

Interview with Rob Serra

VR2-A-L-2013-066

Interview # 1: August 14, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, August 14, 2013. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history with Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today, I'm in the residence of Bob Serra. Good afternoon, Bob.

Serra: Hi. Glad to see you.

DePue: Bob lives in the Illinois Presbyterian Home here in Springfield, Illinois. Today, we're going to hear all about being in the Navy at the beginning of World War II and having the experiences of being on the *USS Yorktown* [aircraft carrier] at both the Battle of Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway. And then, Bob had some shore duty after that, primarily because the *Yorktown* got sunk, right?

Serra: Right.

DePue: I always like to start with some background information. So tell us, to begin with, when and where you were born.

Serra: I was born in Pawnee, Illinois, July 14, 1920.

DePue: What can you tell us about your parents? Let's start with your father.

Serra: My father was a coal miner. We moved from town to town. When a mine had closed in one town, we had to go to a different town for him to get work. That

went on until I was about six years old. Then we moved to Taylorville, Illinois. There was two movies there, and my godfather ran both of them, owned both of them.

DePue: The theatre there in town?

Serra: Dominick Versena. He had a chain of movie theaters. My dad ran the machines up there, projection machines.

DePue: Does that mean that only when you were very young was the timeframe he was coal mining?

Serra: Yeah, up until I was about six years old.

DePue: You mentioned to me before, your dad was an immigrant?

Serra: Yeah. Him and his brother came over; I don't know what year. They kind of got split up when they got here. Pop went to work on the railroad. To make a little extra money, he built an oven out of blocks, and he baked bread and sold the bread for a nickel a loaf.

DePue: Where was he from originally?

Serra: Sicily.

DePue: You ever been back to Sicily?

Serra: Have I been there? No. Tom was there.

DePue: Talking about your son, Tom?

Serra: Yeah. He was there.

DePue: You don't know when, but had he been married for a while when you came along? Had he been in the country for several years when you were born?

Serra: Yeah. My brother was six years older than I, and I was born in 1920.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about your mother.

Serra: She was born in the United States, but she was from Poland accent. She had a sister, and my dad and his brother married my mother and her sister. Brothers married sisters. For quite a while, we lived in Taylorville, and like I say, my dad run the movie, and my uncle had a shoe store. We spoke English, Italian, and Polish, and I was quite fluent in all of them when I was about six, seven years old, because we were living together in a flat, right on the square, just a couple doors down from the theatre. Then, when they moved away, my uncle and aunt, then the only language spoken in the household was English. Pop had broken English. He never had any schooling; he couldn't read or write. So

the Italian and the Polish languages faded away from me, and I don't remember either one of them.

DePue: That answers one of my questions here. When you were growing up, was your father proud to be in the United States?

Serra: Oh, yeah. He didn't express himself much, because he couldn't speak real good English. Every chance he got, he spoke Italian. Of course, Dominic Versena, the owner of the movie, was Italian, and they spoke Italian. My aunt opened a restaurant, and my Uncle Jim closed his shoe store. They both ran the restaurant. Pop would talk, when they got together, him and my uncle would speak Italian, and when my mother and aunt got together, they'd speak Polish. So, it was kind of hard to keep up with. (chuckles)

DePue: Now, I know that you didn't spend all of your young years, early years, in Taylorville. Where did you move after that?

Serra: Somehow, we moved to Detroit. I don't know how we got involved in that. We lived in Detroit about two years, and then we moved back to Taylorville. We, I think, stayed about a couple of years there, and then we moved to Springfield. That's where I stayed from then on.

DePue: What brought your dad to Springfield?

Serra: In Detroit, he was driving a delivery truck, and he couldn't read or write. But he was driving a delivery truck in Detroit, Michigan, and the boss said, "You're always the first one to get there. You're always right on time." He said, "The rest of these guys are always late." Anyway, when he come back to Taylorville, Pop started in the movie again, running it. (phone rings)

DePue: I'll pause for just a second here. We've got your dad back in Taylorville, so we'll pick it up from there.

Serra: Yeah, he went back to running a movie. We stayed there until I was about eight years old. My mother, she done sewing. She took in sewing. Then we moved from Taylorville to Springfield. I went into the sixth grade in Springfield Converse Grade School, and I stayed at Converse through eighth grade, freshman and sophomore in high school, and then they built the new Lanphier School. It was ready, and I finished up school in Lanphier High School, and I graduated in 1938.

DePue: All of this timeframe that you're talking about, when you're back in Springfield, would have been in the depths of the Depression.

Serra: Right.

DePue: How was the family doing during the Depression?

- Serra: Pop was making a little bit of money running the movie. That was all the income we had. Of course, my aunt opened that restaurant, and that helped.
- DePue: I thought the restaurant, though, was in Taylorville. Was that in Springfield as well?
- Serra: Yeah. What was you talking about?
- DePue: How things were in the Depression, once you got back to Springfield.
- Serra: Well, they were bad. I forget what Pop done when we first came back, but he ended up managing the Tivoli Theatre, which was also a Versena movie.
- DePue: Tivoli? Was that downtown?
- Serra: Yeah, down on Sixth Street.
- DePue: Well, Bob, does that mean you got free tickets to the movies?
- Serra: No, just the one. (both laugh) Then I was ushering at the Roxy. When I was ushering, then I could get free tickets to any movie in town.
- DePue: Do you remember, when you were growing up, going in and watching the newsreels, what's going on in the world at the time?
- Serra: Yeah, yeah.
- DePue: Were you paying attention, especially later in the 1930s, to what was going on in Europe.
- Serra: Not really.
- DePue: When did you graduate from high school?
- Serra: Nineteen thirty-eight.
- DePue: What did you do after that?
- Serra: After that, I got a few odd jobs around town. I set pins at the Elks Bowling Alley for a while. Then, when I graduated, I got a job in a kite factory, Ayling's Kite Factory, A-y-l-i-n-g. It was on Third Street, between Washington and Jefferson. I printed the pictures for the kites and cut all the sticks for the kites. They had about twenty girls upstairs, putting the kites together and rolling them up. He had a pretty good business.
- DePue: When you first mentioned this to me, I had no idea that Springfield had a kite factory.
- Serra: Yeah.

DePue: Had it been here for a while?

Serra: I guess, pretty long.

DePue: You mentioned all the girls were upstairs. That's not a bad place for a young guy to be working, is it?

Serra: I wasn't thinking too much about girls then. I was trying to keep a job going so I could get some money.

DePue: So, just happy to have a job?

Serra: Yeah, right.

DePue: This would have been towards the tail end of the Depression, but still some tough years.

Serra: Probably in '39 and then '40.

DePue: Were you interested at all in the military during that time?

Serra: No. My buddy, we were standing on the corner of a drugstore at Eighth and North Grand, where we used to just hang out. We got to talking about what we was going to do. I said, "Well, there's no jobs here." He said, "Let's join the Navy." I said, "Let's go." So I went home and told my folks, and he went home and told his folks. We got called, and we went down to Federal Building, took the examination, everything, and signed up and got a date that we was going to leave. When we went down there, my papers had got mixed up, and I had to wait. He went, but I had to wait another week. I didn't see him—

DePue: When was that?

Serra: ...He went to the West Coast, and when I got out of boot camp, I went to the East Coast.

DePue: When did you join the Navy?

Serra: October 22, 1940.

DePue: I know that, at the end of September—I think it's September 16, 1940—President Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act, which established the draft. So this was the only peacetime draft, up to that point, the United States had ever had. Did that have anything to do with you guys enlisting when you did?

Serra: No. We didn't know what the draft was. We just wanted to get out of there and find a place where we could eat, live, because things were pretty rough, at our

house, especially. I had a brother and a sister, and Pop wasn't making too much money. I figured, what the heck? He's supporting me; I might as well go in the Navy.

DePue: You said you had an older brother, though, quite a bit older? What was he doing?

Serra: I don't know if I can remember where he was working.

DePue: Do you remember why the Navy, instead of the Army? Was it simply because your buddy was going that way?

Serra: We saw the newsreels and everything about the sailors, having aboard ship and hitting foreign ports. We thought that would be better than the Army.

DePue: That sounded like more adventure?

