



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of: Lyle J. Bercier, former Gunner's Mate 3/c, USN

Conducted by: William Thiesen, Coast Guard Atlantic Area Historian

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Location of Interview: Indian Head, Maryland

Abstract:

LANTAREA Historian Dr. Bill Thiesen interviewed GM3 Lyle Bercier about Coast Guard hero Lieutenant Thomas James Eugene Crotty, USCG, whom Bercier knew and served with while both were stationed on board the Navy minesweeper USS *Quail* (AM-15) in the Philippines.

The Coast Guard had assigned Crotty to duty with the Navy in October, 1941, and he saw service in the Philippines on board the *Quail* after the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into the war. The Japanese captured Crotty and his surviving *Quail* shipmates after the fall of Corregidor and he perished in a prisoner-of-war camp a few months later.

LT Crotty was the only Coast Guardsman held as a prisoner-of-war in the twentieth century.

Thiesen: This is Bill Thiesen, William Thiesen. I am the Coast Guard Atlantic Area Historian serving out of Portsmouth, Virginia, and we are here today on December 15, 2009. It is Wednesday and we are here in Indian Head, Maryland, interviewing Lyle J. Bercier. Sir, if you will just give us information like when you were born, where you were born.

Bercier: Okay, I was born in St. John, North Dakota, on June 8, 1922. We lived on a farm there. We were wheat farmers. When I graduated from high school in 1940, I graduated in June and I enlisted in the navy in July. From North Dakota, I went to Great Lakes [Naval Training Base], Illinois, and went through training there and without any leave or anything else, I was shipped to Pearl Harbor. I got to Pearl Harbor and went aboard the flagship of the mine force in

the Pacific Fleet, which was the OGLALA [CM-4]. Incidentally she was sunk at Pearl Harbor and from the OGLALA there was a bunch of us, apprentice seamen, standing there and an officer came up and said, "See those four ships over there, which one would you like to go on?" So I, being in the alphabetical order of "B"; I got to pick first and so I said, "I'll take number fifteen there," and three other guys said, "Well, we'll take fifteen." That's how I got on the U.S.S. QUAIL, AM-15. This was in October, I believe, in 1940.

Thiesen: 1940 or '41?

Bercier: '40.

Thiesen: Okay.

Bercier: So immediately after getting aboard the QUAIL, we operated around the Philippines, or around the Hawaiian Islands and we made a trip to Johnson Island and Midway Island, taking out a tow [barge] of construction material for those two islands. When we got done with that, about January of 1941, the QUAIL was dispatched along with the TANAGER [AM-5], WHIPOORWHILL [AM-35], and the LARK [AM-21] as Mine Div. 1 to the Asiatic Fleet.

Thiesen: Mine Division 1?

Bercier: Yes. To the Asiatic Fleet and when we got out there we operated in the southern Philippines and all the way up to the Yangtze River. This was a little bit north of Shanghai and back to the Philippines. In December, when the war broke out we were in the navy yard, the Cavite Navy Yard in the Philippines.

Thiesen: Now you said, that prior to the Japanese attack, you pretty much had the sense that they were going to attack. Is that correct?

Bercier: Yes. When we were operating in the southern Philippines during the summer of 1941 we saw several things that told us that we were going to be under attack before long.

Thiesen: And what were those things?

Bercier: That was airplanes and ships would come right into our operating area. Japanese destroyers.

Thiesen: Openly, just challenging your authority?

Bercier: Yeah, and we were in our own territory which was down around Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Thiesen: They were kind of testing you, or...

Bercier: It seemed that way and we took it as a test too. We were ready for them.

Thiesen: At that time, I was wondering, General [Douglas] MacArthur was basically in charge of military operations in that area, is that correct?

Bercier: Well, MacArthur, when the war broke out, you know, he was working for the Philippines, working for the Philippine Government. And then when the war broke out, he was called back to duty and he became the commander-in-chief.

Thiesen: But he had a sense that they were going to attack at some point, but he didn't think they were going to attack as soon as they did. Is that correct or do you recall? What was the sense among the people on the frontline?

Bercier: Well, when we heard about Pearl Harbor we knew that we were coming next and of course it was the next day. They hit Pearl Harbor on the 7th and then hit us on the 8th. And they hit us at high noon.

Thiesen: Is that bad time, or good timing or just...?

Bercier: Pretty good timing because they wiped out the navy yard in one mission. I think there was something like thirty-four airplanes all flying about 17[,000] to 20,000 feet. We never shot down a darn one. We shot down one of our own planes--Army Air Corps fighter.

Thiesen: When did you arrive at Cavite Navy Yard, the one in Manila? The navy yard.

Bercier: Me? Navy yard? We arrived there about, I think it was sometime in November, around the 1st of November 1941.

Thiesen: So you were there only ...?

Bercier: A week or two before the war broke out, yeah. In the navy yard.

Thiesen: But you were stationed in the Philippines prior to that?

Bercier: Yes.

Thiesen: When did you first arrive in the Philippines?

Bercier: First arrived there about January or February of 1941.

Thiesen: So where were you stationed between January/February and November? In Mariveles [Philippines]?

Bercier: No, we were operating with the Asiatic Fleet.

Thiesen: So I believe now we are getting close to when Lieutenant [Thomas James Eugene] Crotty arrived on scene there in the Philippines. He arrived in late October in, you pronounce it Cavite?

