

Bryan, Bill Interview 3-31-93

[Speaker 2]

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Testing. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

I don't believe that tape is... It's going in there. Is that thing just turning inside that tape and not doing anything?

[Speaker 1]

No, it's working.

[Speaker 2]

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Over.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. This is Stanley H. Tinsley speaking.

This is March 31st, 1993. I'm speaking today with Mr. William Bryan of Knoxville, Tennessee, where it is a place of business. We'll be discussing his remembrances of World War II.

Mr. Bryan, when did you join the service?

[Speaker 1]

I joined the service in May of 1941.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, and what branch did you go into?

[Speaker 1]

I joined the Navy, went to flight school in Atlanta, Georgia, and then transferred to Pensacola as an aviation cadet in December of 1941.

[Speaker 2]

Okay. Do you remember how old you were when you went into service? 27.

Okay, was anyone else in your family in the service?

[Speaker 1]

No, nobody in my family. Both of my grandfathers were in the Civil War.

[Speaker 2]

I see.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I had a brother in Iceland, that's right, I forgot.

[Speaker 2]

Okay. Was it much of a wrench for you to leave home? But you, 27, you knew what to do.

[Speaker 1]

No, at that particular time, it was not a lot of problem for me to leave home. I kind of looked forward to going where everybody else was, and I went down to Pensacola in December of 1941, went through flight school, was commissioned in 1943.

[Speaker 4]

Thank you.

[Speaker 1]

Was commissioned in 1942, June 1942.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, what I'd like for you to do now is tell me a little bit about Pensacola, right on up, everything that happened to you before you went overseas.

[Speaker 1]

Well, I started out at flight school in basic training, went through basic training and passed all the tests, and when time came to decide what you wanted to do, what type of airplanes you'd be flying, I picked, as I remember, Squadron 5. That was always two U's, which was a seaplane, and they did have wheels on it, amphibian, and I was commissioned in that and then was going to fighters, and at that particular time, they needed marine aviators, and I had a instructor.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, go ahead.

[Speaker 1]

On Christmas Day of 1943, by that time I checked out in the Kurdish commando, the R5C, the airport called that the C46. We took off from North Island at midnight with a crew of about six people, and right at the last minute, some general brought a big footlocker full of clothes that he wanted taken to Honolulu, so we were actually overloaded. We took off at midnight, and we barely did get that plane off the deck.

I'd like to hear your experience sometime. Yeah, I've got a tape over there.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, go ahead. Where were we?

[Speaker 1]

I was trying to think. We were on the way to Honolulu, right?

[Speaker 2]

Honolulu, right.

[Speaker 1]

We were in the air about 12 hours and in a suit most of the time, and I remember how glad I was to see one of those big mountains over there, and I knew I was in Honolulu. I was really glad to get on the deck. We landed in Honolulu, and they sent me to a Marine Corps air station at Ewa, and I stayed there for about eight months, flying to Midway at least once a week, flying to islands in the South Pacific.

Our main function at that particular time was being a convoy for the fighters.

[Speaker 3]

We couldn't afford to bring the chariots back to Honolulu and take them aboard the chariots, so we would fly escort, a lead plane and a chase plane for fighters, and they would fly formation on us because they couldn't navigate.

[Speaker 1]

I see. So we would take them to whatever island they wanted to go to, Palmyra, Fort Lafruti, Johnson Island, in a particular case in Midway.

[Speaker 4]

I see.

[Speaker 1]

And then part of our duty there was bringing back Japanese prisoners. They captured a Jap sub, and we brought back a bunch of Japanese prisoners in the back end of that R5C, and we had about 12 Marines guarding them, and those Japs were about 5 feet 5, 5 feet 6, and they had those 12 big Marines guarding them with guns over them. We had a sketch-looking bunch that almost turned white on the way back from Midway.

[Speaker 2]

Did you all have a navigator on board on your ship?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, we had two navigators, a radio man and a couple of crew chiefs.