Serra: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: Were you concerned at the time about whether or not you had the stomach for the Navy?

Serra: No. I found out a week later, I didn't like it. (both laugh)

DePue: I guess you adapted, though, somewhere along the line.

Serra: I had five years and fifty-one weeks to regret it. (laughs)



Apprentice Seaman Robert Serra

DePue: Nineteen forty, by that time, were you paying any attention to what was going on in the world then?

Serra: Not really.

DePue: Did it occur to you, did it even cross your mind that you might end up in a war, somewhere down the road?

Serra: No, it didn't.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your basic training experience.

Serra: Actually, it was cold, because it was in October.

DePue: Where did you go?

- Serra: I went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station. There was a barracks. We slept in hammocks, but they were only four feet off the deck. Every day, we went out and had exercises. We carried Springfield rifles; we trained with them. We went out there and went through a lot of exercises, lifting the rifle above your head and behind your head and marching around a parade field. If you made a mistake, you got a couple of extra laps around the field. We took swimming lessons. If you can imagine, having a wool uniform on, a wool sweater, and going down into a building where the swimming pool was, where it was hotter than blazes. We had to sit around there for about two hours, while they talked to us about this and that, with all that heavy wool uniform on. Then we stripped and went swimming, and then got dressed and went back out in the cold. The next day was same old, same old, up at 5:30, got breakfast, went to the parade field and started all over again.
- DePue: Did you already know how to swim?
- Serra: Oh, yeah.
- DePue: Now, basic training is supposed to be tough, no matter where you go. Did you find it especially challenging?
- Serra: What we had to do was mostly routine. We done practically the same thing every day. Then we cooked; we had to do mess cooking. We had to work in the kitchen, and then we had to do compartment cleaning, which we had to clean up the barracks. Still, if we didn't do that, on the days we didn't do that, we was back out on the field, parading around and doing exercises with that 03 [M1903] Springfield.
- DePue: Was there an opportunity, when you were going through basic training, to get out on the water at all?
- Serra: No. The only thing we did was they had some boats set up there, some motor launches. We sat down in there, and they broke us into oaring, rowing, and we just did not too much of that. We didn't even see any water.
- DePue: You mentioned when you first started talking about basic that you were sleeping in hammocks, which would never be my idea of a comfortable place to sleep.
- Serra: They're comfortable; you'd be surprised, because we'd stretch them. You're not belly up and down. You're straight out. The thing is, if you move wrong, you're on the deck.
- DePue: See, that's the other part of it, the deck. That was all part of your acculturation, I would think. It's no longer the floor, is it?

- Serra: No. The Navy doesn't have floors; they have decks. They don't have stairs; they have ladders. They don't have right and left; they have port and starboard. And they don't have up and down; it's below deck or topside.
- DePue: It doesn't matter if you're on land or on sea, huh?
- Serra: Right.
- DePue: Did you find that easy to adjust to?
- Serra: Yeah, it wasn't bad. The hardest part was finding my way around that ship, when we did go aboard, big ship. We was on the fifth deck.
- DePue: While you were at Great Lakes, did you get any kind of specialized training?
- Serra: No.
- DePue: Where did you head after you got done at Great Lakes?
- Serra: After we got out of Great Lakes, they gave us leave. Then we came back to Great Lakes. We stayed there a few days, just in, like, a receiving ship. Then I was sent to *USS Ranger*¹.
- DePue: Where was the *USS Ranger* at the time?
- Serra: The *USS Ranger* had just gotten back from a cruise in the Virgin Islands, and it was tied up at pier seven in Norfolk, Virginia, while they was doing work and cleaning up and everything. I got assigned to a scouting squadron, VS-41.
- DePue: VS?
- Serra: VS-41. Those planes were on the beach at Norfolk Naval Air Station.
- DePue: Does VS stand for anything?
- Serra: "V" is always aircraft, when it's designated on something like "CV." (phone rings)
- DePue: You're a popular guy today. I'll get you started here; hang on just a second. Okay, we're back.
- Serra: Okay. We was on the beach, and the planes that we worked on were SBU-1s. They were old biplanes, dive bombers and scouts. "V" always meant air, like CV-5 was the carrier aircraft, number five; five was the keel number.
- DePue: For the *Yorktown*, which we'll get to pretty soon. Do you know what the "S" stood for, then, scouts?

¹ The first ship of the United States Navy to be designed and built from the keel up as an aircraft carrier.

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: That's all part, again, of the Navy's way of...They've got their own language, don't they?

Serra: They've got their own lingo.

DePue: When you got there, what was your rank?

Serra: Apprentice seaman.

DePue: What was the specific job you got assigned to?

Serra: It was just cleaning up the hangar, mess cooking, compartment cleaning, cleaning up the grounds. We didn't touch an airplane for about two or three weeks.

DePue: You said that the *Ranger* was in port?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: Did you get any kind of sea duty at all with the *Ranger*?

Serra: No, I never saw the *Ranger* from then on, when I left that first night.

DePue: How long were you on the *Ranger*, then?

Serra: We got there in the afternoon and stayed that night. The next morning we went to naval air station.

DePue: In Norfolk?

Serra: In Norfolk.

DePue: So, that's where you were doing these duties you were talking about?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: How long were you at the naval air station?

Serra: We were there until around June of '40.

DePue: Forty-one?

Serra: Forty-one, yeah. Then we got new airplanes, and our designation was VF-42. That's when we got the Grumman Wildcat.

DePue: So VF now would stand for a fighter squadron?

Serra: Yeah, right.

DePue: The Grumman is the F4F Wildcat?

Serra: Right.

DePue: When did you start learning how to do maintenance on these things?

Serra: On the aircraft? When we first got them, they had ninety-some bureau changes on them. From the time they left New York to the time they got to Norfolk, Virginia, they had found 90-some-odd things about them. We spent two or three months just making those changes.

One of the main faults of the F4F was a tail hook, [it] would pull out when it would grab the cable. It would just pull right out of the airplane, and the airplane, it'd scoot on down. We had a hard time getting that built strong enough to hold that aircraft when it grabbed the cable.

DePue: You say this was happening in early '41. Did it just then hit the inventory in the Navy? Was it a brand-new style of aircraft?

Serra: Right.

DePue: What's a bureau change? I assume that's when you have to make some kind of a modification to the aircraft?

Serra: That's right, yeah. It was little things like the rigging might be off, or, I don't know, different things about... wing tips might have been changed a little bit; the tail wheel might have to be changed; cockpit arrangements might have to be changed. But they were all minor, compared to the tail hook.

DePue: I've got a picture here that we're looking at right now. How would you describe the F4F Wildcat?

Serra: It was well-built. It had a R-2000 radial engine. It had 650-caliber machine guns.

DePue: In the wings?

Serra: Three in each wing, yeah. The pilot was enclosed in armored plate. In the wings, besides the guns and ammunition, the gas tanks were sealable. In other words, if they got a hole in them, they'd seal up automatically—that was a big feature—and single-seated, of course.

DePue: It sounds like it was built to be rugged.

Serra: It was a rugged little plane. When they met the Japanese Zero, the Japanese Zero didn't have sealable tanks; they didn't have armored plate, but they were much faster, more maneuverable. The Wildcat just couldn't keep up with it. But the thing about the Wildcat, [it] could take multiple hits and still be flying. But when they hit one of the Zeroes, it just took a short blast, and the Zero just exploded.



Grumman F4F Wildcat

DePue: When did you get assigned to the *Yorktown*?

Serra: About June of '41.

DePue: So this is after you had been working on these Wildcats for a while? Or was that after you got to the *Yorktown*?

Serra: I went aboard the *Yorktown*. We had the F4Fs.

DePue: So that's when you received them, once you got to the *Yorktown*?

Serra: Well, we had them before.

DePue: Did you stay with the VF-42, that squadron?

Serra: Yeah. The squadron was VF-42, which means it was a *Ranger* squadron, but we went aboard the *Yorktown*. I don't know why that happened.

DePue: Did you finally get to sea, then, on the *Yorktown*?

