do you have any idea how deep the water was there?

APPLETON: There have been several people that did photographing the wreck. All put it at, I think it's twenty-three meters, which would be about sixty or seventy feet in depth.

COX: Do you have any idea how fast the ship was going at that time?

APPLETON: Not very fast at all. They were jockeying for position. And there was one ship, I think it was an LST, that tangled with a wreck that was on the bottom. I think it had an anchor that tangled up with it some way. Oh, we had been anchored, waiting for the order to move in. And when they tried to raise their anchor it hung on this wreck, and they lost the anchor. So while they were tied up with that we had to divert and go around it to assume its position. So that's one reason I guess, too, that we weren't making much headway. They're not a speedy piece of business anyway, you know.

COX: Definitely not.

APPLETON: They called them Large Slow Targets, LST.

COX: Large Slow Target. Well, when you were in the life raft did you see any of the equipment that was on the bow? The bow was still above water?

APPLETON: It was clean. At that point they're chained down, the vehicles, to cleats on the deck that are welded in. I don't know if the blast blew them off. It would have had to, because they didn't have anywhere to go.

COX: So it was clean; there was no equipment on it.

APPLETON: Not on the top deck.

COX: While all this was going on, did you see any other vessels that were hit?

APPLETON: No. I didn't.

COX: Of course, you were pretty busy yourself.

APPLETON: I don't think there were any others hit at that time. The trips we made in, the only ones I saw go were the LSTs. Now, our one LCVP was blown up. But the LSTs, we lost one every trip we made, but it was just one. That may not have been all that got sunk that day, but where we were, in our vicinity.

COX: On the 19th, prior to your ship hitting a mine, did you observe any of these DD tanks in the water? That is, the tanks with the flotation device, enabling them to get into the shore? You didn't observe any?

APPLETON: No.

COX: Okay. Did you happen to notice any the day you were sunk?

APPLETON: None of those.

COX: What you observed going in?

APPLETON: Well, they open the bow doors and there's a little ramp you let down there, which is supposed to hit sand. And they'd drive off and trundle away.

COX: Do you know how many of the ship crew members were killed on that day due to the mine blast?

APPLETON: The number varies, but I think the most reliable is that there were seventy-four or seventy-six survived it, of the total crew.

COX: Of the total crew.

APPLETON: I don't know how many there are but we had about five hundred people on board.

COX: Total. That was Army and Navy?

APPLETON: Yes.

COX: And approximately seventy-six?

APPLETON: Of the Navy people.

COX: Of the Navy people.

APPLETON: And I doubt that there were many Army survivors, because they were either topside and busy getting their vehicles' motors going and this sort of thing, so they'd be open to the blast there. But the guys down on the tank deck—I just can't see that they had a chance at all.

COX: In your opinion, was it a mine that the ship hit, or was it a torpedo?

APPLETON: I'm inclined to think it was a mine. People wonder, in discussing this happening: Well, didn't they use minesweepers? We were advised or told that it was a mine that had been dropped from aircraft over sea, and it was a magnetic-type thing. The minesweepers, we saw them going constantly. But these magnetic mines, as I understand it, had a weight to carry them down to the bottom, and when a metallic, metal-bottomed ship went over it would click. And it was set for so many clicks. Then when that setting came up, the mine was released and it would go up and strike the bottom of the ship and then that set it off.

COX: It's going to be a contact explosion.

APPLETON: That's what we were told.

COX: All you know, is that it just blew the ship apart.

APPLETON: Yes. That I can vouch for.

COX: Are there any observations that you would like to make concerning that day that your ship went down?

APPLETON: Well, one of the fellows that was on the stern in addition to the doctor thought he'd been—well, he was knocked out I guess. But he came to and thought that he'd been blinded. He said he felt, and he knew what he was feeling was blood, and he couldn't see. He said he was reluctant to raise his hand up and maybe stick his hand in a bad wound or something. But he finally did, and it was a great big G.I. bucket that had come down over his head. He was quite relieved to pull the bucket off and find out, yeah, he could see. He had some head cuts, which I think were probably from when the bucket hit him.