Bercier: Cavite.

Thiesen: Cavite.

Bercier: Yes, he came aboard [USS QUAIL] right after the bombing of the navy yard.

Thiesen: Was that the first time you had ever met him, or seen him?

Bercier: First time I had ever seen him.

Thiesen: Okay. Did you have a sense of what he was doing there at that point; at the navy yard? What his purpose was . . . or his mission?

Bercier: He probably did. As I understand it, he was assigned to the navy yard and he had a sense of what was going on in the navy yard, as far as ships overhauls and maintenance things like that. He would have had a sense.

Thiesen: You have no idea who was his commanding officer at that point?

Bercier: No.

Thiesen: Okay.

Bercier: Well, if he was assigned to the navy yard, he had to be the commanding officer of the navy yard, you know. Or the officer in charge of the navy yard, which would be a navy engineering officer.

Thiesen: Oh, okay. Alright. Did it strike you as funny that a Coast Guard Officer...?

Bercier: Yes, we couldn't understand what the hell a Coast Guard officer was doing there.

Thiesen: A little talk amongst the men there on the ship.

Bercier: He was very cordial. He was a very friendly fellow. I remember him, and I kinda got pretty well acquainted with him. He was a gentleman all the way through.

Thiesen: So he treated everybody

Bercier: He had good things to say about everybody and while we were operating in Manila Bay, after the war started, I can remember being at the helm when he was officer-of-the-deck. The skipper would turn over the "con" [control of the ship] to him and we would go around Manila Bay within reason.....

Thiesen: Just the Bay, behind the mine fields...

Bercier: It would be on the Manila side and we chased them damn Japs all over the place. The airplanes.

Thiesen: Oh, okay. That was during the antiaircraft missions. Okay. Do you recall any conversations that you might have had with him about anything particularly, anything that he liked to talk about?

Bercier: We really didn't have a chance to talk like you and I are talking here today because we all had our jobs to do and we had to do that job. You just didn't have time to talk. I remember taking commands from him when I was at the helm, the wheel, and he was a very nice guy all the

way through. I wish that some of the other guys were living, like a guy by the name of Riggs who was the quartermaster who used to be on there and chief quartermaster by the name of Byrd. They knew him much better than I did because they stood watches with him and so forth.

Thiesen: At that point, you were a gunners mate third-class, is that correct?

Bercier: Yes.

Thiesen: And he was probably a full lieutenant.

Bercier: He was a full lieutenant.

Thiesen: We were discussing earlier, age difference; you would have been what?

Bercier: I was nineteen.

Thiesen: You were nineteen and he was thirty at that point. This was late '41 or early '42 and he was born in 1912. So he came aboard, you said, at the navy yard. This is December 10th, say, somewhere in there? Right after the attack?

Bercier: I would say it was right after the bombing, probably December 10th.

Thiesen: Because it was the 8th, I think, is when they bombed the navy yard.

Bercier: The 8th was when they bombed the Navy Yard.

Thiesen: So he would have come on the day after...

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: Now why did he come on board? Was he just....

Bercier: I wish I could answer that. I don't know whether he came on board and asked to come on board, or whether somebody assigned him, or just how it happened; but I would guess that he had no place to go and he came aboard and asked the skipper if he could come aboard, like the other boys did that lost their ships.

Thiesen: Do you think he knew the skipper before he came on board?

Bercier: I would doubt it. Because the skipper was very senior to him, you know. The skipper was of the Class of '24 out of the Naval Academy. He was a submariner before that, before he came to the QUAIL, and he was on surface craft too, destroyers.

Thiesen: So he came on board, right after the attack, and did he stay on the QUAIL for quite a while?

Bercier: As far as I know, he was attached to the QUAIL right up to the time of the surrender, but he wasn't there all the time.

Thiesen: Yeah, you mentioned that he would come and go.

Bercier: He would come and go and I can remember that he swept mines with us that night [and] for probably half-a-dozen [more] times.

Thiesen: So you started sweeping mines even like on the 10th or mid-December and he helped out about that time.

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: Can you describe a little bit about how you went about sweeping mines and describe the mines that you swept; what they looked like; and the kind they were?

Bercier: We didn't use the ship at all for sweeping mines out there, but we did rig two motor launches, thirty-foot motor launches; and we operated one from the QUAIL and the TANAGER operated one and when we got the word to clear the field for a submarine coming in, we would go out and clear a trail in and escort them most of the time. When the [amphibious] airplanes came in, they would have to land out, out...

Thiesen: Beyond the minefield?

Bercier: Beyond the minefield or at the edge of the minefield and taxi in, we'd clear a path for them.

Thiesen: And that would usually be at night; is that correct?

Bercier: All our minesweeping was done at night with the boats. And it went on for, well, six months.

Thiesen: Until the surrender. And how often did you have to do this? Once a day? Once a week?

Bercier: Whenever we had a vessel coming in, or an airplane coming in, and we were always available.

Thiesen: And you indicated that Crotty participated in this a number of times.

Bercier: Yes, he did. He participated in a small boat minesweep.

Thiesen: Did the Commander ever participate too? Lieutenant Commander Morrell, the ship's CO? Did he ever participate in minesweeping?

Bercier: He was our skipper every night.

Thiesen: Oh, so he was in the launch. Every night?