Serra: Yeah. We went up to Portland, Maine, and we anchored out of Portland, Maine. Then we convoyed British ships from Halifax, over to about 300 miles from the English coast, and then the Royal Air Force would take over, and the Royal Navy. Then we'd hand over the supply ships to them, and then we'd pick up ships with refugees and the wounded and empty cargo ships to come back. They'd load up in Halifax, and then we'd take them back again, a few weeks.

DePue: Well, Bob, I've got a whole bunch of questions now for you, but I wanted to start with something we had chatted a little bit about before, and that's the experience of getting your sea legs.

Serra: The *Yorktown*, you really didn't need too much. It was very seldom we hit enough rough water to even think about getting sick. In fact, one time, we picked up a sailor that had gone overboard from a destroyer, and he was on



USS Yorktown, anchored in Hampton Roads, 1937

the *Yorktown* for seven days, and he was sick for seven days. It was the difference. Destroyers used to bob up and down, and the *Yorktown* just kind of had a roll.

DePue: So he was okay with bobbing up and down, but not the roll, huh?

Serra: Right. If we'd had went from the *Yorktown* to the destroyer, we'd have been like that, getting sick all the time. In fact, when we got picked up, after the ship was sunk, there was a lot of them got sick.

DePue: Did you?

Serra: No. We was only on it about two days.

DePue: Now, the questions I've got for you, though, deal with what the *Yorktown* was doing when you sailed from Halifax, I guess. That's, you're escorting British ships across the Atlantic Ocean, right?

Serra: Yes. We had four or five destroyers and a couple cruisers. Then we'd escort them in. Of course, we wasn't at war with Germany. We had orders not to shoot at German...at the submarines; just spot them. The Royal Navy was also with us. [They] would sink the ships, or try to sink them.

DePue: That's the nature of my questions. We're at peace. Great Britain's at war with Germany. Were you flying air missions at the time?

Serra: Just scouting.

DePue: So they were looking for the submarines, from the air. Isn't that kind of a dicey thing to be doing?

Serra: I guess it was. In fact, we did sink a sub. One of our destroyers did sink a German sub, but the Germans never fired on a US ship.

DePue: You just said, though, that you weren't supposed to be firing on the German subs.

Serra: We weren't, but I don't know, things happen. But anyway, the Navy was credited with sinking one of the German subs.

DePue: This is why some historians speculate about what FDR was doing, whether he was trying to get us into a war at the time.

Serra: Well, I don't know.

DePue: What were you and the other sailors thinking about all of this?

Serra: We was thinking about how we'd like to be off of it (laughs) [and] get someplace else for cruising. There must have been 100 subs between Halifax and the east coast of the United States and 300 miles out from Britain.

DePue: What was your personal opinion? Was getting into the war the right thing for the United States to do at that time?

Serra: We wasn't thinking about it, getting in war, you know, until the British just couldn't handle anymore. We had to get in.

DePue: Were you essentially just working on the F4Fs at the time? Were the F4Fs the ones that were flying these scout missions?

Serra: Everything was flying. Of course, we had F4Fs that circled above our ship all the time. When the scout planes would go out, a couple fighters would go with them, in case they did get attacked. But, we had orders not to fire on the German subs. How what happened, we sank a German sub, I don't know.

- DePue: Were you ever in a position where you watched a British ship go down or a British ship get attacked by the subs?
- Serra: Yeah, a lot of them, a lot of them. We'd come across them in the early morning, when they'd get sunk at night. In the North Atlantic, it was bitter cold. We'd even run across motor launches that had survivors in them, sitting there froze to death.
- DePue: Literally froze to death?
- Serra: Froze to death; their ship was sunk. They was picked up in a motor launch. That North Atlantic, that temperature was...oh, man, was it cold. They were just probably out in that temperature for three, four, five hours.
- DePue: Did you hit any really rough weather in the North Atlantic?
- Serra: Yeah, a lot of rough weather.
- DePue: Big storms?
- Serra: Storms, yeah. In fact, one morning, about 3:00, they come down and give me a winter flight suit, winter gloves and a big bundle that was an engine cover for the plane I was in charge of, and said, "Get that on as soon as possible." We had to go up there. It must have been way below zero and thirty to forty-knot winds. We was doing maybe twenty knots, into the wind, a lot of time. We had to get that big, clumsy engine cover on that fighter. By the time we got it on, we had to take it off. (laughs) [It] took us three hours to get the thing on.
- DePue: I would have thought, to be doing the maintenance on it, you would have been on the hangar deck most of the time, but it sounds like you got on the flight deck occasionally.
- Serra: There was a lot of planes that was always on the flight deck, and a lot was always on the hangar deck. They had to have them spotted where they could take off if they had to.
- DePue: So you did work on both decks quite a bit?
- Serra: Yeah. But when we was on the flight deck, they always had three fighters lined up to be able to take off in a moment's notice, because we never knew when we was going to get attacked, or if we was going to get attacked. Then we had the rest of the planes on the flight deck. Some had bombs, and some had torpedoes.
- DePue: Wow, it sounds like now you're talking about when you were in the Pacific, and we were at war.

- Serra: Even in the Atlantic, we had armed shipped planes.
- DePue: So, the fighters were loaded up with fifty-cal ammunition, and the bombers and torpedoes, they all were loaded up as well?
- Serra: Right. Not all the planes, but enough to send them out.
- DePue: Did you spend all of your time in the Atlantic in the North Atlantic?
- Serra: Up until about, I'd say, a couple of weeks before the war started. Then we went back. We got back; we was back in Norfolk.
- DePue: You mentioned, when we first met, about an experience with a catapult. Can you tell us about that?
- Serra: We didn't use the catapults, per se, like they do nowadays. They was trying them out, but that was aboard the *Hornet* [*USS Hornet*, a Yorktown-class aircraft carrier of the US Navy]. They sent us aboard the *Hornet* to get qualified.
- The first plane that they hooked up to the catapult was our commanding officer, and he was a tall man. When the trigger was pulled, the catapult and the plane shot forward; the navigational chart slid under the dashboard, so they could navigate when they was out there. That flew back and hit him in the throat, and he couldn't talk to radio back to tell them about it. The next plane that took off on a catapult was the executive officer, and he was shorter. When the chart board came out it hit him right in the mouth, broke his jaw and knocked all his teeth out. Well, not all of them. That was the end of the catapult. (laughs)
- We never used the catapult again. Captain of the *Yorktown*, Blackjack, they called him, said, "Get that blah, blah, blah squadron off of my ship, and don't ever let them come back."
- DePue: That's learning about catapults the hard way, huh? I understand there was one time, though, that you had some encounter, or the *Yorktown* had an encounter, with a German battleship, as well?
- Serra: After we was coming back from the North Atlantic, convoying ships, they sent us down to the South Pacific. They said the British were—
- DePue: South Pacific or Atlantic?
- Serra: South Atlantic, sorry. They said that the German master battleship, one of the big ones...I forget what the name of it was.
- DePue: Was it the *Bismarck*, the *Graf Spee*?

Serra: I don't know which one it was. But they had a clue to where it was, and they sent us down there to help the British find it. We never did see it. Some other ships in the British Navy found it, and then we just turned around and came back and went to Norfolk. But they told us we was looking for a cruiser, German cruiser, but we was actually looking for that battleship.

DePue: Do you remember any other stories, during the time that the *Yorktown* was in the Atlantic, you'd like to share?

Serra: When we was anchored out, in Portsmouth, Portsmouth? Not Portsmouth, what am I talking about?

DePue: Not Norfolk, not Portsmouth?

Serra: No, it's in Maine, Portland, Portland, Maine. We was anchored out there when we was going back and forth to British. We'd get liberty there, and we'd have to take a motor launch from the ship into the pier. Then, coming back, 1:00, 2:00 in the morning, they'd have boats from our ship that made rounds every so often. The other ships had their boats out, and if you missed your boat, then you had to wait for the next one. At a certain time, like I think, 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, they quit running the boats, and they had a all-ships boat.

If you got there too late to get on our last, from our ship, we had to wait for the all-ships boat. We'd get on that, and it would take you to every boat around that was anchored out there. A lot of times, we'd pull up to a ship, and they'd holler out the name of the ship and then take off, and some guy would say, "Hey! Hey! That's my ship!" (both laugh) He'd have to finally go around all those other ships, so he got back to them. It was cold up there.