But he went on around the rail to get off, and one of the pharmacist's mates had this railing wrapped around him and he had a broken hip with bone, compound fracture. The guy weighed well over two hundred pounds; he was a great big guy. This fellow then couldn't budge him. The rail had wrapped around and had him trapped there. His name was J. J. Miller. Miller told him to go ahead, said there's no point in both of us drowning. That was sinking very rapidly. So he left him.

COX: And he went down?

APPLETON: That bothered him a long time, the guy that left.

COX: Certainly.

APPLETON: But there really was nothing he could do.

COX: Now, you mentioned that part of the ship stayed afloat?

APPLETON: The bow did.

COX: For several days?

APPLETON: Yes. Well, the bow doors were closed, and that's pretty watertight. The explosion would have forced air up in that area, and then the broken part would seal it pretty much at that point. I've heard, I don't really know, that they sent ships out and sunk the bow to get it out of the way after the storm was over. It was still sitting up there. All I could see, the last I saw of it, was barely the mast sticking up like that, and there's a cross arm across there. At low tide you could see that. Other than that there wasn't much to be seen out there.

COX: So it went down at a different area than the stern did.

APPLETON: The skipper, I think, said it was about seven hundred feet apart. The stern, when it exploded—the people that observed it said it didn't move. Or not much at all. But it gave impetus to the bow section, which pushed it on out. And I suppose that's what happened.

COX: Now, after you went back to England, what took place?

APPLETON: We went into Southampton and entered a hospital there and they checked us over. Went out, got in a truck—you know, that had the benches down the sides—and then they told us to bail out. They called out some names. "Get out and line up." He read the little thing and handed us our Purple Hearts. Said, "Now get back on board." Very formal presentation. And we took off to the survivor pool.

COX: Where did they disperse you to from there?

APPLETON: Well, we hung around there for, I don't know, maybe a couple of weeks. We'd make muster and they'd call off people that would be reassigned to another ship and all. We just sat in our little Quonset hut and enjoyed the rain and mud until they called us out one day and told us we were going to be sent by rail somewhere. We went up to Edinburgh and Glasgow. And so we went from America to England on the LST, which is about as slow as you can get, and we got on the *Queen Elizabeth* to come back. Nineteen days going over and we came back in four-plus. That was quite a ship.

COX: Was it completely loaded with troops when you came back?

APPLETON: Pretty much.

COX: Do you remember the date?

APPLETON: No. I can look it up. It's written somewhere.

COX: So you got back to the States, and then what happened?

APPLETON: We went into New York. One thing that was most remarkable about that was seeing the Statue of Liberty. I had seen it before we left New York, but it didn't have near the meaning then that it did coming back and seeing that lady standing out there.

COX: I'm sure that's true.

APPLETON: And we went into Pier 90, I believe it was, and disembarked. Got on a train and went to Norfolk, Virginia. We stayed there maybe a couple of days, three. Everybody thought we'd be reassigned to shore duty, I mean maybe shipped right on to the Pacific. They kept us over longer than what they initially said, I guess to give us psychiatric exams and all that sort of thing. But then they gave us a thirty-day survivor's leave. Went back to Norfolk, and from there we went to the Great Lakes Navy Hospital to pull duty there. We got disgruntled. Great Lakes is also a boot training facility.

COX: Oh, certainly.

APPLETON: Independently—there was no discussion, but there were four of us malcontents that went in and asked for a transfer. Well, there was the nicest little old lady; she was civilian, the gray-headed mother type. Wanted to know how she could help me. I said I want a transfer. "Well, you just got here." I know; I want a transfer. "Where would you like to go?" I said anywhere. It's a difference in facilities one place and another, about the rigidity of things, you know. So she said, "Well, I'll see what I can do." She said, "You know that means you could go overseas." I said yeah. I really wouldn't, because they had ordered us to stay on shore for a year. I didn't know that.

