



*U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

**Interview of Machinist's Mate 3/c Steven J. Seward, USCGR**

World War II Coast Guard Veteran, 1944-1946  
USS *LST-763*, Iwo Jima & Okinawa

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Location of Interview: Redding, CA



**MM3c Steven J. Seward, USCGR**

**Biographical Summary:**

Steven J. Seward, born in Orleans, Nebraska on 26 April 1924, grew up and attended public schools in Hastings, Nebraska. While in high school he lied about his age and joined the Nebraska National Guard. After graduating from high school in 1943, he enlisted in the Coast Guard on 23 June and attended recruit training at the Manhattan Beach Coast Guard Training Center from 1 July to 20 August 1943. He then attended Motor Machinist School in Groton, Connecticut from 20 August to 21 February 1944. While waiting to report aboard LST 763, then under construction, he was temporarily assigned to USCGC *Lilac* (WAGL-227). He boarded LST 763 on 30 August 1944 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The ship was commissioned on 8 September in New Orleans. While aboard LST 763 he participated in the assault landings at Iwo Jima from February to March, 1945 and later at Okinawa, from April to June 1945. After the end of war against Japan he endured the 1945 October Okinawa typhoon. He departed the LST-763 and was discharged as a MM3c on 24 January 1946 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

After discharge he moved to San Jose, California and worked briefly for his brother's restaurant. There he met and married his wife, Norma Cook, then a student at San Jose State College. The couple had two sons. He spent a career working for the City of San Jose, beginning as a mechanic and ultimately retiring as the Superintendent of Public Works. Upon retirement he moved to the Mount Shasta region of California and then to Redding, California where he and his wife currently reside.

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**INTERVIEWER:** When and where were you born?

**SEWARD:** On April 26, 1924 in Orleans, Nebraska.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you tell me a little about your childhood?

**SEWARD:** I came from a family of eleven, eight boys and three girls, the second son died shortly after birth. At the time of my childhood the depression was going on and banks were taking over farms. That's what happened, so we moved to Hastings, Nebraska. I was probably about five or six years old when that happened. So I grew up in Hastings. That's where I went to grade school, junior high, and high school. When I was a sophomore in high school, I lied about my age so that I could join the Nebraska National Guard. I joined because my brother was in the National Guard and because you got paid for going to the monthly meetings. I got discharged before I graduated from high school in 1943 because they mobilized the National Guard and they were sent to Arkansas for more training in 1940.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you come to join the Coast Guard?

**SEWARD:** There were several of us high school guys and we knew we would be drafted, so we got in a car and drove to Denver, Colorado. Two of us joined the Coast Guard because we thought that we would just be "guarding the coast" [laughter]. One of them joined the Navy and the other joined the Merchant Marine. They gave us a letter to show our draft board, in case we were about to be drafted. I headed off to basic training shortly after I graduated from high school.

**INTERVIEWER:** What day did you enlist?

**SEWARD:** On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1943.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where were you sent for basic training?

**SEWARD:** To Manhattan Beach in New York City. I got on a train in Nebraska by myself for New York City. After I arrived at Grand Central Station in New York I went up on the street. I started asking people and they

told me how to get to Manhattan Beach. One of my best memories is walking through the main gate. There were young men hanging out of the nearby windows and shouted at us that we were going to be sorry.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you tell me about what your basic training was like at Manhattan Beach?

**SEWARD:** Mostly marching, but I already had experience at that from my time in the Nebraska National Guard. While in the National Guard I had also done things with the U.S. Army so they actually had me take the squad for a little bit when we were out marching.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did they teach you nautical things?

**SEWARD:** Yes, knots and throwing heaving lines as well as about boats and how to launch a boat into the surf, but mostly it was just marching and then they gave you an aptitude test. I always liked mechanics and I had worked in a few garages after school and on Saturdays. I passed the mechanics test with a very high score. They told me I was qualified for an engineering rate. After I graduated in August they sent me to Groton, Connecticut for Motor Machinist School.