DePue: That was never you, though, was it?

Serra: No. I always managed to get on the right liberty boat.

DePue: Here's a question you might not have expected. When in your career did you get the tattoo?

Serra: I got that when I was in boot camp in Chicago.

DePue: Was that kind of a rite of passage at the time?

Serra: I don't remember, really. (laughs)

DePue: But early in your career, huh?

Serra: Yeah, I was only in the Navy about three weeks, I got that.

DePue: The other thing, you mentioned you had some time in the South Atlantic. So, it sounds like you crossed the equator at some time.

Serra: In the South Pacific.

DePue: That happened in the Pacific?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: While we're in the neighborhood, tell us, did you have time in the South Pacific for any kind of the normal ceremonies?

Serra: Crossing the equator, yeah. We had to go through the initiation. Then we was right on where the equator crosses the date line. We [were] just weaving back and forth. What they had us doing was, we'd bomb islands, Jap islands, down the South Pacific, and then we'd steam full speed ahead up to the North Pacific and bomb some islands up there. Then we'd turn around and run back down and bomb some islands in the South Pacific. We was trying to make the Japs think that we had more carriers out there than we did. That was their way of trying to do it. We had quite a deal on the equator, when we passed it.

DePue: How would you describe your experience?

Serra: Kind of confusing and sometimes embarrassing. (laughs)

DePue: But Bob, what did they do to you?

Serra: They made you get down amid ships and pull your pants down to your ankles, and run from there up to forward or back aft, all silly things like that.

DePue: And the International Date Line, did that get confusing, crossing that back and forth?

Serra: Yeah. In fact, the chaplain passed the word on the intercom. He said, "I don't know what day it is. We'll have church services every seven days," because we was just weaving in and out. We'd cross it, maybe like on Monday, and then cross again on Thursday, and then cross it maybe on Saturday, and then they wouldn't cross it until the next Saturday. It was confusing.

DePue: Let's get you back to the Atlantic. It sounds like you were in port. But I wanted to ask you what you remember about December 7th.

Serra: December 7th, we had already got back to Norfolk, and we were on liberty. When we went on liberty, Friday afternoon, we had to line up, according to rank, and wait on a quarter deck and get our instructions about, you know, "Don't get in trouble; don't embarrass your uniform," blah, blah, blah. Just before we left to go ashore, they passed the word that said, "All military personnel report to their bases or stations every four hours." That's the last we heard of that.

While we was in Norfolk, on the beach, on liberty, that's what we did. We reported every four hours. I forget how the time situation was. It must have been right after Pearl Harbor got bombed. I don't know what time it was here. There's a big time difference between here and Oahu. But they said that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and all military personnel report back to their stations on the double.

DePue: What's going through your mind when you heard that news?

Serra: We didn't know, really, because we didn't get much information on the Japanese and Pearl Harbor. Evidently, they didn't either, because there was nobody ready for it. What I can't figure out is why they told us to call in every four hours. That was a good day or two days before Pearl Harbor, when we were on liberty. We went on Friday, and Pearl Harbor was bombed on Sunday.

DePue: It does make you stop and think, doesn't it?

Serra: That's a mystery to us. I've never heard it or seen it mentioned anyplace.

DePue: How soon after December 7th did the *Yorktown* steam out of port?

Serra: About a week.

DePue: What was going on with *Yorktown* during that timeframe?

Serra: Nothing, really. It was just tied up at pier seven. We'd go ashore, have liberty, and come back. That's about all there was to it. That's all we heard, other than when we called back in, and they told us to get back aboard ship. Then we found out that the *Yorktown* was going to leave and go to the Pacific Ocean.

DePue: Now, what you've talked about so far, all of this activity the *Yorktown* was doing in the Atlantic, escorting lots of British going back and forth, doing a little bit of a dance with the German submarines, kind of skirting the edge between war and peace, it sounded like you and your buddies and the other sailors weren't all that excited about going to war with Germany.

Serra: No, we weren't. (laughs)

DePue: What was your thought, now that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor?

Serra: That was a big surprise, like everybody. Nobody expected it.

DePue: Did that get your fighting blood up?

Serra: Not really. They bombed us, so we had to go to war. The next day, we took all our gear aboard ship, and the next day, we unloaded it. They couldn't make up

their mind whether we was going or not. Then we finally moved on, and a week after Pearl Harbor, we was on our way to Panama Canal.

DePue: I would think, if nothing else, though, you hear the president declare war against Japan, and then Germany, as well, it gets your attention.

Serra: Yes, it did.

DePue: What happened, once the *Yorktown* got to Pacific? Did it go through the Panama Canal?

Serra: Yeah, we went through the Panama Canal, and we headed down the South Pacific and bombed the Solomon Islands. Then, from there, we went into Pearl Harbor. We got into Pearl Harbor sometime in January.

DePue: Was it after that, then, that you were describing going back and forth across the International Date Line and the equator.

Serra: When we left Pearl Harbor, then we went back to South Pacific and started our run up and down, from South Pacific to North Pacific.

DePue: The first time you sailed into Pearl Harbor, that would have been, what, January?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: Describe what you saw when you got into the harbor.

Serra: We were told that Pearl Harbor was just decimated and that several battleships were sunk and cruiser and some destroyers, many aircraft, blah, blah, blah. Well, we went into Pearl Harbor and went down Battleship Row. There wasn't a couple of them; there was eleven of them. The *Nevada* was the first one we saw. When the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, *Nevada* tried to get out, go out through the channel and get out into the water. They saw they couldn't make it, so the captain beached it, instead of letting it sink in the channel and block the whole channel. Then, from then on, I don't remember the order of the ships, but the *Arizona* was a mess; it was nothing but a pile of iron. The *Oklahoma* was upside-down. I forget all the names of them.

DePue: That sounds like it's a sobering sight to see.

Serra: Boy, was it ever. The sick bay was right in the middle of Pearl Harbor, and a bomb went right down in the middle of it. It was built in a circle. It was a hospital, and a bomb come down in the center. It killed quite a few and wounded a lot, tore up the hospital.

DePue: During this timeframe, were you able to hear much of the news about what was going on, especially in the war in the Pacific?

- Serra: We didn't hear too much. We was only in there, I don't know, a couple of days, I think, at the most.
- DePue: Were you aware, at the time, that the Japanese were going on quite a terror?
- Serra: Yeah. We were aware of that after we saw Pearl Harbor. But it also hit Hickam Field and a bunch of planes, Army planes. [There] was P-40s all over the place, shot up and fired, barracks burning, still smoking. Battleships, some of them was still smoking.
- DePue: What were you thinking at the time, about the United States' prospects in this war? Did you think that, inevitably, we were going to be able to beat the Japanese?
- Serra: I knew we was going to be at war with the Japanese, but I kind of had a feeling that Germany would be next on the list.
- DePue: But were you confident that the United States would end up victorious?
- Serra: Yes.
- DePue: Even in the early days, when things were going so bad?
- Serra: Well, we always figured that you get knocked down; you get back up; you can still win the fight. I knew we wouldn't have any trouble with Japanese. I knew it'd be a tough war, but I knew that we would conquer, eventually, but the Germans is the ones.
- DePue: When did you leave Pearl Harbor, then? Was that still in late January?
- Serra: We was only in Pearl a couple days.
- DePue: And then you're back to sea again?
- Serra: Back to sea.
- DePue: And that's the timeframe when you're going and doing these missions you talked about before?
- Serra: Running up and down from the south to the north. Then we went back to Pearl Harbor.
- DePue: Did you get any shore leave during these early trips to Pearl?
- Serra: When we went into Pearl the first time, we got some shore leave. Then the second time we went into Pearl was after we had been in the Coral Sea.
- DePue: That's a different story all together. We'll get there in a little bit.

Serra: But we went in there, because we got bombed, and we had to go in dry dock.

DePue: I was curious, how was Pearl at that time as a shore leave place?

Serra: Busy, real busy. You can imagine, it was all them battleships in there, and their escorts, their cruisers, destroyers, get all in there together.

