

Nelson, Rodney Q. Jr. Interview pt 2 8-18-87

[Speaker 1]

If you can get a calm day, the sun is just so warm, and I'll never forget my LCI, I wasn't on duty then, I just went out on the deck and laid down and watched the dolphins race alongside just jumping out of the water right along with the ship, like carrying a conversation. And you know, that was a nice time, I thought.

[Speaker 3]

I've talked with enough people to know that there's good and bad and boring and scary and all of it, you've got a piece of everything.

[Speaker 1]

Well, I want to tell you about the scary part. If you, you know, if you're looking after your safety, they're wearing hats now, again. And so, all about two weeks, I was introduced to Wilma, who's to be my wife later, and it was the girl up there arranging those flowers.

So, I'm still married to Wilma, raised four children, three of them girls, and one, my youngest, is a boy. And the two of them went to the University of Tennessee, no, three of them, three girls went to the University of Tennessee and a son, and Maryville College on basketball scholarship. So, I'm in Bunker Hill Naval Air Station, and this is 1940, or May about, 45.

And so, I marry her September 31st of 45, and I no sooner married, they sent me to Glenview Naval Air Station in north of Chicago. And my wife and I, we set up housekeeping in Kokomo, and she's teaching school, and then we learn that we're going to expect our first baby, and I'm up in Chicago. So, I come back on weekends to be in Kokomo with her.

So, she finally moves up there to Glenview, and I had a one-room apartment with a sway-back bed, with a shared bathroom with two other couples. And we cooked, ate, slept in one little room, and on the wall was a water closet from an ancient commode. But we were happy, and so, on July the 10th, my wife has this baby, and I get my orders for demobilization for July the 15th.

So, I go to the hospital, Naval Air Station, or Great Lakes, that is, Great Lakes Naval Hospital, and told them what my problem was. I says, I'm being demobilized the 15th of July, but my wife's in heaven. She's just had a baby, and I'm just wondering if I can stick around here long enough for her to get back on her feet.

It so happened that they were keeping her anyway two weeks. So, when we left there, I had everything packed, and I picked up my wife and baby at the hospital, got on the train, and went to Kokomo about 100 miles away. And we set up housekeeping there, and about seven months later, well, let's see, my final active duty was October the 10th, 1946.

That was demobilization date, because I had no leave here in the state for my whole duration, so I had 90 days coming. So, after that demobilization, I went on back to work for the airline in Indianapolis. So, I went back there, and I was with them seven months, and my left eye went blind.

All of a sudden, just wham, bam. So, I was driving 50 miles from Kokomo to Indianapolis and then back every day. So, my eye went blind, and so I checked into VA hospital at Indianapolis, and so they said, well, you've got a detached retina.

And so, they operated on it, and over a period of two years, it began to function. But they thought they was going to lose my right eye in the same period of time, and so after two years, I was allowed to take off these little black glasses that would just let light come in through a little hole. So, back then, they didn't know how to operate, so it was really an experiment, and it worked fairly well.

So, over that two-year period of time, I got to have plenty of time to think, and I wondered, well, what would cause this? And so, I thought it was the explosion, blast in my face, which I caught. My head facing this explosion.

Caught all that, and then they throw them in the air and drop them back on the deck. And so, I wrote a letter to the Naval Department just explaining to them what the situation was. So, they ordered me, called me back to duty to report to the Bethesda Naval Hospital.

That was around December of 1948, I believe. And so, I reported to them, and I didn't know what they were going to do, but they examined me and all that, but they put me, had to appear before a retirement board. I didn't know that.

And so, they talked to me about what happened and everything. So, in about two weeks' time, they told me they were retiring me, full pay from, or, you know, at that time, it was three-quarters pay. So, I was retired to be effective February 1st, 1949, and that's really just the beginning.

You know, the problem, really, is, the sad problem is, service-connected disabilities of troops, sailors or servicemen, you can't go out into private industry and get jobs. They won't hire you. Now, they don't tell you that, but they won't hire you because of insurance reasons and so forth.

So, that actually is not quite fair. So, you have to do a lot of adjusting on your own to find a place where you can still function with your disability. I've been lucky in that, now, this eye here is no good.