[Speaker 2]

I see.

[Speaker 1]

We had a full convoy. The only weapons we carried, of course, was a .45. We had no guns of any kind on that plane.

[Speaker 2]

Right. Okay. Now where were you when you had the Jap prisoners on board?

[Speaker 1]

We picked them up in Midway and flew them back to Honolulu. I see. And then we left Honolulu in about six months and went down to an island called Emeru, and I read it was uninhabited.

It had never been inhabited by any human beings until we went in there and built an airstrip. The Seabees built the airstrip. The Marines came in there, and we had a squadron of VMR-952, and we were living in huts there, and it was all kind of critters there, pythons and all kind of snakes and lizards.

You'd wake up in bed with a lizard on your chest trying to keep warm. I never will forget that little island called Emeru. And after that, we went to Guam, and from there we staged at the Philippines and Peleliu, and the last combat mission I was on was at Iwo Jima.

And we flew out of Guam and carried troops and food and ammunition and anything they needed to Iwo Jima, and then we would bring back the wounded with a hospital ship with nurses on board.

[Speaker 2]

Okay.

[Speaker 1]

That's just a few of the things that I did.

[Speaker 2]

Okay. Well, tell me some more. Let's don't leave anything out that you remember.

[Speaker 1]

Well, most of the things that I enjoyed, of course, that I remember was flying, flying through rain so thick that the engines would cut out. The harness on those big Pratt & Whitney engines would get wet, and they would cut out on you. You were afraid you was going down, and you couldn't land because you had two aircraft engines in the back of the airplane, and if you would land in the water, they would come through the cockpit, and that's the end of you.

[Speaker 4]

Right.

[Speaker 1]

So I had a Marine sergeant on there, Gunner Bean from California, and he was in the cockpit. It was a white cockpit, and I saw him down there on his knees in the cockpit, and I thought he was working on something. I thought something was wrong.

I said, Gunner, what's wrong with you? He said, nothing's wrong with me, Captain. I said, I'm just praying.

And to make a long story short, we finally closed the cow flap, put on preheat. Then when you finally got up over the clouds and got back into that particular place called Peleliu, and then Bloody Nose Ridge was.

[Speaker 4]

Right.

[Speaker 1]

And then we would carry the wounded out of there and carry stuff. We just did anything anybody wanted done, way of transportation.

[Speaker 2]

Did you have any experiences with Jap fighters trying to get to you?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I did. I got one time we were coming out of, I believe, coming back from Iwo Jima, and I saw a Japanese airplane. It was a Betty's, it turned out.

And so I kind of made a run on him, and he thought we was a fighter, I guess, because he took out and went north, and we got shot at a couple of times by anti-aircraft fire. But they had the airplanes for them. There was no Japanese planes coming except like the Betty, you know.

[Speaker 4]
Right.

[Speaker 1]
But they were pretty well under control. But we did see quite a few Jap airplanes, of course, at Iwo Jima and other places. Most of them were wrecked.

I've got pictures showing Japanese soldiers getting out of trucks and running from us because they thought we were bombing. We didn't have a gun on board, but they were still getting out of the way. Most of the Japs I saw were running, thank goodness.

[Speaker 2]
Those five you mentioned guarded by those 12 big Marines, say they looked like they were kids and scared to death, right?

[Speaker 1]
That's right. They were just scared. They didn't know what was going to happen.

They had told them all kinds of things about what the Americans would do if they captured them.

[Speaker 4]
Right.

[Speaker 1]
And, of course, all we wanted to do was interrogate them. So we had to take them back to Fort Island where they had all the brass out there trying to think who was there, McArthur, I believe Leahy, and they wanted to interrogate them and see what caused the sub to sink and how many American ships they had sank and all that. But I had what I called interesting duty.

We flew up. The admirals wanted to go somewhere. We'd take them somewhere.

We flew all over the South Pacific.