DePue: I know when the Battle of Coral Sea was. A couple weeks before that—and I assume you're out in the Pacific someplace—April 18, 1942 is General James Doolittle's raid on the mainland of Japan. Did they let you know about that? Did you hear about that, Doolittle's raid?

Serra: Seems to me like we didn't hear about that for quite a while.

DePue: You don't think you even knew about it when you got into the battle in Coral Sea?

Serra: I don't think so. [We] might have. I can't remember.

DePue: It sounds like your experience is the typical GI's experience in war. You're always the last to find things out.

Serra: Like I say, we got to Coral Sea. Did I tell you about the planes, the Japanese planes?

DePue: What I'd like to have you do next, then, is to talk us through your experiences in the Battle of Coral Sea, which I think was May 4th through the 8th of 1942.

Serra: Yeah. The night before the battle, June 3rd, our planes had been out, scouting and checking around. We had some fighters in the air and had some fighters that were with the scouting planes. They was coming back at dusk. All of a sudden, we get an announcement that said some of those planes are unfriendly. What had happened, the Japanese mistook our carrier for theirs, and they were trying to land on our carrier. It was just dark enough, we could just barely see the exhaust.

DePue: That was before the actual attacks on either side?

Serra: That was the night before the actual Battle of the Coral Sea.

DePue: From reading about it, it was a couple days. I assume that there was really one very hot day or two that you had. Can you walk us through your experiences in the Battle of Coral Sea?

Serra: It was a long night...I mean, a short night. Nobody slept, hardly, because we knew what was coming, first thing in the morning. Like I say, when we got our planes out in the air, our bombers out and our scouts out and our fighters up, then pretty soon, I guess about an hour, half-hour or hour later, they

passed the word that, "Enemy planes approaching. Air department, take cover. Gunnery department, take over." That's when things start popping.

DePue: Were you in the air department?

Serra: Yeah. All the squadron people.

DePue: What did you do at the time? You've got no aircraft on the ship, it sounds like, at this time, so where do you go?

Serra: All around the flight deck, right under the flight deck, every so often, they'd have a room, about eight by eight. It was lined with boilerplate, and they was bomb shelters, so to speak. Most of the air department got in one of those bomb shelters. They was about three feet away from the twenty millimeters from the catwalk. All this time, we was bottled up in this boilerplate-lined room, just three or four feet away from these twenty-millimeter guns.

The shot would bounce off of the iron plate, and about drove us crazy, while we was sitting in there. You could hear the five-inch going off and fifty-caliber going off. Amidst all that, you could still hear the little thirty-calibers going off, and then the bombs coming in from the Jap plane and torpedoes coming from the Jap planes and our planes flying. It was a wild day.

DePue: It had to be hot in that place.

Serra: It was hot, real hot.

DePue: Did they have you crammed in there pretty tight?

Serra: Well, no. It was about six of us in that one I was in. A lot of them went down to the hangar deck. We spread out, all over the ship.

DePue: Tell me about the complement that the *Yorktown* had, the number of aircraft and the type of aircraft.

Serra: They had one squadron; a squadron had eighteen planes in it. They had one squadron of TBDs, torpedo bombers, and one squadron of SBDs that were scouting planes, and one squadron of SBDs that were bombing planes, which they eased back and forth, the same plane. Then there was eighteen planes, eighteen fighters, on there.

DePue: So you had two SBDs, one TBD, and one fighter squadron?

Serra: Yeah. Four squadrons.

DePue: Did the fighters typically go with the dive bombers and the torpedo bombers, or did they fly cover over the aircraft carrier, as well?

Serra: Some of them stayed and flew cover over a carrier, and some went with the torpedo planes, and some went with the dive bombers. What happened to that squadron that lost the whole squadron was, the fighters got tangled up with the Zeros [Japanese planes], so the TBDs didn't have any fighter cover.

DePue: You're talking about the Midway Battle now, aren't you?

Serra: Yeah. But [in] the Coral Sea, that's the way it worked.

DePue: I'd like to have you walk me through your specific duties, as much as you can, when you're actually in a combat zone, what you did from first thing in the morning to when you got to sleep at night.

Serra: First thing in the morning we, naturally, had breakfast. Then we went up, and we stood by our plane. We washed it; we cleaned it; we checked everything on it, landing gear, tires, the brakes, the rigging. Then we'd start it up, warm it up.

DePue: Before the pilot was there, you'd fire it up?

Serra: Yeah. That engine, the R20, was a twin bank engine. It had nine cylinders in front and nine in the back. Each bank had a magneto², and we'd warm that plane up to a certain temperature. [The] cylinder had a temperature. Then we'd switch one mag off, and then we'd notice how much revolutions it would drop off. We'd turn that one on, let it run a little bit, and then we'd turn the other one off, to check both magnetos to see how much it was falling off or whether there was only one operating.

If that was everything, and everything else was all right, then we'd turn the engine off; we'd top off the gas tanks; we'd check the oxygen equipment, and then we'd just wait until the air department wanted to do something.

First thing in the morning, they'd send up three fighters, and they would circle a pretty wide area over the ship. In case we picked up some enemy aircraft, there'd be three fighters right away. Then they had other fighters standing by, and then they had bombers loaded with bombs and torpedo planes loaded with torpedoes. If we got attacked, why, they'd launch those right away.

DePue: Could you have a lot of aircraft sitting on the flight deck at any one time?

Serra: We had them from the island back.

DePue: The island is the superstructure that you would see.

² An engine driven electrical generator that uses permanent magnets and coils to produce high voltage to fire the aircraft spark plugs. (http://www.qualityaircraftaccessories.com/blog/what_is_an_aircraft_magneto)

- Serra: From the island, we had dive bombers. I don't know how many, maybe twenty and maybe ten or twelve torpedo planes and some fighters, right in front. We only had three from the island forward, because they needed that space to take off. Those three fighters would take off in the morning, and then three more would take its place. Then those planes would fly around, and then we'd have to move all the planes out of the way so the fighters could land, and [then we'd] send up some more.
- DePue: Were you moving the planes around with just plain, old muscle power?
- Serra: Yeah. We had crews there that pushed it around.
- DePue: How many elevators did it have?
- Serra: It had three. Forward elevator, [we] didn't use too much. We had middle elevators, the ones we used the most, and then the one in the back, the rear, we used two and three, mostly.
- DePue: When you're reversing and you're landing, can you afford to have a lot of aircraft sitting on the flight deck then?
- Serra: Can't have any.
- DePue: It's got to be completely empty? So, as soon as one lands, it goes down the elevator, and the next one can land?
- Serra: Yeah. It's a hustle, boy. (laughs)
- DePue: Yeah, because if I'm flying around, I'm sitting there looking at my gas gauge and wondering how quickly I'm going to have my turn.
- Serra: They replaced it. They watched it pretty close. But there's planes, a lot of them, that run out of gas. They'd ditch alongside the carrier, and a destroyer would pick them up.
- DePue: Does that mean there were extra aircraft on the aircraft carrier, or you just had that complement, and then you just were an aircraft short?
- Serra: Yeah, right. It would be short until we got in port.
- DePue: I'm sure the Navy thought that pilots were much more expensive than aircraft, huh?
- Serra: Right.
- DePue: You mentioned, when we first met, about the experience of getting up there and fueling the aircraft at dawn, early in the morning, and then hugging the deck, as well.