It's just glass. Now, this right eye, and when it's finally, you know, it's gone. And so, this right eye, its depth perception is not as accurate as it would be if it had been left.

So, well, I've got no complaints, but I do have the two things in my mind they ought to correct. I think they have corrected some. Now, that, it keeps coming back to my mind.

Now, here's this sailor, volunteered, jumped overboard, saved this man's life, and is nothing out of the ordinary, justifying some award. Now, I reflect on that in this respect. To put it in proper context, as Sir Larry knows, a sailor on my ship, we had a, I had a 24-hour watch.

We were on what you'd call, we were on battle station all the time. Skeleton, so if anything happened, we could be right in action right away. This aircraft spotter says there's something coming in, airplane, spotter and airplane way off in the distance.

He called it in, looked, yeah, it was there. Just a minute or so, he says, say there's something coming in, certain direction bearing, and sure enough, it was there. It was the first radio-controlled bomb the Germans had, and it comes in, and I was sitting right close to this cruiser, USS Savannah, and it comes right down into that Savannah ship.

It never fired one shot. It could have thrown up and had the ability to throw up a canopy of fire that probably could have shot that slow-moving glider. It was a kind of a glider thing, you know.

So, okay, I've still to go to Washington and check the ship's log on what their report was during that happening, and I'll bet you they've got oodles of officers that got awards for damage control inside that big ship. That's regular Navy, see, and there's a difference between the Reserves and the regular Navy. That kind of sticks in my craw a little bit, and I haven't been able to do a thing about it.

Well, it won't be done about it. Nothing will happen. They say the legislation prohibits reviewing those now, but in my report, when that mining happened, I put this sailor in for an award.

And they never honored it, never even responded to it, and so I almost come to the conclusion that the regular Navy has one set of values, and the Reserves has another. There are people who feel that way about the Army, too. The Reserves do the work.

These other guys do the planning, but they should smooth, and I think they have some, because here's what brought it to mind. I was talking to some colonels, and this colonel said that he was decorated because he saved a man's life. And I said, here's this boy from Georgia.

He saved that man's life and wouldn't even bother to do it. He did it on his own. So I'd like to see our armed services, which they have a better opportunity now because they've got the National Guard works more closely.

And I think they've corrected some of that, but they ought to go back and pick up this guy, because he has no record. Now, I've got the letters, but I don't know where he is. I can't locate him.

He's from Georgia. The fellow that got killed was from Georgia. And I sure would like to get that straightened out.

Congressman Duncan, he wasn't able to get any help. The Navy Department says that we aren't able to do it because they put a deadline on reviews, but they never advise me there's a deadline, so how in the heck would I know to act? One more thing.

[Speaker 2]

I'd like to end up by asking, looking back on it, is there anything special that you want to highlight that you'd be sure that I know and anybody else who hears this tape knows about World War II? I can pretty well guess.

[Speaker 1]

Well, my advice to any man going into the service is this. If you go into the service afraid to die, then don't go in, because you're not going to be effective at all, period. And if you do go in, hell, learn safely how to do what you're supposed to do, because if you're dead, you can't help, but if you're alive, you can help.

Now, so many of them say, well, I don't want to die. Well, then they better not get in the service, because you can die in just merely maneuvers. I've seen, I didn't see it, but I was on these maneuvers because of the carelessness of somebody.

They ramped on these personnel, LCVPs, dropped them prematurely and just shoveled a whole boatload of troops weighted down 100 pounds on their backs. See, drowned like dogs. Well, I mean, so there's a safe way to do things and be very effective.

And fighting a war is like anything else. If you do it right, your chances of success are greater. And it's just as simple as that.

And go to bed at nighttime saying, have I done my best? Have I done what I'm supposed to have done? And if you do, you're going to have a clear conscience, and you're going to be able to be more effective.

You can't run scared. And those that run scared, they lose their equilibrium. I'll give you an illustration real quick.

All right, when the ship was mined, I had two rafts, one on the starboard side, one on the port side. And so there was a white guy there, smart, 12th grader. And so I asked him to take that raft and go get those guys out there in the water.

And so we had maneuvers on how to do that. You get the retaining line and hold it and cut your raft loose or untie it. All right.