[Speaker 2]
What was your rank at that time?

[Speaker 1]
I believe I was a captain, and then I finally got major before the war was over.

[Speaker 2]
That's right. That's the same Marines rank just like the Army.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, that's right.

[Speaker 2]

Or it didn't do like the Navy. Well, that's interesting. Okay.

Let's see if I got some. Do you still contact some of the fellows that served with you still today?

[Speaker 1]

In fact, I talked to one of them just a couple of weeks ago, a fellow named Chuck Myre from Minnesota, and we flew together at Camp Kearney, and we both were in an outfit called SCAT. That's called the South Pacific Airline, and we flew in and out of Guadalcanal. He was doing the same thing.

I was in the same kind of airplane. And every now and then I'd see some of the RE Carters, another one was over there, but not many of them anymore. I used to, right after the war, I'd see them in the Reserve.

So I stayed in the Reserve and flew Corsairs and the big airplanes, 4-engine airplanes. After the war for about 15 years, about 29 years in altogether.

[Speaker 2]

I see.

[Speaker 1]

Most of it in the Reserve. Six years active duty and the rest of it on the Reserve.

[Speaker 2]

Did that Corsair have a 2,000 Pratt & Whitney?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, had a 2,000 Pratt & Whitney, a gull wing, and a very tricky airplane.

[Speaker 2]

I imagine it was a lot of fun to fly. Yeah, it was.

[Speaker 1]

It was fast. The Japanese called that the whistling death.

[Speaker 2]

Do you remember that? Okay, so do your outfits still have some conventions that you go to?

[Speaker 1]

No. VMR 952, as far as I know, hasn't had any. The fighter squadron, I was in Atlanta after World War II.

That's not interesting, but they have a convention every year with the Moorhead City, North Carolina. I've been to one or two of those.

[Speaker 2]

I stayed in the Reserves for a little while, and I'd never flown fighters in the service, but in the Reserves I got to fly the P-51, and I really enjoyed that.

[Speaker 1]

That's the same way. I never flew a fighter. I got out of the service.

[Speaker 2]

Did you all have any contact with civilians when you were overseas, natives, civilians?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, yeah. We went to an island about 15 miles outside of Emeru, and I had a buddy who had a motor torpedo boat, the same kind that John F. Kennedy was shot out of, you know.

And he got to an island and got saved. We were on this motor torpedo boat, and we pulled into this little island about 20 miles from Emeru in this torpedo boat, but we had machine guns on, and the natives came down from this hut. And it turns out they were cannibals.

I've got pictures. They put us on their shoulders and took them up to the hut, and they showed us all these shrunken heads there which were about the size of an orange that they had shrunk, and they told us that we don't do that anymore. We used to shrink heads, but now, you know, a coast watcher from Australia came over here, and he was a preacher, and he told us it was wrong to shrink heads.

Of course, we were glad to hear that. But he said we don't shrink heads anymore. But I've got pictures of those Japs with the spears, and they formed a ring around us and did dances for us and everything.

And so I would give him a ride in my airplane, and he'd take me out in this torpedo boat.

[Speaker 2]

What do you remember most about your time overseas? What was the thing that made the biggest impression?

[Speaker 1]

Well, I think what made the biggest impression to me is you have so many people all got the same goal. We wanted to get the war over with and get home, and nobody shirked their job, and they were anxious to fly, and they're just a great bunch of people to be with. Of course, I've been partial to the Marines for a long time.

[Speaker 2]

I guess so, sure. Did you have any contact with the Allied troops, the British or the Dutch or anything?

[Speaker 1]

Well, I flew with the British in Pensacola. We had people from cadets like I was from Great Britain, Lime as we called them. They were nice fellows, and they were good aviators.

They were good instrument pilots. They didn't seem to have any nerves at all. And the other I was trying to think, we had some from Canada, of course, people from the Royal Canadian

Air Force, people from the ABG Group, what they call the Flying Tigers, Flying Hump, and we had quite a few Flying Tigers there.