- Serra: It was still dark when we got up, and the planes were spotted real close. If your plane was like in the middle or in the back, and the other planes was running, the only way to get to it was just crawl on your belly, and crawl under the props. Sometimes it was even hard to find when you was laying there under the plane. You'd have to remember where your plane was. Then they'd turn the planes off, and then the pilots would come out and get in the planes, and then we'd help them get harnessed up. Then, when they was all in the planes, then they'd start them all up again, and then they'd take off.
- DePue: Was it different guys who were actually controlling the takeoff and landings? The ones with the paddles that you always see?
- Serra: All they did was bring them in. They had other people that sent them off.
- DePue: So that wasn't your crew?
- Serra: No, they had special guys that that's all they done.
- DePue: Still, in all, this sounds like a dangerous place to be.
- Serra: It was, a noisy place.
- DePue: Do you have any stories of hairy takeoffs or landings?
- Serra: When the planes would take off, they'd go out of sight. They'd drop down. You're standing on the flight deck, and that plane would go off and drop down out of sight, and you'd hold your breath. Pretty soon, it'd come up.
- Several times, they didn't come up. They went down, and the ship either hit them, or it dodged them. But it was an eerie feeling to see those planes go off the bow and disappear and then slowly come up. The catapulted planes, they didn't go out of sight. They went down that deck, the newer carriers that used catapults.
- DePue: But that wasn't your direct experience, it sounds like. That wasn't something that the *Yorktown* had while you were on it?
- Serra: No, we didn't use a catapult. I don't know why, but we didn't use it.
- DePue: Talk about the damage, then, the attack where the *Yorktown* actually took damage at the Battle of Coral Sea.
- Serra: It took one bomb hit. It went down, right alongside the island, just a little aft. It left a hole in the flight deck, about six inches around. It went through the hangar deck, through the mess deck, through the fourth deck—that's where all the men slept—and then went off on the fifth deck, which was [the] armor plated deck. Below that was all the ammunition, gasoline and everything. If it had went through that fifth deck, it would have sank the *Yorktown* right there.

- DePue: You might not be sitting here today.
- Serra: Probably not.
- DePue: So, small holes through the first two or three decks, sounds like.
- Serra: Through four decks.
- DePue: Remember that feeling you got when you realized the explosion had gone off and the *Yorktown* had been hit?
- Serra: We knew it was hit, but we didn't know where it went off, until we got out, until the battle was over. Because we would hold up underneath the flight deck, we didn't hear much and we didn't see much.
- DePue: So, where you were at, you didn't feel much of an explosion?
- Serra: No. In fact, we didn't know a bomb had hit until we got out, until the battle was over.
- DePue: What are the orders for the *Yorktown* after that?
- Serra: We were supposed to go back to Pearl Harbor and go in dry dock for repairs. They said it'd take six weeks to three months. But the Navy cracked the Japanese code and found out that the Japanese were sending their best carriers and landing forces into Midway. They was going to take Midway. So they took boilerplate and welded it over all the holes in the *Yorktown*, amid ship. We left two days later.
- DePue: Do you recall how many casualties the ship suffered at Coral Sea?
- Serra: I think it was forty-seven; forty-seven keeps coming to my mind.
- DePue: Was that strictly from the attack on the *Yorktown*, or did that include pilots that had been lost during the battle?
- Serra: No, that was strictly from the bomb.
- DePue: Did *Yorktown* lose some aircraft during the Battle of Coral Sea, as well?
- Serra: No.
- DePue: That was very fortunate, I would think.
- Serra: Yeah. We had some that was pretty shot-up, but they managed to get back.
- DePue: As I understand, though, the sister carrier with you in the Battle of Coral Sea was *Lexington*.

Serra: No, *Enterprise*.

DePue: The *Enterprise* was with you down in the Coral Sea?

Serra: Yeah. That was the sister ship to the *Yorktown*, was the *Enterprise*.

DePue: But I thought the *Lexington* got sunk at Coral Sea.

Serra: *Lexington* did get sunk at the Coral Sea.

DePue: When you've got holes in the decks, holes in the flight deck and the hangar deck, did you and your buddies start wondering, "What the heck is going on? We're just patching this up and heading right out to sea again?"

Serra: We thought we was going to get a leave. The ship was in dry dock; we thought we was going to get to go home for a couple of weeks or a month. Then they decided to send it out in three days.

DePue: Now, they certainly weren't telling you, "Oh, we've broken the code. We know where the Japanese are coming." What were they telling you at the time?

Serra: They did tell us that they broke the code; the Japanese was on their way to Midway.

DePue: Oh, you did know that?

Serra: Yeah. But see, there wasn't any damage to the first four decks, really. Just one hole where the bomb went through. But when it exploded, that tore the whole amidships.

DePue: Well, that's got us to Midway, then. Can you walk us through that battle in as much detail as you can remember, from your personal perspective?

Serra: I forget now. The US Navy knew the Japanese Navy was on their way to Midway, but they couldn't find them. They had Catalina's³ out. The Army had Catalina's and Seventeens out, and all the ships had their scout planes out; they couldn't find the Jap fleet.

One particular scouting squadron was heading back to the *Yorktown* and spotted a destroyer that was moving pretty fast. He just figured maybe that the destroyer, the Jap destroyer, was heading back to the fleet. So they followed it, and sure enough... They're all about to run out of gas, but they followed that destroyer and found a fleet and bombed it and then put out the

³ The most extensively used anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters of World War II, and were also used in the Indian Ocean.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_PBY_Catalina)

word. The Air Force got the word; all the carriers got the word; all the ships got the word. B-17s didn't hit nothing when they bombed.

DePue: Were the B-17s based out of Pearl Harbor then? Must have been.

Serra: Yeah. Piece by piece, they found that fleet.

DePue: You mentioned, when we were talking about the Battle of Coral Sea, about the problems that torpedo bombers were having. What happened to the torpedo bombers from the *Yorktown* and the other aircraft carriers in Midway?

Serra: Like I say, squadron eight, eighteen planes, every one of them was lost. One man survived, Ensign George Gay. He got shot down earlier and managed to survive, and he was hanging onto some wreckage and saw the whole Battle of Midway from paddling around out there.

DePue: Was that the *Yorktown's* torpedo bomber squadron?

Serra: No, that was a *Hornet*.

DePue: But sounds like, from what I've read, that the *Yorktown* squadron got pretty well beat up, as well.

Serra: Those TBDs, they were flying coffins. They had to slow down to ninety knots and come in about ten, fifteen, twenty feet from the water and drop their torpedo. There was nothing between them and the enemy ship to protect them, and no fighters. The fighters got mixed up with the Jap Zeroes. The torpedo planes didn't have any fighter protection. It was just like shooting ducks in a shooting gallery.

DePue: How well did the dive bombers do?

Serra: Dive bombers done good, yeah. They made some hits. They sunk a couple battleships. All the planes there, we couldn't tell... There were five carriers; I think five.

DePue: Four Japanese carriers from what I've heard.

Serra: No, I mean American carriers. They had the *Enterprise* and the *Yorktown* and the *Hornet* and a *Wasp*, and I think the *Saratoga*. All those planes was coming in. They all knew where the fleet was, the Jap fleet, so they was all bombing it.

DePue: Again, I was just doing a little bit of reading about this. Apparently, the *Yorktown's* dive bombers, they got the *Soryu*, and that's a Japanese aircraft carrier, and the *Enterprise* dive bombers got the *Akagi* and the *Kaga*.

Serra: Yeah. I don't know who shot down who, really.

DePue: Again, from your perspective, you were just waiting and hoping that they come back, I would guess.

Serra: Well, they was coming in from all angles and from five different carriers. It's hard to know who shot what down.

DePue: What's the feeling, though, when they come back and you find out they got them?

Serra: Well, they didn't come back; that's a problem.

DePue: What happened?

Serra: The *Yorktown* got bombed, and they couldn't land on it. So, they went to the *Enterprise*, most of them, and landed on whatever other carrier they could find.



The Yorktown (left) and the Enterprise at the Battle of Midway

DePue: Walk us through the experience of getting bombed in the Battle of Midway. Do you remember that one? Were you closer to the action than you were at Coral Sea when it got hit?

Serra: When we got hit in the Coral Sea, like I say, that was the only bomb we got. That didn't do any damage to—really damage—to the first four decks. That didn't bother the flight deck, as far as landing or taking off. Didn't bother anything. But the Battle of Midway, one bomb went down in smoke, down the stack and knocked out a boiler room or two. I think two or three bombs tore

up the flight deck, where you couldn't land on it or anything. Then two torpedoes made the ship list, so it couldn't be used as a carrier anymore.

DePue: I think I've got a couple pictures of it, to show you here. There's one here especially; it's clearly listing in this picture up here.

Serra: You got another one of the *Yorktown*?

DePue: Yeah, we're looking at some of the pictures. Maybe it was this one.