Bercier: See, you had to be a very accurate, specific navigator and he knew where the mines were and he knew the courses of the fields and so forth; where we could go and not bother the minefield or the minefield bother us for that matter.

Thiesen: So Commander Morrell, every night he was on the launch.

Bercier: Yes, he was on the boat. He was the guy that steered the boat.

Thiesen: Okay, and Crotty would be...

Bercier: Yes, Crotty would be with him on the stern. Then there was a crew of myself, or an engineer, Richardson; myself and a boatswain's mate by the name of Hailey and that was the crew.

Thiesen: Could you describe the mines that were used?

Bercier: The mines we used for Manila Bay were called Mark VI mines. They were moored mines and they were kind of a complicated thing that when you dropped them off the minelayer, which was the QUAIL, she was a minelayer or minesweeper, things came apart. The anchor went down first, then you knew how much water you had underneath the ship and you always planted it at such and such a depth.

Thiesen: So many feet from the surface of the water?

Bercier: That's true.

Thiesen: Did you have any close calls when you swept mines using your motor launches, or was it fairly routine and you didn't really have that much danger?

Bercier: It became routine for us, but the reason the crew was so small because if we had a mishap you only lost four or five guys see and we never had a mishap and we sunk probably ten or twelve of them.

Thiesen: So if you had to sink them, you just mentioned that you take out a rifle and blast holes in them?

Bercier: Yes. Take an old breech Springfield, yeah. And only one that I remember that I think, it... Haley had the gun at the time; he hit a horn, and it blew up and it was probably 150 feet from us or something like that.

Thiesen: You were not only concerned for your lives, but would that have touched off the Japanese too, that something was going on, or not necessarily?

Bercier: It actually became routine. I was glad to be in the crew because it kept you out of that damn tunnel [Malinta Tunnel, Corregidor] at night later on.

Thiesen: So it was almost something that you volunteered to do just to get out of thefor a while.

Bercier: Well, I was also picked by the skipper. And this I would like to go off the record for just a minute.

Thiesen: Okay.

[Recording stopped]

Thiesen: Okay, we're back and just wanted to continue on with our discussion about minesweeping operations. It sounded like Crotty was probably joining you half a dozen times?

Bercier: Yeah, he did.

Thiesen: Yeah, when you did that. Okay.

Bercier: I would say that it could have been a half a dozen times or more. As I mentioned to you, like we had a couple of reunions of the crew, the QUAIL crew and everybody remembers a story, but they remember it in a little bit different fashion than maybe you or I would you know. You could be on the same boat at the same time doing the same thing, but he'll describe it different than I would describe it. That has happened.

Thiesen: You mentioned that Crotty was basically on board the QUAIL, however, there were days when he would be gone as well. How often did this happen?

Bercier: Well, as I recall, it happened quite often. You know, you wouldn't see him for maybe two or three days and then he'd be back. Nobody ever, especially a young enlisted guy like I was, you really didn't miss him and you didn't ask any questions when he got back either.

Thiesen: You were [gunners mate] third classwhere did he stay when he was on board?

Bercier: He had a berth in the officer's quarters.

Thiesen: You indicated that there was an XO [executive officer] already on board, a chief warrant officer, so how did that work out as far as change of command and all?

Bercier: I guess he got to be executive officer because he was actually senior to everybody but the skipper. So the next senior guy generally in the navy, the next senior officer on a ship is the XO.

Thiesen: Right.

Bercier: So, I think he became XO by his seniority. Officially there was no orders or anything like that to make him CO [should be "XO"], because this guy Lee...

Thiesen: That was the original XO.

Bercier: Jesse Lee was his name and he was a boatswain's mate.

Thiesen: He was XO. Jesse Lee.

Bercier: He was XO; officially the XO.

Thiesen: So was there any jealousy there or how did that work?

Bercier: I don't think so.

Thiesen: Because they were both on board the same time.

Bercier: See, T.J.E. Crotty had no orders to come aboard the QUAIL as XO. He was in a different service, you might say. At that time though, the Coast Guard was under the command of the navy.

Thiesen: Right. It was a branch of the navy. For a nickname, you mentioned that he was called "TJE" by the crew? Is that right? Or how....

Bercier: As soon as I saw initials in that paper, I remembered his initials just like it was yesterday. T.J.E. Crotty. It was an odd thing and everybody knew him as "TJE, Lt. Crotty."

Thiesen: Oh, they did?

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: Okay, all right, because he did have a lot of first names. He was really quite a big fan and participant in team sports. Did he ever talk about baseball or football, or did you ever play any sports?

Bercier: I didn't have any discussions with him in that regard. Some of the other guys may have; I don't know. I thought he was an [Coast Guard] Academy graduate and I was right when I

thought that. He pointed that out. You know it is all kind of strange in a situation like that; here you are, you have a job to do like Crotty, and he is one of a service. One of a service in the whole Asiatic Command, and then all of a sudden he has no home at all and he comes aboard the QUAIL.

Thiesen: Yeah. Interesting. Do you recall any of the demolition that took place at the navy yard? Like the SEALION [SS-195]? Were you around when that was blown up? Or any of the other...?

Bercier: We were around there, but we were not involved in that. I'm pretty sure that Crotty was involved in the demolition of the SEALION. And another thing, I meant to tell you this before; when the navy yard was bombed, they [enemy bombing] took everything out of the navy yard, but the ammunition depot and the commissary store, and Crotty helped us go back and get ammunition and he showed us where the commissary store was.