They got into the Marine Corps or the Navy.

[Speaker 2]

That's interesting. Did you get any leave when you were overseas or in the States?

[Speaker 1]

I was overseas for about 18 months, and I had one hop. They had a plane there, a 24-victor. I never will forget it.

The commando was always going broke, and nobody wanted to fly it. So they needed to get the plane to Mobile, Alabama, and nobody wanted to fly it. So I volunteered to fly the thing, and I flew it.

Got it in San Francisco, all right, and then my wife and my sister, my mother, were going to meet me down in Montgomery. So I came into Montgomery in that airplane, and everything was looking pretty good. I tried to get my gear down.

I couldn't get my gear down. And I was going around and around the field, and somebody asked my wife, she asked my wife who that was and said, I think I was a captain at the time. That's a Captain Brian up there.

He can't get his gear down in that airplane. To make a long story short, we finally did crank the gear down and get that airplane into Mobile.

[Speaker 2]

That's a hell of a job.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, so I had three days off before I got on it, and that's the only leave I had the whole time.

[Speaker 2]

Three days off, and you had to go back.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, and about three and a half, four years, I had to go back overseas.

[Speaker 2]

When were you married? Were you married when you went into the service?

[Speaker 1]

I got married in June of 1942 as soon as I got my wings.

[Speaker 2]

I see. As soon as you got your wings.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. I got married at the Chapel of Pensacola.

[Speaker 2]

All right. Let's see. Okay.

Did you ever wonder about what you were doing and why you were there and one thing or another?

[Speaker 1]

Well, no, I really didn't, because at that time, everybody was doing the same thing, and they had a lot of reasons for doing that, and we were fighting the Germans and fighting the Japs, and I think it was just more everybody felt like it was a matter of survival. Either they would get us or we would get them. We saw the Japs planes and the Jap warships coming in.

I came back one time from Midway and the Japanese had bombed part of Pearl Harbor there. I don't know whether they ever got them or not. It could have been from a submarine.

I don't know. But, no, we didn't wonder about what we were doing, really.

[Speaker 2]

You knew what you were doing.

[Speaker 1]

Not like it is today.

[Speaker 2]

Right. Did you have any feelings about the people of draft age who didn't go in, weren't in the service, the 4Fs?

[Speaker 1]

No, no, there again. No, I didn't have any bad feelings about them, really.

[Speaker 2]

How did the war affect you or change you?

[Speaker 1]

Well, it made me appreciate the United States a great deal because I met people from other nations. I got to work with people from different backgrounds, and everywhere you went people were talking about the United States. It made me appreciate the United States a great deal more than it would have been if I hadn't been in the service.

And I still feel like it's the greatest country in the world.

[Speaker 2]

How do you think that World War II changed the United States? Was it for the good or the bad?

[Speaker 1]

Well, it's hard to tell. We never will know what happened if we hadn't gotten into World War II. But I think it brought the country together more.

I think they were more cohesive, and I think most people feel the same way I did. I know when people came back overseas everybody was just so glad to see you, and you could go to San Francisco and you'd be in uniform and people couldn't do enough for you. You had that same experience I had.

I mean, you owned the whole city if you wanted to do anything for it. So it was really proud to serve.

[Speaker 2]

What do you remember most about coming home?

[Speaker 1]

Well, my oldest son was born, and he was three months old when I left, and he was about a year and a half old when I got back and trying to get him to recognize me, I guess, when I came home. He didn't know who I was.

[Speaker 2]

What could we have done better than we did during the war?

[Speaker 1]

In World War II? That would be a question you should ask some of the generals or admirals. They would probably tell you that they did everything they could.

I think that the country got behind the military and the factories that built the planes. I know part of my duty was ferrying airplanes from the Curtis Wright factory, and the people up there, when you go up there in uniform to pick up the airplanes, were nice to you. The whole country got together.