**INTERVIEWER:** How long did that school last?

**SEWARD:** Quite a while, at least through winter [20 August 1943 – 21 February 1944]. It was a great school. It was a very large class. If you were in the top ten you were supposed to be promoted to petty officer when you graduated. But what happened was that promotions were slowing down and they made only one. I think I came in third.

**INTERVIEWER:** How was the food at Groton?

**SEWARD:** It was excellent for us.

**INTERVIEWER:** What happened after you graduated from Motor Machinist School?

**SEWARD:** I have to think about that. They sent me to Camp Bradford near Norfolk, Virginia. It was a Navy base; I think an amphibious training center. They had mock ups that we trained on.

The ship I was being assigned to, the LST-763, was not built yet, so they sent us to Philadelphia. While we were there, a ship was in the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. They needed a few men to help out there, and I was one those chosen to do so. The ship I was sent to was a Coast Guard buoy tender, the USCGC *Lilac* [WAGL-227]. It had formerly been an icebreaker. They were re-bricking the boiler and since I was a smaller guy, they liked to put me inside the boiler. When it was finished they let us go out on it for a shakedown cruise in the Atlantic. I got to see them pick up and service a buoy. They were covered with seaweed and urchins and smelled really bad!

Then they sent us to Pittsburgh, where the ship was being built. We stayed at Carnegie Tech while we were waiting to board the LST-763. We boarded the ship [30 August 1944] and it was piloted down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River. The shipyard personnel were still aboard and they handled the ship. We didn't have to stand watches yet. We only traveled about three miles an hour and went through all the locks. It was most wonderful ship ride I've ever had. When we got to the Gulf of Mexico we started all the drills and standing watches as we went through a shakedown cruise. We came back into New Orleans and all the shipyard personnel and the pilot departed the ship. LT [Alton W.] Meekins [USCG] took command [commissioned on 8 September 1944]. I would spend most of my time standing watch in the main engine room. The ship had two 12-cylinder supercharged diesels, 12-5-67 [Gray] Marine V-12 engines, quite large.

We went over to Florida and up to Chesapeake Bay. We made our first beach landing there. On one of our practice landing we ended up high and dry on the beach and couldn't get off. As we went in we pumped the water out of our forward ballast tanks and dropped an anchor behind us several hundred feet behind us. We had a crowd making our landing by the time we got stuck on the beach and had to be pulled off by a tug boat. It was a little bit embarrassing.

**INTERVIEWER:** What happened after that?

**SEWARD:** We then sailed back to the Gulf of Mexico and through the Panama Canal and then up Camp Pendleton to pick up Marines. I think it was the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, but I'm not sure. We went to Hawaii, we might have picked up Marines there, too. We learned there that we were going to be heading to Iwo Jima. I got to know some of Marines really well and there were some good guys. When we arrived at Iwo Jima we anchored off. They were still bombing Iwo. The Navy ships were firing their big guns. This would have been February 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>. As I recall we were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> wave.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was it like going in to make the landing, getting shot at by the Japanese?

**SEWARD:** They didn't do that. The Japanese decided the best thing would be to let the Marines get on the beach before they would begin firing. We didn't know that that was their plan. The first group went in in LCVPs, which have a bow door on them as well. I was sometimes placed on the LCVPS as a Motor Machinist Mate.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you carry LCVPs on the LST?

**SEWARD:** Yes, we had two of them. One time we also carried an LCI.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your experience during the Battle of Iwo Jima?