Thiesen: So you didn't have an idea before that where it was?

Bercier: We couldn't go ashore. We didn't know anything about it, but we got extra ammunition and we must have had 5,000 tubes of toothpaste and things like that and he's the guy that led us to these places. But that was all that was left of the Navy Yard. When the bombing took place, the QUAIL was tied right up next to the damn torpedo factory or the torpedo shop, and my god, when those torpedoes went off, it was just awful. There was no defense, you know. What could you do but get the hell outta there. That's when we got the [un-repaired] QUAIL and the PIGEON became one [were tied together underway]. We pulled those submarines out of there.

Thiesen: And lucky you did too.

Bercier: The first casualty I saw of the war was an officer in whites leaning over the bridge of the SEALION. I believe it was, yeah, the SEALION, with no head. Leaning over the rail.

Thiesen: Wow. That was during the bombing.

Bercier: During the bombing.

Thiesen: Well when did they evacuate? You probably were not with the QUAIL operating out of the navy yard after that bombing, I suppose.

Bercier: No, I was on it fulltime.

Thiesen: But was the ship actually operating out of the navy yard after the bombing.

Bercier: Yes, we went back in the Navy Yard, some of the engineers did, and got some parts that fit the QUAIL; or maybe the QUAIL's old parts, I don't know. I don't remember. But we got the QUAIL running and we dodged those bombs for six months and running pretty good. But there was no oil for example. There was no fuel there and that is why we couldn't go outside or even make a run for it. If we had known about the surrender, and they had said make a run for it, we had no fuel to go anyplace.

Thiesen: So I know the CANOPUS [AS-9] was kind of turned into a makeshift tender and it was not in the navy yard, but it was actually close to Corregidor...

Bercier: Yeah, she was tied up to a dock over here in Mariveles

Thiesen: And was that kind of a makeshift navy yard for everybody for fueling, and for machine work and things like that.

Bercier: I don't know about fuel, but I think the repair people on the CANOPUS did a lot for small boats and ships that were locked into the Manila area.

Thiesen: So, say after Christmas and into January, do you recall, was it mainly minesweeping? Did you do any other operations?

Bercier: The only operation was keeping ourselves afloat. That was our mission.

Thiesen: Well you did a lot of antiaircraft.

Bercier: Oh my god, yes!

Thiesen: How did you have enough ammunition?

Bercier: Crotty again. We knew where the ammunition was until we couldn't get back there, but we brought on a helluva a lot of ammunition and just stored it on deck.

Thiesen: So he helped you by showing you where it was...

Bercier: Yes, he did.

Thiesen: ...and helped to load the ship with ammunition after you ran out. Did you go in at night?

Bercier: No, we went in the daytime.

Thiesen: Really. And you weren't detected by aircraft?

Bercier: The first time we went in it was daytime and we only made a couple of trips in there because everybody found out about it, you know, that the ammunition depot was still afloat so to speak. Well we spread the word.

Thiesen: So everybody else was going in there and getting ammunition too, but Crotty got you there first. Wasn't it blown up ultimately and if so, do you remember when?

Bercier: I can't answer that. I really don't know. But it probably was because there was a policy during WWII and they called that "scorched earth." Did you ever hear of that?

Thiesen: Yeah.

Bercier: I am sure that they blew it up and Crotty might have been the guy who was in charge of that. I don't know.

Thiesen: Yeah. Okay.

Bercier: As you mentioned, with his background, I'd bet ya money he was involved.

Thiesen: But it was definitely destroyed before the Japanese captured it.

Bercier: I am sure of it.

Thiesen: You think so?

Bercier: Oh yeah, especially the ammunition. Now, the commissary store, you know that was just groceries and what have you. Toiletries.

Thiesen: So you never actually saw any of the demolition going on at the Navy Yard?

Bercier: No.

Thiesen: Okay. So how often did you participate in antiaircraft? Was it everyday?

Bercier: Everyday. Just about every...

Thiesen: ...for several months, almost everyday you were shooting at Japanese.

Bercier: The entire six months.

Thiesen: Did you use a three-inch guns, or was it primarily the heavy machine guns on board for antiaircraft?

Bercier: No, you had the two 3-inch-50's and we had a fifty caliber Browning air cooled, and we had some thirty caliber. That was all we had.

Thiesen: Were you very effective in shooting down any aircraft with that?

Bercier: Yes, we got credit for a couple that I know of. There might have been more, but I know we got credit for a couple. As a matter of fact, we shot down one guy. We got credit for him. He landed the airplane in the water and he got out of the cockpit, stood on the wing and when we went to pick him up, son-of-a-gun tried to shoot the skipper.

Thiesen: With his pistol?

Bercier: So we shot the Browning and cut him in two.

Thiesen: I've heard stories like that. Was Crotty ever involved in any of the gunnery operations you had?

Bercier: Oh yeah. He'd be on deck when we were shooting, if he was on board the ship.

Thiesen: Any role that he played generally, or . . . ?

Bercier: I think he directed, along with Commander Bridget, some of the firing that we did off the QUAIL, when we went around Mariveles here, and right into those tunnels. Bridget and he were really, I think, calling the shots from the bridge.

Thiesen: What about with the antiaircraft? Did he do any gun direction with that, or when you were firing at enemy aircraft, or....?