It's unification.

[Speaker 2]

Was that up in Buffalo?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, Buffalo.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I was flying ferrying airplanes down there.

[Speaker 1]

You went to that same thing. It's cold up there. I like to froze to death.

I went up in Kackers. Yeah, I like to froze to death. It's a little tougher than I think.

[Speaker 2]

I can say it's my war. When were you discharged and where?

[Speaker 1]

Well, that was at El Centro, California, which is probably the hottest place in the United States. It's right below the Salton Sea. It's about 60 degrees below sea level.

And after I got back from overseas, they sent me to El Centro where I was instructing and flying. And I was discharged at El Centro, I believe it was in 1945, late 45, maybe December 45.

[Speaker 2]

December 45. Yeah. Okay.

Now, let me see here. December 45. Now, when did you get back in the States?

[Speaker 1]

Well, I got back in the States probably the first part of 45 maybe. I stayed overseas 18 months. I got back probably in August of 45 and went to El Centro.

At that time, when the war was ended, I know when, what do they call it, VE Day, I had a chance to stay in the Marine Corps, go to work for United as a pilot, come back and work with this company that I'm still with. So I chose to come back to Knoxville, Tennessee, and I've never regretted it.

[Speaker 2]

Well, that's great. When you were overseas, what did you plan to do when you got back? What did what?

What did you plan to do when you were overseas? What were your plans for after the war? Had you made plans for the war?

[Speaker 1]

No, at that time, the only thing I knew was the Marine Corps. I probably was thinking about maybe staying in the Marines because a lot of regular Marines would influence you, you know, and talk about how good it was in peacetime duty and your leave that you got. So I was probably thinking about staying in the Marine Corps.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, but you got the phone call that brought you here.

[Speaker 1]

He said, come back, I'll sell you stock and a company, and that's what happened.

[Speaker 2]

Well, that's good. What else do you think of that, you know, most everybody has got two or three unusual happenings that they remember more than the old day-to-day stuff. You got any more of those?

[Speaker 1]

Well, there's one thing I remember on that uninhabited island, Emerald.

[Speaker 2]

Right.

[Speaker 1]

They had the head was about maybe 50 yards from where we slept, and at nighttime you would go out there and they had lanterns and all, and it's a latrine, you know, you call it.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

And I tried to get in the latrine, it had a door, a spring door, and I tried to open it, I couldn't open that door. And I kept pushing and pushing, and finally my hands came down, and there was a bull constrictor and anaconda about, you know, holding the door closed. It scared the heck out of me.

Of course, I let him go first.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I bet. Okay, well, that sounds pretty good. Have you got, go ahead.

[Speaker 1]

I don't know whether that's what you wanted.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, that's it. It sure is.

[Speaker 1]

We would fly to Midway, I think it was about 1,500 miles away, and they didn't have any weather.

[Speaker 4]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

And the navigator would have to run a sun line. Are you familiar with that?

[Speaker 2]

No.

[Speaker 1]

They would have to compute where the sun would be at a certain time, and then you'd turn to the left or right because you could miss the island.

[Speaker 2]

Right.

[Speaker 1]

But if you fly down the sun line, but the weather was our worst enemy. It was not the enemy so much as it was flying the weather, because we went. They didn't care whether it was

night or day, and sometimes you would have two or three aircraft in, and sometimes you'd have troops.

You would have ammunition. You would have supplies, what they call sea rations, and then we would drop paratroopers on these islands, and we would see them drop, and your plane would get real light. I know you probably did some of that, too.

So I think the thing that impressed me most was the feeling of helping the war effort, which I felt like we was. Even though I wasn't on the ground fighting, but we had a lot to do with the troops. We'd land, we'd take out wounded, and we got to know a lot of them.

We was in the same bread line with them and so on, the chow line.

[Speaker 2]

So you were an instrument flight instructor?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

I'll tell you a funny story.