**SEWARD:** My General Quarters station was on Gun No. 5 on the starboard side, a 20mm. We had a lot prayers going in there. It was rough for everybody. It got rougher later. We took the Marines and their equipment in and then we backed off. Then our ships would put other items in us to take in. We had a big tank deck so we could carry a lot. And later we hauled in ammunition to the Marines on Iwo. We even dropped some tanks and half-tracks on the beach. The



The Japanese held their fire until our Marines hit the beach with the LCVPs. But once they got on the beach the Japanese opened fire with guns and mortars they had pre-aimed. It was a terrible thing. As we came in later the beach was covered with blasted LCVPs. It was really rough going in. We became like a hospital ship in taking off wounded Marines in later days. I remember one time we went back in and from my gun mount I looked down and saw a dead Marine floating in the water, his body already bloated.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did the Japanese ever fire on your ship, or just at the Marines in the island?

**SEWARD:** I don't think the Japanese wanted to waste their ammunition on small ships. We did take a mortar hit to one of our barges attached to the port side while we were at the beach. I had been relieved to eat when this mortar hit.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you see the famous flag raising on Mt. Suribachi?

**SEWARD:** Since my battle station was topside on one of the 20mm mounts, the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> day it got light enough that I could see our flag flying on Mt. Suribachi. It was a wonderful feeling, seeing that American flag flying there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was this the biggest action you saw in the war?

**SEWARD:** Yes, we were also involved in landing troops at Okinawa. It was a big battle and I think we landed either the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Marines. Before Okinawa we made a landing on Iwo Shima Island, only to discover that the Japanese had abandoned it.

**INTERVIEWER:** When you were landing troops at Okinawa did your ship come under attack by Japanese *kamikaze* pilots?

**SEWARD:** The only place I actually shot my 20mm gun in combat was at a *kamikaze* as we were setting off of Okinawa. I think this was just about a day before the armistice was signed with Japan. Okinawa was not fully secured before the war ended. *Kamikazes* were sent out to do as much damage as they could. A lot of ships were making smoke and we didn't have lung gear so it was very bad. My loader got sick, vomiting over the side. It was pretty dark and hard to see, but over my headphones I heard how close the *kamikazes* were. About that time, not very high above us, maybe 100 feet, here comes a *kamikaze*. The smoke had cleared a little and I thought I could actually see the pilot looking down for a target. All the ships in our area opened up firing, including us. The sky was full of tracer bullets.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did they hit the *kamikaze*?

**SEWARD:** As far as I know he just flew away, but I would think he went down. I had a brother on the USS *Solace* [AH-2], a hospital ship, which was hit by a *kamikaze* pilot.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were you still off of Okinawa when World War II ended?

**SEWARD:** I think so, but we might have been in the Philippines before. I remember as some point towards the end, we did pull into the Philippines. It was at Leyte. We did travel in Japan for the surrender. We had to deliver security Marines for the ceremony.

We also took occupation troops to Yokohama, Japan. I remember we had to have a pilot to go in there. There were tricky reefs to avoid. We later went up to Sendai, where they recently had that tsunami. From there we went back to Okinawa or the Philippines. I know we did come back to Okinawa. We were on the beach there and I happened to be in the engine room. I was blowing out the test cocks on the big 12-5-67 Gray Marine diesels that were V-12s. The engines were running as I was blowing out the test cocks when all of a sudden on the enunciator I got a full reverse. I was all by myself in the engine room so I went over and shifted us into reverse and we backed off the beach. The ship had gotten warned that a typhoon was coming. It was late in 1945. That typhoon was terrifying to be in.

We were in a flotilla that made it to sea during the typhoon, but an LST only draws six feet of water. We were like a floating bath tub. The cooks weren't able to cook. We were in it for two to three days. We lost a crane and one of our LCVPs. We kept going and finally end up off the coast of China, I think in the Yellow Sea, to get away from it. It was quite an experience. We would climb the latter in the engine room to check the equipment, you had to go a few steps when that side the ship going down and hang on as it rolled the other way and then resume climbing when that side of the ship went down again. I really remember that, because I had to go up and down some of those ladders. I didn't get sea sick, but a couple of guys did. I couple of years later I thought that I was only a third class in the engine room when we had to go to full reverse. There should have been a first class on watch. I was all by myself and thought I should have at least gotten an acknowledgement from the captain. There should have been first class on duty that day, but he came down and was happy that all was well. I wonder if he took all the credit. When we returned to Okinawa after the typhoon, I saw that at least two ships didn't get off. They were "high and dry" on the beach. The typhoon drove them right up there.