Bercier: Yeah, he did.

Thiesen: I suppose you needed people fore and aft on board the ship that were helping with directing fire.

Bercier: Well the two 3-inch-50's were forward of the bridge.

Thiesen: Oh, really? One was lower and one was higher? Yeah, okay.

Bercier: The two 3-inch-50's were right there. There is the bridge and here are two guns in that tub there. The machine gun was back here on the boot.

Thiesen: Okay. Alright, so you had two 3-inch-50's forward of the bridge there. So he would have been involved when he was on board?

Bercier: He was involved in spotting aircraft guns when we bombarded the beach.

Thiesen: Yeah. Okay. Now you were mentioning Commander [Frank J.] Bridget and he was part of the "Naval Battalion," I believe is what they called it.

Bercier: He was the commanding officer of the Naval Battalion and his former job was the [Naval] Patrol Wing 10.

Thiesen: So he was a former pilot. He was a commanding officer.

Bercier: Top pilot. Commanding officer at Wing 10.

Thiesen: When did they use the Naval Battalion? Was that January [1942]?

Bercier: Oh, the Naval Battalion was formed when they started having real problems on Bataan and that would have been probably in February or something like that. Maybe a little bit; might have been sooner than that because the Japs came aboard at Luzon which was over here; the island over here, they came aboard over here like...

Thiesen: Well, they came south from Northern Luzon.

Bercier: Oh yeah. Lingayen Gulf was where they landed. They had a helluva bunch of Japs there and we had nothing.

Thiesen: So it was pretty quick. They came down pretty quick.

Bercier: Yeah, they came across country in a hurry. At the same time, what we had stalled them. That's why it lasted six months.

Thiesen: Bought you some time. Yeah. So with the Naval Battalion, I guess it was over 1,000 personnel, perhaps?

Bercier: Oh no, there weren't that many.

Thiesen: Oh really. Between about 100 and 1,000 troops.

Bercier: Some of us on the QUAIL were sent up there. I went up there and spent two nights and the most I saw was probably 100 guys.

Thiesen: Really?

Bercier: There had to be more than that, but you're in the jungle and Bridget and it was a buncha ...Can you imagine a bunch of sailors in the jungle?

Thiesen: Sailors and aviators and people who no longer had a command.

Bercier: Everybody. And there wasn't a hell of a lot of command to be real honest with you. Well, Bridget would say, "We're going to go this way tonight," and you'd probably go a hundred yards and if you heard a shot everybody would hit the deck, you know, and that would sort of be the end of it untilBut I never saw a damn Jap and I never fired a shot.

Thiesen: Well, I think the Battalion helped to contain the Japanese that were trying to advance a beachhead behind the lines...

Bercier: They did and the Naval Battalion was in on this. Bridget was the guy and his Naval Battalion were the ones that saw the damn Japs land on the other side of Mariveles.

Thiesen: Now when was it? Now, I guess Crotty was over there on Bataan with Bridget too during this time.

Bercier: Yes.

Thiesen: He served with him?

Bercier: As I recall, he was kind of close to Bridget.

Thiesen: You mean close to him?

Bercier: Yeah. See Bridget was the very senior commander, full commander. He was senior to our Skipper. Our Skipper was a lieutenant commander.

Thiesen: So Bridget might have been an [Naval] Academy guy, perhaps?

Bercier: Oh, I'm sure he was.

Thiesen: Naval aviator.

Bercier: Morrell and Bridget knew each other from someplace; probably at the [Naval] Academy or somehow. I don't know.

Thiesen: Right, okay. So how many times do you think Crotty went over there to serve with the Naval Battalion?

Bercier: I really couldn't answer that. I don't have a clue. As I mentioned before, you know, a third-class gunners mate....

Thiesen: You didn't keep tabs on the officers or what they're doing. Well when was it that Bridget and Crotty came aboard to direct fire against

Bercier: There was a conference held in the [Malinta] tunnel at Corregidor. Bridget called this conference.

Thiesen: Was it January?

Bercier: No, it was; I'd say it was March, about March. You see, Bataan surrendered on April 6th, I think it was; and it was before that, so it would have to be late February or March, I would say. I remember this, that Bridget came aboard Corregidor and he got in touch with the higher ups in the navy and the army and he said, "Hey this is what I want to do and this is my plan" and he picked the QUAIL to go around and fire into these caves where the Japs were.

Thiesen: This was kind of their strongholds, the Japanese had their supplies there and some of their personnel...

Bercier: There was a lot of stuff in those tunnels. I just can't tell you what it was, but we got credit for killing 140 and Crotty was aboard the ship along with Bridget on the QUAIL.

Thiesen: Directing fire?

Bercier: We went around out in the China Sea so to speak.

Thiesen: Which is pretty dangerous territory for you guys because the Japanese fleet is out there.

Bercier: Yeah, we got in there and fired and old Bridget says, "Cease fire." And at twelve knots we went back in there to Manila Bay; but we didn't get attacked. They'd observe us though. The Japs came up in an airplane. They had a reconnaissance airplane that they flew every morning and every evening all around the place. We shot itnot we, but forces shot down two or three of them. We had a name for them. Some kind of "Charlie." I forget the name of them.

Thiesen: Why do you think Bridget chose QUAIL? He could have chosen WHIPPOORWILL, or TANAGER, or any of the other minesweepers that were there.