Serra: Yeah, that one. That's what it looked like when we abandoned ship. The bombs hit on this side, right in here, and the captain was afraid that, if that ship should list and turn over with the crew on there, they've lost all of them.

DePue: Was the listing primarily from the torpedo hits that you took?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: Were those happening roughly at the same time, or it there—

Serra: Yeah, the same time.

DePue: The torpedo hits and the—

Serra: Bombs. We tried to go down from the flight deck, but—

DePue: On the side that wasn't listing?

Serra: Yeah. It was too high. I've always wondered exactly how high that flight deck was, and I never could find out. But with the ship listing, it was about twenty feet higher than normal.

DePue: And it's pretty high up to begin with.

Serra: Yes, really. So we went down to the hangar deck, and they had mooring lines over the side, big two-inch lines. We went down, one by one, and it was coming down so fast that when you hit the water, there was another guy on top of you. I thought it was going to end right there.

DePue: That much of a drop into the water?

Serra: No, the line went into the water. When you went down, you let go, maybe eight, ten feet, because your hands was burning on that big line. But the guys in back of you, they was coming right on top of you.

DePue: In other words, you better be swimming away from the ship as fast as you can.

Serra: Yeah, as soon as you hit the water. Boy. I thought I was going to end up right there.

DePue: Were you thinking, if the ship does go down at that time, you could get sucked down right with it?

Serra: No, I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking about being able to come back to the top of the water. [I] ended up swallowing seawater and gasoline and oil mixture, and then I got sick and started heaving. I started paddling away from the ship. They were trying to lower guys from the flight deck, wounded, in metal baskets. They'd slip, or the line would break or something, and poor guys would just tumble down from halfway down.

DePue: Did you end up getting fished out of the water then?

Serra: Well, I swam around about three, four hours, I guess. At one time, I was tired, and I just lay back and relaxed. I had a lifejacket on. I woke up, and I couldn't see any ships. I spun around, and I had just drifted away from them. [The] tide carried me out. I was about 100 yards from the nearest ship, all by myself. So, I paddled real fast to get back up in there. Then I kicked stuff. I didn't know whether there was sharks. I didn't think the sharks could be back that soon, after the battle, but they can smell blood for miles, they say. So I figured, yeah, there might be sharks. There might be a body; there might be a piece of wreckage.

I just kept paddling up, and then a whaleboat came by from a destroyer or a cruiser. They say that you can't sink a whaleboat. This one here, you couldn't even see the gunwales. The gunwales was about even with the water; it was so packed. I grabbed a hold of it, and the coxswain said, "Oh, no more. No more." I say, "How far are we from land?" He says, "Three miles." I said, "Which way?" He says, "Straight down." (laughs) I had to paddle around, probably another hour.

But I finally got close enough to a destroyer that had cargo nets over the side. Usually, they'd get a contact, and all the guys around there, trying to get aboard. The destroyer would just give her full speed ahead. A few guys got sucked into the screws [screw propellers]. [They were] so close to the ship that the ship took off and just sucked them in. The guys was hanging on the cargo nets, and the ship was moving. The guys on the ship was trying to get them aboard. It was a hell of a time there for a while.

DePue: But you finally got onto the cargo net and got on the destroyer?

Serra: Yeah. When all the survivors had been picked up, then the captain of the destroyer says, "All survivors, get below deck," because we was 100-and-some men over wartime complement. If the destroyer got a contact and had to make a sharp turn, we'd be top-heavy, and the whole thing would flip over. So we all had to go down below.

Those guys on the ship took us to their bunks, gave us clothes, told us to get in their bunk, really good. Then later on, when we was far enough

away, they told us we could go topside. Then at night, it was freezing. Boy, it was cold out there.

DePue: Were you topside? Were you able to watch the end for the *Yorktown*?

Serra: No. When we was down below, everything happened to the *Yorktown*. When we come back up, it was still listed, like this, and the *Hammond* was tied up to it on the port side, aft, trying to get it rigged for tow. Then there was a Jap sub laying out there that the destroyers couldn't pick up, because of all the damaged planes and ships that was in the water. The Japs slipped through and bombed, sent two more torpedoes into the *Yorktown*. One of them hit the *Hammond*. When the *Hammond* sunk, the depth charges went off and really blew the bottom out of it. [It] just broke the *Hammond* in half, and it blew most of the bottom out of the *Yorktown*.

DePue: What kind of ship was the *Hammond*?

Serra: Destroyer.

DePue: Did you see the *Yorktown* sink?

Serra: No. Well, I saw it sink the final day; it was floating for probably three days. We saw it go down in the evening.

DePue: What's going on in the minds of you and your buddies, then, when you watched the *USS Yorktown* finally go under?

Serra: Just that we're glad we're not on it. We could have been on it, if they'd had righted it up a little bit, been able to right it up a little bit and get the board level. [If] they'd got it underway, some of us might have had to go back. But they was more interested in getting ship's company back on there than it was getting [the ship upright].

DePue: You're kind of stoic about the whole experience, then.

Serra: Kind of what?

DePue: Stoic.

Serra: Yeah. Well, things happen so fast.

DePue: Now, we've been at this for about an hour and a half. Is this a good place for us to stop, or do you—

Serra: Whatever you do. Do you want something to drink?

DePue: No, I think I'm okay. How about we see if we can drive on and finish off with this today? If you've got another half an hour or so in you?

Serra: Oh, yeah. Go ahead.

DePue: What happens to you after you've lost your ship? You're reassigned to another ship?

Serra: No. Like I say, I got picked up by a destroyer, and a day or two later, a supply ship got there. We went aboard the supply ship, and then went into Pearl. We all thought we was going to get assigned to another ship, but they sent us from Pearl back to Treasure Island, which was turned into a Navy receiving center, during the war.

Then we got thirty days leave. After we come back from leave, we went back in the supply ship, to Treasure Island and got our assignments. Then I got on a Norwegian fishing boat, icebreaker, and went back to Pearl, and then from Pearl over to Maui, and joined the CASU unit .

DePue: Yeah, you called that a CSU, Casual Support Unit?

Serra: CASU, Carrier Aircraft Service Unit.

DePue: Carrier Aircraft Service Unit.

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: What does a Carrier Aircraft Service Unit do?

Serra: When the carriers come into Pearl, the planes fly off, maybe five, ten miles out and go to one of these islands. Like, all the fighters would go to one island, torpedo planes to another island, and the pilots be picked up by a transport, taken to Pearl. While the carrier was at Pearl, we'd take care of the planes, if there was any damage to them or if they needed service or whatever.

DePue: Any memorable stories from that experience?

Serra: No. Just a lot of work.

DePue: I expect, after going through the Coral Sea and Midway, it's kind of routine stuff.

Serra: Yeah, it was nice. (laughs)

DePue: Was there much to do on Maui, when you had free time?

Serra: There's a little town. What was it? Wailuku.

DePue: Wailuku?

Serra: Wailuku. You're just as good as mine. (DePue laughs) I think it's W-a-i—

DePue: Well, we'll figure it out.

Serra: Yeah, l-u-k-u, something like that. It didn't have any bars, but you could still find some booze, if you met the right guy.

DePue: I was going to say, here you got sailors on land, and there's no bar close by?

Serra: Yeah. It had a movie there and a drugstore with a nice eating place in it and a lot of little stores, some restaurants. That was it.

DePue: How long did you spend on Maui?

Serra: I was there, probably—let's see, the ship went down in '42—probably a year and a half, something like that.

DePue: I've got a picture here of you and a bunch of other sailors. Was that during the timeframe you were on Maui?

Serra: Yeah, that was CASU unit. CASU four.



Carrier Aircraft Service Unit 4.

DePue: What was your rank at this time?

Serra: I was first-class when I went there, and then I made chief, while I was on CASU unit.

DePue: Is that the equivalent of a noncommissioned officer in the Army?

Serra: That's an equivalent to a master sergeant, I think.

DePue: Master sergeant would be a senior NCO in the Army. We'll figure that out; that's okay. Did you get shipped out from there to someplace else, during the war?

Serra: I went from there to San Diego.

DePue: Do you recall when, roughly, you went to San Diego?

Serra: Probably '44.

DePue: Is that where you spent the rest of the war?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: What did the Navy have you doing in San Diego?