From there on we picked up military and started to head home, back to the United States now that the war was over. We went back to Hawaii and spent a little time there. We sailed to San Francisco and then stopped at Long Beach. From there we went south and through the Panama Canal and up to New Orleans. New Orleans is where I left the LST.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was the food like on the LST?

**SEWARD:** The food wasn't very good. It got a little better at the end of the war.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where you discharged in New Orleans?

**SEWARD:** Yes. [24 January 1946]. I was planning to go back to Nebraska, to Omaha, where one of my brothers lived. When I got there I learned that two of my brothers were living in California, the one on the *Solace* and the one who had been in the Army. My mother and sister were also living in California. I came out to San Jose. My brother had a little restaurant there that served just breakfast and lunch. I went there to find him and he immediately put me to work running the cash register. That's where I met my wife. She was attending San Jose State College.

I only stayed there a short while and then worked for the Food Machinery Corporation for about three years. I then took the test for the City of San Jose truck and equipment mechanic. I did fairly well on the test, because of the school I got to go to when I was in the Coast Guard and engine and experience on LST-763 during the war. I started as a mechanic and then got into first line supervision and eventually became the public works superintendent. I retired at the age of 54.

**INTERVIEWER:** Of all the things you were involved with during WWII in the Coast Guard, what is probably the most memorable experience?

**SEWARD:** I still have a clear memory to seeing the streets of New York City for the first time. I had never been in a large city in my life, before then. As far as my wartime experiences, the most memorable and most scary was being in the typhoon off of Okinawa. You have to have been on an LST to know what I experienced. It was amazing that the bridge crew could keep the bow pointed into the sea.

**INTERVIEWER:** Tell me about any liberty you took, especially overseas.

**SEWARD:** We got liberty in Hawaii both going and coming back. One time we got to go ashore on some secured island and have a beach day. I think it was somewhere in the Philippines. We also got liberty in all the American ports after the war was over, on our way to New Orleans.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you ever encounter other military personnel? Were there animosities, rivalries or did you get along well?

**SEWARD:** You cannot believe New York. It had every other branch and also personnel from other countries. Everyone seemed to get along, especially at Cooney Island where everybody liked to go. One time I was put on Shore Patrol at Cooney Island. Fortunately we didn't have any problems. It was different in the bars in Hawaii before we went to Iwo Jima. I never heard of any problems with the Marines but I heard that the Navy liked to call us the "broom stick navy" or the "ankle deep navy."

**INTERVIEWER:** What was the relationship like between the officers and crew of the LST?

**SEWARD:** Probably a lot more informal than in the Navy. The officers and crew got along and the crew had nicknames for all the officers. Captain Meekins was called "ears" because his ears stuck out. The Engineering Officer was called "bird legs" because he wore shorts all the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were there any crewmembers on the LST of different races?

**SEWARD:** My loader on the 20mm was a black. He was a very nice person. Their regular duties had to do with custodial type of stuff, and stuff in the kitchen. We got along real well.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you feel about the Japanese?

**SEWARD:** No particular feelings. We all had our duties to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** What comments, impressions, or thoughts would you like to share; areas I have missed and that you think are important for future generations to know?

**SEWARD:** I think this country would be wise to take young people, for maybe a year or two of training and schooling for whatever they a particular occupation they have an aptitude for. Then give them free education after they were discharged. I think in the service you develop a lot more love for your country and our constitution. I think we need that today. It makes you wiser and a little more appreciative. My training with the National Guard prepared me for duties in the Coast Guard.

I love the Coast Guard yet and belong to the Coast Guard Combat Veterans Association. I will always have a deep appreciation for our Marines.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