Bercier: Well, the TANAGER was the only one there, and the TANAGER didn't have the reputation we had chasing the Japanese, so we could get under them and shoot at them. We had that reputation.

Thiesen: With your antiaircraft?

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: So the QUAIL had a reputation of being more aggressive than the others...

Bercier: We were very aggressive.

Thiesen: Any other shore bombardment activities that QUAIL did?

Bercier: No.

Thiesen: That was basically it. How many rounds and what kind of rounds were they that you fired?

Bercier: Well, they were 3-inch-50's and it was old ammunition. Most of it was old ammunition. The only good ammunition we got was what Crotty steered us to at the ammunition depot and we did a get a few rounds off one of the submarines that came in and they had timed fuses. Most the stuff we fired was, "AA Common", is what you would call it, I guess. It was fused, but it was so damn old.

Thiesen: It was from WWI, or...?

Bercier: Yeah. Some of the ammunition that we had aboard the QUAIL was put on there the day she was commissioned.

Thiesen: And that was nineteen [1919]?

Bercier: '17.

Thiesen: 1917. That was pretty old. I'm surprised they still used old ammunition like that.

Bercier: Well that was what we had. It said it right on the wooden boxes! Four rounds to a box and damn it was awkward to handle. Terrible.

Thiesen: So, were you part of the loading crew?

Bercier: Oh yeah. I was first loader on one of the guns.

Thiesen: Who was usually responsible for firing the guns?

Bercier: The gunnery officer.

Thiesen: Okay. There was a chief warrant officer on board that was a gunnery officer?

Bercier: No, he was just a warrant. That was Don Taylor.

Thiesen: Now when we get into, that was in March, again you have been doing largely mine sweeping duties and antiaircraft. Was there anything else that comes to mind?

Bercier: All of April, up until the day of the surrender, was pretty much minesweeping, probably a couple of times a week, but we were under fire every day and even the damn Jap bombers would peel off of their formation and make runs on us.

Thiesen: What, strafing runs?

Bercier: Bombs.

Thiesen: Oh, okay. Were they accurate?

Bercier: Never hit us and I'd say the closest one was probably 150 yards off the ship with a 500 pounder or 200, and when it hit the water, but we never got a scratch. The only damage that was done to the QUAIL was one day when we weren't on board, everybody was in the tunnel, we got two hits in the forward area here right under the anchor and a hit on the bridge. A shell; a bomb.

Thiesen: So, were you basically staying in the [Malinta Hill] tunnels starting in January.

Bercier: No. We didn't go into the tunnels until sometime in February, I'd say.

Thiesen: And the only tunnels really there were, were located in Malinta Hill on Corregidor. Is that right? They called it Fort Mills. Is that what they called it?

Bercier: Fort Hughes. There was Fort Hughes, Fort Mills, Fort Frank and Fort...another fort over there.

Thiesen: Fort Drum, of course.

Bercier: Fort Hughes was Corregidor. I believe. If I remember correctly.

Thiesen: Maybe check that.

Bercier: Fort Hughes was Caballo. Fort Frank was the "stone battleship." I am pretty sure that was correct.

Thiesen: Yeah, I think Fort Mills was Corregidor actually. Fort Hughes was on the other island there, but you wind up starting to stay in the tunnels there on Corregidor in February.

Bercier: I'd say it was February.

Thiesen: Before that. You were just sleeping on the ship.

Bercier: Staying on the ship.

Thiesen: So whenever you weren't patrolling you'd go in the tunnels....

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: In February. So the whole crew used to sleep together?

Bercier: Well we were assigned a section. The ship was assigned a section for the crew to hang out in the tunnel.

Thiesen: Oh really. How many men altogether were there on the QUAIL?

Bercier: Well, when we went to the Philippines we had fifty-five people on the QUAIL and the day they surrendered us, I think there was eighty.

Thiesen: Eighty?

Bercier: Yeah, we took that many people on board during.....guys like Crotty and other people that were lost.

Thiesen: Where did everybody stay? I guess you were operating....

Bercier: they were sleeping on the boat deck, they were sleeping all over the place.

Thiesen: is it because they wanted to serve, or just there was nothing else to do?

Bercier: There was no place to go. There was nothing else to do but serve.

Thiesen: Otherwise you got stuck in the tunnels and nobody wanted that I guess.

Bercier: Nobody wanted that because the tunnels were stinking places. The air was terrible. I say that, off the record. I was put out of the Navy with tuberculosis. I had a spot on my lung and I say that is where I got that damn spot in that tunnel.

Thiesen: There were thousands of people in those tunnels, weren't there?

Bercier: Oh my god.

Thiesen: Civilians?

Bercier: Civilians. There was everybody in there. Civilian Filipinos even. It was just so damn crowded, you couldn't believe it. There was nothing to eat and freshwater was at a premium. I can remember sitting in front of that tunnel one day and another guy and I were sitting out there and it was hotter than hell, during the day, when two old Army mules walked up there, walked up toward the area. I said, would it be a blessing if the goddamn Japs killed those Army mules and we could get something to eat. No more than I got it out of my mouth, the mules were dead. Bomb killed them.

Thiesen: Really?

Bercier: And I did see them take care of that, so you'd see the hoof sticking out of some boiling water, but we never got a taste of it. Army ate their own mules.

Thiesen: In March and April, you had regular patrols that you did during the day, every day?