Serra: Well, first they put me in charge of [the] disassembly shop in the A&R Department. Then I went from assembly shop to—they give me what was equivalent to a leading man in A&R Department.

DePue: What does A&R mean?

Serra: Assembly and repair.

DePue: How would you describe that job?

Serra: There was about twelve sections in the A&R Department, and they started out with assembly and repair. In assembly, we'd take that ship all apart, that plane all apart, and tag it, put it on little dollies, and then they'd take it to different parts, take engines to the Engine Department, fuselages to the Fuselage Department, landing gears someplace else, just split it up, and they'd repair it. They'd go to the assembly shop, disassembly. [They'd] go through the disassembly shop. Then they'd go get assembled. Then they'd take off and fly to different parts, depended what kind of ship it was. We had a lot of transports.

DePue: You were working on transport ships at the time?

Serra: On the planes. What we'd was take them apart.

DePue: So, it's not the stuff that you were working on when you were on an aircraft carrier. This is a different kind of aircraft, it sounds like.

Serra: Oh, yeah. These were DC-3s.

DePue: Did you like that work?

Serra: Yeah, I did. When they put me in there and they give me a crew, I find out that they took all the deadheads and give them to me. (laughs) They were...I

had about eight of them, boy, they were wild. They was doing something one time, and the ensign came by and jumped and told them attention and was chewing them out. I went up there, and I said, "Pardon me, sir." I says, "Chain of command works two ways in the Navy." I says, "If you want to go up, you start, and you go to the next higher man." I says, "It also works coming down." I says, "I'm in charge of this department. If they done anything wrong, you come and see me." He kind of flushed a little bit, and he said, "Carry on." From then on, those guys was like, You're the best guy I ever met. (laughs)

Planes come in. They had a lot of stuff in them. They had forty-five-caliber handguns and binoculars, a lot of things in there that the pilots used. When they left, they just left everything in there, and we had first crack at it. I didn't take anything, but those guys would haul that stuff out, binoculars, forty fives.

DePue: Considering where else you could have been serving at the time... Now, you've certainly done your time in the hot part of the war, with both Coral Sea and Midway, but did you feel like you were a pretty lucky guy by that time?

Serra: I liked it for a while, and then it got boring. I was ready to go back to sea, but the chief commanding officer wouldn't send me, refused my request. Then, when the war was over, they put me in the fire department, in charge of make sure [that] every vehicle [that] came through there, had up-to-date fire equipment on it. That's where I ended up.

DePue: How was San Diego as a port, as a liberty port?

Serra: Wild, typical Navy town.

DePue: I don't suppose there are any stories you want to tell us about that, are there, Bob?

Serra: Not many. (DePue laughs) See, we was on North Island, and to get to San Diego, you had to take a ferry across. They called it the Nickel Snatcher; it cost you a nickel to go on that ferry, over to San Diego. When you got off of that, and you stepped on the dock, there was a bar there. A lot of times, that's as far as guys got on their liberty, (laughs) was a bar.

San Diego was a nice town then, clean, and a lot of taverns, a lot of places to go. When I got married, I took my wife out there on a honeymoon. I went in some of those places that I used to go into, and they were dives, junks, junkers. Boy, I got in one place that was like in Egypt. They have, like, tents, you know, at the table, like one of those tents in Egypt, queers and dope-heads. I said, "Let's get the hell out of here." I had a hard time finding a place that I felt at ease.

DePue: How long after the war was that, that you went back to San Diego?

Serra: It was '48.

DePue: Not that long, then.

Serra: Huh?

DePue: Not that many years afterwards.

Serra: No.

DePue: Since you were in the Navy in 1940, long before the United States got into war, were you one of the first ones released from the Navy, after the war was over?

Serra: No, I had to serve out my time. I signed up for six years. The guys that were kind of drafted or volunteered, they signed up until the war was over. That's their enlistment. They didn't have to stay after that; when the war was over, they were free to go. All the guys that ended up like that, they left. They got out of the Navy and went home. All the guys that were regular Navy, by that time, most of them was chief petty officer. So, all you had was chiefs. That's how come I ended up in the fire department. Hell, they had chiefs cutting grass, (both laugh) and they had more chiefs than they knew what to do, more chiefs than they had Indians.

DePue: By that time, I would imagine you're eager to move on and become a civilian?

Serra: Yeah. I was eager to become a civilian a week after I'm in the Navy. (both laugh)

DePue: This is a question I ask everybody I interview. What were your thoughts when you heard about the atomic bomb being dropped?

Serra: I figured that was the beginning of the end. It had to be, because if we had that kind of power, no country could survive.

DePue: Did Truman make the right decision, as far as you're concerned?

Serra: I think he did. It was a horrible thing to do, but it saved a million American lives, I think, because Japan would have been a big, big deal.

DePue: Tell me what you did when you came back home.

Serra: When I came back home, there was no jobs, like when I went in. That's why I went in, because I couldn't find a job. By the time I got home, all the jobs were taken, so I had to do whatever I could find. I set pins at a bowling alley for a while. I cut asparagus. Then I got on to Pillsbury, worked at Pillsbury.

DePue: Their factory here in town?

Serra: Pillsbury Flour Mill, yeah, down on Phillips Avenue.

DePue: How long did you stay there?

Serra: Until '55.

DePue: And then?

Serra: I went to [the] post office.

DePue: I think that's where you ended up retiring from, correct?

Serra: Retiring in '79.

DePue: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill?

Serra: Not really.

DePue: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

Serra: American Legion.

DePue: Go to reunions and things like that?

Serra: No. Never did go.

DePue: Did the *Yorktown* occasionally have reunions?

Serra: I don't know. I never heard of anybody from the *Yorktown*. If they had a group from it, I didn't know about it.

DePue: Coming into your apartment here, my impression is that you're very proud of your service on the *Yorktown* and in the Navy.

Serra: I am.

DePue: You've got a big model of the *Yorktown*, when you first get in, and I'm looking above me and I've got all these model aircraft, a lot of them that you worked on.

Serra: Yeah. I worked on SBD, F4F, TBD's over there.

DePue: Now, you mentioned just a couple minutes ago, that you regretted you had joined the Navy, just a week or two after joining the Navy. But from this perspective now, are you glad you did this?

Serra: Yeah.

DePue: How did the experience change you, do you think?

Serra: Change me?

DePue: Yeah.

Serra: Well, I don't know, really. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't went in the Navy, probably ended up a bum someplace, because there was no jobs.

DePue: You certainly would have gotten drafted, somewhere along the line.

Serra: Yeah, I'd have got drafted, been in the Bulge or the European Theatre.

DePue: You saw some pretty tough action during the time you were on the *Yorktown*. Do you think the sacrifice that you and your buddies, those pilots who were lost at sea when they were at Midway, those kind of folks... Was it worth the sacrifice?

Serra: Well, who knows? Who knows what would have happened if they hadn't have done it? What if they hadn't have stopped the Japanese? If the Japanese had taken Midway, then the next stop would have been Pearl Harbor, and from Pearl Harbor, hit the West Coast [of the U.S.]. Who knows what would have happened?

DePue: Are you proud that you served?

Serra: Yes.

DePue: Would you do it over again if you had the same set of circumstances?

Serra: I probably would.

DePue: How would you like to end the interview, Bob?

Serra: Well, I don't know. I'm very, very proud of the guys that fought in that war. They saved this nation, and I feel very, very sorry for them, because this nation's turning into a hellhole.

DePue: Would you agree with the sentiment of a lot of folks, that the World War II generation is the greatest generation?

Serra: I would.

DePue: Any words of advice for your grandchildren or anybody who's going to listen to this, somewhere down the road?

Serra: Well, I don't know what to tell them. Sometimes I think there's not going to be down the road. If we're going like we're going now, we ain't going to be around here five years from now. That sounds an awful thing to say, but we can't keep going like we're going.

DePue: Let me close with this. It's been a real privilege for me to have the opportunity to sit and hear your stories and understand the war from your perspective. You were in the midst of it. It's important that we get these stories preserved. So, thank you very much, Bob.

Serra: Okay. [I] appreciate it.

(end of interview)