So it went on for a couple or three days and I hadn't heard anything. I went back to see her and she raised the blotter, pulled it out. She said, "Now, you still want to transfer?" And I told her yes. It ended up, she said she'd see what she could do, and we were sent, the four of us—neither of us knew the other ones were involved in this—they sent us to Lambert Field in Naval Air Station, St. Louis. I stayed there for six weeks. Then on Christmas Eve I was shipped to Chicago at a V-12 school, as ship's company, not as a student. And that's where I spent the rest of my time.

COX: And when were you discharged, George?

APPLETON: At Memphis; I'd been in just short of three years. That's dated here on a discharge somewhere.

COX: You got out and you went to college. And you specialized in dentistry?

APPLETON: No. I was still wanting to get into med school. I think I told you this, I don't know if it's on the tape or not, Tennessee only had classes of thirty-five. But it was on the quarter system. With the influx of GIs and all it was really a problem to get in. So I guess I was hedging a bit, but I decided I'd get into something I could make a living with if I didn't succeed in getting into a professional school. So I majored in bacteriology and took a job at East Tennessee Baptist Hospital as a bacteriologist.

I was doing some post-grad work then and I had talked with this neurosurgeon. He suggested, if he had it to do over he wouldn't go into medicine. I asked him what he would do. He said he would go into dentistry. He said you can still be helping people, you're in the health environment thing, and, he said, you have better control of your time. So that's how I came—I had an application in for a position in Washington in bacteriology up there. At the VA—it was a civil service thing. They had given me an appointment to come for an interview. And I had an application in for dental school. That's what that neurosurgeon had suggested that he might have done if he had done it over. My acceptance to dental school came in just before the deadline for that interview in Washington, so I went to dental school.

COX: And you retired as a dentist after how many years, total?

APPLETON: I started practice in ’57 and I retired my license two years ago. Now, how long is that?

COX: Thirty-seven years?

APPLETON: Something like that. Whatever it is.

COX: Well, we’re just about to conclude our interview here, George. Is there anything that you’d like to add before we conclude this?

APPLETON: Well, in the process I’ve met some very interesting people. Some have become real good friends, most of them. And my patients I’ve had over the years—I enjoyed my tour as a dentist.

COX: Did you enjoy your tour in the Navy?

APPLETON: It may sound freakish to some people, but yes. Here again, I met a lot of real nice people. While I was in Chicago I met a doctor who had been on the teaching staff at Northwestern medical school. I’d take busman’s holidays going to Cook County Hospital, St. Luke’s Hospital, and going to their emergency rooms and watching.

There’s one little story there. I was at St. Luke’s Hospital one night and this guy came in. He’d gotten some trash—he was working at a freight trucking firm not far away—and he’d gotten a bunch of trash in his eyes. He came in and I had him sit down. The intern that was working the emergency room that night told me I could see what his problem was. So I went over and sat down and I got this little mirror on, you’ve seen with the hole in the middle. Got it all adjusted. Did you ever have the feeling that somebody’s watching you? I looked around and there’s a fellow standing there in his long white coat. He was head of their ENT department, a specialist. I said, “This is your patient, isn’t it?”

He said, “Well, it was.” He hadn’t seen him yet. He said, “No, it’s all right; you’re doing all right.” He said, “Go ahead.” And I’d done nothing, except wrote (phonetic). So I excused myself and let him have his patient.

But Dr. Fauley had a practice there in Chicago and I got to know him real well. He was still seeing some patients, which I don’t think he was supposed to. But he’d let me track him around while he was making his tour over at Northwestern and around. I used to be with him then.

COX: Couldn’t get that urge to be a doctor out of your blood, could you?

APPLETON: No, it was pretty solidly there. But I’ve had, I think real good experiences over the years.

COX: It certainly sounds like it.

APPLETON: Some of it I wouldn't want to repeat and some I wouldn't take anything for it.

COX: Well, let me shake you hand, George, and thank you for your service to our country.

APPLETON: Thank you. You're most welcome.