Bercier: We had to stay underway, or we would have got bombed.

Thiesen: So you had to move everyday.

[Recording stopped/started]

Bercier: You had to stay underway during the day, you know...

Thiesen: You had to move around, or otherwise you'd be a sitting target.

Bercier: ...and the day we left it, the crew abandoned the ship, that's when we got hit. It was from a shore battery.

Thiesen: Japanese shore battery.

Bercier: In April, from the time Bataan surrendered, until the surrender on May 6th, Corregidor was getting hit from both shores and the air and everything around it.

Thiesen: So for one month basically, Corregidor was being bombarded from everywhere.

Bercier: Real concentration of shore battery and air.

Thiesen: If it hadn't been for the mine fields, you'd probably get it from the water as well.

Bercier: That's right. And this guy right here, these fourteen-inch guns. They were actually Navy turrets on a stone island.

Thiesen: Yeah, that fort looks like a battleship when you see pictures of it. It's called Fort Drum.

Bercier: Formed just like a stone battleship.

Thiesen: That was the one you said blew up the destroyer that came within range...

Bercier: Yeah.

Thiesen: When did that happen?

Bercier: That happened in, I would say, March.

Thiesen: Japanese destroyer came close. One salvo polished it off....

Bercier: One salvo and that was all she wrote. Did you know how the Japs captured it?

Thiesen: Did they storm it? No, I am not sure.

Bercier: No, it was us [U.S. forces] that [re-]captured it. We saturated it with gasoline, or napalm or something; and, of course, all the ammunition--that was powder bags you know. It just blew the whole damn rock up.

Thiesen: Yeah, amazing. So tell me some more about life in the tunnels. You said that Crotty was sleeping next to you one time.

Bercier: Yeah, I woke up one morning and there was Crotty, laying right next to me.

Thiesen: Do you think he was just there because the crew was there?

Bercier: I don't know where the hell he came from, and I don't know where he went. He might have gone back to the ship with us, or. I just don't remember, but he was laying next to me and I looked at this guy and he had bars on his collar.

Thiesen: He had on what would be readily identifiable Coast Guard uniform, is that right, or just his cap? Did you just recognize him

Bercier: It seems to me that he always had khakis, wore khakis, which most of the officers, you know, that had clothes wore khakis with short sleeves.

Thiesen: But I suspect he had the Coast Guard emblem on his cap, maybe not?

Bercier: He wore an overseas cap as I recall all the time. I'd never seen him with a square rig hat.

Thiesen: Oh, really?

Bercier: Overseas cap. You know the emblem is on the side, rank, and Coast Guard.

Thiesen: Okay. So, throughout April, just more of the same; anti-aircraft?

Bercier: More of the same, only doubled up on us from the shore. Prior to that, they could only reach us from the Bataan side, but later on they moved that heavy artillery over, like eight-inch. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you a story about an eight-inch projectile.

Thiesen: Yeah.

Bercier: We were on Caballo [Island], on the day of the surrender, and as soon as we raised the white flag, they were supposed to stop firing at us. Well, the QUAIL crew was manning this mortar. This twelve-inch mortar, this big mortar kept on top of the mountain there on Caballo and a damn eight-inch shell came in to that; projectile came into that pit and it hit the wall and glanced off and wedged itself into the wall about, oh, fifty feet from us and never went off.

Thiesen: If it had gone off that would have been hurt....

Bercier: It would have killed us all.

Thiesen: Well, a miracle for you.

Bercier: Honest to God; a miracle.

Thiesen: When did you last see Crotty? Was he still serving on board in April? Or do you recall?

Bercier: I believe that he, when we came off the ship, which was I would say somewhere around mid-April, was about the last time I saw him. Because it was after the surrender of Bataan and before the surrender of the entire archipelago, so that would be about mid-April was the last time I'd see him.

Thiesen: And up until that time, he would still have been serving off and on, on board the QUAIL when he wasn't doing something else, I guess.

Bercier: Periodically.

Thiesen: Any idea what he might have been doing on Corregidor in April?

Bercier: I really can't answer that. I don't know. Too bad this has come so late you know. The Admiral could have answered all of these questions.

Thiesen: Admiral Morrell? The commanding officer?

Bercier: Yeah, and Don Taylor might have too. Don Taylor, just died here a few years ago.

Thiesen: Any other stories or recollection about Crotty that come to mind that you recall, just even anecdotal or?

Bercier: Not really.

Thiesen: What he did, or looked like?

Bercier: Well his appearance was always good, very good. He looked like an officer and he acted pretty much like an officer. But at the same time he was very congenial with the enlisted people. To me, he was sort of a helpful guy, you know. I remember one time we were pulling this damn mine in and he was on board with us, and he said, "How can you be careful that thing isn't going to hit the side of the boat?" I said, "You're not going to pull it in that close." He said, "Well, I don't know how you're going to control that." He said, "You know this is rough water over here." So, as I remember, I said, "You pay your money, and you take your chance," and he kind of smiled. He was a very congenial fellow, as far as I was concerned, and I am sure he was that way with everybody. He was that way with me, when I was nineteen years old and he had to be that way with the rest of us.

Thiesen: Any jokes that he told, or was he kind of a jocular fun-loving guy?

Bercier: He had a lot of remarks, but I don't remember any jokes that he told.

Thiesen: Did he usually carry a side arm when he was?

