Herbert "Herb" Cohen: From the Bronx to Saipan: A Coast Guardsman at War

U.S. Coast Guard • World War II, 1943–1946

At seventeen, Herbert "Herb" Cohen wanted a say in how he would serve during World War II. He had grown up in New York City, the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and was living near Coney Island when he finished high school in 1943. Rather than wait to be drafted, he enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard that July. In his oral history, he explained that enlisting early meant he could "pick my service." The Coast Guard training facility near his parents' home made the choice seem almost local. It would soon take him across the Pacific.

Cohen was assigned to the USS Cavalier, an attack transport that carried troops and supplies. He worked with landing craft, the smaller boats that transported military personnel and equipment from a ship to shore. The job required more than steering. Crews had to navigate coral reefs, difficult water, and uncertainty as they approached contested beaches. Cohen remembered transporting Army troops during operations at Saipan. Looking back at his younger self climbing into a ship's lookout position, he observed, "I was some kid from the Bronx." That line captures both his youth and the extraordinary distance between home and war.

His recollections of Saipan are not simply a story of military logistics. He described frightening conditions, shortages on his landing craft, and the suffering of civilians. In January 1945, the Cavalier was torpedoed. It did not sink, but it could no longer move under its own power and had to be towed toward Pearl Harbor. Cohen also recalled how wartime experiences continued to affect his sleep and reactions many years later. His account reminds us that the consequences of war could persist long after a service member had returned home.

After the war, Cohen worked in the printing industry, married Ruth, and raised a family. He relocated to Las Vegas in 1982, where he remained connected to fellow veterans through organizations including Jewish War Veterans. His story broadens the public understanding of World

War II service: a Coast Guardsman could be involved in major amphibious operations, witness difficult events, and carry memories into decades of civilian life.

Source Herb Cohen, oral history with Barbara Tabach, December 6, 2022; Veterans' Voices: We're Listening (UNLV, 2023).

Transcript

Herbert "Herb" Cohen

U.S. Coast Guard | World War II

Saipan: The Work of an Amphibious Landing

Source: UNLV, Veterans' Voices: We're Listening · Cohen_Herb_2 Book.pdf · PDF pp. 33–35 (printed interview pp. 16–18) 700

VETERAN I had to climb way up to get in the crow's nest. The crow's nest had a little tin roof, an opening and steel all around it. I go in, and I stand up, and I can't see nothing because I'm too short, and so I had to stand outside with the earphones on until they put a pail there upside down so I could stand on that. I was a short kid. I was young. What the hell was I? I was some kid from the Bronx.

INTERVIEWER The people you were transporting—

VETERAN Were Army troops. I remember we took the troops to Saipan. It was the 27th [Infantry] Division [National Guard Division from New York]. The reason I know that: I had a cousin in that division, and that's what we carried to Saipan. They were invasion forces of Saipan with the Marines. If you look at a map of Saipan, Marines were supposed to hit the front there, and the Army was supposed to hit the back. If you look at a map of Saipan, the back end is like a big horseshoe. If you go in there, you can't maneuver much, and there was supposedly in one of the caves in there they had a sixteen-inch gun that they got from Hong Kong. Any ship going in there, it was a sitting duck. The Army was supposed to go in there, but the Marines got stuck in position that they backed up the Marines.

INTERVIEWER I assumed you were armed so that you could also defend yourself.

VETERAN Not really. In the beginning in Saipan at the first landing, I had a forty-five. I had a forty-five for the landing but they took that away from us quick.

INTERVIEWER Oh, really.

VETERAN When we got back on the ship. You don't need a forty-five on the ship. They watched that. Some of the guys wanted to keep it and said, "We lost it on shore." But they checked up on them and got all the forty-fives. The guy in charge on the ship was a gunner's mate. He is the one that handed it out and stuff. In Saipan, I remember on the beach—see, one of the things is people on Navy ships, destroyers, aircraft carriers, they never get ashore. We got ashore. Every time we passed one of them, they would yell down, "Got any souvenirs? Got any souvenirs?" I keep a little piece of

coral on that ship of mine that's in the other room, the little copy [a model of the ship he was on], because coral was in many places, and for our landing it was a problem because you can't get to shore for the troops. You'll be too far out, and the water is too deep. They would blow up the coral. What do you call them now, the fancy guys that go crazy? We called it the underwater demolition team, UDT, and they would blow up the coral reefs so we can get in. Usually, like on the island, there would be the coral reefs here, but behind it is a couple of hundred feet of regular water. Before you can make a landing, you've got to get past those coral reefs, and that's what the UDT did. They would blow up an area, and we entered through it so we then could hit the beach. As I say, Saipan, we were there for eight days.

INTERVIEWER It's interesting. You talk a lot about Saipan, eight days.

VETERAN Saipan was the big landing.

INTERVIEWER That was a significant part of your experience.

VETERAN Yes, yes, Saipan was big because after that we hit the Philippines. One of the things is my ship was the lead ship because they put a commodore on it. A commadore was a rating like an admiral that they brought back to the war, it was an old rating. We were a flagship, and we had this Navy commodore on this Coast Guard-manned ship on this flotilla of about eight ships. Now, he's in charge of all eight ships. The captain is in charge of the ship, what you're going to eat and what you're going to do. He was a Navy guy.