He released the raft and didn't have the retaining line. So there goes my raft. Okay, I turned to the port side, and here's this 6th grade black from Indiana and this other 6th grader.

I don't know how they both came together right there, but they were. And I told him to take that raft and go out there and get those fellas. They did it.

6th graders. So I don't know how you explain that.

[Speaker 2]

Education isn't all of it.

[Speaker 1]

But it's not so. Just the same, they'd come to me with a lot of tales about the black boy. They couldn't substantiate nothing.

And I told them, I says, listen, I don't want to hear no more about this unless you got the goods. I don't want to hear no more about it. I says, he's doing his job.

Are you doing your job? So we have lots of blacks in the service. And you can't put a label on them beforehand.

You're going to say, let the action speak louder than the words.

[Speaker 2]

And this guy worked out all right for you?

[Speaker 1]

They got their rewards except in that mining. Now the executive officer and this sailor that saved the other fella, no declarations whatsoever.

[Speaker 2]

Have you ever had a reunion of those guys getting together for you two?

[Speaker 1]

Well, there weren't 33 of us. And you can't find them. Now you see, the service won't give out addresses on them.

Now you can put in a letter addressed to the service. And then you write in the letter what you want forwarded on a self-addressed envelope. And they'll put his address on it.

And if he's interested, he'll answer back if he's alive. And these are scattered. So I got highway.

They were all over Brooklyn. Had them right off the streets of Brooklyn. But I will say this.

I had good officers. I had good men. And how I account for their functions is it was successful.

When I hit that mine, they functioned. Remember when that ship was in front of me and we were going to have a head-on collision out in the middle of the ocean? They could have hesitated on giving me that full steam astern.

They could have hesitated. They could have froze up. They could have delayed.

If they had, we'd have had the collision. As it was, got it immediately. And shoot, they were good.

They were good. We never damaged that ship one iota. And many, many times higher ranking officers would come and volunteer and say, your ship came in real pretty.

It was real smooth. You see, you don't do it by yourself. At Salerno, I forgot to mention this.

Commander. But there was a Commodore Zimmerle, American representative in the British task force at Salerno. And he's the one that was in command of the convoy that we LCIs came over in.

He was the commanding officer. He was Captain Zimmerle. And they promoted him to Commodore to match up with the British at Salerno invasion.

And on the 10th day, I got my orders to join the convoy and go back to Africa. Two Focke-Wulfs came in and by gosh, one of them dropped a bomb right off the stern and

knocked out my port propeller, strut that supports the propeller. The propeller was just unsupported and flopping in every direction.

Well, that's how close it was all the time. That was the 10th day. On the 9th day, Commodore Zimmerle pulled up along in his flagship, pulled up alongside this little old ship of mine.

It's 200 feet long. And he says, I'd like to speak to the commanding officer, the skipper. So I happened to be in the continent tower and I acknowledged him.

He says, I want to extend my commendations to your ship and so forth and so on. Now, I wasn't trained in Northwestern how to get those things in writing, see, or how to get a decoration point blank. They never mentioned that.

So I should have said to him, I thanked him then. But I should have said after I thanked him, I says, now, Commodore, would you put that in writing so all my men will have for their descendants a record of this commendation? Never occurred to me that you'd have to do a thing like that.

Yeah, you'd think that they would take care of that. They didn't. They didn't.

And so the only thing we can live with, he said it. He said it and you know it and you told the crew, I'm sure. Oh, the crew heard it.

They heard it. Because see, when a ship pulls up to try another, it's kind of like, well, visitors have come. So that's the way it went.

And I again think that it's the difference, you know, regular Navy reserve is just hanging in there. Oh, that's all right. They'll be out of the Navy in a few years.

They'll be out and all that stuff. But that's what happened.

[Speaker 3]

It would have been nice to have.

[Speaker 1]

That ship deserved commendations.

[Speaker 3]

Yeah, sounds like it.

[Speaker 1]

I gave full report. I've got my report, but the men don't have it. Yeah, the radio man, I hope he made a copy for the ship.

He did all the typing. So, well, that's the complete story. I thank you very much.

[Speaker 3]

That is it. I thank you.