Bercier: You know, I never saw him with a side arm on. Navy wasn't big on side arms. Even on Corregidor. Navy was not big on that, but the army was.

Thiesen: I know you don't recall or actually know what happened to him in April, but I was wondering if you recall the types of artillery pieces that were used on Malinta Hill and on Corregidor. They had mobile artillery pieces that they used. Being a gunners mate, I was wonder....

Bercier: Mobile 75mm, 3-inch-50, or whatever they called them and I think the three-inch was the main artillery battery for antiaircraft. That was all we had.

Thiesen: Well, those 75mm howitzers that they had, they were kind of British. Were they British pieces, I'm not sure, but they had two wheels on them....

Bercier: Well the 75mm, some of them were British for sure.

Thiesen: They were kind of older pieces and they had quite a few of them on Corregidor, they could move around. Did you ever see any of those? The crews that manned the...

Bercier: Yeah, I saw them. But come to think of it, the ones that I saw were not mobile. They were stationary.

Thiesen: Had they taken the wheels off of them and mounted that way?

Bercier: I don't know what the hell they did with those to be very honest with you. We did see them and we watched them fire too.

Thiesen: I guess they used a lot of what they called Philippine Scouts as crews for these guns. Do you recall the Filipino artillery people?

Bercier: See there were constabularies, Philippines Constabulary onboard Corregidor. And of course there was a lot of constabulary, or scouts, or whatever you want to call them, Filipino Army, on Bataan. We saw a lot of them there.

Thiesen: Did you see them fight? Or did you fight with them? Or hear anything about them?

Bercier: No.

Thiesen: What about Malinta Hill? Did you ever climb to the top of it and look out from there?

Bercier: Yeah, I've been to the top of it. One time. That was all.

Thiesen: Seems like the Japanese attacked on the very narrow strip of the island and came up from there.

Bercier: Let me just give you a little.....Corregidor was only a mile long and it was sort of shaped like this.

Thiesen: Like a tadpole kind of?

Bercier: Like this, but this was very narrow down in here.

Thiesen: And that was the east side.

Bercier: Monkey Point, was what they called it.

Thiesen: That was the very end of it?

Bercier: They had this little air strip in here called Cab Cabin and that is where the Japs landed and they landed and went forward like this, up both sides of Corregidor.

Thiesen: So they came from the narrow end and they went west.

Bercier: And they landed on the inside. This would be the mainland down here, and they landed on this side, because it was about midnight on May the 5th, that we were, sorry May the 6th.

Thiesen: Yeah, the surrender was May 6th around mid-day.

Bercier: They landed and they were advancing on Corregidor when Wainwright surrendered.

Thiesen: Yeah. When was the last time you were on Corregidor before the surrender? In May, or April?

Bercier: Yeah, it was in May. As I recall we spent a couple of nights and there was nothing to do and we spent the night on Corregidor. It was early May.

Thiesen: I suppose food and provisions and whatnot had gotten pretty low by that time.

Bercier: Yeah. Basically there was really nothing to eat. We had a few things that we had gotten from the commissary store and a few things that we had aboard the QUAIL and the last thing that I ate from Corregidor was a can of shrimp. Canned shrimp.

Thiesen: Wow. That's not bad.

Bercier: Well, it was tasty.

Thiesen: Considering the circumstances.

Bercier: Yeah, but on board the boat [QUAIL motor lifeboat during the crew's escape to Australia] well, we had some corned beef on there. I think we had one meal of corned beef and the rest of the time we lived off the land, you know, coconuts. One time we bought a steer, or an animal, we butchered it and it spoiled in the sun. We bought chickens and rice was our big thing. We lived on rice mostly.

Thiesen: What I would like to do is maybe stop for a minute here and I do not know if you would be interested in reading this information about Crotty. It might bring up some more memories for you and I would record that if you wouldn't mind.

[Recording stopped/started]

Thiesen: Okay, we're back with Mr. Bercier and he is just reading a copy of an article written, about four pages long, about Lt. Crotty and his experiences in the war. And just wanted to see if there is any other things that you remember about him, or about the days in the service there that have to do with him, having read that and brought up any memories or things that we hadn't talked about before.

Bercier: Bill, I cannot think of anything else. As I mentioned before, it was a long time ago. It was a very, very short experience that I had with him. But just like you said in your write up there--he was a good, I thought--a very fine person. The work that I did under him, when he was in command of the ship, when he was given the con [control of the ship] by our skipper, he was very professional about it though in changing courses and speeds and things like that. He was right to the point. He told you to stay on 090, you better stay on it because he'd check you. He did that. I do remember that very distinctly.

Thiesen: When he did take over the con? when did he usually take over? Was it at night or just spelled the skipper?

Bercier: The only time that I really was a helmsman under him was during the day, but I do know that he had the con at night too when we were underway at night. We stayed underway most of the time during the day, to stay away from danger, and at night we would hide. Hide between the two islands, so the Japs couldn't get to us. I am sure he had the con at night. I never witnessed it, but when he was on board, I am sure he got the con because the skipper; there was no question about it--he trusted him.

Thiesen: Sure. You also mentioned that; did he do any duty or did he go below much? The engine room, or, or . . . ?

Bercier: I don't remember him going below.

Thiesen: He was on the bridge.

Bercier: On the bridge or on the gun deck.

END OF INTERVIEW

